

Success story of changes in girls' attitudes to early marriage in Northern Nigeria

"I want to become just like Malala, she's a Pakistani who was shot....She wants to attain rights for girls to have education that's why I want to be like her"



Girls in primary school at Kurmin, Kaduna. Copyright, dRPC 2015

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1.0 Introduction

Early marriage has been a longing problem among communities of northern Nigeria. The age at which girls are given out in marriage is an important determinant of their future lives and health. Women are physically and psychologically ready to start child bearing at certain age than at others. In some communities especially in rural areas and among the urban poor early marriage is a rule rather than an exception. Girls are married from the age of 11-17 depending on their physical stature and other factors. Once girls are married, the culture of leaving them to mature before beginning child bearing is no longer fashionable as such; girls married start childbearing at the age of 15-19 years.

Islam prohibits pre-marital sex and the preservation of virginity has strong social relevance. Parents ensure that their female children's social security is protected, by marrying them up at a tender age when they are in their early adolescence. This is in an attempt to prevent them from sexual promiscuity and premarital pregnancies that can damage the image of that of the entire family.

Early marriage is also closely related to the body-build of the girls. If a girl is physically grown up, she stands the "chance" of getting someone to marry her. It is socially unacceptable for a person to allow his daughter to grow (up to 16-17 years) in his house. She is considered as leftover (*kwantai*) and the person will lose his public respect; it is also a sign of failure not to marry one's daughter married as soon as they are 12-13 years old.

People, who are poor however, delay the marriage of their daughters because of the costs involved and they are subject to public scolding for the delay. (Adamu, 2003)

Although girls are allowed as their male counterparts to attend Qur'anic schools and to get Islamic education, it is not the same with Western education school which have time frame of twelve years (6-3-3) In communities where there is poor access or negative perception about western education schools, girls who are not in primary or secondary school, the chances of delaying her marriage under the guise of schooling are not there. Parents who have their girls in school sometimes use the schooling to delay their marriage arguing that '*saita gama makaranta*' So, leaving the girls without school only exposes them to the marriage square.

The dangers of marrying girls early are many, key among them are:

- (a) It leads to child bearing and increase their risk to maternal morbidity such as Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) and Recto Vaginal Fistula (RVF)
- (b) It leads to high fertility and poor health.
- (c) Increase their chances of dying are many folds that of their counterparts living in elsewhere
- (d) Lifetime dependency on the husband and inability to have economic freedom

All these factors and other not mentioned drew the attention of many development partners and local non-governmental organizations, thus for

a number of years, many projects have tried to address early marriage. In the past, the approach was direct and the attention was on sensitization of parents to stop early marriage, latter, the approach shifted and the strategies

1.10 Background

In response to the findings of a 2013 Ford Foundation scan of early marriage in West Africa, Action Aid Nigeria, provided technical backstopping and anchored an innovative 2 year project to delay early marriage and the onset of childbearing in Kano and Kaduna states.

There are three Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) involved in the delivery of the project as follows:

- (a) Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative (IWEI) that worked in Ajingi Local Government Kano State.
- (b) Girl Child Concern (GCC) that worked in Igabi Local Government Kaduna State; and
- (c) Girl Child Education (GCE) that worked in Giwa Local Government, Kaduna State. (dRPC, 2015)

This report is an outcome of a project aimed at delaying child marriage by reducing social and economic barriers to girls' education in north-western states of Nigeria notably Kano and Kaduna States. The project's specific objectives are as follows:

1. Establish a strong and effective consortium of civil society organizations working to delay marriage in the north-western states of Kaduna and Kano;
2. Increase awareness among key stakeholders of the adverse social and reproductive health consequences of child marriage and to build political commitment (within two years) for concrete measures for its reduction
3. Pilot government-civil society partnerships to scale-up best practices in reducing child marriage in the two states

One of the important innovations of this project is that it is implemented by the indigenous NGOs working in this area prior to the intervention in 2013. The study targeted NGOs; the girl's beneficiaries; government officials; Islamic opinion leaders; community leaders and teachers. The development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC) is one of the 4 NGO partners with responsibility for monitoring and evaluation on this project.

1.20 Objectives of the Study

- 1) To identify the extent to which the project increased understanding of community members about the harmful effects of early marriages as a result of sensitization activities of the 3 NGOs
- 2) To find out the extent to which key community level stakeholders have changed



Plate 1: The dRPC Research team during fieldwork

their attitudes, behaviours and practices as a result of the project

3) To examine the extent to which community members with decision making power such as the LGA; the traditional leader; teachers/principals in secondary schools in the community accepted the project, found it valuable and are prepared to sustain activities of the project after completion

2.0 Study Methods

In order to achieve the study objectives and recognising that the NGOs involved in the project did not collect comprehensive baseline data on the state of things before the start of the project, this study have to retrospectively collect information on how things were before the project an how the projects have change or not change things.

Consequently, interview guides were developed and targeted selected stakeholders about their position; practices, knowledge, and attitudes prior to the project and as a consequence of the project. They were also asked about the value and importance of the project and whether they are prepared to sustain it after completion.

The study interviewed the direct beneficiaries of the project-the girls, community leaders, teachers and implementing NGOs. The study is entirely qualitative and Key Informant Interview was the tool used. All respondents are purposely selected. Ethical issues were considered as all respondents were clearly informed and their consents obtained. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated. Photographs were taken during the interviews. This report is preliminary as not all the data was analysed.



Plate 2: Community Leaders at Maigana waiting to be interviewed by the research team

3.00 Summary Of Findings

What follows is the summary of the findings of the study which is presented based on the study objectives. A number of stakeholders were part of the project. They include the direct beneficiaries, that is the girls and indirect beneficiaries that is the traditional and religious leaders, government agencies and teachers. The study found very interesting findings as far as the project is concerned.

3.10 Community Understanding

Prior to the commencement of the project, overwhelming majority of the girls have either narrow view about education or mindsets that has accepted marriage as the ultimate goal of girls. The

girls have accepted their cultural fate of getting married after primary school or at most after junior secondary school. Those who are already at senior secondary school have already choosing where to go after school which is ABU. ABU does not mean the Ahmadu Bello University at Zaria rather, a popular phrase among Hausa girls which means **Aure Bautar Ubangiji** (Marriage an act of God's Worship). There are many reasons that led to this perception, first of all there was the age-long culture of early marriage, marriage give girls social security, attainment of higher education reduces girl's eligibility, poverty, ignorance and many more.

The inception of this project seems to open a new window to the girls. Almost all the girls have realised that education is a key to successful life; in fact, education can help make them better human beings and mothers.

A 16 year old respondent from Ajingi, Kano State, when asked about how if she is able to convince her parents to allow her finish her senior secondary school education, she said “Yes I have, particularly with the coming of this project. After every session I use to engage my mother on the relevance of girl child education and the need to finish school.”

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Another 17 year old from Ajingi also explained what they were taught on the importance of girl education to the family explained *“They said girl child education is very important as it will assist her in taking proper care of her home. And if the husband becomes incapacitated*

due to a mishap, the women can work and support the family”

Another respondent also explained how the project helped them *“Frankly, the project has really given me courage to finish and further my education. I really experienced changes. They taught us variety of skills such as how to make facial powder, how to cook, how to make pomade. The project has boosted my confidence in speaking in public. The project encouraged me to study given the problem of no of female teachers”*.

For the one that wished to be a doctor, she gave a long lecture about how to convince her parents, hear her *“Well the fact that I want to become a doctor if they would object to it I would convince them most especially my mother whom I am closer to, I’ll tell her if I become a doctor you will be very proud of me and as far as this community is concerned there isn’t a single female who is a doctor, you will be quite pleased and proud to know that your daughter is the only doctor, won’t you? Most especially when people are sick and have no money to go to the hospital I’ll be called in to assist that is something you will be happy with. I’ll will be paid well and earn reward for it too, I’ll get to sit my siblings down to ask them what they want to be in the future I’ll start first just by saying I want to be a doctor then my parents will get to hear me and know I’m serious about it, this is a way I will get to convey my message they might even call me to tell me they want to marry me off but I will*

tell them I want to study”.

In Kaduna State, the responses are also encouraging. A 15 year old student at Kawo Kaduna when asked about specific information, person or activity of GCC organisation supports her best to stay in school and complete her education; she responded ***“I saw a lot of things that were impressive in GCC. I was taught a lot of things. The way the GCC members are educated makes me want to be like them”*** and that projects like this is ***“Very good. The programme we had this year was better than all other programs that was held in the previous years.”***

In Zaria, the project has given them self confidence and wings to fly, an 18 year old student at Dakachi, Zaria said ***“I had no ambition, but after the program came I want to continue my studies and become a teacher”*** and according to her, the facilitators of the project are ***“My role models... those people that come to taught us, asking questions, their responses etc., the really impressed me that’s why I want to become like them.”*** Another respondent was blunt and argued the program has changed her perception entirely that ***“Even though I thought I’d get married immediately I’m through with secondary school but now I don’t even think about it, all I want is study.”***

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dream about a bright future as majority of them have the ambition of becoming teachers, nurses, doctors and lawyers.

As for the community leaders, the study found that, religious and traditional leaders’ understanding and acceptance of girl’s education is fundamental in changing community perspectives. All the leaders that spoke to the research team have indicated their acceptance of allowing girls to finish their schools before marriage. In fact, some say, they allowed theirs to finish school as examples and that has influenced others. However, they all agree that the projects have opened new windows of opportunity to their members and have positively impacted on the way people see girl’s education. The scholarships and the training workshops have made many women happy, women who at the back of their mind want their children educated have welcomed this opportunity.

As for government agencies, they see the project as a **“welcome development and of great value”**. For them, government efforts are not enough and this project has helped them get a little more enrolment. They also argue that although at the level of policy, their governments are not fully aware of the project of the three NGOs, communities are happy with them and that government may have some few things to learn from the projects.

3.20 Changing Stakeholder's Attitudes

The three projects have also helped in changing the stakeholder's attitude to allowing their children to finish school before getting married. But, of most interest, are the girls themselves having a new view of life. An 18 year old student at Dakachi Zaria said **“I want to become just like Malala, she's a Pakistani who was shot, she is now in the United States of America. She wants to attain rights for girls to have education that's why I want to be like her. Secondly, I want to become like my mother because she's a very kind hearted person and lives peacefully with the entire community. I love her courage and enthusiasm she began pursuing a career after she was married with children, she helps and assists anyone in need in our community”**.

Another respondent explained that **“Before I began the program I didn't see any reason to study, I just go to school because I know girls**

in my family get married early so nothing to think of or prepare my mind for, unknowingly if early marriage brings about any problem I haven't seen any one female who has benefited from it or want to be like her. Not up until now that I started this program which enlightened me and showed me how important education is, and the problems that come with early marriage, health wise etc. if this will continue there will be reduction in female population outside school.”

The responses of the girls are very encouraging, the trainings have made them different as one of them said **“To my perspective I think girls should be allowed to finish their studies because if they are married off early it's like their lives have been destroyed, if they gain a sound education it's like the whole world has gained which will lead to a lot of changes, and lack of education leads to marrying of the girls early as well as financial issues it also leads the parents in marrying of their girls, some others[parents] don't leave the girls to study because its seen as useless and it's a waste of time they prefer to send their male children to school”**

Efforts like this will continue to encourage parents to send their daughters to school and allow them finish the school before marriage. It will also sensitise the girls to see beyond their noses.

3.30 Acceptance and Sustainability of the Project

From the study, we found that all the stakeholders have accepted the projects; in fact, they all commended the NGOs for a great job and see them as partners in progress. For instance, an education officer in Kaduna heard about the activities of GCC and he looked for them and influenced them to take the project to his village, he did not wait for them to look for him.

In other communities like Ajingi Local Government in Kano State, the approach of the NGOs has helped in making their activities acceptable to the community. A community leader explained about IWEI's approach ***“Is definitely a good thing most especially when you approach a person in a calm and compose method or manner it will be very easy to convince a person to accept your plea and ideas unlike where one applies an aggressive or humiliating or abusive manner where by even one religion and culture are against those certain behaviour. For example even the methods of teaching such as the play way method and so on all of which we were taught. The method they (IWEI) came with was very pleasing where by everywhere they go to they have female mentor which say a whole lot to their purpose and what they try to educate others on and this female mentor resides in all village Torenke, child were the community are pleased with her and upbringing which will protect the dignity and***

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that of every female student that will interact with. These are all qualitative means in which one will respect a female for.”

As for sustainability, it is important to note that the activities of the NGOs have in some ways attracted the attention of government agencies to do more to support girl-child education. In Ajingi, a community leader explained how ***“Well, before Isa Wali (IWEI) came here, the Hisba does that through the educational secretary and the Hisba commander here in Ajingi, but the coming of Isa Wali, the educational secretary follows up and provides the schools with some material needed just like IWEI does”*** evidence like these are pleasing because they give some hope that the projects are influencing government and that may help sustain the project.

Another interesting finding is that almost all the

teachers in the project are working with NGOs for the first time; this perhaps is because development partners do more projects on health directly rather than in other sectors like education. But their experiences are encouraging and involving teachers will help projects like these to succeed.

Finally, community leaders are not only pro girl-child education but working in the community to sensitise their members and encourage them to allow their children finish school before marriage. However, their efforts cannot be sustained without projects like this and in addition influencing governments to make and implement policies that will make it easy for girls to get education as one respondent argued ***“ I was introduced to the program by a teacher in our village she was asked to get girls that have concluded their primary school whose parents cannot afford to further education, so we went there, sat for an interview, we wrote math and English examination we passed so we were given the scholarship.”*** And that ***“I enjoy my studies and I don't have any problems because the organization supports us and pay for our school fees, they even provided us with writing materials.”***

4.00 Conclusion

This project of delaying age of marriage for girls in northern Nigeria has used an effective approach in its delivery. Instead of facing communities with the jargon of delaying marriages for health reasons the decision to encourage retention of girls in school has made it easier for community members to accept.

The NGOs have been successful in dealing with community members by respecting their cultural and religious beliefs and by using people communities will identify with. In addition, the scholarship program and the training of the girls have also helped the girls get a new direction in life.

Finally, the project has succeeded in changing the way communities see and do things as far as education of girls is concerned. The projects also have potentials of influencing governments and communities to sustain the achievements so far made, however, the project as it is now should be seen as just a beginning, and if abandoned it may not be sustainable.

5.00 Recommendations

1. It is recommended that this project be expanded to cover more communities.
2. Successful projects like these should be publicized so that Federal and State government agencies can learn about what works, leverage findings and replicate successes.

6.00 Reference

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