

## Renewed efforts to help rural girls in Ethiopia stay in school.

By Martha Tadesse

Ayana (not her real name), 17 years, is one of the girls living at the newly-opened Kidus Girls Hostel in northern Ethiopia. In most rural areas, including the village Ayana is from, there are no secondary schools close by. Parents usually cannot afford to send their kids to live in a larger town in order to access a secondary school, so for most children like Ayana, they drop out. But Ayana was determined for this not to happen, so until recently, she was walking for three hours to get to school and another three hours to return, to continue her education while living at home.



Ayana, 17, inside her dorm at Kidus Girls Hostel. © Martha Tadesse

In Ethiopia, "approximately 2.6 million children of primary school age are not in school, of which 43% are boys and 57% are girls. Only 25% of secondary school aged children are enrolled in secondary school, even less in rural areas. Traditional gender norms, a high burden of domestic work (especially for girls), long distances to school are some of the barriers to education. Many of the out-of-school children are from farming, internally displaced or refugee communities." (UNICEF)

Remembering the time she finished Grade 8, Ayana states, *"My family couldn't afford to send me to live in town. They couldn't afford the rent. So, they wanted to marry me off. I told my friends at school that my parents were going to marry me off, and they advised me to tell my parents that I would sue them."*



Ayana with her mother Mariam at their home. © Martha Tadesse

Mariam (not her real name), Ayana's mother, laughs nervously recalling this and says, *"We were very scared when she said that. The only reason we wanted to marry her off is because we couldn't afford sending her to the town for school. But she was very bold about her education. So we abandoned the idea and told her she can continue her education, if she found a way."*

Ayana and her sister, Hirut (not her real name), aged 20, were both offered a place at the Kidus Girls Hostel, funded by Create Impact NGO. They moved into the hostel in 2021 and both begun Grade 10 at the adjoining Secondary School. The Hostel has purpose-built facilities to house 36 girls. The hostel provides the opportunity to address the needs of disadvantaged girls from rural areas who cannot afford the living expenses required to attend secondary school. It provides a free, safe and supportive living and learning environment for selected girls to continue their higher education (Grade 9-12).



Dormitories at the Kidus Girls Hostel. © Martha Tadesse

Ayana shares the challenges she faced in Grade 9, before she lived at Kidus Girls Hostel, *"I am the last born of six children and had lots of responsibilities in the house. I used to tend to the cows, collect firewood, fetch water and carry traditional plough and accompany my dad when he goes out to the field. On top of all this work, Hirut and I would have to leave home at 5am every day to get to school on time. I would get so sleepy and tired and lose concentration in class. We would get home late night between 8:00-9:00pm and were exhausted to do homework. Plus, without electricity, it was impossible to study that late."*



Ayana collecting firewood near her home. @ Martha Tadesse

Fetching water and firewood can also be dangerous for girls in Ethiopia, facing the risk of physical and sexual assault. (UNICEF) Mariam recalls, *"I used to be so worried about them every day. When it got dark, I would go out and look for them, calling out their names in the woods."*

Mariam explains that she no longer worries and is happy that her children are getting free accommodation at the Kidus Girls Hostel to attend their school with full attention. Hirut adds, *"I don't have to spend many hours doing chores away from home everyday. I have enough time to do my homework and study with my roommates. I don't get tired in class. It makes me happy that my parents don't have to worry about us anymore."*



Girls studying in the Kidus Girls Hostel library. © Martha Tadesse



Girls during lunch at the Kidus Girls Hostel. © Martha Tadesse

Ayana now talks about her future with enthusiasm, *"I will make the decision when I want to marry but I want to finish my education first and become a doctor. I like studying biology, and now I can continue on that path."*



Ayana and her sister Hirut, 20, inside their dorm at Kidus Girls Hostel. © Martha Tadesse