

Daring to Aspire

Maimuna Garba, 29, a mother of 4 lovely children is educated, empowered, and an advocate of education and sexual rights in her community.

Advocating for education has not been easy in a community where many are in favour of early marriages.

Maimuna, got married early at age of 12 but was able to finish senior secondary school from her husband's house due to an agreement entered into by both families to the effect that her husband will keep her in school. Mai as she is popularly referred to proceeded to pursue university education to graduate as a medical doctor. Her choice of specialisation is her desire to help pregnant women who she grew up seeing dying while giving birth. She would bear an aunt died and a baby is left in the care of older women in the extended family.

Some of the girls she grew up with are married and within a year or more; they would have problems and end up in hospital to be 'sewn up'. Where that is not available she grew seeing some of them live in abandonment due to their condition, which made it almost impossible to live with them due to foul smell and human dirt. Maternal mortality in her community was commonplace as many women delivered at home with limited support from traditional birth attendants. Some actually died 'trying and bearing the pain' as a mark of 'honour' in motherhood! With early marriage, the educational dreams of these girls are truncated, as even those who start never return to school again.

However, and with Mai, returning school reduced the stress of being that new wife with a truncated dream. Later in life, Maimuna said: 'I have a very creative mind and since I love to read, it provided me a good avenue to search for who I wanted to be'. Reading helped me realise that I can be anyone I want to be, so I made up my mind to study beyond senior

secondary level! She however, soon realised that marriage comes with responsibility; she got pregnant at age 15 just after her Senior Secondary Examinations where she excelled.

A new baby and marital responsibilities set in to threaten her ambition to go to University. Her husband reneged on his promise to allow her to continue her education. This looked like the end of the road for her education dreams. Happiness and tranquillity were soon to leave her home as her struggle to continue her education resulted in bouts of arguments and quarrels. Although her husband didn't assault her physically, he tortured her emotionally; disrespected her in public and created a perception to relatives that she was not a good wife and mother.

In spite of all these, she kept her head high and continued to struggle for permission and support to seek University admission. In the end, her husband succumbed to pressure from her family and she went back to school three years later. "As I returned to school, almost four years after our first child, my husband desired another child, even though I explained that it will clash with school examinations. He insisted that my priority in life is to be a mother and nothing else!" So she missed school examinations when she got pregnant for a third time in 5 years. She had lost control over her body and had no information or access to child spacing services.

She lost 5 years weaning 3 children without finishing University. It was difficult for her combining studies and as most of her age mates were either completing University or proceeding for post-graduate study after the mandatory service. With two births and a pregnancy in a 5 year frame; Mai fitted the reproductive frame of 'too many, too soon'. She did not relent, and immediately after she delivered, she started preparing herself for the exam at home. Mai did her best to balance the home front and her studies. She took the exam, but she didn't pass; perhaps from the burden of care on her.

Discouraged but not despairing, she decided to try one more time, this time with support from relatives tending to her kids, she excelled. After 9 years, Mai finished University and graduated as a medical doctor. She now helps members of her community in all health matters. She set up a referral system that ensured women could be moved from the village dispensary to bigger hospitals and have safe deliveries. She organized refresher courses for the willing traditional birth attendants in and around her community. Due to this opportunity it came easy for her to advocate for continuous education. She dialogues with ignorant and apprehensive parents to justify delaying marriage for school. She encourages parents to commit to supporting the education of their daughters.

These gave her husband a sense of pride. Now she looks back and says:

'More girls have enrolled in school; women are learning that even with family responsibility, seeking education is essential, it is not easy, but it is worth it! They also have a say in what happens to their body; there is help available to guide its protection in all circumstances.'

Reports show that 43% of girls in Nigeria are married off before they are 18 years old, 17% are married off before they are 15 years old. Considering regional differences, reports state that in the North 76% of under-aged girls are married (this includes Kaduna and Plateau State); in the South, it is 10%

