

Mahelet

Whoever meets Mahelet* in Desta Mender—the village of joy—notices how delicate and diminutive she is. She is about 1.50 m tall and around 18 years of age. No-one speaks her language, Basketanja, here, because it is only spoken in Mahelet's homeland. What is Mahelet, a young, unmarried woman without any family, doing so far from home? This is unusual in Ethiopia and gives rise to suspicion.

Difficult events, which no young girl should have to go through, led Mahelet to a special clinic which she is dependent upon now as an adult; she can no longer return home.

Mahelet grew up in a simple village, where her parents were farmers. She has a brother and a sister. Mahelet never had the opportunity to go to school. The nearest health centre was a five-hour hike away. She was barely 14 years old when she got pregnant. Prenatal care was completely unknown in this remote region. Mahelet had lived with her husband's family since her marriage. This meant that she worked for his parents and siblings, so even during her pregnancy she did all of the usual—and heavy—tasks expected from a woman, such as fetching water from the river, gathering wood, cooking and serving all of the family members. Her own parents had passed away. She had been very close to her father; he seems to have helped her quite a bit and she still mourns for him.

As is common in her village, Mahelet gave birth to her child at home. The contractions began at the end of her pregnancy. The female members of the family and neighbours accompanied her during childbirth. Mahelet suffered for many long days which changed her young life forever. The childbirth was severely obstructed and her child was stillborn after seven days of labour. She appeared hardly conscious when the health worker came to pull out the dead child with his bare hands.

Mahelet's life hung on a fine thread. She survived, but did not recover from the stress and strain of the childbirth and had severe abdominal pain. Because there was no money to pay for transportation to a hospital, her family waited. Nine days later they brought her to the hospital anyway, where the doctors established that she had obstetric fistula—her excrement passed continuously and uncontrollably through an opening which had developed in her vagina. Mahelet stayed at the hospital for only four days, because it cost money to stay there, and no-one could really help her and stop the incontinence. So she returned home.

The 15-year-old girl's suffering was immeasurable and left her without hope. Mahelet stank, she was ill and weak and was unable to return to a normal life. There was no way to relieve her condition, because her family is very poor and does not have access to medical facilities or hygienic resources. Even the water was used sparingly, as the women had a three hour's walk to and from the river. Mahelet did not have the strength to take care of herself, nor to work as she had done previously.

She had been at home for a year when the members of a local evangelical church heard of her situation and offered help. A faint hope arose when she heard that she might be healed in the capital, Addis Ababa. But how would she get there? The church was prepared to pay for her transportation. She travelled for five days until she reached the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital, the special clinic for obstetric injuries. There, for the first time, she saw that she wasn't the only one with incontinence. She met many girls from the different regions of the country who had gone through the same experiences as she, all of whom hoped for healing. The medical examinations showed that the hole in her colon could be closed with surgery. But the bladder fistula was so large that Mahelet no longer had a bladder. The only option was a stoma, which means that the urine flows into an exterior plastic bag through an artificial opening in the abdominal wall. This was tragic news for the young woman. She could regain strength, she would no longer be permanently surrounded by an odour, but her life wouldn't be the same again, and she couldn't go back home. Mahelet stayed at the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital and had several operations. The rehabilitation lasted several months. During this time, she learned how to read and write and made friends with other women. She broke all ties with her husband and his family.

Today, her home is Desta Mender, which lies in the rolling hills outside of Addis Abeba. This village consists of ten houses which accommodate up to ten women who have not been able to be completely healed. Mahelet has learned how to live with the stoma. She is greatly relieved that the focus is no longer on her health condition and that she can look forward to other interests and activities. She is currently undergoing training at the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital's tailor training centre. Her greatest wish is to visit her sister and brother in the south of the country, whom she has not seen for two years.

* name changed