

Education as Liberation: One Woman's Journey to Break Traditional Chains and Champion Refugee Rights

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This International Women's Day, as we celebrate the indomitable spirit of women around the globe, we are incredibly proud to share the extraordinary journey of **Aini**.

Aini, a 23-year-old living in a refugee camp, embodies the themes of strength, resilience, and the transformative power of education. Her story is not just about survival; it is about thriving against all odds and becoming a powerful advocate for herself and countless others.

Aini's early life was marked by profound loss. Born in Kenya, to an Ethiopian mother and Somali father, her family sought refuge from conflict. Aini's world was shattered when she lost her grandfather to violence, and shortly after her mother succumbed to illness. Aini faced a future where many expected her to fulfill traditional roles, where girls are often expected to sacrifice their dreams and education to fulfill traditional household roles or contribute financially to the family. Often girls in her community, some as young as 15, are pulled from school for child labor or marriage, ending their chance at a brighter future. And these cultural "chains" often prevent girls from speaking up for themselves or using their voices to influence their communities.

"Growing up in a refugee camp was challenging," she recalls. "The earliest memories are the harsh climate, the lineup for food distribution, and the uncertainty of refugee life."

Yet, even amidst such profound hardship, Aini held on to an unwavering belief: ***"We never chose to be refugees. It is the circumstance that made us refugees... but it does not mean hopelessness."*** This conviction would become the bedrock of her remarkable journey.

For Aini, **education was not just about learning; it was about liberation**. It was her shield against despair and her sword against the limitations placed upon her. She vividly remembers the heartbreak of losing her mother at a young age. Although her father was still alive, her mother's death left her feeling alone and vulnerable in the already challenging environment of refugee life.

Despite immense challenges from limited resources and financial struggles to a community where *"societies expect us as young girls to undergo FGM so that we are pursued, considered suitable for marriage, for the society"* Aini pressed on. She excelled in primary school, achieving the highest marks in her camp and securing a scholarship to secondary school. This achievement was not just personal; it was a beacon of hope for her entire community.

Aini's commitment extended beyond her own studies. She understood that true change meant empowering others. *"I want my story to inspire every girl who never had a supporting community,"* she states. She put this into practice by successfully persuading a parent to send their 15-year-old daughter back to school, preventing child labor and giving the girl a chance at a brighter future. *"Education changed my perception towards life,"* Aini reflects. ***"Through education, I can now speak up for myself and use my voice for other girls."***



Aini's graduation photo from the filmmaking program

Aini's passion for advocacy found a powerful new medium in filmmaking. In 2025, she harnessed her scriptwriting skills to create a compelling documentary. This film did not just tell a story; it shone a light on the critical issue of how climate change impacts refugee youth, particularly girls, in the camps. The documentary garnered awards and provided Aini with a platform to bring the realities of refugees directly to decision-makers in Nairobi.

This experience solidified her understanding of the power of media. She is now actively working with the **Refugee Consortium of Kenya** as a protection monitor. Through her role, she continues to advocate for refugee rights, gender equality, and mental health, using digital platforms to amplify the voices that are often ignored.

Aini's story is a powerful reminder that ***"depiction is not endorsement,"*** but rather, a celebration of human resilience. It challenges us to look beyond labels and see the individual strength, talent, and potential within every refugee girl. Her unwavering belief in education, her courageous advocacy, and her dreams for a more equitable future are an inspiration to us all.

This International Women's Day, let Aini's voice resonate. **Let it remind us of our collective responsibility to support refugee girls and women**, ensuring they have the tools, opportunities, and platforms to achieve their dreams.

What steps can you take in your own community to advocate for gender equality and education?

We are deeply grateful to Aini for courageously sharing her story with us. Your journey of resilience, determination, and advocacy is an inspiration to so many. By opening your heart and showing how education and empowerment can transform lives, you have given a voice to countless girls facing similar challenges.

Thank you for reminding us of the strength, potential, and hope that exists in every refugee girl. Your story is not just a testament to your courage, but a call for all of us to support and uplift others.