Dedication

This novel is dedicated to the unseen victims and survivors of the Money Wife system in South-South Nigeria and to girls & women all over the world in similar circumstances. To Perpetual, Gold, and Pearl, whose lived experiences are recreated through Idara. Thank you for your resilience in facing adversity, surviving, and sharing your stories with me.
Prelude

“I was given out as a loan repayment; I was 5 years old and married to a man that could be my grandfather. He abused me sexually and verbally, resorting to violence in many instances. After his death, I ran home to be free from the hellish marriage; My family was harassed by the man’s family until I sought help”.

—

Perpetual, 19
Former Money Wife & Survivor

“I was 6 years when the other children called me a wife; I did not even know what it meant! I was sent on all odd errands and neglected; I had no clothes or shoes. I was denied an education to limit my exposure. When I asked my father why I was suffering so much, he said I was married to repay a loan; I decided I would not go back no matter what. My family still suffers harassment for my decision, but I know I have made the right decision.
I am now 15 years and in Junior Secondary School.”

—

Gold, 15
Former Money Wife & Survivor

“I was the family slave, I ran all the errands and was denied food. I suffered daily, suffering working from dusk to dawn. When I told my father i wasn’t going back, he said I had to because there was no money to repay the loan. Now I am in secondary school with some kind help, I want to also go to University”.

—

Pearl, 13
Former Money Wife & Survivor

Girls are also given out for debts borrowed before the girls’ existence; on this premise, more money is collected from the lender, with the girls being used as collateral. Having a money wife is also seen as a status symbol for these men, a property that can be inherited.

—

Pastor Richard Akonam,
Coordinator, Faith Missions Center
In South-South Nigeria, the village of Abanikok was a thriving farming community. For many years the villagers had enjoyed massive harvests and had more than enough to eat.
Then one year everything changed. There was very little rainfall. Although the farmers worked hard, their harvests were very small.

I don’t understand what is happening!! This time last year we had lots of rain. But now there is no sign of rain clouds in the sky, and the ground is so dry!

Brother, look at the size of these yams! They’re not even half the size they usually are!
THE POOR HARVEST WAS THE REASON MY PARENTS COULDN’T AFFORD TO SEND ME TO SCHOOL. INSTEAD, I COLLECTED BOTTLES AND EXCHANGED THEM AT THE RECYCLING CENTRE FOR CASH.

I AM SO TIRED. I WISH I COULD JUST TAKE A BREAK!
I REALLY MISSED MY MUM. I WISHED I COULD SEE HER.
AFTER HOURS OF COLLECTING PLASTIC BOTTLES, I WOULD HEAD TO THE PLASTIC RECYCLING CENTRE, WHICH WAS LOCATED AT MY FORMER SCHOOL.

LOOK AT HER TORN CLOTHES!

OH, I WISH I WAS BACK IN SCHOOL!

LOOK HOW DIRTY SHE LOOKS!
Today we will look at the history of one of Africa’s greatest leaders, Queen Amina.

Queen Amina shows us the strength that young girls can have, and inspires us to be brave in the face of hardship.

Who wants to be brave and strong like Queen Amina?

Yes! I want to be brave and strong like Queen Amina too!
AFTER THE CLASS, I WENT TO THE TEACHER TO DROP OFF MY PLASTICS.

WHEN SHE WAS NOT LOOKING, I TOOK THE HISTORY BOOK!
It had been several months since I had a book in my hands. I was so absorbed in reading the story of Queen Amina that I lost track of time.

Idara!

Stupid Girl!
I did not marry you to read books!
Get up and fetch me water this instant!
I trekked a long distance away from my village to get water.
BUT THE STREAMS WERE DRY IN THE OTHER VILLAGES TOO.
YOU SHOULD JUST TAKE THIS WATER WHILE THERE’S STILL SOME LEFT. THE OTHER STREAMS HAVE BEEN DRY FOR WEEKS NOW.

THIS WATER IS SO DIRTY. HOW CAN I USE IT?
THE NEXT DAY, I DECIDED TO RETURN TO THE SCHOOL AND RETURN THE BOOK TO THE TEACHER.

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?! WHO BEAT YOU UP LIKE THIS?

DON'T WORRY... I'M SORRY, MA'AM, I TOOK THIS BOOK FROM YOU YESTERDAY WHEN YOU WEREN'T LOOKING.
YOU CAN SPEAK WITH ME. TELL ME, WHAT'S GOING ON WITH YOU?

I JUST WANT TO GO HOME.

HOME, WHERE IS YOUR HOME?!
TWO YEARS AGO, MY LIFE WAS VERY DIFFERENT. I WAS IN SCHOOL AND EXCELLED IN MY CLASS, I PLAYED WITH MY FRIENDS AND WAS VERY HAPPY.
MY FATHER’S FARM HAD A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST!

THE HARVEST HAS BEEN GOOD TO US THIS SEASON. WITH THIS MONEY, I CAN GET YOU THAT NEW ROOF YOU HAVE BEEN ASKING FOR. BUSINESS IS LOOKING GOOD!

AND WE CAN PAY FOR IDARA’S SCHOOL FEES.
My mother sold a lot of fruits and vegetables at her stall in the market.

She made enough money to pay for our education.
BUT A YEAR LATER, EVERYTHING CHANGED. WE WAITED MONTHS FOR RAIN, MY FATHER’S FARM FIELDS ALL DRIED OUT.

AND BECAUSE OF THE DROUGHT, THERE WEREN’T ANY FRUITS AND VEGETABLES TO SELL. MY MOTHER’S MARKET STALL WAS EMPTY.

DON’T TELL ME THAT IS THE ONLY BASKET OF YAMS YOU GOT FROM THIS LARGE FIELD?

THIS IS ALL OH, THE ENTIRE FIELD IS DRY, THERE ARE ONLY LEAVES ABOVE THE GROUND, NO TUBERS!
OH NO, EFFIONG!
HOW WILL WE FEED THE CHILDREN AND PAY FOR THEIR SCHOOLING?
WHAT CAN WE DO?

UYAI, MY WIFE,
WE ARE RUINED!
THIS HARVEST IS NOT EVEN ENOUGH TO FEED OURSELVES! HOW WILL WE MANAGE!

I CAN ASK BASSEY FOR A LOAN.
HE IS MY FRIEND AND CAN HELP US OUT.

NOT BASSEY,
WE DON'T HAVE TO DO THAT YET.

WE DON'T HAVE MANY OPTIONS LEFT. I DON'T WANT THIS TO HAPPEN TO IDARA, SHE'S DOING SO WELL IN SCHOOL, BUT WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY TO FEED THE FAMILY
THAT EVENING, MY MOTHER AND FATHER VISITED CHIEF BASSEY.

BASSEY, MY FRIEND, THE DROUGHT HAS DESTROYED MY CROPS. I CAN BARELY AFFORD TO FEED MY FAMILY. COULD YOU PLEASE HELP ME WITH A LOAN?

I CAN DO THAT FOR YOU BUT YOU HAVE TO AGREE TO MY REPAYMENT PLAN. I'VE SEEN YOUR ELDEST DAUGHTER AROUND THE MARKET. YOU KNOW, SHE'D MAKE A GOOD WIFE...

THEN WE HAVE NOTHING TO DISCUSS. GOOD DAY!

NOOO! PLEASE SIR, SHE'S STILL SO YOUNG!
MY POOR DAUGHTER. I WISH THERE WAS ANOTHER WAY.

BASSEY... YOU HAVE A DEAL.
GOOD!
HERE IS THE
MONEY IN
EXCHANGE
FOR IDARA.

I LEFT WITH CHIEF BASSEY THAT SAME DAY...
AND STARTED MY NEW LIFE AS A MONEY WIFE.
Back in the classroom with Uyi, I couldn't help crying as I told her my story.

That is how I ended up here, collecting plastic instead of coming to school.

As Uyi comforted me, we were interrupted by someone coming into the classroom.

Idara! What are you doing here? We need to go!
WHO IS SHE?

THIS IS ETIEBET. SHE IS MY SENIOR WIFE. I HAVE TO GO NOW, CORPER UYI.

OK, BUT PLEASE COME BACK HERE TOMORROW AND WE CAN TALK.
EtiBeti was very grumpy with me. Before returning to the house, we visited the health centre because she wasn’t feeling well.
Etiebet found out surprising news from the nurse.

Etiebet, you are pregnant.

Chief Bassey will treat me better now that I'm pregnant and will be a full wife. Idara, you should forget about all that book nonsense and the teacher. You won't have a choice!

What will you do?!

No oh! I don't want that.
THAT NIGHT, I COULDN'T SLEEP. I DIDN'T WANT TO END UP LIKE ETIEBET. I DIDN'T WANT TO HAVE A BABY SO EARLY AND NOT BY CHIEF BASSEY!

I PACKED MY TINY BAG AND RAN FOR MY HOME!
IT TOOK ME A LONG TIME TO WALK HOME IN THE DARK BUT I MADE IT BACK TO MY FAMILY HOME. I Couldn’T WAIT TO SEE THEM AGAIN.
WHAT HAS HAPPENED, IDARA? WHO BEAT YOU LIKE THIS? AND WHY DID YOU RETURN HOME?

I DON’T WANT TO GO BACK THERE! CHIEF BASSEY BEATS ME AND DOESN’T GIVE ME FOOD UNTIL I FINISH WORK AT THE END OF THE DAY. I DON’T EVEN GO TO SCHOOL ANYMORE!

MY DAUGHTER, IF YOU DON’T GO BACK, HE WILL TAKE YOUR LITTLE SISTER TO REPLACE YOU!

MAMA, I DON’T WANT TO GO BACK THERE. I DON’T LIKE IT THERE!

YOU ARE DOING THIS FOR THE FAMILY, MY DEAR. PLEASE, I’M BEGGING YOU, BEFORE THEY NOTICE YOU ARE GONE, RETURN EARLY TOMORROW MORNING!

JUST GO TO SLEEP NOW, IDARA AND WE’LL TALK FIRST THING IN THE MORNING.
The next morning there was a commotion outside. Chief Bassey sent law enforcement agents to take me back.

Please have patience with her, my brother. She is just a child.

Return to Chief Bassey's house now, you stubborn girl!

That is not my problem! Return this wife to her husband this minute, or else you will have to deal with the consequences!

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When I returned to Bassey’s house, he beat me for running away.

I was left to do all the tough errands alone and hawked goods in the market.
A FEW WEEKS LATER, I RAN INTO UYI. I WAS AFRAID TO GET CAUGHT TALKING TO HER, BUT IT WAS NICE TO SEE A FRIENDLY FACE.

MS UYI, I'M...OK.

IDARA! HOW HAVE YOU BEEN?

YOU DON'T LOOK OK. YOU LOOK THIN AND YOU HAVE BRUISES ON YOUR FACE LIKE SOMEONE'S BEAT YOU AGAIN!

OF COURSE, ETIESET CAUGHT ME TALKING TO UYI AND WAS ANGRY.

IDARA! WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO THIS TEACHER AGAIN? YOU DON'T LISTEN! YOU WANT BASSEY TO GIVE YOU ANOTHER ROUND OF BEATINGS? COME HOME!

IDARA, YOU WILL BE IN A LOT OF TROUBLE IF YOU GO WITH HER AND YOU KNOW IT!

IDARA, I KNOW SOME PEOPLE THAT CAN HELP. IF YOU COME WITH ME NOW, WE CAN PUT AN END TO ALL OF THIS ABUSE.
IT WAS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DECISION OF MY LIFE: SHOULD I GO BACK WITH ETIEBET AND CONTINUE MY LIFE AS BASSEY’S MONEY-WIFE? OR SHOULD I GO WITH UYI EVEN THOUGH I WASN’T SURE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT?
THE MOMENT I GOT ON THE BUS WITH UYI, I CHANGED MY LIFE FOREVER.

UYI BROUGHT ME TO A RESCUE CENTRE THAT HELPS YOUNG GIRLS AND FAMILIES TRAPPED IN THE MONEY WIFE SYSTEM.

I MET WITH THE ORGANIZATION'S COORDINATOR AND VOLUNTEERS.

IDARA, YOU ARE VERY BRAVE FOR COMING TO US!
That same day, the organization swung into action and started the process that would eventually free me from Bassey.

First, the rescue coordinator spoke to my parents about how much they had borrowed from Bassey.
The coordinators reviewed the available funding to repay Bassey’s loan, and collected donations from the local community.

As well as larger organizations to help support my family. This was all part of the actions needed to remove me from the “money wife” practice.

They also held community meetings to educate parents on the dangers of money-wife system, and how steps families can take to protect their daughters from abuse.
MEANWHILE, BASSEY ANGRILY WENT TO THE POLICE AND REPORTED ME MISSING AGAIN.

IDARA’S PARENTS NEED TO REPAY ME FOR EVERYTHING I’VE DONE FOR THEM OR RETURN THE GIRL TO ME. OTHERWISE, THIS VILLAGE WILL NOT CONTAIN US ALL!

IT TOOK SEVERAL WEEKS OF NEGOTIATIONS, BUT THE RESCUE CENTRE WAS SUCCESSFUL IN REPAYING BASSEY’S LOAN FOR MY PARENTS. THEY BROUGHT CHIEF BASSEY AND MY PARENTS TOGETHER TO FINALISE MY RELEASE.
ALL THE LOANS HAVE BEEN REPAYED TO CHIEF BASSEY. OUR IDARA IS BACK!

SHE'S GOT A HARD ROAD AHEAD OF HER. LOTS OF FORMER MONEY WIVES DON'T RECOVER FROM THIS TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE.

THEY DON'T RECEIVE THERAPY OR ANY HELP FOR THEIR PAIN.

SHE HAS BEEN THROUGH A LOT, I HOPE SHE WILL BE OKAY.

THANKFULLY WE HAVE THE RESOURCES TO GIVE IDARA THE SUPPORT SHE NEEDS SO SHE CAN LIVE A PRODUCTIVE LIFE.
A year later, I was enrolled back in school for the new academic year! Uyi and Frank came to see me off my first day of school.

The rescue center helped me enroll in an after-school program, specializing in trade skills. That is where I learned to sew.
FLASH FORWARD TO ME TODAY.
I AM ACHIEVING MY DREAM OF
GRADUATING FROM THE UNIVERSITY!

CONGRATULATIONS
IDARA!
WE WILL NOW LISTEN
TO YOUR SPEECH.
This is my story of surviving the money-wife system, but I was one of the lucky ones. The dangerous tradition is unfortunately a common practice that negatively impacts the health and well-being of young girls in my community. If it wasn't for Uyi who cared enough to bring me to the rescue organization, and coordinators like Frank who negotiated on my behalf, I would still be a money-wife.
TO THIS DAY, MANY YOUNG GIRLS ARE STILL SUFFERING UNDER A SYSTEM THAT ENSLAVES AND TREATS THE GIRL- CHILD AS A COMMODITY. WE MUST DO WHAT WE CAN TO HELP THESE GIRLS.
AS I CELEBRATED MY GRADUATION WITH MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY, I SPOTTED A PREGNANT YOUNG GIRL, SCRAMBLING TO COLLECT PLASTIC BOTTLES JUST LIKE I HAD MANY YEARS AGO. I COULD ONLY ASSUME SHE TOO WAS ALSO A MONEY WIFE. I KNEW THEN WHAT I HAD TO DO.
Hi, my name is Idara. Let me help you.
The Money Wife system is a cultural practice across several communities of South-South Nigeria that allows for the illegal 'sale' of young girls to pay off family debts, procure favors, or trade for scarce resources such as food. In some isolated communities, girls as young as three years of age are sold into the system. Worse still, some girls are pre-sold before they are even born.

The girls sold into this system are called "money wives." A money-wife's life is riddled with abuse and neglect. These young girls are not allowed to attend school and are kept isolated from the rest of the community. Drought caused by climate change has exacerbated the situation and increased this practice. Communities dependent on agriculture are experiencing increased poverty levels, forcing families to consider exchanging their daughters for food and other basic amenities. Despite efforts to abolish the Money Wife system, current community leaders have deemed it too ingrained into the culture to eradicate the system.

Several community-based local organizations are working to help support victims of the Money Wife system and educate communities about this dangerous practice.

If you or someone you know is a victim of the Money Wife system, or if you wish to support one of the organizations working to end this harmful practice, please contact:

**Faith House Mission**
+234 815 566 8844
www.faithhousemissions.org
Akonam Richards, Founder
Author's Note

Ayomide Solanke is a graphic artist and activist in Lagos, Nigeria. Her graphic novels and blog (Ireticomicsafrica.org) focus on the intercessions between climate change and gender-based violence. Her most recent novel, *Idara's Story*, features the journey of a girl trapped within child marriage practices. Other stories explore the issues of kidnapping in schools and domestic violence against girls. She has spoken on global platforms such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (NGO CSW), COP26, and the International Education Funders Group 'Brain in Gear' series (IEFG) to educate funding organizations about the importance to protect girls and women against gender-based violence in Nigeria.

Ayomide wrote *Idara's Story* during her 2021-2022 Future Rising Fellowship at Girl Rising. The graphic novel explores how climate change increases harmful practices such as child marriage, and aims to provide helpful resources for young girls at risk. Education remains a determinant of success for girls because it provides them an opportunity to develop skills and agency to advocate for themselves. Through her work, Ayomide seeks a better status and quality of life for girls and women in Nigeria and worldwide.

“If Idara's story helps even one girl, the work I put into writing this novel will be worth it.”
~Ayomide Solanke