

## I'll Cry With You: Finding Hope in Kenyan Refugee Camps

Interview with Mary Obara



*"What really breaks my heart and what depresses me often is when I get to the reception centre in the refugee camp."*

*"No human being deserves to stay in such conditions because there is no dignity."*

**We all have injustices that break our heart, those moments of not being able to bear standing on the sidelines to watch things that we want desperately to see change in this world.**

**Kenyan refugee aid worker, Mary Obara, faces these moments every day.**

**Today on *Messages of hope*, we'll be hearing Mary's story of bringing dignity and hope to refugees across the world. We'll also ask what can we learn about hope from these stories?**

### **Intro to Mary and her background**

**Emma:** Today we're talking to Mary Obara, who works for the aid organisation, Lutheran World Federation, in the countries of Kenya and Somalia.

Mary, could you tell us about yourself and what you do in Kenya and Somalia?

**Mary:** Thank you for having me. So my name is Mary Obara. I'm a Kenyan, and I work in Kenya and Somalia program for the Lutheran World Federation managing the programs that we implement for refugees in Kenya and for internally displaced persons in Somalia.

**Emma:** How did you come into this role and line of work?

**Mary:** It's been a journey. It could begin quite early in my life and how that shaped me, so perhaps I would start with my growing up.

**Emma:** Yeah, please tell us what your growing up was like.

**Mary:** Yeah, so I grew up in the seventies at a period when it was not really easy for any African country at that time, but some light had come through, there was some, Christianity and there was some education taking place. Particularly for my mother, she did go to school because of the church and because she went to school, that rubbed off

for the next generation, which was us. Went through school, got very protected in boarding school. I went through university and graduated as a teacher.

I taught for five years as a secondary school teacher. I was in a rural setting and when my baby came along, I didn't quite think my daughter would fit in. So, I found my way to the city, that is Nairobi. I knew that would give my daughter a better chance at education, and it did indeed.

So, while in Nairobi, I taught for three years, got into the airline industry, which was fancy, but really did not sit well with me. Worked with the UN – fancy again, but did not sit down well with me. Then I went on to development work within the Kenyan space, comfortable space working with small enterprises, but not so challenging.

My breakthrough came when I went to South Sudan with the Lutherans. The experience there was so profound. I got to see firsthand conflict setting, it really changed my life. It grounded me. It took me back to basics. And that's when I realised what human beings can do to others and what change other human beings can make for others.

I had a stint of three years in South Sudan. And then after that, I couldn't work, not with human beings. I came back home, worked with my farm, working with animals and plants, and I was comfortable.

And so after my nine years just doing my thing in the farm and giving some consultancies, I saw a chance again in the Lutheran organisation, but in the Kenya office. And I told myself, 'I can go in, give back to society and come back to my farm.' And I went in 2021. It's 2026, 5 years and counting.

## **The situation in Kenya**

**Emma:** So, tell us about the situation in Kenya at the moment.

**Mary:** Kenya right now is supposed to be a lower middle income country, but the reality of poverty is there. But compared to our neighbours, we are relatively stable. And because of that, we are hosting so many displaced persons in our country and we have not chased them away. Yes, we've had instances where the government wants to chase them away, but the general Kenyan population does not really subscribe to that.

**Emma:** And what drives your passion for working with refugees in Kenya?

**Mary:** Because I got an education, I really would like others to have the chance. It's not easy. There's so many barriers to education in our context. It's either you don't have school fees, you don't have uniform, there's no school near you. For the refugees, it's simply too many barriers. They're displaced, they're traumatized. So just giving that chance for anyone to access education, because I'm deeply an educationist and I believe education really opened doors for many, especially in my context. So that really drives me – to give someone else a chance because I was given that chance.

The second thing that drives me is my faith. I've seen what human beings can do to others, which is bad, and I know what good human beings who believe in God can do for others. So, I feel a moral responsibility to make the little change I can in my context, it may be as little as just giving water bottle to someone or just opening a door for someone and it just gives me joy.

## Refugee Reception Centres

**Emma:** So Mary, you've mentioned there are many refugees coming into Kenya at the moment, are there any specific issues that you're seeing that breaks your heart or urges you into action?

**Mary:** Yes, what really breaks my heart and what depresses me often is when I get to the reception centre in the refugee camp, which are centres where newly arriving people, newly arriving asylum seekers have to report to get their data taken before they are sent out to the communities to settle. And those centres can really be depressing because people arrive, they're very depressed, and you cannot just treat them like numbers, you have to listen to them, listen to their stories. And some of the stories, the experiences they've seen really make us break down.

The conditions in the reception centre are not that good, because these are just open spaces where people come in and they're just happy to settle in because they have run away from something worse. But no human being deserves to stay in such conditions because there is no dignity. There's no privacy, male and female, children and adult, they're all mixed up. But what makes us happy is they are happy to be here. Because for one, they're not hearing the gunshots, for two, they're not going hungry, they have access to some basic services like water. They can have a shower, they can feed and they're happy. So when they're happy, we are also happy. But then we feel the moral duty to make their conditions much, much better.

**Emma:** And how long would someone be in that reception centre space? Is it just a quick passing through?

**Mary:** Yeah, ideally it was designed to be a quick passing through – two weeks maximum, but of late, it takes a long time because of the dynamics of the funding in the sector. It's taking sometimes up to six months.

So, without funding then we cannot buy the basic necessities any family needs to relocate to the community because when they come, they're actually empty handed. So you've got to get them from the spoon to the basin, to everything that they need. To a roof over their head. So the basic package that we need has to be given by someone, usually the international community. And when there's no money to buy such a package, then they stay on.

Then secondly, it's become more difficult to get extra land to settle them on because of the numbers. So, the host community has been gracious, but the more they come, the more land you need. And thirdly, the third dynamic that has made them even stay there for six months to one year is a phenomenon called Onward Movers. So Onward Movers are this group of refugees and asylum seekers who are moving to seek for better services within the region. So, you can get people moving from the Uganda Refugee camps into the Kenya refugee camps because maybe the Uganda refugee camps have reduced the food rations, and then they come to the Kenyan refugee space.

And because of the kind of refugee management policy we have, we do not recognise you as a refugee within the Kenyan borders if Kenya was not your first stop.

But I think progress has been made because the countries involved, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia have been able to sit down and almost agreed that we could accept them in and let them stay because fundamentally they're from within the region. So more and more, the Onward Movers are getting resettled in the community, and we hope that the time that is taken at the reception centre goes back to two weeks.

## Providing support to refugees

**Emma:** Okay, so let me get this right, your organisation has to provide everything for these refugees? Space, food, shelter, clothing.

**Mary:** Yes. And psychosocial support. Very important.

**Emma:** What is psychosocial support?

**Mary:** So when you talk of psychosocial support, this is support that perhaps if they were in their home setting, an auntie or a husband or a father would give. So that lifeline that makes you really feel like, 'yes, there is hope. I'm still valued. I can still live.' It's nothing medical. It's, 'I'll cry with you. I'll pray with you. If you need water, I'll give you a cup of water. To give you the space to heal.' We are not medics. We just give that immediate support that makes you more comfortable. And that is perhaps just the basics.

## Resettling refugees

**Emma:** So what then is the process for a refugee after the reception centre?

**Mary:** So after the reception centre, we've entered you into the government system. You're given a number, then you're given basic utilities including netting, beddings, slight tarpaulin for your head.

You are located a piece of land, within the refugee community. You go there, you pitch your tent and you start living. The tarpaulins really come in handy. Then after a while they can get sticks, they can get iron sheets, they can put a roof off their head, and no one stops you from even building a stone house if you're able to.

**Emma:** On average, how many families would be in these kind of areas?

**Mary:** Right now, we are talking of a caseload of over 800,000 refugees in Kenya. 450 of them upwards are in the Dadaab refugee camp, mostly from Somalia, and another 300 to 400 are in the Kakuma refugee camp. So, these are really huge numbers compared to the host community who are maybe 50,000.

So it's many times the number of people, and you can imagine the services. So the services are really strained. If it's school, if it's hospital, if it's road, everything is completely strained.

**Emma:** Is the idea that that is now their home, in a sense, place to live? Is there a further place that they eventually hope to get to, or this is it? This is their spot?

**Mary:** For some people it is home, they've grown up there, they've gone through the Kenyan system, they have absolutely no knowledge of their original home. But ideally it should be that you come in, once your home area becomes safe, you can go back home. But safe now is relative.

**Emma:** Are there solutions coming about for where these people can go next?

**Mary:** Of course the best solution is to go back home, which no one is forced to. If you feel comfortable going home, people have gone back home, and they've stayed home. If you go back home, we facilitate you, we give you transport, we give you a ration for six months, and once you're on the other side, you are on your own.

Then the second solution is resettlement. And this is thanks to the international community. Countries like Canada, America, Australia do receive some of these refugees into their

homes, into their economy, but this is really minimal, 1%, at most. So resettlement is an option that most refugees like and look forward to, but it's also very minimal.

And the other third option is integration. So you could be integrated in the local community. This is a challenging one because it comes with a lot of social cohesion issues: We have the host community who usually feel the refugees are more favoured than them. And then we have to have acceptance by the host community and the larger community. And there is political dynamics, where you have a population, a foreign population that is larger than your own population. It could easily mean that if anything were to get into the democratic voting, then the foreign community would easily topple the local community. And so, the Kenyan government has been careful with the integration bit. But this requires a lot of policy change, structural change, removing all the barriers that there have been that hindered such an integration. And so it's a process. It's gonna be a 15-year process, and hopefully by the time we reach year 15, then the Kenyans would be living side by side with their neighbours.

## **Finding hope**

**Emma:** Do you ever feel overwhelmed by how much struggle and challenges there are?

**Mary:** So many times, it is overwhelming. And there are days I'm really low, especially when I go down to the field and just see what people are going through. It's so profound when you see or hear and witness some cases.

We do cry and we pray and we are like, what is the end of all this? But then there are also brighter sides when you go there and you find a child who is now walking because of the intervention, a lady who's gone through school, or a new school structure that is so beautiful and girls in uniform and boys in uniform.

Yeah. So, there are times you're quite happy, but more often it's overwhelming and we simply do what we can.

**Emma:** In the refugee camps, are there times of celebration and fun?

**Mary:** Yes, actually, the refugee camps just operate like out here, just like other communities. We have culturally organised dances where the community just decide, today we are going to dance, we are celebrating a wedding or something. We do organise football tournaments, we celebrate international days. So we have fun as well.

## **The role of faith for Mary**

**Emma:** Are there any moments where you see the role of faith and God working in these situations? Maybe for you personally or as a community?

**Mary:** Absolutely. If you don't have the faith in you, you will harm your fellow human being, and that's where it all starts. And at a personal level and with my colleagues that I work with, we do a lot of prayer. It's a big responsibility that we have. We are using people's money. People who had to maybe forego a meal, or maybe forego buying clothes to give us that amount. And we always pray that we make the right decisions.

Every time we remember whom we are working for, we know it's God's work, really. It's not about us, it's about people who have seeking refuge and we have a responsibility to take care of them.

## How can Australians support African refugees?

**Emma:** Kenya is quite far away from us here in Australia. Are there any ways that we can still help out?

**Mary:** Indeed, it's far away, actually it's 10,553 kilometres. That is a long distance. Yet we feel the impact of how you support us. \$20 in Australia might seem little money. That's a whole lot of intervention in our context. And evidence of change is what's happening in Somalia right now because we got into Somalia as the Lutherans, and other organisations are in Somalia as it opens up. Of course, the whole global peace missions with the African Union, the European Union, supporting the Somali government to just stabilise. It has an impact because after stabilisation, it opens up the space for humanitarian intervention. And humanitarian intervention means people stay at home, which is a best option. And that's all because we have the support.

Supporting and just being aware, just caring that someone somewhere, is struggling much more is a good thing and I find a lot in the Australians. So we really don't take that for granted and we do value the support that we get from Australia.

**Emma:** Is that a challenge to continue asking for funding and support from people?

**Mary:** Yeah, I think the world really likes to jump onto the newest thing in the news. And then the protracted cases, like the refugee camps in Kenya get down the ladder, they become less and less important, less visible. So just being on the table, making sure the conversation goes on so that protracted nature is never forgotten again.

## Hope for the future

**Emma:** So Mary, where do you see hope for the future?

**Mary:** There is hope for the future. We just need to sustain the support. There is hope that people, the refugees will return home. There is hope that there'll be integration in case there is no return home option, because the Kenyan government has now opened its space. And it's challenging, but if everyone is on the table, there is hope that we shall see better things to come.

**Emma:** Well, thank you, Mary for sharing about what's going on across the world and how we can be part of bringing hope to refugees. Do you have a final message for people listening in today?

**Mary:** Just to tell the public that our refugees are happy. They're happy because they get services, however minimal. They're grateful. They're secure. And I think security is top. If you're not hearing a gunshot, you're safe. If someone is giving you food however little, it is food and they're happy. And don't forget us. I think there is need, and until such a time that we have a durable solution, which will come, there is hope. We hope that we shall still be in this together.

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