

LYDIA'S STORY

INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges of the Girl Child Concerns and Girl-child education in the Northern part of Nigeria in general is the retention of girls in school until they complete their studies. Female students are often withdrawn from school without the knowledge of school authorities and GCC either for marriage or due to relocation of parents. It can even be because the parents are so poor that they can not continue paying school fees for a 'child who will ultimately leave the house for another family house' (as culture demands). One of such cases is that of Lydia Ishaya and her cousin Maryam.

STORY

Lydia Ishaya is a beneficiary of GCC's Female Student Scholarship Scheme (FSSS) who came on board about five years ago through screening. She is eighteen years old of Karkare ward, close to Zuntu under Soba Local Government Area. An intelligent science student of Government Secondary School, Zuntu who almost dropped out of school even before taking her Senior Secondary School mock examination, November/December 2009 in preparation for the West African Examination Council (WAEC) exams to complete her secondary education.

Lydia's father, Mallam Ishaya Magaji, the ward head of Karkare who had supported her all the way because of her brilliant performance and the fact that she lost her mother when she was barely a few years old, suddenly stopped her from going to school while making preparations for her marriage to an illiterate man.

Lydia had earlier been introduced to the man but she hid her displeasure with the arrangement because of the Hausa Culture which prevents children particularly girls from challenging their Parents'/Elders' decision on any issue at all. (Any child who does anything contrary to the wishes of his/her parent is regarded as a rebel, a disrespectful and wayward child who seeks to discredit the family and taint the family image.

Mallam Ishaya however continued the marriage preparation without informing Lydia's school and the principal did not notice her absence on time to inform GCC of the development.

Apparently, Mallam Ishaya was acting on an allegation that Lydia and her cousin Maryam were entertaining boyfriends at their hostel after school hours instead of concentrating on their school work. Both girls denied the allegation but their parents were determined to marry them off to preserve the good family name which could be soiled if the girls got pregnant or other negative consequences of their supposed action. So the marriage was fixed for January 14, 2010.

Looking on helplessly but determined to complete their education at any cost, Lydia and Maryam (SS2 Student) decided to run away from home. As they were planning to do so, Lydia found a business card of the coordinator of GCC, Hauwa Baba Saleh which has her telephone number. Lydia and her cousin then left home at about 6pm to collect their sewn dresses from the tailor's shop with nobody suspecting their movement, they headed for the motor garage to try to board any vehicle going out of their village without a definite destination by then it was late in the evening and there was no taxi around so they kept running away from their village. They flagged down a passing vehicle which took them to the nearest city to their village. They lost direction but they found a vehicle going to Kaduna and decided to board the vehicle.

At first they were afraid since they have never left their immediate environment except for the secondary school which is a few kilometers away from their house, but were spurred on by their desire to complete their education. They believe that they could only actualize their dream if they complete their secondary education.

On their way to Kaduna, Lydia remembered that she had earlier seen a business card that belongs to Hauwa Baba Saleh. She brought it out and on getting to Kaduna around 9:30pm, tried to trace Hauwa Baba Saleh, the GCC official by calling the number on the card with a paid phone. Hauwa Baba Saleh though Lydia was pulling her legs when she said she was calling from Kaduna and at night too. But the Lydia started crying, saying she and her cousin had run away from home, Hauwa Baba Saleh realized that she had a problem on her hand. So she tried to trace the girls and took them to

spend the night in her house while she found out why they ran away and try to solve their problem.

Lydia's case as she recounted to Hauwa Saleh Baba, posed a major challenge to GCC and its efforts to keep the girl child in school through the Female Student Scholarship Scheme (FSSS). So GCC first contacted the school principal by phone to find out if he was aware of Lydia's predicament. The response of the principal, Mallam Abdullahi encouraged GCC to probe further by sending the programmes officer to investigate the matter.

However, what GCC initially thought was an issue that could be resolved with one trip, turned out to be a very sensitive and delicate one but the Programmes officer was determined to resolve the impasse between Lydia and her parents and to ensure that whatever be the case she must be allowed to complete her secondary education.

The Programmes officer first went to the school principal to get his perspective of the matter and was told that Lydia had been absent from school since about two months before and she missed the mock examination. So, the programmes officer and the school principal decided to take the matter to the district head for resolution. The district head listened to the problem and pledged to ensure that the two girls completed their education. He then sent for the parents of the girls and told us to come back the following week with the girls.

Meanwhile, the parents of the girls continued with the marriage preparation, hoping that some how they would be found. They did not disclose their plan but assured the district head of their loyalty and obedience.

So when we got to the office of the district head, we met the parents of the girls. We restated our case adding that if the parents insisted on preventing the girls from completing their education, they must refund all GCC's expenses on Lydia and the district head should be wary of such people who do not want development and prosperity for the district. Otherwise they must commit into writing, their agreement to allow the girls complete their education.

The parents agreed alright and did so in writing which was witnessed by all those present they even agreed suggested that the girls be relocated to different schools in view of the prevailing circumstances. The girls on their part signed an undertaking to be of good behavior. What we did not know at that time was that festivities for the girl's marriage had already started in their village with all the parties involved awaiting the arrival of the girls.

So we all dispersed from the office of the district head feeling happy that we have resolved the matter amicably. What we did not know at that time was that festivities for the girls' marriage had already started in their village with all parties involved awaiting the arrival of the 'brides'.

We later learnt that immediately the girls returned to the village, the parents seized their cell phones and they were handed over to their grand parents who presided over the ceremony. The school principal gave GCC this update and we told him that we were going to court. He quickly summoned the parents and told them our decision.

The parents regretted their action claiming that the wedding had to take place due to pressure from the grand parents and extended families of the parties involved but re-assured GCC that the girls would complete their education from their matrimonial homes.

The girls have since relocated to schools near their new homes and continued from where they stopped but they have lost one school session in the process and would not be graduating with their peers. However, the good news is that although they are now married, Lydia and her cousin Maryam will complete their secondary education and GCC facilitated the process.