

## Unholy Matrimony: Female Chief in Lesotho Defends and Protects Orphans

By Karen Kartes

### Summary:

Children in the developing world who have lost one or both parents to AIDS are always vulnerable. If you're a girl, however, those risks are even higher and can lead to horrific experiences, such as abduction and rape as a prelude to forced marriage.



*Chief Tlaitai encourages Manepo in her recovery*

Imagine a teenage experience so traumatic that you long for your more innocent days of merely having lost both parents to AIDS.

Manepo\*, 15, an orphan in the southern African nation of Lesotho, has endured such a nightmare on top of her loss. In this nation where nearly 30 percent of the population of two million are HIV+, being an orphan is not unusual. And the stealing of innocence by opportunistic adults – in the name of tradition and marriage – is not uncommon either.

Manepo's father died in 1997 and her mother followed in 2004. She went to live with an aunt raising other children in Sekameng Area Development Program (ADP), and worked hard to do well in school and help with household duties. But at age 14, when a parent's love and protection are especially needed for girls, Manepo became the victim of a cruel tradition involving abduction, rape, and coercion into marriage – a cultural practice outlawed in Lesotho in 2003 but still pervasive throughout the country.

Manepo's ordeal began one afternoon in January 2006 as she walked home from school, on a day seemingly as normal as any other. To earn some small change to help her foster family, Manepo would sell snacks along her 4-mile route. Her walk home was the longest among her classmates, so they would go with her part way before dropping off for their own homes. On this day after her friends had left, a woman approached her and wanted to make a purchase.

"She had only a large bill, and I didn't have enough change," recalls Manepo. "I did not want to lose the sale, so I agreed to follow her to her home where she said she had the right amount."

With no idea that she was stepping into a lure, Manepo was stunned when two men jumped out and grabbed her on the way. "Please, leave me alone, let me go!" she yelled, as they forcibly carried her to the nearby village of Ha Mphofu and into a house. An old woman there looked her over approvingly. This woman and the one who had tricked her offered a hot meal, new clothes, and warm wishes into the family – as well as a freshly made bed for Manepo and her new "husband" – one of her attackers.

"I was confused and recognized no one there," says Manepo, with her eyes downcast and speaking very softly, treading cautiously on painful memories. "I just wanted to go home."

Though now illegal, girls' abduction is common in Lesotho, as it is considered a traditionally acceptable entry into marriage. The abducted girl is usually raped. The "husband's" family will then inform the girl's family that the child is married and therefore they should not look for her. They are asked to suggest an amount that the husband's family should pay to finalize the marriage – usually six cows.

The government of Lesotho has officially outlawed this abusive custom by way of the Sexual Offense Act of 2003 that prohibits men from abducting girls or women whether they are underage or adults. According to the law, men should seek consent of their future wives for marriage. If the woman has not granted consent the act is regarded as abduction and is an offense. Further, for girls under 16, even if they agree to the marriage it is still an offense.

The government, World Vision, and community leaders are working together to communicate and enforce this law – through training and information distribution into rural areas –but much more needs to be done. Deeply entrenched customs like this one require years of education to eradicate.

Manepo, traumatized and missing her home, school, and way of life, was held at the house for over a week by this man and his family members.

"They told me that this was part of the culture, that I should be happy to be getting married," says Manepo. "Also, they told me my new name was to be 'Matabello,' which means 'mother of expectation.' But I didn't want to be a mother."

Unlike some girls who accept their new circumstances and learn to live with their new family, Manepo was upset and resisted the assimilation, especially because it meant she could no longer attend school. Community members nearby heard her crying and reported the case to the local chief. This female chief, Mamohau Tlaitlai, became an advocate for Manepo and was instrumental in notifying and working with local police to enforce the law and return her home.

However, the crimes against Manepo didn't end there – her would-be husband and even her aunt now wanted the marriage transaction completed. She was abducted yet again by the *same* man in October of 2006, according to witnesses (teachers and a principal) at Rabeleng Primary School in Sekameng.

"The first time she was rescued by the community and the second time she ran half naked to school in broad daylight where she was taken to the police," said teacher Makhotso Sehlole. "I provided shelter for her until she was ready to go back home to her foster family."

Manepo's teacher provided care for her because the two families had attempted yet again to proceed with the marriage, which the law stated had to be unraveled. Both parties were reluctant. Manepo's aunt was to have received six cows – an attractive opportunity for a desperately poor woman in rural Lesotho. The abductor and his family were to have received a wife and a worker. Neither side was ready to give up these goals. As an orphan, Manepo had no one to represent her best interests.

Fortunately for Manepo the community members of Ha Mphofu did so, because they understood the purpose and value of the law. They cared enough about Manepo's well-being to act on the injustice they witnessed against her. The fact that she is now back home and in school is a testament to a supportive and vocal community, including schoolteachers, the chief, and World Vision.

Manepo receives regular visits from Sekameng ADP staff and periodically receives an orphan care kit, which includes goods like school supplies, blankets, food, and other necessities. These goods have been helpful in assuring that her aunt will continue guardianship for the time being. Although not a loving environment for Manepo, at least it is a safe one for now. World Vision will monitor Manepo's health for any changes, and encourage HIV testing if appropriate.

"Manepo is a good student. Even though her work has suffered in the last year, she is ranked 8th in her class (of 62 students). She has a future," says teacher Sehlolo.

World Vision is seeking to expand an advocacy campaign in rural Lesotho to bring an end to the traditional practice of abduction and rape. Explaining the harm this practice causes – and inspiring the will to end it – will take time and resources.

Manepo has a quiet but determined nature, and is clinging to *her* vision of her future. She is now in grade seven and will take her primary examination and join high school next year if she passes.

"I am not ready to be a woman because I am still a child. My dream is to complete my education and become a qualified policewoman in order to help combat crime in my village."

With her painful, personal understanding of the law's reach, she knows this is her right.

*\* name has been changed*