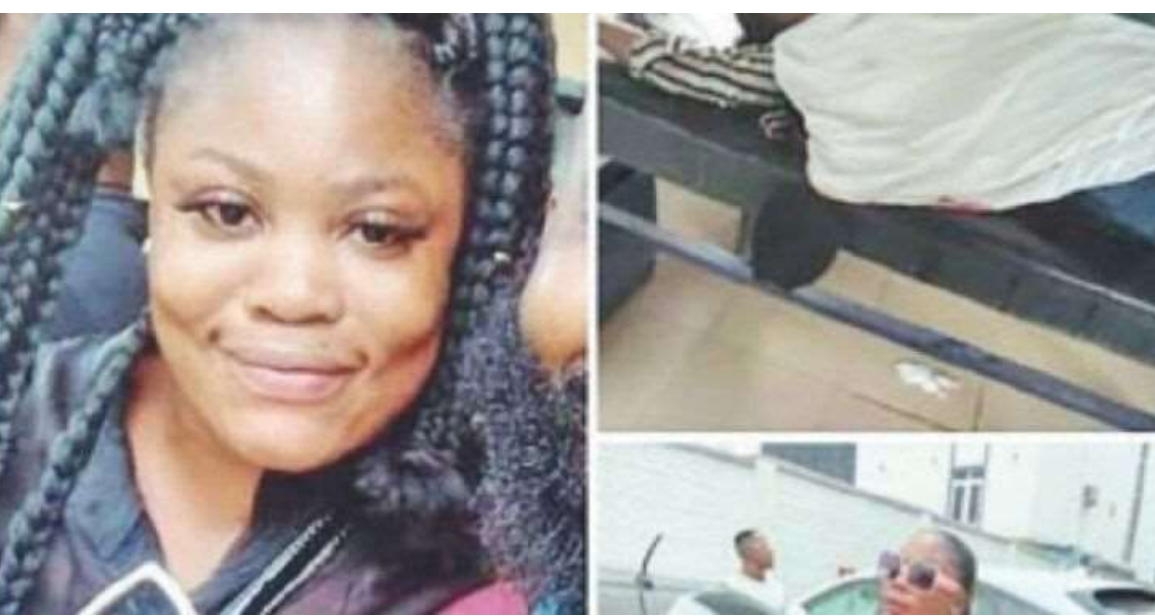


A father's agony: How my daughter was gunned down in Abia

• I asked her to return home to avoid being hit by stray bullets, 20 minutes later, I learnt she was dead

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From **Okey Sampson**, Umuahia

It Was a painful end. Mary Chiemela Ajunwa, 29, daughter of Mr. Gordon Ajunwa, a retired civil servant from Amuta, Isuikwuato but residing at Ohafia, in Ohafia Local Government Area of Abia State, was a businesswoman whose life was cut short on August 17 2022. That was the day soldiers from the 14 Brigade of the Nigeria Army, Ohafia had a gun battle with some gunmen. Mary was hit by a stray bullet, leading to her untimely end.

After the incident, *Saturday Sun* set out to meet with the relatives of the deceased lady.

According to her father, Mary attended Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Imo State, where she obtained a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Secretarial Studies. While in school, she was said to be involved in events planning and decoration business, as well as selling of clothing materials.

So, after her academic programme last year, the lady, not wanting to depend on her parents or any other person for that matter anymore for financial assistance, opened a shop within the bustling Ebem Park, where she replicated what she was doing in school, albeit on a higher scale.

Booming business

Ajunwa said his daughter had just finished her Higher National Diploma (HND) at Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Imo State and was going for her clearance, preparatory to getting her result. In the middle of that, she set up a business, the type she was doing while in school.

“Mary was just fresh from Federal Polytechnic, Nekede. She had not even collected her result, but was going for clearance to enable her collect her result.

“The business she was doing before her death, she started it in school. When she came back after her studies, she opened a shop in Ohafia and was doing it there instead of staying idle. She opened the shop at Ebem last year and had been going there since then, until the day of the incident. She was more of a makeup artist and she was well known in the area for doing that.

Black Wednesday

Ajunwa said on Wednesday, August 17, he left the house in the morning, hours before her daughter. “She was with the mother in the house, and after a while, she told the mother she wanted to go to the shop and after that, she left for her shop. After about an hour, she spoke to me on the phone. She called to inform me that there was crisis somewhere around the Ebem Motor Park where her shop was located. She told me there was heavy shooting around the area and I advised her to be very careful, that she should in fact close her shop and find a way to come back home, instead of falling victim to what was happening.”

Ajunwa never knew that death was lurking around for his daughter and that she would become a victim minutes later.

“It was not up to 30 minutes; in fact, it was just about 20 minutes after we spoke on phone, that somebody called me and said, ‘Are you the father of so, so and so person?’ I said yes, the person told me my daughter had been hit by a bullet and that she had been rushed to the hospital.”

The confused pensioner dashed to the hospital, but beheld what he never bargained for. His daughter was hit on the chest by the stray bullet, and she had died before she could arrive at the hospital. Ajunwa was faced with the corpse of a daughter he was in the house with some hours earlier, someone he spoke with on phone 20 minutes earlier.

“From what I deduced, it was like she had closed her shop and was trying to run away from the crossfire when the bullet hit her from the back and pierced her heart,” said the distraught dad.

Shock of my life

Mary’s father said he got the shock of his life when he got to the hospital and found her daughter dead, as he said he thought when he got the phone call that her daughter was wounded either on the hand or leg.

“But when I got there, the thing was too bad. The bullet hit her from the back side of her chest and came out from the front.

“The corpse was left where she died that day because there was no way to carry her to the mortuary as a result of the heavy shooting at Ebem, and soldiers blocked everywhere. It was the next day that I took her to the mortuary.”

Burial

It is customary in Igbo land in most cases, to keep the dead for long before interment, to at least prepare and give it a befitting burial. But in the case of Mary, it was not so. She was buried at her home town in Isuikwuato on Saturday, August 20, three days after she was killed. The father explained why it was so.

“Being a young lady, relatives didn’t waste time for the burial. You know, in this part of the country, if someone dies, he or she is kept in the morgue for some time and preparations made for the burial. But in her case, because of her age and the circumstances surrounding her death, my relations were contacted immediately and she was buried on Saturday, August 20 at our home town in Isuikwuato.”

Parent’s agony

Ajunwa, his wife and Mary’s mother, and other members of the family are not happy and not feeling fine also as a result of the incident.

The sad dad said: “It is not easy losing such a daughter who you suffered under the rain and sun to train to that level and you’re thinking of how she would settle down in life and be of help to the family, before she died the way she did.

Ajunwa said the family would sorely miss Mary. He said her daughter was humble to a fault. The man said what they would miss most, was her contributions to the family.

“Since I retired from service, she became a sort of breadwinner of the family and since she is no more, I don’t know what we are going to do. We are also going to miss her presence, she was very lovable and caring; people were always happy staying with her.

“Since the incident, thousands of people have been trooping to our house to console us. Her former classmates and fellow students called from Nekede to express their sadness, that was how much she was loved everywhere she went to while alive.”

My future plans for her

Ajunwa told the reporter that he had lofty plans for the young lady before the stray bullet cut her life short.

“My plans for her like any of her siblings, was that after coming out from school as she did, she will get a nice job, but since getting a job is not that easy, I had planned to help her expand her business.

“Already, before her death, her business had started doing well. She was known all over the place. There is nobody who doesn’t know her. They even know her more than myself. Wherever there is an event in the area, she was always the person to be invited for the decorations and all of that, and she used to go with her staff.

“I had in mind that within a short period, she would get married, stay with the husband who would take over in planning her future from where I stopped, but all these things have now been cut short,” he lamented.

Mary’s future plan

Ajunwa said the deceased told him she would like to be self employed after her youth service and that was why she established the business immediately she came out from school. “She told me she would not like to depend on anybody for money and that she will like to expand her business. She was already doing well within the short time she started that business.

“That was what she told me, but I do not know whether the husband, if she had gotten married, would have altered her plans a bit.”

On whether the family would continue with the business established by Mary as a way of keeping her memory alive, Ajunwa painfully said: “We are still mourning her death. It is still early to think of what will happen to her business. As things are, nobody has even gone near that shop since the incident. It is after mourning her that we would be able to know if any of her siblings could continue with that business, for now, that thought is not crossing our mind.”

Relations, neighbours mourn Mary

Relations and neighbours are mourning Mary’s death. One of her uncles, Iheanochi Mbaneme described Mary’s death as a big blow to the family.

Mbaneme said Mary was always respectful and humble when he was alive and that all would miss her.

He urged the Federal Government, Nigerian Army and Abia State Government to find a way of compensating the family of the lady, who he said was more or less the family’s breadwinner.

“This is one death too many. It is very painful. The government and the Army should find a way to compensate the bereaved family,” he said.

One of her neighbours in Ohafia who gave her name as Eunice said they lost a loving and caring neighbour in Mary.

Eunice condemned in its entirety the incident that led to the death of the young lady and called for peace.

“All of us who are close to her are pained over her death,” she said.

Appeal to government

Mary's father is appealing to the Federal and Abia State governments, including the military to do something to compensate the bereaved family. "They are all aware of how my daughter was killed. They should not keep quiet.

"Although no amount of money would bring her back or equate her place in the family, they should do something to mitigate our pain. The proper thing is for government to compensate the family," he said.

Ikpeazu, Army react

Governor Okezie Ikpeazu has reacted over the disturbances in Ohafia which led to the death of Mary and called for calm. Ikpeazu, in a statement, said he was deeply saddened by reports of loss of lives in the incident.

The governor said he was shocked by the reckless display of disregard for human lives, and sent his condolences to the family of the deceased person.

The Nigerian Army has equally reacted to the development. The new Commander, 14 Brigade, Nigerian Army, Brigadier General Adegoke Adetuyi expressed his displeasure over the incident that happened in Ohafia last week which led to the killing of the lady.

While appealing to people in the area to always volunteer information that would help the military flush out criminal elements in the area, he said this was imperative so that innocent and law abiding citizens would not be subjected to unnecessary inconveniences or get killed.

Gen Adetuyi said he was not in Ohafia to 'romance' any criminal, but to constitutionally do everything possible in ensuring that peace is maintained in Ohafia and the whole of Abia State.