

Zahra & Nura's story



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This book was made possible by Telling the Real Story, a community-based platform that documents and shares the stories of Eritrean and Somali refugees and asylum-seekers and the journeys they take in search of protection. This book aims to give young people an accurate picture of what these dangerous journeys are like for those who embark on them.

We hope the information you find here will help you make a more informed decision, should you ever consider taking the journey yourself.

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This is the story of two girls from Gash-Barka, Eritrea. The older one is me, Nura, 14 years old. The younger one is my cousin, Zahra, she is 10 years old.



Life in Gash-Barka was ordinary and carefree. We had family, neighbors, fields and cattle.

But life could be hard for girls as they could be forced into child marriage or female genital mutilation. The latter is the reason for the miserable journey which Zahra and I have been on.

All of this began when Zahra's parents decided to make her undergo FGM.



Our family kept it a secret from us. They were probably more concerned about my reaction than with Zahra's. I had FGM a few years ago and am still dealing with the consequences. Every time I recall this awful incident, I get nightmares.

I told Zahra about it the day before the ceremony and warned her based on my own experience.

The young girl confronted her mother, who refused to deny what they had in store for her. When Zahra refused all of this, her mother's tone changed. She assured her that FGM would keep her pure and that no one would want to marry her without it. "Then I don't want to marry," Zahra said.



At this point, her father intervened and ended the discussion by an ultimatum. Either have FGM willingly or by force.

That's how it all started.

I had excellent contacts with children in the village and had heard about prospects for a better life that included education elsewhere in other countries. Some of our friends had already left, and some of them had told us about their new lives.

I had been hoping for someone to accompany me on this journey. Oh how I was so happy that Zahra would be the one to join me. Although I am her cousin, I felt more like her older sister. I didn't want any harm for her.



We didn't have much time, the danger we were running from was approaching. Zahra took some money, packed her bags and left the house before the ceremony.

That night, five of us left together.
Me, Zahra and three boys.

After two and a half hours of walking across the fields, we met the smuggler. He was driving a car and smoking heavily. The smuggler ordered the boys to sit in the back and ordered me and Zahra to sit up front.



Soon I realized my plan was not safe at all.



After a few hours, we changed cars. This time the smugglers were rough with us. We spent hours on the move, only to reach some houses at the border. We did not see any other children there, only men. We were thrown into a room in an apartment.



A bald man approached us and informed us that the journey's fees had increased. I impulsively said that that was not our agreement.

He replied: "We are not going to use the usual route because the borders are closely monitored, we have new routes now and they cost more. And regarding the agreement, consider it a new one with new terms then."

He closed the door and started beating us.
I embraced Zahra. We kept crying until he left.



The next morning, he returned with a whip in his hand. He demanded we provide him with the contact numbers to our families. We cried and begged him but he still beat us.

At the end he got the numbers which he asked for, so he left to make the calls.



We cried everyday for months
until there were no more tears to cry.
We were only given bits of bread to eat.
We were forced to do labour which was
the only time we were able to move freely.

Seeing Zahra in that state made me feel
sad and guilty. I was the one who had
brought her on this journey and now
she was suffering. I had failed her.



My friends who had made such journeys never mentioned facing
such suffering. If they did, why wouldn't they tell us? Why didn't they
warn us?

I felt duped. The journey was far from what I thought it would be
like. How could they not tell us?



After four long months, my aunt in the city managed to gather the ransom. It was collected with the help of good hearted people.



We arrived at my aunt's house in the city in poor shape, filthy and stinky from not showering in months.

At my aunt's house, Zahra called her mother for the first time since we went on our journey. She showed sympathy at first, but her father was quick to blame us for our own misfortunes.



After a while, Zahra was optimistic.
We were interviewed by UNHCR during our asylum application.
She was planning to go to school. So she could have a normal life.



One day my aunt told us about her relative who could take us to
Egypt and from there onwards, the possibility of going to Europe.
I was excited with the idea and desperately wanted to make
amends with Zahra by getting her a better life again.



When I told Zahra, she immediately refused. The memories of the
experience with the smugglers still fresh in her mind. My aunt in
the city didn't want to foster us and FGM was waiting for Zahra
in Gash-Barka.

Should I not have convinced her? Where would we have gone?
She eventually agreed, even though she still showed signs of
hesitation.

So we left for the Egyptian border after 2 months.
We traveled for 4 days straight. We were exhausted.

One evening, the man who had been entrusted with us abandoned us and left us to a group of armed smugglers. They were tough and harsh. They beat us and then shipped us with many others. After hours of travel, we had reached an abandoned house at the outskirts of the city.



What have I gotten us into again? How could I not see that smugglers were only interested in money? They are liars. I was heartbroken, Zahra could barely look at me.

The armed men warned us not to make any noise. They told us that if the authorities caught us we would be imprisoned. I asked about the next step for traveling to Europe. The smuggler looked at me and laughed. And then demanded a ransom worth 8000 dollars first. I kneeled and begged for his mercy, but to no avail.



One day, after weeks of torture, I silently woke Zahra up.
The smugglers had left the door open. The light was bright.



We rose up and ran.
We were running for our lives.
Running from our captors.
From our past.
From our fears.
While at the same time,
we were running towards the unknown.

That unknown turned out to be a crowded neighborhood.
People would walk past us as if we were invisible.
I had to search for leftover food in the garbages.
I gave the best of it to Zahra.
We lived for days on just that.

But eventually poor Zahra fell down from hunger and fatigue.



When she woke up, she found herself
in a hospital bed belonging to a charity.
I was on the bed next to her. From the door,
curious faces were welcoming us.
This charity helped children seek asylum.
Meanwhile, we'd be placed in a foster home.



Somehow, I thought I was able to bring her to Europe
and keep her safe. I was wrong.

We were fortunate in comparison to the horrific stories we
have heard. Nonetheless, the scars from this experience will
take a long time to heal. Time will only tell.

For the time being, we are content to be safe.

