

# Africa's Child



MWAKA SIMBEYE was married to settle her father's \$16 debt

**Forced by tradition to marry when they're as young as 10 or 11, girls in rural sub-Saharan Africa pay a lasting price**

**By Sharon LaFraniere in Malawi**

2,000 kwacha, about \$16. The family was fed.

But that created another problem: How could Simbeye, a penniless farmer, repay Kalabo? The answer would shock most outsiders, but in sub-Saharan Africa's rural patriarchies, it is deeply ingrained custom: Simbeye sent his 11-year-old daughter, Mwaka, a shy first-grader, to Kalabo's hut. There she became a servant to his first wife, and, she says, Kalabo's new bed partner.

Now 12, Mwaka says her parents never told her she was meant to be the second wife of a man about three decades older. "They said I had to chase birds from the rice garden," she says. "I didn't know anything about marriage."

## STAGGERING CONSEQUENCES

Mwaka ran away, and her parents took her back after six months. But her escape is the exception. In remote lands like this, where boys are valued far more than girls, where older men prize young wives, where fathers covet dowries, and where mothers are powerless to intervene, many African girls like Mwaka must leap straight from childhood to marriage at a word from their fathers. Sometimes that word comes years before they reach puberty.

The consequences of these forced marriages are staggering: adolescence and schooling cut short; early pregnancies and hazardous births; and lives often condemned to subservience. The list has grown to include exposure to H.I.V. at an age when girls do not grasp the risks of AIDS.

Increasingly, educators, health officials, and legislators are discouraging or even forbidding these marriages. In Ethiopia, for example, where studies show that in a third of the states most girls marry under the age of 15, one state took action in April. Officials say they annulled as underage the marriages

**M**apendo Simbeye's difficulties began in early 2004 when his crops failed in the hills along Malawi's northern border with Tanzania. So to feed his wife and five children, he went to his neighbor, Anderson Kalabo, and asked for a loan. Kalabo gave him

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of 56 girls ages 12 to 15, and filed charges against parents of half the girls for forcing them into the unions.

Yet, child marriages remain entrenched in rural pockets throughout sub-Saharan Africa, from Ghana to Kenya to Zambia, according to UNICEF. Studies show that the average age of marriage in this region remains among the world's lowest, and the percentage of adolescent mothers the world's highest. Many rural African communities, steeped in centuries of belief that girls occupy society's lower rungs, are unbothered by the outside world's disapproval.

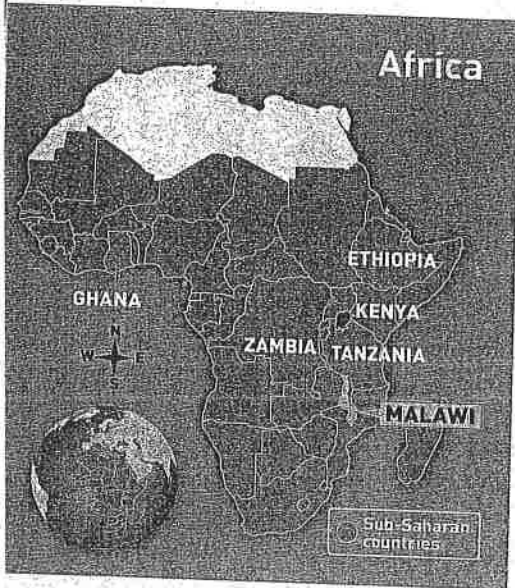
of belief that girls occupy society's lower rungs, are unbothered by the outside world's disapproval.

Now about 17, she has two children, the oldest nearly 5, and a husband who guesses he is 70. "Just because of these two children," she says, "I cannot leave him."

### 'I WAS THE SACRIFICE'

Beatrice Kitamula, 19, was forced to marry her wealthy neighbor, now 63, five years ago because her father owed another man a cow. "I was the sacrifice," she says, holding back tears. She likened her husband's comfortable compound of red brick houses in Ngana village to a penitentiary. "When you are in prison," she says, "you have no rights."

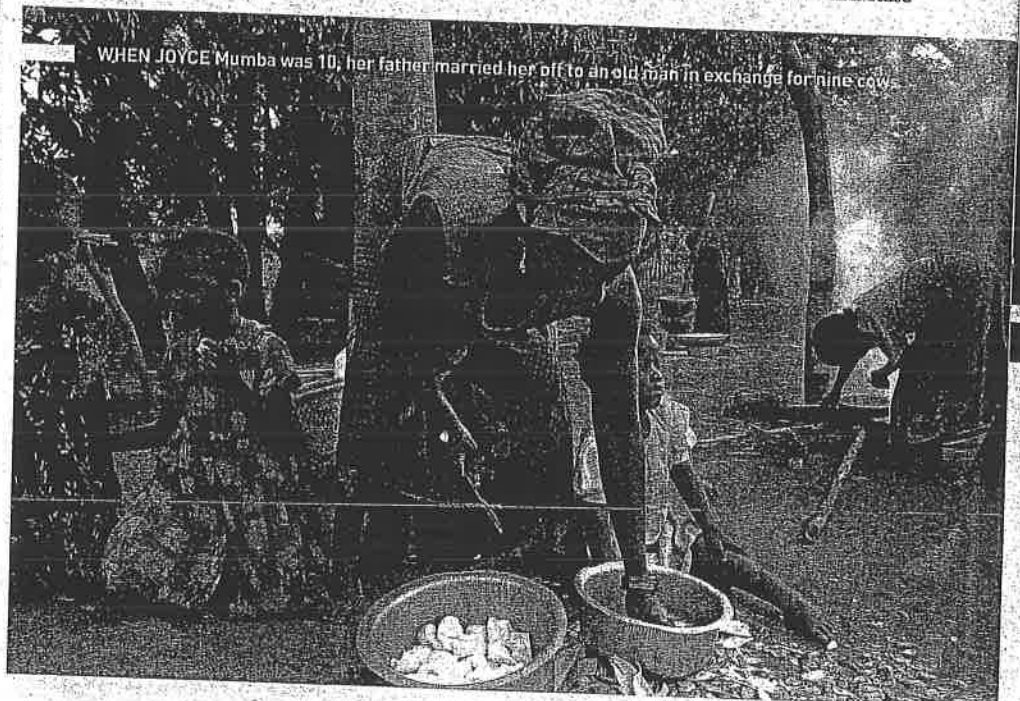
Malawi government officials say they try hard to protect girls like Beatrice. Legislation before Parliament would raise



"There is a lot of talk, but the value of the girl child is still low," says Seodi White of the Women in Law in Southern Africa Research Trust. "Society still clings to the education of the boy, and sees the girl as a trading tool. In the north, girls as early as 10 are being traded off by the family for gain. After that, the women become owned and powerless in their husbands' villages."

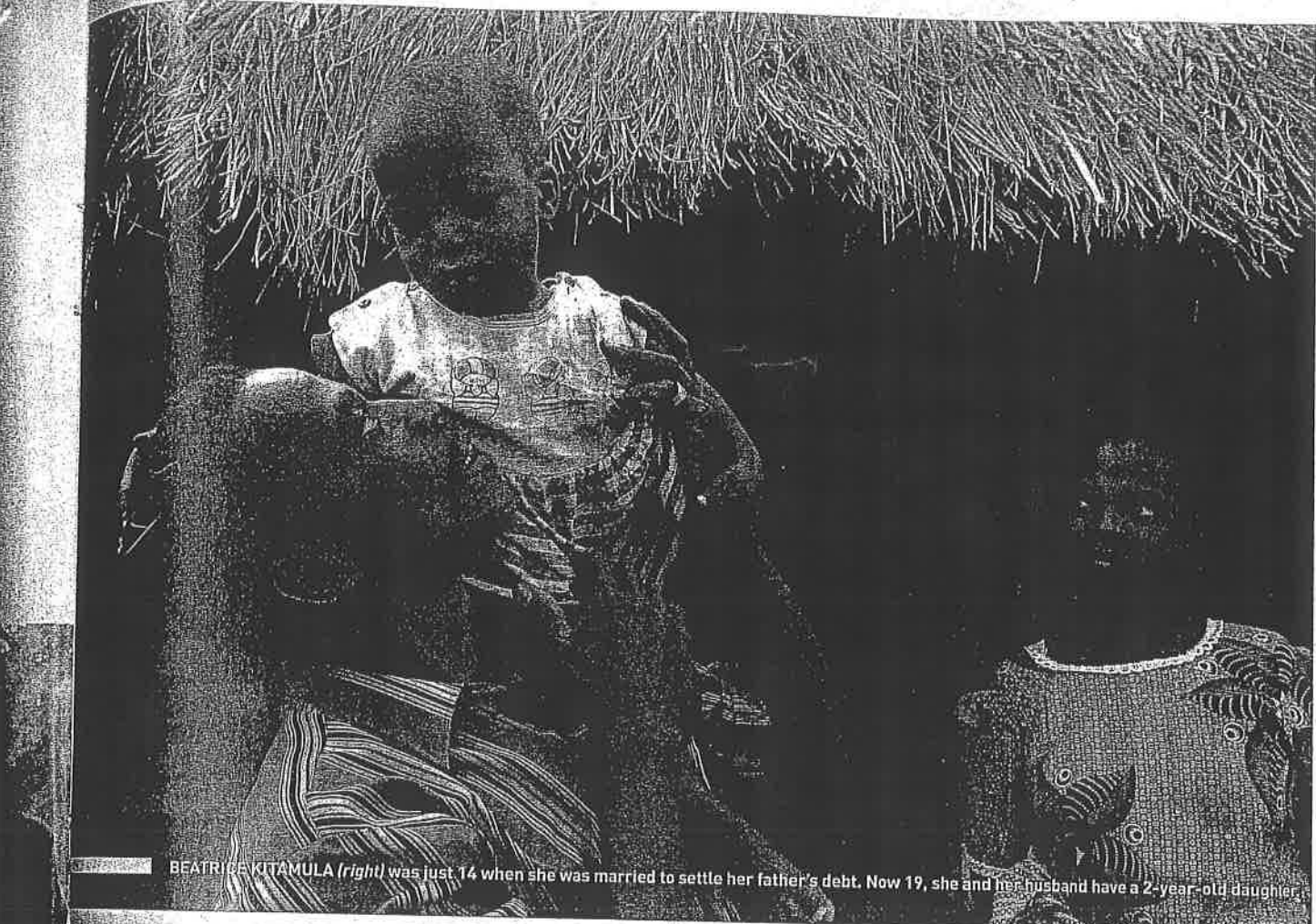
In villages throughout northern Malawi, girls are often married at or before puberty to whomever their fathers choose, sometimes to husbands as much as 50 years older. Many of those same girls choose lifelong misery over divorce because custom decrees that children in patriarchal tribes belong to the father.

In interviews, fathers and daughters here unapologetically explain the rationales for forced, intergenerational unions. Uness Nyambi says she was betrothed as a child so her parents could finance her brother's choice of a bride.



the minimum age for marriage to 18, the legal age in most countries. (Currently, marriages of Malawian girls from 15 to 18 are legal with the parents' consent.) Women's rights advocates say they welcome the proposal, even though its effect would be limited because many marriages in Malawi, and the rest of the sub-Saharan region, take place under traditional customs, not civil law.

Last year, the government trained about 230 volunteers in ways to protect children, especially girls. Volunteers for Malawi's Human Rights Commission, Roman Catholic Church workers, and police victim-protection units also try to intervene. In Iponga village, for example, Mbohesha Mbisa averted a forced marriage to her uncle at age 13



BEATRICE KITAMULA (right) was just 14 when she was married to settle her father's debt. Now 19, she and her husband have a 2-year-old daughter.

last year by walking a half-mile to the local police station, where officers persuaded her father to drop his plans to use her to replace her deceased aunt as a wife and mother. "I was really scared, but I wanted to protect myself," says Mbohesha, now in the sixth grade.

Still, Malawi officials say that this region's growing poverty, worsened by AIDS and a recent crop-killing drought, has put even more young girls at risk of forced marriage.

### MARRIAGE PAYMENTS

"This practice has been there for a long time, but it is getting worse now because there is desperation," says Penston Kilembe, Malawi's director of social-welfare services. "It is particularly prevalent in communities that have been hard hit by famine. Households that can no longer fend for themselves opt to sell off their children to wealthier households."

Women's rights advocates want to abolish marriage payments, or *lobolo*, saying they create a financial incentive for parents to marry off their daughters. In its most benign form, *lobolo* is a token of appreciation from the groom's family to the bride's. At its most egregious, it turns girls

into the human equivalent of cattle. In much of northern Malawi, *lobolo* negotiations are typically all-male discussions of down payments, installments, settlements, and the occasional refund for a wife who runs off.

After Mwaka Simbeye returned to her parents' home, she went back to the second grade. Her body remains that of a child's. At her husband's house, she says in a whisper, "I had to do all the household chores. Washing the plates, cleaning the house, fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking when the first wife wasn't around."

Her father, Mapendo Simbeye, who repaid his \$16 debt with Mwaka, says he took her back after hearing that the police could arrest him. He says he underestimated her, adding, "My daughter is worth more than 2,000 kwacha."

"I did it out of ignorance," he says. "I had five kids, no money and no food. Then Mr. Kalabo wanted the money back so I thought of selling the daughter. I didn't know I was abusing her."

Mwaka's mother looks like an older version of her daughter and is no less shy. "I did object," she says softly. "I said, 'My daughter is very young.' But the control is with the man. The daughters belong to the man." ❶

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