

# A fair chance for Bridget\*...

By

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Globally, it is estimated over 600 million girls and women alive today were married as children. For some of these women and girls – this means a life being deprived of their rights. Deprived of a seat in the classroom. Deprived of a chance to make their own decisions and deprived of a voice to speak out about issues that they face.

The practice of early child marriage limits choice, limits futures, and limits the lives of millions of girls. It challenges the commitment to gender equality and it blocks progress towards the better, fairer world envisioned by the Sustainable Development Goals.

Despite this daunting number there is some good news like in Bridget\*'s story.

Bridget\* is a 15-year-old girl living with a disability. In 2017, Bridget\* was enrolled in one of our creative learning centres for catch up and later reintegrated into a mainstream school. Bridget\* and her sister live with their elder brother Jasper\* in a Kampala suburb.

Jasper\* does not have a stable source of income and when COVID hit in 2020, he could not afford to take care of both his sisters hence sending them to live with their mother in the village. When schools were partially opened in 2021, both girls returned to Jasper\*'s place. This was however short lived as the country soon went into a second lockdown. Once again, the girls returned to their mother's village in Mpigi.

In 2022, following a full reopening of the economy, schools reopened once again. Bridget\* however, did not come back to Kampala. Jasper\* later learnt that his young sister had been married off by her mother. As soon as he heard the news, he travelled to the village to ascertain what had happened. To his surprise, it was true. Without hesitation, Jasper\* got in touch with Bridget\*'s Learning Support Teacher at her former school who later got in touch with the mentor in the same community. Both the teacher and mentor are associated with Oasis a CRANE network member.

The community mentor and Jasper\* agreed to meet and pay a visit to his mother. This was to tactfully rescue Bridget\* from a forced marriage. With the help of police in Mpigi, Bridget\* was rescued and the perpetrator imprisoned. Bridget and her sister are now back in school and receiving counselling to heal from the traumatic experience.

We know from the COVID spread and from other public health crises that adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by emergencies. Child marriage, sexual violence and exploitation, and adolescent pregnancy increased in some parts of the country leaving so many marginalised children out of school.

This particular pandemic led to school closures and a loss of education, schools were closed for nearly two years. We therefore would like to thank our network members especially Oasis in this case particularly Mentors and Learning Support Teachers, who worked tirelessly to ensure that our girls were kept safe and made sure they all returned to school as soon as schools reopened.