



**Child Jury**

The members of the World's Children's Prize Child Jury are experts on the rights of the child through their own life experiences. Each member of the Jury represents first and foremost all children in the world who have had similar experiences to them. They also represent children in their country and from their continent. Whenever possible, the Jury includes children from all continents and all major religions.

# Meet the Child Jury!

The Jury members share their life stories and the violations of the rights of the child they have experienced themselves or that they campaign against. In this way, they teach millions of children around the world about the rights of the child. They can be members of the Jury until the end of the year they turn 18. Every year, the Child Jury

selects the three final candidates for the World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child from all those who have been nominated.

The Jury members are ambassadors for the World's Children's Prize in their home countries and throughout the world, and they lead the annual WCP ceremony in Mariefred, Sweden.



*Dario, 17, Romania*

**Represents children who grow up in children's homes and who are discriminated against because they are poor and/or because they belong to a different minority ethnic group.**

Dario grew up in the deprived area of Ferentari, in a wooden shack that his dad built on the pavement, with no heating, toilet or running water. His mum did everything she could to make sure her children were ok, but his dad spent all the family's money on alcohol.

"When I was 9 years old, me and my little sister were sent out onto the streets to get some money for food. The police caught us and we were forced to move to a children's home. It was really hard at first. We missed mum and cried every day. But after a while, once we had made friends, things got better. Like Dario, many of the children at the children's home come from Roma families. The Roma have been Europe's most discriminated against minority ethnic group for hundreds of years.

"If I could decide, I'd clean up all the litter and all the drugs in my area so that people would be kinder to one another. And all children would get to grow up with their families."



*Kim, 18, Zimbabwe*

**Represents children who have been empowered to stand up for children's rights, and in particular for equal rights for girls.**

Kim is a WCP Child Rights Ambassador and has started her own Child Rights Club at school. She's given thousands of children knowledge of their rights and encouraged them to fight for a better world for children.

"When I was little, I didn't know that children have rights. It made me sad when I saw children who didn't get to go

to school, who were beaten and subjected to sexual abuse and child marriage. Now I am a voice for children who are too afraid to tell, or who don't know they have rights. I fight in particular for girls, for example to put an end to child marriage and so that girls have the right to their own toilets at school. Being a WCP Child Rights Ambassador feels like an honour. It means everything to me. And I know that my generation will make sure that changes are made for the better for the world's children."



*Omar, 18, Palestine*

**Represents children living under occupation and who want a dialogue for peace.**

Omar goes to school close to a roadblock with armed soldiers. There are often conflicts there, and tear gas leaks into the school. It makes your eyes sting, and Omar gets stressed.

“The thing that helps me the most is listening to music or playing the piano. That makes me happy. I have a keyboard that I’d like to take to school with me, but it’s too dangerous. I’d have to carry it in a big black bag, and people might think it’s a weapon. The Israeli soldiers are suspicious of such things. Mum is afraid that I might get shot. I’ve lived under occupation my whole life, and it affects everything. The soldiers treat me and other Palestinians as though we don’t belong here. That makes me sad and angry. I feel in my heart that it’s wrong. It’s my country, and I should have the right to move freely. Instead it feels like we’re living in a prison. It’s easy to lose hope sometimes, but I try to believe in change.”



*Jhonmalis, 16, Brazil*

**Represents children who belong to indigenous groups and fights for their rights and for children who have been the victims of violence and who have been affected by environmental destruction.**

Jhonmalis lives in Amazonas in Brazil and belongs to the Guarani indigenous group. Her family has been fighting to get their land back for over 40 years, land that was stolen by forest companies and

corrupt politicians. Jhonmalis’ own grandfather was murdered for his struggle.

“He was very brave, and he’s a big role model for me. The worst day of my life was when someone started shooting into our house. I thought I was going to be killed.” The Guarani people are now living in roadside camps, where they can neither fish nor hunt. This makes the adults, like Jhonmalis’ dad, depressed; they drink, take drugs and get into fights. He disappeared after attacking her mum with a knife. Now Jhonmalis has to work in the field every morning before school to help the family survive.

“I’m proud of my mum, who is fighting hard for us children! My dream is to put a stop to the violence against children and women.”



During WCP week, the Jury members have meetings during which they share their experiences and discuss important issues.



*Zohar, 16, Israel*

**Represents children growing up in conflict zones and seeking dialogue for peace.**

“It’s important for me to be aware; to learn about what’s happening in the world and try to help as much as I can. I’m involved in our student council and in a young people’s organization. I’ve taken part in lots of demonstrations over the past few years to support girls’ rights, for LGBTQ+ rights and against bullying and corruption.”

When there was a dramatic increase in violence and rocket firing in the conflict between Israel and Palestine in 2021, Zohar and her friends were stressed and frightened. She got to know Palestinian children for the first time quite recently, despite living in the city of Haifa, which has a mixed population.

“Of course I knew that Palestinians live here, but I didn’t know anyone personally. Last year I started going to after-school activities with Arabic-speaking girls. We also started a mixed group, where we learned coding together. The Palestinian girls were really nice, and it was interesting to learn about their culture, which I knew so little of. We don’t know one another at all, even though we’re neighbours. I think it’s easier for people to hate the other side if they don’t know anything about their lives or history. When we get to know one another, we find out that we’re all human beings and quite similar. If the whole of society could see that, then it would improve the chances of achieving mutual understanding. It doesn’t matter how many times the process fails, or how many territories Israel has to give up. We have to keep trying to find a way of living together in peace.”



PHOTO: SVEN OLOF JOHNS & CHRISTINE OLSSON



# Threatened by rifle and water

“I’m going to carry on going to school. Kill me if you like,” said Rizwan to the man holding a rifle to his head. The man wanted to force him to quit school and work in the landlord’s fields instead along with the debt slave children. Tales of Rizwan’s bravery spread and gave other families the courage to send their children to school.

Four years later, Rizwan was rescued during the severe flooding, caused by climate change, that destroyed his family’s home and killed their animals.

“My grandfather Shamlu was born a debt slave, because my great grandfather had taken out a loan from the landlord. That’s how you become a debt slave, and the landlord can then force the whole family to work in his fields. But when grandfather grew up, he managed to free our family from debt.

“The landlord wouldn’t let any children in the village go to school, so dad got to start school in grandma’s village. Grandfather also helped another boy in the village, Naveed, to start at the same school. Naveed returned to the village as an adult and started a school. When the landlord got to hear about it he came here in his jeep with armed men and said:

‘Shut down the school!’

“Naveed was supported by the villagers, and the landlord was furious when he left.

## Brothers threatened

Two men with rifles threatened Rizwan and his big brother, Sami Ullah, on their way to school. Since the flood they have been living in the tent behind the brothers.



## The walls collapsed

As the sun rose, Rizwan saw the first wall being destroyed by the floodwater.

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“A year later, a man shot Naveed dead, right in front of the students. Many villagers were afraid then and wouldn’t let their children go to school any more. But my brother and I started at a school five kilometres away.”

## Go and work!

“It was a year after the murder of the teacher, and I was ten years old. We’d been up since four and had gone into the forest first, because we don’t have a toilet. Then we fetched water before going to the mosque to pray. Once we’d eaten breakfast, bread with potato, we headed off to school.

“Suddenly we were stopped by two men with rifles. My big brother didn’t hang around and ran off, but I wanted to know what they wanted. One of the men grabbed my arm and the other put his rifle to my head and said:

‘If you don’t work in the field, I’m going to put a hole in your head. You’re ruining other children for us.’

‘I will carry on going to school. Kill me if you want!’ I said. Several people gathered round us, so the men headed off and I continued on to school. When I got home, my brother asked:

‘Why didn’t you run? I thought they were going to kill you.’

“Dad and some others from the village went together to see the landlord and speak to him, but he pretended he didn’t know the men.”

## Never free

“All the other families in our village, my uncle’s too, are debt slaves to the landlord. The reason the men threatened me and my brother was to get us to quit school, so the other children wouldn’t get any ideas about going to school.

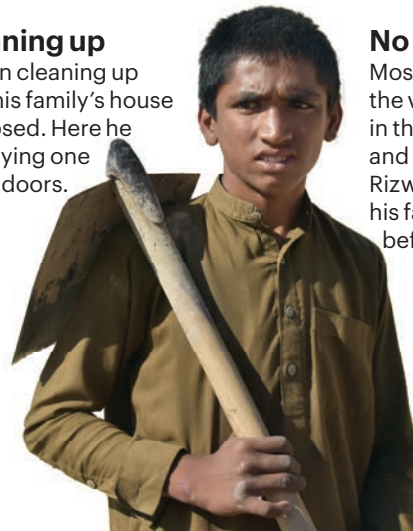
## Cleaning up

Rizwan cleaning up after his family’s house collapsed. Here he is carrying one of the doors.



## No debt slave

Most of the children in the village have to work in the landlord’s fields and can’t go to school. Rizwan only works in his family’s little field before going to school.





Rizwan, 14, Pakistan

**Represents children whose rights are violated due to climate change and other environmental destruction.**

**BEST TIME:** Going to school.

**DOESN'T LIKE:** How landlords treat poor people.

**WORST TIME:** The major flood.

**MY GOAL:** To help my family have a good future.

“The landlords are very cruel. They have often broken their workers’ arms or legs. If anyone protests, the landlord tells his foreman to shoot him. No one dares report him, because it’s dangerous. And there are no police here. People living in poverty have no rights. I don’t like it at all. They also mistreat women and girls.

“The landlord has thousands of hectares of land, but the debt slave families only get wheat and rice and very little money, so they can never be free of their debt.”

**Then the water comes ...**

“I was doing my homework before the sun went down. We have no electricity here. Mum had made bread with carrots for dinner.

“I woke up in the middle of the night because I heard dad shouting. There was



**Saved by a sugar dish**

Rizwan and eleven others in the family were saved from drowning, just like the children in the photo above, by sitting in two huge tin dishes that are normally used to make sugar.



FIDA HUSSAIN/AFP

water everywhere. I thought the floodwater would kill us. The water continued to rise, and my uncle said we had to save our families. Mum cried and said:

‘But how can we save everyone?’

“Dad asked us to help carry two huge tin dishes to the door. We use them to make sugar from sugarcane. We sat seven people in one dish and five in the other. Dad and uncle were able to wade through the water and pushed the dishes in front of them.

“I watched our wall collapsing. I thought about our animals, and that our dog would also die. I cried many tears.”

**Slept on the road**

“Dad and uncle pushed the dishes with us sitting in them for four kilometres, to a road that is high up. For the first two nights we just sat and watched the water, or slept on the road. During the day it was hot under the sun, and at night we were bitten by large mosquitoes. We got two tents and some blankets, so on the third night we were able to sleep under cover. We stayed on the road for 22 days.

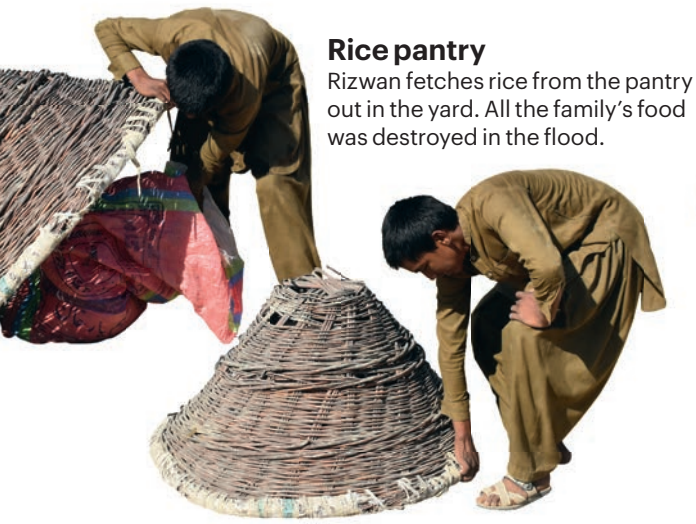
“All the time I was longing to go back to school, and I remember to the day how long I had to wait: two months and eight days!

“We had 10 hens, 24 chickens, 3 goats, 2 lambs and 2 cows. When we returned home, all of them had drowned and disappeared in the floodwater.”

**Glaciers melting**

Pakistan is severely affected by climate change, which has a big impact on the glaciers in the Himalayan mountains. The 7,000 or so glaciers in Pakistan are melting fast. Pakistan is downstream from the Himalayas, which means it is affected by heavy flooding. In 2022, a third of the country was flooded, and the monsoon rain made the situation even worse. The province of Sindh had 680 mm of rainfall in 24 hours.

1,700 people died during the flooding, and 33 million people were affected.



**Rice pantry**

Rizwan fetches rice from the pantry out in the yard. All the family’s food was destroyed in the flood.



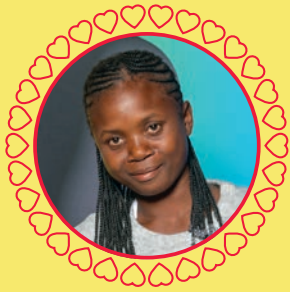
**Defying the landlord**

Defying the landlord  
The landlord wants all the children to work in his fields, but Rizwan goes to school every morning.



**Dog survived**

The family’s 10 hens, 24 chickens, 3 goats, 2 lambs and 2 cows were swept away by the floodwater. But their dog survived.



*Alcina, 16, Mozambique*

**Represents girls subjected to child marriage, or at risk of child marriage, and who are forced to quit school.**

# Alcina has dreams



Alcina is growing up in the village of Malhacule near Limpopo National Park in Mozambique. Her dad supports the family through poaching.



But when armed rangers start protecting the wild animals, he gives up poaching. This makes the family even poorer.



Alcina goes to school, but she has no time for play. She has to gather wood, fetch water, cook, do the dishes ...



When Alcina is 13 and in fifth grade, a 40-year-old man who is a rhino hunter starts paying visits to her parents and offering money, food and beer.



Although the man is already married, Alcina's parents force her to marry him. She has to quit school against her will and move to the man's village.



Alcina is devastated. Her dreams for the future are in tatters, and she doesn't know what to do. All day she does household chores.



Alcina gives birth to her son, Peter, when she has only just turned 14.



In November 2021, Alcina's head teacher Ricardo goes on a course (page 37) with four of his students, and they learn about children's rights.

"Before the course, I didn't know that girls have the same rights as boys. Now girls' rights always have a place at my school," says the head teacher, listing the rights on the blackboard.



# for the future once more



A month later, Alcina takes a walk to her home village to ask her parents for maize. She meets her head teacher, who asks why she isn't at school. Alcina tells him about all the terrible things that have happened.



When the head teacher tells Alcina's parents that in Mozambique there are laws prohibiting child marriage, they agree to let Alcina and her son come home, and to let her start school again.



Alcina meets her school friends and learns about her rights. She helps out at home and looks after her son, but is happy that once again she can dream about her future.



Alcina becomes a Child Rights Ambassador and joins the WCP Child Jury. Her mum looks after Peter when she's at school and during her trip to Sweden.



Alcina and Kim from Zimbabwe accompany Queen Silvia to the World's Children's Prize ceremony at Gripsholm Castle in Mariefred.

During the ceremony, she stands up on stage and tells everyone that on the Child Jury she represents all girls who are subjected to child marriage and forced to quit school.



Alcina is involved in the WCP project My Rights & My Future for girls in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, which teaches girls about their rights and helps them return to school.

# Slave at five years old

Kwame was just five and couldn't swim when he had to go out in the canoe with his slave master for the first time to cast nets. Every day and every night he was forced out onto the lake, and he had just one meal and drank lake water. But one day, after three long years, the boat came ...

When Kwame was five years old, a couple came to his home in Winneba in Ghana. They asked if they could take Kwame with them and said he'd be able to go to school. The couple gave Kwame's parents a little money. When Kwame woke in the couple's car the next morning, he was in the city of Yendi on the vast Lake Volta.

"We took a boat to an island. When the couple handed me over to a man, he said that I had to go with him out in the canoe and fish. It was really hard at first, and I couldn't swim," explains Kwame.

He had been trafficked and was now forced to work every day and night, without any hope for the future.

"But as I grew older I started to dream that one day I'd be rich, and that my family would celebrate my return."

## Two hours' sleep

Every day, at six in the evening, Kwame packed the nets in the boat and set off onto the lake with his slave master, Brother Abbam.

"The moon and stars helped light the way, but we used a torch as well. When the weather was really bad, it was hard to see, and I was frightened.

"First we let down the net that would be taken up early the next morning. Then we cast another net in over and over again and dragged it along behind the canoe for several hours, before turning back at midnight," explains Kwame. He slept in the canoe for a couple of hours before it was time to go out on the lake again to take up the net.

## Beaten with a paddle

The slave master often beat Kwame with a paddle or steel cable that they used to mend the nets.

When he got home in the morning, Kwame usually jumped in the water to wash. He was never able to wash himself or his clothes with soap on the island.

Once he'd carried the fish they'd caught to the slave master's wife, he helped her smoke it. In the afternoon, Kwame



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returned to the canoe to empty the water out and get the nets ready for six o'clock, when it was time to go out on the lake again.

## Dangerous work

Many children have drowned while being forced to fish on Lake Volta.

"Once, when Brother Abbam wanted me to dive down and loosen a net that had got caught, I said I didn't dare. Then he pushed me down under the water. I thought I was going to die.

"When he got angry, he hit me with the paddle," says Kwame, showing a scar on his forehead. "And he used to beat me with the steel cable that we mended the nets with, and call me stupid.

"Brother Abbam's own daughters got three meals a day. They got fish and

sausages to go with their kenkey (cornmeal dumplings) and banku (cassava dumplings), and sometimes soft drinks. But in all the years I was with them, I only drank lake water. I got one meal a day, and never anything to go with it."

## The rescue

"I'd heard that there were people who came to fetch children. But Brother Abbam and the other slave masters scared us by saying these people wanted to abduct us, and that we should run and hide."

One day when Kwame was eight years old and standing on the shore, sorting nets, he saw a motorboat approaching.

"I thought it was my mum who had come to get me, so I didn't run away."



# Fishing slaves

The fishing slaves are called “The boys who went to Yeti”. Most of them end up in Yeti before they are sent out to various slave masters. Child slavery is common in Ghana. The children are sold by their parents or relatives, often by single mothers who cannot afford to buy food for their children. It’s also common for people living in poverty to borrow money from a slave trader for a

funeral when someone dies. If they can’t pay it back, the slave trader takes their children. The adults might receive USD 20, and the children then have to work for at least two years, often much longer. Ghana has a law against child slavery, so Challenging Heights can get the police to help when they rescue children.

## Safe house

Kwame arrived at the organization Challenging Heights’ safe house for rescued trafficked children.

“All I had to do was get up in the morning, make my bed, shower, eat breakfast, go to school and then go to bed in the evening. And no-one beat me or let me starve.

“I do a lot of drawing, but I never paint anything from my time on the lake. It would only remind me of all the terrible things I went through.”

Kwame now had friends, got three meals a day and could watch TV in the safe house. After a year, they started talk-

ing about reuniting him with his family. Kwame couldn’t wait, but there was one thing he didn’t want to miss before going home:

“I wanted to experience Christmas at the safe house one more time. We practised Christmas carols and dances, and I was one of the dancers. We got Christmas clothes, sweets, biscuits and soft drinks. The Christmas meal was so good, chicken and rice.”

## Finally home

It was almost as Kwame had imagined it. He didn’t come home rich, but when his family saw him, everyone cheered and cried.

“I thought a lot about my parents when I was on the island and at the safe house, and I recognised them as soon as I saw them. Dad lifted me up in the air!

“I’m happy now. Challenging Heights give me clothes, and they help dad with the cost of my school fees. I’m in seventh grade now.”



*Kwame, 16, Ghana*

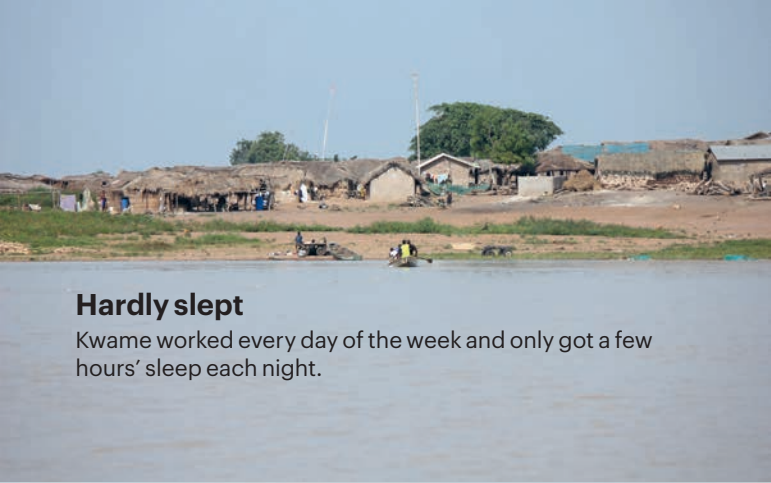
**Represents child workers and children who have been trafficked and forced into modern slavery.**

**BEST EXPERIENCE:** Christmas Eve at the safe house.

**WORST EXPERIENCE:** When the slave master pushed me down under the water.

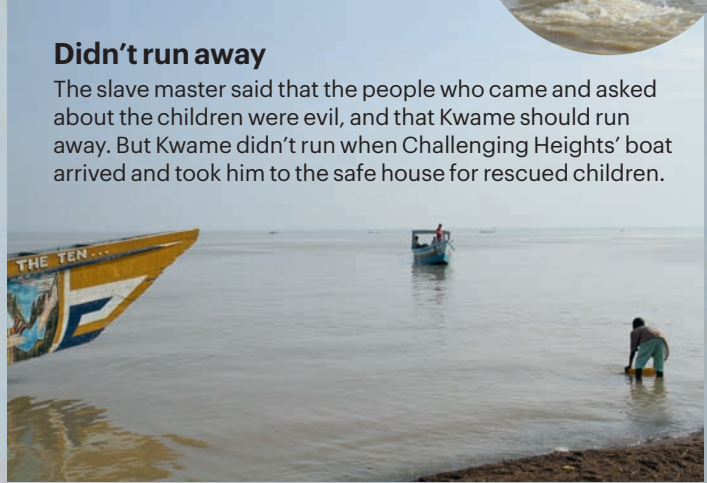
**HAPPIEST MOMENT:** When I returned to my family and dad lifted me up.

**FAVOURITE THING:** Painting pictures.



## Hardly slept

Kwame worked every day of the week and only got a few hours’ sleep each night.



## Didn’t run away

The slave master said that the people who came and asked about the children were evil, and that Kwame should run away. But Kwame didn’t run when Challenging Heights’ boat arrived and took him to the safe house for rescued children.



# Bindu rescued from a r

Bindu believes the distant relative is her friend, but instead the woman tricks her into travelling to India, where Bindu is locked in a house along with lots of other girls ...

**B**indu, who is 12, and her mum are often visited by Karuna, a distant relative. She's always suggesting to Bindu that she should travel to new places. Bindu says no, but she's curious about what she hears.

When Bindu gets bitten by a dog, Karuna happens to drop by.

"I'll go with you to the hospital to get a tetanus jab," she says.

On the way home after the vaccination, Karuna says:

"Your mum is always scolding you. How do you put up with it? There's only one boarding school here in Nepal; let me take you there so you can get an education".

## The journey begins

Later that same day, Bindu goes outside when she hears Karuna calling for her. As she approaches, Karuna pulls Bindu to her and covers her mouth with a shawl. She drags Bindu with her through a gate. When they get to a bridge, there's a strange man waiting there.

"He's going to take you to the boarding school," explains Karuna.

The man takes Bindu to a hotel room. Before she falls asleep, the man's phone rings. It's Karuna, and she wants to speak to her.

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Bindu comes from a poor family and had barely gone to school before she was abducted and taken to India. She is keen to learn and was soon moved up to the second grade at Maiti's school, Teresa Academy, home in Nepal.

"I've told your mum that you're safe."

"I want to go to mum," replies Bindu.

"What are you going to tell her?"

"Everything."

"If you do that, I'll kill you and your family," warns Karuna.

The man drinks alcohol and his snores keep Bindu awake all night. The next morning, he tells Bindu to get into a taxi. They travel the whole day and the day after.

## Where am I?

When they arrive in Delhi in India three days later, Bindu is taken to a house, where she meets Karuna's sister. When she enters a room, Bindu sees lots of girls, some of them wearing hardly any clothes.

"What are these girls doing here?" asks Bindu.

"They sell clothes and do this and that," is the response.

When Bindu asks if she's at a school, as Karuna promised, the other girls laugh at her.

"All the girls who sleep here work at our brothel," explains Karuna's sister.

"Aren't you ashamed of selling girls like this?" says Bindu when she realises where she's ended up.

"I haven't killed anyone, so why should I be ashamed?" replies the woman. Soon there'll be another thirty new girls arriving.

"Please, let me go home," begs Bindu in tears.

"There's no way we're letting you out of

A dog bite was what started the whole thing, when a woman she knew lured Bindu away from her home.



Bindu was taken to India in a mini taxi, but she had no idea where she was going.



# nightmare



It's like a dream for Bindu to be free and have friends after her experiences in India.

here," answers Karuna's sister.

Bindu is moved to another building, where for a month she looks after the young children of the older girls and women. Every day Bindu is given a drug, but she has no idea why she is given it, and that Karuna's sister wants to make her grow faster so she looks older.

### Rescue on its way

Bindu is taken to yet another building that Karuna's sister is also responsible for. Bindu is kept locked in a room as the days go by. She cries every day and misses home, but she no longer has any hope of being free.

Back in Nepal, Bindu's mum has gone to the organization Maiti Nepal and told

them her daughter has disappeared. Maiti, which fights against the commercial sexual exploitation of children, contacts an Indian organization and the police in Delhi.

When she's been in the room for a week, Bindu suddenly hears raised voices outside the door, which soon opens. The police and some other people she doesn't know are standing there. Then everything happens very quickly. Bindu's clothes are packed in a bag, and before long she's sitting in a car on her way home to Nepal.

### Keen to learn

When she arrives back in Nepal, Bindu gets to stay at Maiti Nepal's sheltered home for children. She hasn't been at

school much before, so she starts in first grade at Maiti's school Teresa Academy, along with some younger children. But her eagerness to learn means she soon moves up to second grade. Most of Bindu's classmates are children with no parents, or other poor children who also live at Maiti's home.

The man who abducted Bindu has been arrested and charged with human trafficking, but has not yet been convicted. Although Bindu managed to be freed before she was subjected to any kind of assault, the man will get a long prison sentence. 🌐



Bindu has just been released by the police and social worker and here she is on her way home to Nepal.



Bindu's family are very poor. Since her rescue she has been living with the organization Maiti Nepal so she can go to school, but her mum Rajita visits her there.

Bindu wants to get an education and help other children who have been exploited.



*Bindu, 15, Nepal*

**Represents children who are the victims of human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children.**

**WORST TIME:** When I was taken to India.

**BEST TIME:** Seeing mum again.

**DIFFICULT:** Telling the police.

**LIKES:** Painting and singing.

**WANTS TO BE:** Social worker and help others.



# Came home after three years

Espoir cried during the whole trek through the forest. His shirt was wet through from the tears, as though it had been raining. If he stopped, the soldier beat him with a stick. All the time, Espoir was thinking of his mum and dad, and that he might never see them again ...

**E**spoir, whose name means 'hope', comes from South Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is the story of three years of his life:

"I was 10 years old, almost 11. Every day I got up early to work in the morning, mostly carrying rubbish to the tip and crops from the field. I'd usually get 2,000 CDF (USD 1), or a kilo of cassava for half a day's work.

"In the afternoons I went to school. After school we used to play football with a ball made of plastic. Every Wednesday and Saturday, I went to choir practice at church. In the evening I did my homework by the light of the fire.

"I'd heard about boys from the villages nearby being abducted and forced to be child soldiers. I was always worried that the same thing might happen to me one day. But my family is very poor, so there wasn't much we could do about it. We couldn't move to the city, which would be safer."

## **Worst fears realised ...**

"I got up early as usual, ate a cold sweet potato, drank a glass of water and began the walk to school with two friends. It takes an hour to get to school and we usually spent the time talking about funny things that had happened.

"Suddenly a group of armed men

stepped out from some bushes and stood in front of us on the path. I was so scared that I just froze. I immediately thought I would die, but thanks to God I wasn't killed. We cried and shook with fear.

"Please, let us go to our families," we begged.

"Why should we do that?" they said, and they beat us with sticks while dragging us with them into the forest.

"Don't try and run! And keep moving!" ordered one of them.

"We carried our school bags and heavy sacks of food that they had stolen from somewhere".

## **Raw cassava for food**

"The forest frightened me. I was afraid the wild animals would kill us and eat us. At first we tried to escape. Then they put us right at the front and one of them said in a menacing voice:

"Fools, just you try and run. Then we'll help you meet your dead ancestors. And we'll show no mercy."

"We walked day and night, ate raw cassava from the sacks we were forced to carry and drank water from springs. When we were too tired and lagged behind, they beat us with their sticks to get us to speed up.

"I thought I'd never see mum or dad or my brothers and sisters again. I kept thinking I would be killed by the soldiers, who beat me as though I were a snake.

"I cried the whole time. My shirt was wet through from the tears, as though it had been raining."

## **Tried to help children**

"First we had to go through an initiation ceremony with drugs and jujus, which are

Child Jury

The war in DR Congo, which has been going on since 1998, is one of the most brutal wars in the history of the world. More than 6 million people have died in the fighting, or from hunger and diseases as a result of the war. At its peak there were over 30,000 child soldiers in the country; now there are around 15,000. Over 7 million children do not go to school.



When child soldiers arrive at the organization BVES' reception centre, the first thing they do is burn their uniforms as a sign that they are now leaving their time as a child soldier behind them. It says: 'Military uniform: Never again!', and 'School: Yes! Military camp: Never again!' on two of the signs.

objects we had to carry with us in combat to protect us from the bullets. Then we had to learn to shoot. It took me three months to learn to use a weapon. First the AK-47 assault rifle and then the PKM machine gun.

"Then I fought against other armed groups and against our country's army.

"One evening we drank kanyanga that made me drunk. I shot a couple of rounds into the air, and the troop leader demanded that I pay 40,000 CDF (USD 20) for the bullets, but I couldn't pay. So he ordered my friends to give me 15 lashes of the whip. I escaped that same night and headed back to my village. But I came across another armed group and I was tortured until I agreed to join them. We stole from fields and homes and robbed car drivers in the evenings and at night.

"I was never involved in abducting

children. When my friends arrived with new children, I tried to teach them how to escape and avoid my fate."

#### Free at last

"I wanted to visit my family, and one night I ran away. On the way I was arrested by a government soldier, who took me to a prison. I was put in a tiny cell with some men who assaulted me. They took my food, sold it and used the money to buy cigarettes. It was so cramped that at night we had to take it in turns to stand up and sleep on the floor.

"The organization BVES visited my cell. When they saw that I was a child, they got the prison manager to hand me over to them. I was taken to BVES' centre for rescued child soldiers, and I had time to recover there until I felt ready to go back home."



## Espoir, 14, DR Congo

**Represents children forced to become soldiers and children living in armed conflict situations.**

**LONGED FOR:** My family.

**MOST FUN:** Playing football and singing in choir.

**WORST TIME:** Being abducted and tortured.

**MOST IMPORTANT:** Going to school.

**FAVOURITE SUBJECTS:** French, history, social and moral studies.

**WANTS TO BE:** A teacher and rescue children.

#### Home again!

"Finally the day I'd been longing for since I was abducted arrived; the day I would be reunited with my family. We were all overjoyed and all of us cried. After a few days, the fear began to creep up on me. Since then I've been constantly afraid of being abducted again if the armed groups find out I'm back in the village. I'm also afraid of being arrested again by the government soldiers.

"Going back to school means a great deal to me. I feel it's helping me build a future for me and my family. I want to be a teacher. But I also want to fight for children's rights, and to prevent children being abducted by armed groups and separated from their families." 🌐

#### BVES bag

Every child who has been at BVES' centre for street children gets a bag containing things that will make life easier when they go home to their families.



The bag contains:



A radio

Shoes

A towel

A blanket

Toothbrush and toothpaste

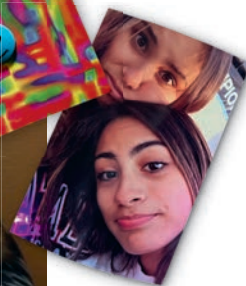
New clothes

Soap





The family and two cats share a double bed. Dahlia and Mersadez each have their own wall where they put up their pictures and drawings.



Selfie with bestie.



# “I lost all hope”

One day when she was 12 years old, Mersadez finds out that her family has just a few days to leave their home. Again.

Mersadez lives with her mum Stephanie and little sister Dahlia in a little student room. But ever since her mum Stephanie was in a serious car accident she has been unable to work or study, so now they have to move.

At five o'clock one morning, Mersadez packs her clothes, schoolbooks and toys into a van that her mum rented. The family has nowhere to go, so they have to sleep in the van for almost a week.

“There was no room to lie down, so we sat and slept in the seats,” recalls Mersadez. “The next morning we used the toilets in shops and at McDonald’s to brush our teeth and wash.”

Mersadez had experienced homelessness many times before, but this was the worst yet because they had to live in the van.

“It was scary,” says Mersadez. “For the first time, I lost all hope. I thought we’d never have a home of our own. That nothing would ever be good again.”



Mersadez does her homework at the table, while her little sister Dahlia, 8, gets a snack.

After a bit less than a week the family moved into a motel that had been converted into a shelter.

“Then we moved a lot, until we arrived at the motel where we live now, in one room with a kitchenette. We’ve been here for two years. Everyone else who lives here is also homeless. Mum prefers us not to leave the room after school. She has always tried to protect us as much as she can,” says Mersadez.

Over two million children in the US are currently homeless, sometimes because their parents lose their jobs and can’t pay the rent. Others have mothers who are escaping a violent partner. Mersadez’s mum had a difficult upbringing herself. Sometimes she still feels so low because of her own childhood that she can’t work and bring money in.

## No one can know

Mersadez’s school friends don’t know where she lives.

“Most of the kids at school are very well-off. If they knew I was homeless, it

would change their opinion of me completely. Instead of being a person, a friend, I’d just be a homeless person to them, not a human being. I don’t want anyone feeling sorry for me or treating me differently.”

During Covid, Mersadez and Dahlia had remote lessons via the internet for a long period. It was tough being locked in the motel room almost 24 hours a day and trying to keep up with school. Mersadez had help then with her schoolwork from an organization called School on Wheels, which was set up by WCP Child Rights Hero Agnes Stevens.

“I’m doing well now and can also help my little sister.” 🌐



Mersadez and Dahlia’s mum doesn’t want them walking around the motel, because some of the people who live there have drug problems and can get violent. “But most of them are nice,” say the sisters.



Mersadez, 15, USA

**Represents children who are homeless and stands up for other children experiencing homelessness.**

**LIKES:** School.

**LOVES:** Dancing, particularly hip hop.

**DOESN'T LIKE:** Not having a home or a feeling of security.

**WANTS TO BE:** Marine biologist.