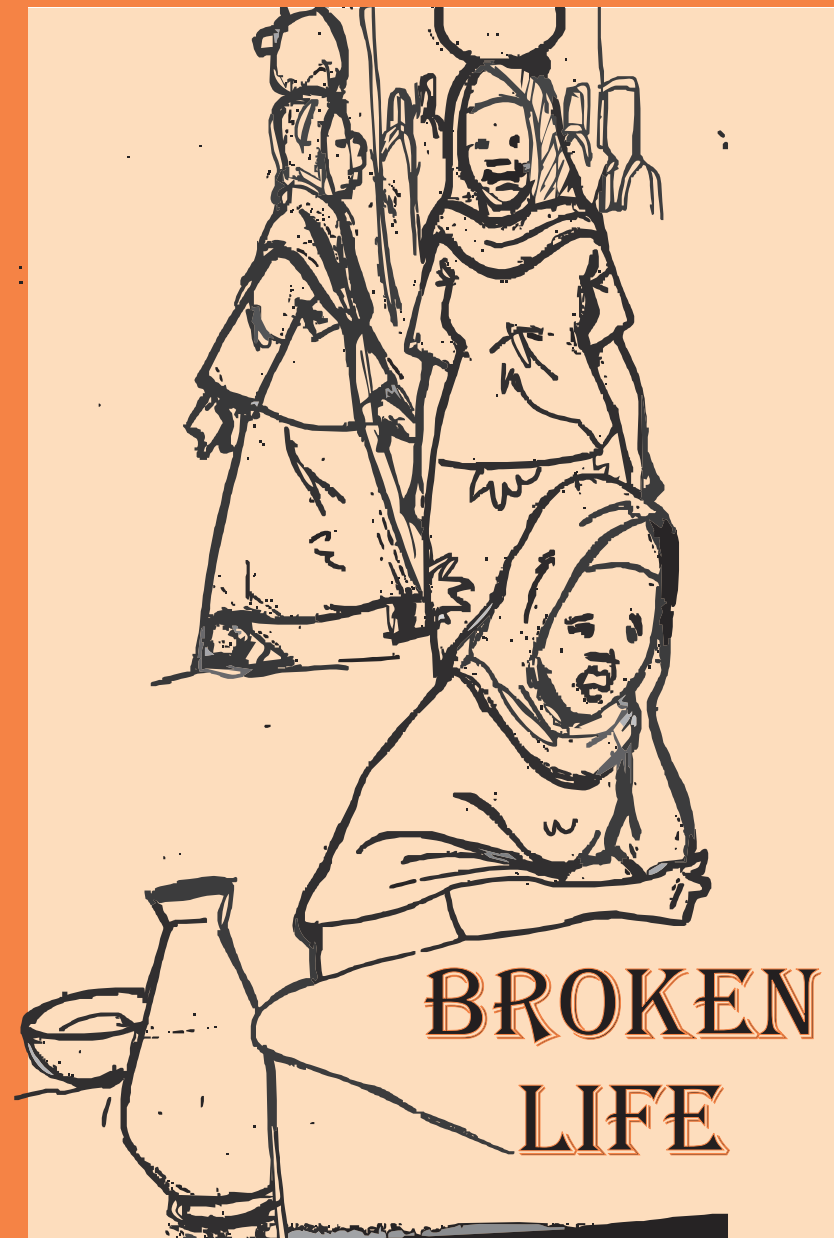


Her uncles had found a forty-two year old polygamist, Mallam Kanto, as a husband for Rakiya. When approached, Rakiya's mother initially looked at them aghast. She said "I can't imagine such a small girl living with a forty something year old man"

The suspenseful true-life story of two teenage girls given out for early marriage.

**Action
Health Incorporated**



A story of two adolescent wives

Broken Life

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Health Incorporated**

Action Health Incorporated is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to the promotion of adolescent health and development. We serve as an advocated and catalyst for change in the present poor status of adolescents' well-being by increasing public awareness and implementing innovative education, healthcare and youth development programmes.

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DEDICATION

*To girls whose dreams it appears will never see the
light of day*

Acknowledgments

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I wish to urge all who read this novel to become champions in the fight against gender inequality in our society.

Adenike Esiet
Executive Director
Action Health Incorporated

Prologue

Early marriage in its entirety holds several implications for the health and well-being of the young bride, some of which are low educational status, restricted social participation, limited access to health information and services, vesico-vaginal fistula, high mortality rate for both mother and child, just to mention a few.

The 2003 National Demographic Health Survey shows that early marriage is prevalent across Nigeria, and the 2005 National HIV/ AIDS & Reproductive Health Survey (NARHS) shows specifically that seventy-three percent of girls within ages 13 and 19 are married in the North-East States of Nigeria.

The 2006 Population census report puts the figure of adolescents in Nigeria at 31,035,369 of Nigeria's total population of over 140 million people. Adolescent girls contribute to 50% of this population. Overall, more than 2 million adolescent girls are married in Nigeria. There are however, regional variations, with many more married adolescent girls married in the

North-east and North-west States (73%) of Nigeria as against only 5% who are married in the South-West and South-South States of the country. Reasons given for early marriage in Nigeria include poverty, marriage alliances and transactions, as well as prevention of pre-marital sexual activities.

The stories of Fatima and Rakiya (real names withheld) highlight the ordeals many married adolescent girls encounter.

Case studies of two married adolescents were conducted in specific communities of Adamawa and Yobe States in North-Eastern Nigeria. Findings from these studies revealed salient characteristics with no significant disparity from those of earlier surveys conducted on married adolescents in the same region, namely: marriage to older husbands, low educational attainment, low social status, limited participation in decisions that affect their well being, limited access to health services, increased risk of maternal and infant mortality, and increased vulnerability to STIs including HIV.

In view of these findings, we felt it was imperative that we brought to the public the stories of the two young married girls by condensing the case studies anecdote.

Young girls are encumbered with a load of challenges in marriage. There's the pain of being married to someone so much older, maybe without love and consequently cannot open up a discussion with; the confusion of what to do in the event of a pregnancy and possibly the sadness of being rejected even by the husband in the instance of a permanent health challenge.

This publication synthesizes the challenges encountered, as well as widespread yearnings of married adolescents. Nevertheless, our intention is not only to tell the stories of these young girls, but to also use this medium to get community stakeholders and all significant others geared up towards actions that will bring about an improvement in the standard of living of these married adolescents, their health and well-being, socio-economic status, and consequently improve the life choices they make. We also hope that this will bring about improved communication amongst wives and their husbands, as

well as inform policies and programming specifically targeted at married adolescents.

Thus, the need to take stock of the cost of denying young girls valuable opportunities that can benefit the society.

Chapter 1

The village of Gaini is situated in a plain vast land crisscrossed by a narrow stream. It is bordered to the East by Dengasa, to the West by Fangge and to the South by Mashin. It has a population of about 8000 people in not more than 1000 households of small huts. These huts which are round-shaped structures of mud walls, with a wooden pole in the centre of each, holding up the grass roof. The floor is just a rough surface in the majority of the houses while a few, owned by the 'wealthy' in the community, are cemented. In the event of wind, dust or rain, the rooms serve as kitchen as well as the living room. The smoke escapes through the roof, and the only opening is a low doorway through which one has to stoop. The huts are generally grouped together in a residential area that is some distance away from the grazing farm land around Gaini. It is mostly treeless except for some patches of shrubs. The best part of the land is owned by the rich people in the city of Damargas, while a small part is owned by 'wealthy' ones in the village.

The village is administered by a system of government,

headed by a title holder called Lawan. The village comprises of different wards. The ward head is called Mai Anguwa. The Lawan reports to the District Head called Hakimi who is responsible for the administration of a number of villages. The Hakimi reports to the Emir who oversees a number of districts.

Maize, what we call garin masara , sorghum, beans and pumpkin form the largest portion of our diet not necessarily for any nutritional merits but because they are affordable. The wealthier families in the village supplement their diets with bread, tea and sugar, but for most people in Gaini, these are exotic luxuries far beyond their means. The people of Gaini village are predominantly peasant farmers. But they also engage in some petty trading, carpentry, bricklaying, firewood selling, water selling, tailoring, shoe shining, cobbling and local pedicure. The women engage in preparing and selling cooked food such as tuwo, porridge (kunu), and roasted groundnuts. Usually, they have their children and wards hawk these in the streets.



Every rainy season, these small businesses come to a stop because of flooding which has worsened over the years. Whenever there is a flood, the inhabitants are forced to relocate or seek shelter with relations and friends in other villages in the hinterland. This 'annual movement' means that the children are deprived of continuous schooling. With economic activities thus stifled or truncated, it is no wonder that a high poverty level exists in Gaini village.

The community lacks basic social amenities required of modern society. Gaini does not have a modern health facility as its only clinic is dilapidated. The nearest one is a general hospital located just about 10 kilometres from the village in Damargas, the closest city to Gaini. There are no roads in the village, only footpaths through the grass worn away by barefooted boys. In a situation of emergency, one must make a four-kilometre trek to the highway in order to find some transport to Damargas. This could be a lorry, a bus, a bicycle and sometimes a donkey. Obviously, many emergency cases rarely survive. The people have a strong faith in the efficacy of their traditional medicine



and hold an even stronger belief that God is always in control.

There is no pipe-borne water in Gaini. Water for domestic use is supplied by water vendors popularly called mai-ruwa, who source for water from wash boreholes that are situated in the water-logged areas. Such water is often not hygienic for human consumption.

The only primary school in the village has rusty and perforated zinc roof. Many of the classrooms are bare and children sit on the cracked floor. The school was built in the time of colonial administration but with independence teachers migrated or went back to their villages. Unfortunately most Gaini indigenes barely embraced western-style education. Now that government is insisting that Local Councils should provide education at the grass root, some semblance of school activity sometimes takes place.

The school which is located close to the home of the Lawan is more like a registration centre. On school

Chapter 2

days, children wait long enough for the roll call and thereafter disappear in search of daily bread. This is necessary given the endemic poverty and large families. Also, within the polygamous family structure, each wife must fend for her children. Leaving school is therefore a duty expected of Gaini children.

There are two privately owned Qur'anic (Islamiyya) schools to meet the needs of this predominantly Muslim community. These Islamiyya schools have incorporated some aspects of Western education. So those who are diligent can attain some degree of literacy. There is neither a vocational centre nor a secondary school in Gaini to enable the youth acquire relevant skills for the 21st century. With the coming of Non-Governmental Organizations and Cooperative Union of Farmers Organization to the village, there is hope that educational activities and even commercial activities will improve.

My father is the *Lawan* of our village. That means that he is the village head of Gaini. He is popularly known as Alhaji Bappah and at 77yrs has been the village head for twelve years. That was after he retired from the civil service. Headship of the village is strictly by inheritance. It is the birthright of the eldest surviving son in the family. Although I can't remember the chain of village heads in Gaini, I do know that my father's father, which is my Grandfather Abdul was at one time the village head. In between the village headship of my Grandfather and my father, there were two village heads. Both of them were my father's elder brothers but my father is the eldest surviving son of my grandfather now.

Among his brothers, my father was the only one who went to school. He had his primary and secondary education in Yerwa. His excellent result earned him immediate admission to read pharmacy at Ahmadu

Bello University, Zaria. Since Gaini did not have a health facility or hospital, there was no place for him to work there on qualifying as a pharmacist. He therefore settled for a job in the city of Yerwa.

My father married my mother from the village while he was still a student. She, like him, is an indigene of Gaini. Although my father's job meant that he went on transfer from one city to the other, he did not forget to visit the village during every vacation and festivity. His being a Yerima, a Chief's Son, made it mandatory for him to build a house in Gaini. This made it possible for all the family to visit the village whenever we so wished and live in comfort.

We are five daughters and four sons in the family. This is moderate compared to the norm in this backwater community. Each of us has a sound university education and my brothers hold important posts in the State's Civil Service.

I made friends with Hannatu and Rakiya, two girls who lived near our house. They were my constant

companions even though they were much younger than me. Sometimes they spent the night in our house. I learnt a lot about village life from them and they in turn enjoyed my stories about city life.

Hannatu hailed from a polygamous family, and was the fifth child in a home of three wives and twenty-three children. Her father, Mallam Mustapha was a petty trader. On a normal day, he was out by 8:00am and rarely got back before 10:00pm. Mallam Mustapha not only stayed out to sell assorted odd wares but saw it as a means of escape from his hovel of a home. The ramshackle house was definitely crammed and could be described as the most wretched house even in terms of the village standard. In addition sometimes insufficient food, incessant bickering and frequent quarrels made staying home even less attractive. Mallam Mustapha therefore often found solace outside.

Each of Mallam Mustapha's wives engaged in petty trading to complement whatever he provided. In truth his contribution was so meagre that the mothers took

up the responsibility of feeding and clothing their children. Hannatu's mother for instance, was a food vendor. Her specialty was rice and pepper-spiced beans in palm oil which Hannatu hawked around the market, carpenters' shed and building sites. It was from the sales that Hannatu's mother bought things essential for day-to-day use by her children. These included toiletries, cheap perfume, costume jewellery, food condiments and the like. This way she augmented whatever Mustapha could afford. In addition, she started planning Hannatu's trousseau long before talks of marriage were started. This included buying sets of kitchen utensils as was the traditional practice. That way, by the time Hannatu was given out in marriage, albeit under-aged compared to her sisters' who got married at the age of 17, it was largely stress free for her.

Rakiya's background is similar to her friend's, Hannatu's. Her house was just a stone-throw from Hannatu's. But their poverty was more marked. Her father had been a labourer all his life and died when

she was nine years old. Although her mother had four children, she was the eighteenth child in the family set-up of four wives and twenty eight children. Her mother, Hennah was the third wife in the polygamous hierarchy. Rakiya's mother had no support and therefore lacked the capital to invest in any sizeable trade. Feeding her four children was a daunting task. Although this caused her much misery she nevertheless maintained a sense of humour. Once an uncle commented on her sickly appearance, but her response, was to say the least, sarcastic.

“What exactly is your problem? You look sickly?”

“Once I get these children off my neck, I will be the happiest woman on earth”. She answered.

“Off your neck? How?” He asked her.

“Well if I am left alone, I can take care of myself without any stress. I can even survive without any food, for days,” she added.

.

Chapter 3

Rakiya like other children in the village went to the public primary school. She started contributing her quota early to the survival of her family by hawking at weekends and after school. As things became tougher for her mother, she started skipping classes to make even more money. When Rakiya was 13yrs old, her uncles went to her mother to discuss her marriage. Her uncles had found a forty-two year old polygamist, Mallam Kanto, as a husband for Rakiya. When approached, Rakiya's mother initially looked at them aghast. She said "I can't imagine such a small girl living with a forty something year old man". "Do you think she can cope in a household of two wives and nineteen children?" she asked. Apparently, Mallam Kanto had divorced his first two wives and his first ten children were older than Rakiya.

Even though Rakiya's mother was not in total support of the marriage, she had to give in later as she reasoned,

"What can I do? I know the man is too old and I fear for my daughter. But her uncles have decided and who am I to go against them? I am a poor helpless widow. And we know children belong to their father's family. Well, maybe it's not so bad after all. I mean many girls get married even when younger. I simply have to be more fervent in prayer to Allah to protect and bless her. Who knows Mallam Kanto might assist with one or two of the other children and take some burden off me", the poor woman consoled herself.

Rakiya was summoned and given the news. She knelt with head bowed as her uncles pronounced their verdict. She had been informed; and tradition disallowed any comment from her. As soon as her uncles left, she looked at her mother in confusion. She wiped her face as if to be sure she it was not a dream. Her mother sighed, shaking her head and cursing her luck. But she knew she had to be strong for her daughter. So she enveloped her in a warm embrace and told her all she believed, that marriage could be the way out of this poverty that threatened to annihilate them. Rakiya's eyes brimmed with unshed tears. Her whole

body trembled with fear. But as her mother held her close she decided she would make even this sacrifice for her family. She had been told she would be the number three wife. "Will the other wives like me? Can I enjoy my life among people old enough to be my parents? Can I get on well with Mallam's children?" Rakiya bombarded her mother with questions. Her mother reassured her that this move was necessary and would be alright. So 13yr old Rakiya was withdrawn from JSS 1 and was married to Mallam Kanto.

Hannatu experienced some form of courtship before being married off as a teenager too. Definitely her childhood held some good memories. She remembered playing hide and seek with her brothers and sisters. She used to play around her father's premises. Like them she went to the village primary school and as was the practice, also attended a Qur'anic school in the evening. The Qur'anic school was quite close to Mallam's house, so she knew him at sight. But then, in the eyes of a child, he was an elder.

When Hannatu turned nine, her mother decreed she was old enough to start hawking. Hannatu would rather sell the food her mother cooked in front of the house, but she realized that she would make more sales by hawking. And so she adapted to it. She quickly mastered the routes to potential bumper sale places. These were the market area, motor park and even the saw mill where hungry unmarried men and busy traders waited eagerly for her mother's delicious food.

It was on one of such trips to the motor park that she met her husband, Mallam Yusuf. He bought some balls of bean cake, *ƙosai* from her. This was a delicacy Hannatu only hawked at weekends because it was usually taken as breakfast. Her mother therefore always prepared it very early. Soon, Mallam Yusuf was one of her regular customers. But the courtship started when he sent Hannatu with ten naira to fetch him Robb ointment, a kind of balm that cost two naira. Unfortunately the balm seller had no change so she got the ointment for him with her own money. When she got back, she handed over the balm and at the same time gave him back the ten naira.

“Thank you”, he said

“What is your name and where do you live?”

He continued.

“My name is Hannatu”, she replied but refused to give her address.

“How old are you?” He asked.

“I don't know”, she replied.

Hannatu was not initially interested in Mallam Yusuf because she believed that she was too young for marriage. Besides he was too old for her. But Mallam Yusuf was intent on marrying her. He never ceased asking her questions in an attempt to find out about her family background, but she refused to respond. He seemed to relent, but in truth he talked to friends and neighbours in the village, and in no time knew where she lived, who her parents were and many other details about her. Then he started visiting her at home. Each time he had some gift for her. Fruits, sweets, enough money to enable her pamper herself by buying latest scarves and slippers, and many more. Hannatu's mother could not stop telling her how lucky she was to have a responsible man court her. Soon even Hannatu began to look forward to his visits; she no longer

showed any form of resentment.

As it was the tradition in the village, Mallam Yusuf sent a delegation to Hannatu's parents, asking her hand in marriage. After several of such visits, his proposal was accepted and he was asked to pay a dowry of ten thousand naira. Finally, at 15 years of age, Hannatu gleefully embraced marriage. She did not seem to mind bidding school farewell; the excitement of Mallam Yusuf's romantic moves trapped her in the euphoria of a blissful union. Yes, Hannatu walked into marriage as a second wife to a thirty-five year old commercial bus driver. Although a professional driver, Mallam Yusuf was too poor to afford or own a bus. He drove only on days when he was opportune to get a bus. He always left home by 6am to be back by 6pm if he was chanced to drive, but was back slightly earlier around 5pm whenever it was not his turn to drive. When he did not drive, he would occupy himself with some “Dan Commission” work at the motor park. This simply meant he would serve as a bus conductor for the interim, chasing after commuters, collecting their bus fares, arranging their seating positions and finally giving the fares to the bus driver. The “Dan

Chapter 4

Commission” gets given a certain percentage, but since drivers must pay for the opportunity to load passengers, pay union dues every day, their take home package was not much. From this little profit, the Dan Commission gets a pittance. In any case, rather than stay idle, the small money was better than nothing. It was in fact because of the 'littleness' of Mallam Yusuf's income that Hannatu did not waste time in starting a small business.

It was yet another time for me to visit Gaini village, and I anticipated a happy re-union with my friends. I wanted to know how Rakiya and Hannatu had been doing in school. When I arrived at Gaini, I waited anxiously to see

Hannatu and Rakiya as usual but to no avail. So I went over to Hannatu's house, hoping to catch them before they would have gone hawking their goods. To my dismay, I learnt that they were now married. I was dumbfounded. It was the last thing I expected to hear. Here I was coming to chat about school and plan how we would make the holiday memorable. Instead, my friends no longer belonged to my league; they were married. “But at what age”, I wondered. “Did their parents give consent? Did they consider their emotional and psychological health? What do my friends know about caring for babies? Will they be able to cope with their demands? What about taking care of their husbands? I mean even though Hannatu is older, still

she is a teenager”, I mused further. I was convinced that they were not matured enough for marriage. But to be married to men old enough to be their fathers or uncles I felt was most unfair. I remembered what we had learnt in Health Education about how under-aged girls could have complications at child birth. Take Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) for instance. This problem results from going into delivery when the body is not physically matured enough to do so. It means one has a permanent rupture which leads to incontinence. “Oh my God”, I said aloud, “do they know that once they get VVF, their husbands will send them packing? Who would like to keep a wife who bed wets?! Oh my God”, I said again. I prayed to God, that their husbands would turn out to be good and allow them to be fully matured before they would experience childbirth. One could excuse the marriage of a nineteen year old girl, but anything younger, I believed, was too risky.

As I thought about my friends' situation, I blamed poverty and illiteracy. But then I was angry that our system allowed such criminal acts to be visited on

young girls. Yes, parents often allowed their children to be caught in a death trap because they wanted to be free of the burden of feeding and taking care of them. Many parents, it seemed, were ignorant of the negative effects of adolescent marriage. But ignorance is not acceptable in law. In truth it was a blatant violation of human/women's rights; an infringement of their rights. Even from the point of view of Islam, such dereliction of responsibility as the basis of marriage is not just frowned upon but condemned. It would seem that in Gaini, culture overrode the doctrine of Islam. Islam does not tell you to deny your children education nor does it tell you to marry under-aged girls. But because most of the villagers were not literate in Arabic, they depended on what others told them or claimed to be interpretations of the Koran. Many were misled and could no longer separate religion from culture.

The more I ruminated over my friends' condition, the more I realized that this injustice must be stopped. We needed to sensitize the Gaini parents and people on the benefits of girl-child education by mounting some awareness programme. But how to go about it eluded



me. Perhaps house-to-house enlightenment would be necessary. But I doubted if my father would permit it. Besides I would have to go back to school once the long vacation was over. Even if it could operate as a club where would be its base? How would I persuade parents to permit their children to be members? I would need to strategize; I would need to plan to become an activist/advocate. But first I would need to be empowered myself to be able to take up this fight. That meant finish school, maybe get a job so I would be taken seriously. For now, all I could do was to pray that their lives would not be broken and wish them luck. I resolved to maintain our friendship by visiting them from time to time.

Shortly after Hannatu's marriage to Mallam Yusuf, she realized he was a drunkard and a chain smoker. Throughout their courtship, she never visited him nor went out with him. Besides as a Moslem, he was not allowed to take alcohol, so obviously he could not indulge in this outside, where he was known. She did not mind his smoking since it was a common habit with drivers, but when she multiplied the cost of five packets

of cigarettes which he consumed on the average daily; she knew she was in trouble. She therefore put in more effort into her petty trading. Really, her business would have boomed but the arrival of children on the scene meant she had to pick up more bills. Besides, her husband could not afford to give her any capital to take off. So her life fell into a predictable routine. Her day started with prayers after which she would feed her children. Breakfast was actually koko, a type of porridge made from grain flour. Her children bought the steaming hot porridge and with bean cake or bread were sure of a balanced diet. With that tucked into their tummy, Hannatu was sure they would survive the three to four kilometres trek to school. Once they were gone, she quickly did her house chores before concentrating on her petty trading. She however made time to read whenever there was a lull in shop.

Motherhood gave Hannatu some satisfaction even though she never discussed this with her husband. She ended up with five children; three boys and two girls. Each was delivered at home with the assistance of a traditional birth attendant (Ngozoma) and her mother

in the first two cases. The Ngozoma plays a critical role in the village. Once a woman was in labour, the traditional birth attendant would be sent for. On arrival, she would request for fine sand to be spread on the ground in the middle of the room. Here the pregnant woman would lie to have the baby. Obviously this allowed for the blood and other fluids associated with birthing to be immediately absorbed into the ground as the sand is swept away after. But although the Ngozoma was a stickler for tradition, not much thought was given to the hygienic condition of the environment. Nothing was sterilized and so Ngozoma used any available blade at her disposal to cut the umbilical cord of the baby. Instead of sterile clamps, hair thread was used to tie the cut cord. It is a wonder that women survived the process. I mean, the room was usually poorly lit since it was the traditional round hut with a single door and no window. In addition, the Ngozomas were usually old women and were prone to the complications associated with aging such as decreased vision, trembling limbs (especially hands). In addition they were not generally amenable to change. The skill of birth attendance was seen as a hereditary gift and so

apprenticeship was restricted and hidden in secrecy. Training did not follow a known syllabus or qualifying examination, rather too many superstitions surrounding child birth were held as common beliefs. It was a taboo for the woman to cry out in pain or even acknowledge she was afraid. So many went into denial and it was not until the midwife confirmed that a case was very bad, would the woman be taken to the hospital. Once it was announced that a woman was to be rushed to the hospital, everyone knew there were complications and the possibility of survival slim. In some cases family members would immediately set up a dirge. But since the people never knew what went wrong, the hospital was blamed as the culprit. In fact, many negative stories and beliefs were associated with hospitals. Ironically, this consolidated the Ngozoma's hold on the community, thus making her even more powerful and respected. Hannatu was not really constrained by the common beliefs but was hampered by lack of funds. She showed remarkable awareness on the need for antenatal care for a pregnant woman. She could easily recollect at least five women who were pregnant when

she had died of one complication or another at birth. In one case the baby was too big and when the Ngozoma pulled it out, it literally tore the woman into two. In another case the woman kept on bleeding and bled to death after a successful delivery. Some of the cases, the hospital said, were brought in too late for any help to be rendered. When I asked her why she did not have hospital deliveries she said, "Well, I never could afford it. My mother told me that one pays at each visit, unlike here where we just present some gifts like chicken or groundnut oil", she concluded. When I explained that all one paid was about one hundred naira per visit, and showed her my sister's ante-natal card, she really was shocked and angry at her mother. "Don't blame your mother. She is not educated and so depended on hear-say. But you are the guilty one because you could have gone there to check. Besides, your husband is a driver and so you could have joined him to the city", I added. Hannatu was pensive. She knew she had been most fortunate to still be alive. Now she would encourage other women to be wise. She was sure she would have been healthier if she had spaced all her births. That was why she had a miscarriage. The

doctors explained to her that it could have been avoided if she had been registered and attended the antenatal clinic. Imagine losing a set of twin boys. Even her husband had blamed her for acting like a common village wife.

Chapter 5

Hannatu's life with Mallam Yusuf was not quite peaceful because just two years into the marriage, Mallam Yusuf made a fourteen year old village beauty his third wife. The girl was extremely quarrelsome and picked bones with Hannatu. Maybe in a subtle way, she sensed that Hannatu's financial independence could be a threat to her claiming Mallam's love. But she chose a wrong adversary. During one of their incessant quarrels they created an ugly scene as they tore up one another's clothes and destroyed some household furniture. Neighbours called Mallam Yusuf from the park. Fortunately for Hannatu they testified that Zainab, the third wife started the fray. Yusuf was angry at the embarrassment more so as some naughty musician was likely to weave his inability to control his wives into a sarcastic song. So he sent Zainab away after just two years in his home. "What a broken life", I

exclaimed when Hannatu told me the story.

But Mallam Yusuf had a roving eye and soon brought in yet another wife. This time around he settled for Kaltum, a divorcee who was a year older than Hannatu. One could say that, it was kind of ordained that Hannatu would not be left alone, peaceful, to enjoy her married life. Despite the high poverty level that persisted in his house, Mallam Yusuf seemed destined to wallow in it for life since Kaltum's background was not any better. Within three months of their stay, Hannatu realised that she would never enjoy a home with Yusuf. Not only was he a womanizer, he was also a poor judge of character. Kaltum was abusive, quarrelsome and totally disrespectful. In addition, she always pretended to be busy whenever their husband wanted food so that Hannatu shouldered feeding him all alone. Yet, Mallam always gave his latest bride more money. What that was used for did not bother Hannatu but she was deeply concerned about Mallam's lack of care of their children. He was not interested in their education, feeding and health. Soon, he also treated her as an intruder, only relevant when he was hungry or wanted some



domestic chore done. She knew she should leave before things worsened but she was worried about her children. "How would they survive?" she always wondered. For quite a long time, she had found solace and comfort only from her children. But as the situation in her marital home worsened, she started contemplating having a divorce. But would her children endure the separation? Where would she live? Would her folks accept her or would she be open to ridicule? These were real fears for Hannatu. Once she confessed to me that she had thought of leaving Mallam Yusuf but doubts assailed her. When I asked why, she said,

"Where do I go from here?"

"Be patient, things might improve"

"Do you think my married life would ever be sweet?"

"Why not?" I interjected, knowing quite alright that her marital life had been broken but I believed that the pieces could be put together.

Hannatu did not regret dropping out of school or being a teenage-bride. But when she ran into two of her primary school classmates who were then final year

students at the University, she broke into tears and said,

"I can't believe this. Dije and Wurwa were not half as intelligent as I was when we were in class six. Oh what a waste I have made of my life", she lamented.

"My friend, be thankful to Allah for your blessings. See you have five healthy children but your school mates are not even sure of husbands. Besides going to school is never too late. What it requires is the determination to persevere and succeed. You are a brave woman and I am sure you can achieve great heights".

"You can't appreciate how I feel. I know I don't look it now but I used to be the brain in class. In fact my class mates nicknamed me 'Scholar'. I remember once during a geography lesson. That was when we were in Pry 6. The teacher asked us for the names of Nigeria's neighbours. I was the only one to get it correctly. But see me now. The other time at the clinic when I was

pregnant with Moshood, a nurse called me an illiterate. I did not blame her. After all, that is what I am now”.

“You can still make it. Never give up”, I said.

Thus re-assured, Hannatu declared that she would make her children proud. But for now, let her work out how they would survive. But this was still a long way from happening. On one fateful day, she and Kaltum had a fight. During the fracas a new transistor radio which only Mallam Yusuf was allowed to tune, got broken. Mallam was totally fed up with the incessant bickering and was convinced that Hannatu must have engineered it. “She simply can't stand having another woman in my home. But I haven't committed a crime by marrying another wife. Haba, it's allowed in Islam. I better send her away before she sets my home ablaze”, Yusuf decided. Hannatu felt betrayed by a husband she had always supported. In an odd way she actually had feelings for him despite his weaknesses. But she reasoned it was time to move on. She mustered her pride, held her head high and walked out. Her children

watched from a distance, tears streaming down their faces. Hannatu promised she would always visit and possibly have her daughters stay with her.

Hannatu moved back home. I visited her a few weeks after. She was full of regret for abandoning her children; that perhaps she should have been less quarrelsome. It took a while for me to re-assure her. I reminded her that life had not been fair to her either. She was not matured enough to handle the stress of marriage when she was thrust into it; and that this was time for her to do some stock taking and move on. As we chatted, she relaxed somewhat and we both laughed at some jokes. But deep inside me, I pitied her. A girl with such a bright prospect being forced into adolescent marriage was an unfair deal. Had it been that she felt loved in the marriage, it would have been a different matter. Here she was, a life with no comfort, broken, full of regrets, left on her own and now battling with societal rejection and fear for her children. All her discussions opened with the phrase, “if I had known”, and regrets only.



Each visit to Hannatu convinced me that she was terribly worried and miserable because her children were at their father's house with no care. She was also not sure that living at home was a good decision. Any time she tried to voice an opinion over even the most trivial thing her parents reminded her that she was a visitor. So she worried over her life. After she had been home for about ten months, I stopped by again to see how she was doing. She was as despondent as ever, if not outright depressed. I thought the gloom would lift but she sat there sighing and shaking her head as if to remove some heavy load. I held her hands and said,

"It will be okay".

"How do I put the broken parts together?"

"It may be difficult, but you will, you can.

Where there is a will, there is always a way".

"Just tell me how to do it?"

"Settle down, have peace of mind", I insisted.

A number of suitors came to see if she would desire marriage. But Hannatu would not even grant any one of them an audience. She knew she could not survive within any polygamous set up and besides she still

planned to give her children a better life. I knew she desired to get an education because even as a child she was always more interested in the books I brought home at holidays. Also when she was married, she always tried to read any scrap of paper that Yusuf brought home from the park. That way she kept her dream alive. Now at home she continued to read up anything within her reach and also listen to the radio. That was how she learnt about an adult education centre to be started in the village. She told her parents. They thought she should re-marry but since she was adamant and would not allow them have peace at home, they finally relented and gave their blessing. She was one of the few to register. She was so good that within three years she attempted the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) and passed. The transformation was unimaginable. She had always checked assignments and taught the younger children in the family almost daily. Now she extended it to their friends, saying she needed to be in the right mental state for school. Favourable comments from grateful parents in the neighbourhood made her parents proud of her and they promised to support her in any way possible. Hannatu knew that she had won the first battle; making

them accept that the education of the girl-child was not a waste. She hoped that whenever she would finish school and would want to directly preach that creed, she would also enjoy their support. For now, she was thankful that the State Government had declared free education for all females to whatever level they desired. She prayed for Allah's blessing and direction.

Chapter 6

As the months went by, Hannatu got set to go back to school. She had been offered admission to read Health Education. Although she was trying hard to forget about her unhappy life in Mallam Yusuf's house, she could not forget her children. She knew she was closer to giving them a better life. In fact, from the bursary the Local Government gave those who registered for the adult classes, she had been able to resurrect her petty trading. Now she sold exercise books and stationery at the school and got her mother to run a kiosk by their house. From the profit she had been able to put her children in the only private school in Gaini. She knew things were really looking up for her but she was resolved to impact on her community. Hannatu knew she needed to understand Islam well. Arabic was one of the subjects she offered at School Cert and could now read the Quran. She was shocked at how much some mischievous charlatans and elders misrepresented the Prophet. Her people needed to be

told that Islam encourages education for both boys and girls, and make a distinction between religion and custom. "I must preach to Gaini people against early marriage. Actually, I will even preach beyond Gaini", she thought. On several occasions, Hannatu showed her readiness to fight against adolescent marriage through any means. In truth Hannatu was fast becoming a known advocate for human rights. Her parents, children and even Mallam Yusuf basked in the glory of her good and positive image.

Rakiya's first marriage lasted for two years. She had experienced two miscarriages before the birth of a daughter. Her baby was less than a year old when Mallam Kanto died suddenly. As the third wife and the mother of a girl-child, Rakiya inherited a room to stay in but very little money. She was however told that she would forfeit these whenever she re-married. Her mother and even her co-wives encouraged her to re-marry, that she was too young to stay like that. Besides without a man to protect her, she could be assaulted or even insulted. Rakiya was confused and when her mother told her of another suitor, she succumbed and

re-married. She took her daughter with her. This second marriage gave her two sons. So at least she had a roof and a place. But she was the fourth wife and had to stomach a lot of insults from the senior wives. Also her husband sometimes battered her. This was what landed her in the hospital. Some social workers came round to see her and she was advised to go back to her mother. So at 18yrs of age Rakiya had experienced two marriages.

As Hannatu moved up in life, she had always continued to be in touch with Rakiya. So she knew of her second marriage and the subsequent divorce. When Hannatu visited at the end of her second year in the university, she was shocked to see how broken Rakiya was. But the visit was good. It made Rakiya realise that she needed to pull her weight too. Hannatu made her realise that a woman could still grow, no matter her past. What she needed was perseverance and focus. Hannatu appreciated the fact that Rakiya had been just too immature when she got married, that she was not given the opportunity to be herself, think of what to do between the first marriage and the second one. She had

been twice married as an adolescent, and she could imagine how horrendous her life must have been. But she blamed Rakiya's uncles and mother. Each marriage was at their instance with the full support of the cultural expectations of their people. One major problem was that in Gaini decision-making excluded women even if the decision had to do with them. Hopefully with more families embracing education and for the girl-child too, this would change. The important thing for Rakiya was to decide on what she actually wanted to do with her life; what she had a passion for. She was never happy as a married woman so another one might not solve the problem, at least for now. She needed a break from the demands of marriage. She knew too that she dared not compare herself with her school mates who were now students in the University. But she could take a cue from her friend Hannatu. One day she hoped that she would be able to put the pieces of her broken life together just as her friend Hannatu; maybe embrace a holistic education that would make her relevant in the community. Yes, the girl-child must be liberated; in fact Gaini must be liberated from the cultural trap of voicelessness for women, illiteracy,

Epilogue

*I*n view of the outcomes of an early nuptial experience for a girl as seen in these stories, what measures do we take? Where do we go and who exactly do we talk to? In a society like ours where religious and cultural beliefs are stringently interwoven, demarcating the two becomes a onerous task and anyone who ventures into such is tagged 'recalcitrant' and a renegade. Consequently, negative situations stare us in the face with our brain boxes stacked with possible remedies but the courage to act eludes us like a mirage.

Consider a situation where these two girls have things turned around for them and can contribute meaningfully to their families and the society. We must rise to give young girls the maximum support they need to explore opportunities they are capable of. It is then and only then that we can have the Fatimas and Rakiyas fulfill their life-long dreams and give back to the society multiple folds of whatever they had from the society.

Are you a brother, sister, father, mother, auntie, uncle, nephew, niece, or neighbour of the Fatimas and Rakiyas? You may even be in a position of authority in Fatima's or Rakiya's village or state. The best you can do is to get involved in ensuring that these girls have access to the basic necessities of life and are not denied the right to education, health, and overall development. The time to act is now and not later as education emancipates any woman.