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Secret strategies: Women and abortion in Yoruba society, Nigeria

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PROLOGUE

TOYIN

Toyin¹ was a 16 year-old secondary schoolgirl whom we interviewed in Lagos Island Maternity Hospital, a public maternity hospital in Lagos metropolis. Her condition was critical. The doctor diagnosed a perforated uterus and septicæmia from a botched abortion. He prescribed intravenous fluid, a blood transfusion and antibiotics. Although Toyin was very ill, she was able to tell us what had happened to her:

I have had a boyfriend for more than two years. He was a senior student in my school before, but is now out of school and without a job. He wants to go to university. We did not have sex very often, just once a month or once in every two or three months. I always watched my safe period. We never discussed marriage, because we both wanted to go for higher education. I knew I must be pregnant when I missed my period at one month and was always feeling sick. I was afraid, because my parents would be very annoyed with me and beat me up [if they found out]. I did not want a baby because I was still in secondary school and having a baby would bring a stop to my education. I told my boyfriend that I was pregnant. He was also very afraid because he was too young to be a father and wanted to go to the university. His father would deal with him severely, and he had no money. We both wanted to abort the pregnancy. I waited till over four months, because we did not have money for abortion. My boyfriend explained the situation to a friend of his and this friend loaned him the money for abortion. The same friend took us to a private hospital in Apapa [an area of Lagos town] where D&C [dilatation and curettage] was done. We paid 3,500 naira [about 35 US dollars]. That same day late in the middle of the night I started bleeding heavily and had severe pains in my waist and a pulling pain around my back up to my shoulders and down my thighs. The bleeding was so much that I fainted. I did not have the time to think. When I came round, I discovered I was in Lagos Island Maternity Hospital. I was told that my parents had taken me first to a private hospital, but that they

¹ Pseudonyms are used for the names of all women we interviewed.

had refused to admit or treat me there when they saw my condition and referred me to the [public] general hospital. From there I was transferred to Lagos Island Maternity Hospital [which is just across the street from the general hospital]. The doctors told my parents that I had had an abortion. My mother is very sad, she is always crying whenever she is in the hospital because she is afraid I will die. My father feels the same way as my mother. He is always asking why fate should be so unkind to him. I did not tell my parents when I was pregnant, because I was afraid they would not allow me to abort the pregnancy, but ask me to keep it instead. I cannot express my feelings, I believe I will not survive. If I do survive I will never have anything to do with men until I am ready to get married.

The doctors advised Toyin's parents that a hysterectomy might save her life. At first, her parents were hesitant to sign the consent form, because they feared their daughter would die during surgery (a common fear among Yoruba). Then, when the doctor informed the parents that after a hysterectomy their daughter would not be able to conceive again, they decided against surgery.

Toyin died of abortion complications after nine days in hospital.