

## **My story, by Gabriel (chosen name)**

I am a child from a small west African country called the Gambia. Both my parents are from the same tribe. I am from a small town where fishing is the main industry. My father cooks and sells meat at the ferry terminal.

I am the first-born male child of my mother. I have a younger brother and two younger sisters. I used to live with my father and my mother, as well as my brother and my two sisters. My father abandoned us to our mother about 3 to 4 years ago, with no assistance.

By the way, my father married two wives, and my mother was the second wife. My father's first wife has four children, and two of them are older than me.

I started going to school when I was three years old. I first started with the nursery level, where I spent three years, before I was promoted to the primary school at the age of seven. It was during my primary school years that I started to understand my situation bit by bit. At this time, I started doing some physical work, like fetching fire wood, helping my mother with some household chores, and at times I also followed my father when he went to work.

My mother used to sell breakfast and dinner some few meters away from the ferry terminal. I helped her in selling and cooking dinner and breakfast during my leisure time. She couldn't afford the cost of hiring a maid to help her, so we all helped her so that me and my younger brother and sisters could grow up a bit.

I spent six years in the primary school, and after passing my grade six exams I was then promoted to grade seven in the junior level. However, after I got promoted to the junior school, my family start facing some difficulties because the relationship between my mom and dad got strange and complicated. My parents were on bad terms at that moment, and they ended up separating. I was 12 years old.

After the separation of my mother and father, I wasn't able to continue with my schooling anymore. My father had abandoned us. I stopped at grade 8, because by then my mother wasn't able to afford my school fees. She was the only one taking care of us. It was at this time that I started following the fishermen to the seaside, to catch and sell fish to make life easier for my mother.

It felt good to go to the seaside and join the fishermen in catching fish. At times I learnt how to be the captain on a boat. It was at this time that the idea of finding a way to Libya came to me in the offing. I found it necessary to give it a try, because I wanted to help my mum and also my uncle. My uncle has been working tirelessly to try to help my mum and

to support my future. He has been wonderful to us. He helped my mother to take good care of us all, making me very proud.

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The story of my life from 2014 to 2015 will always stand out as "red letter days" for me: unforgettable moments in my life. The journey to make my life easier has actually been the most difficult experience I have ever faced in my life.

I started this secret journey without my mother noticing. At first she thought that I was fishing at the seaside, but when the boat returned to our village my mum couldn't find me. After several months had passed, she thought that I had died.

The first country I went to after leaving Gambia was Senegal, which neighbours Gambia. After spending several days in Senegal I then departed for Mali, a country where I faced a lot of difficulties. My money ran out in Mali, and I wasn't able to continue my journey. I stayed there for three months and six days before heading to the next country. In Mali I did some physical work, including labouring jobs and helping people to carry their goods to various places. This gave me the required amount of money to continue my journey.

From Mali, I needed to go to Burkina Faso. It took two days to get there. I didn't want to waste any time in Burkina Faso, but unfortunately I wasn't able to pass through all the checkpoints without being stopped. It was at the second to last border point in a place called Kantchari where the police stopped me and took all of my money. I stayed in Kantchari for some days because the police detained us for one week.

Eventually the police allowed us to pass through the check points in Burkina Faso, and I then continued my journey toward Agadez in Niger. Before arriving in Agadez I reached Niamey, the capital of Niger, where I spent a few weeks. It was here that I experienced even more difficulties in life. I had to sleep on the street and at times it was very difficult for me to eat because I couldn't always find work. Eventually I was able to move on to Agadez.

In Agadez things were also very hard for me, because I arrived during the rainy season and at that time it was difficult to get a job. I stayed there for less than a month in total, and for a while without doing anything. I wasn't able to look after myself well, because it was difficult for me to buy food and to pay for my transport in the city. Luckily, one day when I was on the street looking for work I met a connection man, who helped arrange to take people to Libya. After meeting with him, he told me that I should come and stay with him - so I did. I was working under him, helping him with household chores like cooking and sweeping his room. Also, at times I would go and find him more customers who wanted to travel to Libya. We were doing those kind of things together until one day

he told me that he would be moving me to Libya also, and finally he did that.

After leaving Agadez for Libya, we first had to face crossing the Sahara Desert. This took a number of days and we had a lot of problems and difficulties before reaching Libya. Unfortunately, as we left Agadez our 4 x 4 Toyota pick-up broke down. We were left in the desert in Niger without our driver, until he came back to repair the car. We spent two days there, sleeping in the desert. We waited for our driver until our food and drink were all gone, and we felt extremely hungry and thirsty. Fortunately, one passer-by in a car saw us and came to speak to us. We explained all our problems to him, after which he gave us some food and water to drink. Following the return of our driver we continued our journey to Libya. It took a total of eight or nine days to reach Libya.

When we entered Libya the first place we reached was Qatrun. We understood that we would only spend one night there, before continuing our journey. Unluckily we were kidnapped by some Arab people there, and we spent three months in their hands. They kidnapped us thinking that we were the group that borrowed money from their driver – but that wasn't us. With the belief that it was, they tortured us almost everyday, pouring water on us. Almost all kinds of mistreatments were done to us during our stay in their hands.

One day they decided to give us a mobile phone so that we could call our families and ask them to send money for our release. Fortunately, during that process one man came and told them that we were not the people who took the drivers money. He told them he had found the group that took the drivers money. That was how we were freed from their hands. Later on they regretted all their mistreatment of us and asked for our forgiveness. Then they then took us to Sabha without even asking for payment. I personally only spent only 28 days in Sabha, because by that time there was a conflict between two rival groups and tensions remained high. So with the instability in Sabha I moved on to Tripoli, the capital city of Libya, which I believed to be a little better.

It was on my arrival to Tripoli that I called my mum to let her know that I was alive. When my mum heard my voice she couldn't believe it, and even started crying because she thought that I had died a long time ago. I then asked her to help me by sending some amount of money, but she told me that things were very hard for her because at that time she was the only one taking care of the family.

I was managing okay in Tripoli, and often connected with my mum at that time. Then one day I met with one Arab man who just seemed to like me, and he decided to give me a job. Early every morning I went to the man's place to wash his car and sweep his compound. Then he would give me some money and food to eat. I was doing this kind of work under that man for three good months, until in my fourth month in Tripoli things started getting harder. This was due to insecurity and instability in the environment in Tripoli.

Finally, conflict broke out in Tripoli. It was not safe anymore for living. Everyone's life was in danger; it is not safe to live in a place where there is a war. Then the people started taking to the Mediterranean Sea and crossing to Italy again. In order to protect myself and save my life, I eventually made up my mind. With the little money I had, I would pay to take the dangerous sea journey to Italy. That is how I came to Europe.

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I saved the money that I got from working for the Arab man to pay for my boat journey. The man who I paid found a taxi so that I was able to get out of Tripoli. It's far away to get to the boat, and they hid me inside the taxi so the police officer could not see me. I went to a connection house, where we spent almost two weeks before taking to the Mediterranean Sea.

A connection house is a place near the sea in which people are packed for some days before travelling. It consists of buildings meant for only people traveling. During our time in the connection house, we couldn't even sleep. The only thing that we could do was sit, because the place was so congested. I personally faced many nightmares there, because the place was so uncomfortable and we ate just once a day.

After some days the weather was good enough to take to the sea. It was by that time, on one special night, that they came for us and we went to the sea by foot. On that night at the seaside the connection man and his men fixed the rubber boat. We were there for an hour and a half. Once the boat was fixed, we carried it to the water and started to get in one by one. The connection man chose one person to be Captain of the boat. After everyone had entered safely, the connection men ordered us to start moving. That was how we finally left Libya, going towards our destination.

There were 135 people on board. We were a mixture of nationalities, with just two women. The Captain had a phone and kept in contact with the connection man throughout the journey. We were comfortably sailing across the water until we totally left the Libyan sea. During our second day at sea we entered international waters. Then we started having some problems with the boat. There was a hole in the front, and water started entering. Thank God - we were so lucky because the place that broke on the boat wasn't too serious or big. Also people were so understanding of each other on the boat, which helped so much.

We had travelled far from Libya when this happened. We were lucky, an Italian navy ship passed us and we were rescued. We were transferred to the big ship where they provided food and medication. After one day there, we were transferred to a Guardia Costiera boat,

which took us to Lampedusa, Italy, in less than an hour. That's how we finally reached Europe, and our lives were saved.

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The day we were rescued by the Italian navy we were all transferred to the big ship that was going to a small island in Italy called Lampedusa. We reached Lampedusa on Friday afternoon, and travelled by bus from the port to the camp.

They kept us inside the camp, where they kept searching us. Later they prepared a lot of things for us. The first thing they did was give out food for us to eat, and allowed us to rest. In the evening they started to give out phone cards so that we could inform our parents that we had arrived at Lampedusa.

Everyday, they cooked food for everyone - in the morning, afternoon and evening time. A week after I arrived we celebrated the Eid-Mubarak (Tobaski) day on Lampedusa.

I was fingerprinted in the centre. Eventually, after a week or so they started separating the people who arrived on the same boat. They took people from my boat to Sicilia, separating people between different towns and villages.

The key difficulty I faced there is that all the people who I came with the same boat were transferred, except for me alone. There were other people I met, I stayed with them over the two weeks I was there until later they transferred me too. That's how I managed until I got to Sicilia. The centre I am in now is a good camp to be in, because they give us each a bed to sleep in and we can play football and volleyball in the centre grounds.

My friends who I came with on the same boat, we used to sit together and asked questions to each other, and about the country we belong to – that is how we coped until we got to Europe. I am not in contact with them any more.