

# Stories Of Innovations To Delay Early Marriage by Indigenous Nigerian NGOs



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*Girls from Kurmi community in Kaduna state crossing the river to get to school every day*

## Empowerment for girls' education at the Girl Child Education (GCE) - A story of innovation

My name is Habiba Mohammed and my organisation is called the Center for Girls' Education (CGE), based in Zaria, Kaduna state. In the project - Building Collaboration, Partnerships and Political Commitment to Delay Early Marriage and the Onset of Childbearing in Northern Nigeria we worked in Zaria.

The approach used by my organisation to delay early marriage and the onset of childbearing in Northern Nigeria is safe spaces for girls. This idea was born as a result of a research conducted by some doctors at the Ahmadu Bello University

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***The research informed our idea to base our approach on education as the strategic innovation to delay early marriage and the onset of childbearing for young girls in Northern Nigeria.***

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Teaching Hospital Shika, which If the girls had completed their secondary education at least, they would have attained physiological maturity, in addition to increased access to antenatal care. This informed our idea to base our approach on education as the strategic innovation to delay early marriage and the onset of childbearing for young girls in Northern Nigeria.

A second factor which shaped the selection of education as the innovative approach to delay early marriage is that we had interviews with mothers in the community. Mothers told us that they sent older daughter to school who graduated without knowing how to read or write. We then found out that the poor educational quality and poor school infrastructure were a big factor behind parents marrying off their daughters at a very young age. The girls in our target communities were normally married off at the average age of 14; they mostly did not graduate secondary school. While there were schools in the community the facility was just too poor, for instance one school building

had only 3 classes and the roofs in 2 of the classes were off. There was also no water supply, no toilet facilities and very few female teachers.

To address these issues we came up with the idea of safe spaces where the girls will be taught basic literacy and numeracy based on a curriculum designed specifically for that purpose. Besides basic literacy and numeracy, the young girls were put through life skills issues such as reproductive health including adolescent health; and personal hygiene. They were also taught how to prepare the oral rehydration solution (ORS), cookery and how to be assertive and be able to say “NO” to being pulled out of school to be married off early. In Hausaland, it is believed that when a girl is silent over the issue of marriage, she is indirectly giving consent, not knowing that most girls only keep silent due to shyness or out of respect for elders, not because they are in support of what is about to happen to them. This affects them later in life.

To help them remember what they have been taught at the safe spaces, we published a comic book so they can practice their literacy at home and they could also read to their younger ones at home and cultivate a reading habit. The comic book is actually a true story, featuring a young girl who was denied education and married at a young age.

I believe this is an innovation because the mixture of safe spaces and educational support is not in the conventional government schools. I would say that our innovation was a success because of how distinguished our first cohort of girls has turned out to be. Parents of girls who are not a part of the safe spaces are presently asking that their daughters be included. Other communities who



*Engagement with mothers of adolescent girls*

were not a part of our intervention communities but who have heard about the safe spaces are also requesting that the safe spaces be extended to their communities. We attribute the success of this innovation to the safe spaces and the comic book.

At first we had resistance from some communities. They were suspicious of our activities and didn't want anything new to be introduced into their communities. There was one community leader (*mai unguwa*) who said to us “what is the point of this education you people are stressing about? After all my son has finished school but is still here with us in the farm. His schooling was a total waste of time.” He asked us to leave his community which we did, but he is now calling us back to come and impart change in his community through the safe spaces sessions we hold for girls so in essence, the innovation has spoken for itself.

Looking back, I feel that we should have included the girls that were out of school into the safe spaces right from the start because now that their parents have understood the importance of education and enrolled them into school, they are far behind and not benefitting from the safe spaces.

***Hajiya Habiba Mohammed***





Group presentation by adolescent girls

## Empowerment for girls' education at the Girl Child (GCC) - A story of innovation

My name is Umma Ilyasu Mohammad and I am the Program Officer of the non-profit organization - Girl Child Concerns (GCC). In this project - Building Collaboration, Partnerships and Political Commitment to Delay Early Marriage and the Onset of Childbearing in Northern Nigeria, we worked in 2 rural local governments in Kaduna state.

In GCC, one of the things under this project we believe has really worked is education. If you have any intervention that can keep a girl engaged, we feel that education is the right strategy to use in delaying the age of marriage because once a girl is in school and she is retained to completion, she would be around 17 to 18 years old. So we mentor and empower girls to attain education. But mentoring and empowering girls in education programs is not so much an innovation but

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***Mentoring and empowering girls in education programs is not so much of an innovation for us, but education supported by community mobilization to change knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of men and boys, coupled with advocacy for policy change is the combination innovation that we use in this program.***

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education supported by community mobilization to change knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of men and boys, coupled with advocacy for policy change is the combination innovation that we use in this program.

In this project, our first step in the journey to introducing innovation is that we identify communities through the annual school census to detect those with the lowest enrollment/retention rate from the Ministry of Education. We then hold needs assessment and situation analysis sessions for women and men separately, so that each party is given the opportunity to speak freely. We often find that in these sessions, the women open up to us, highlighting where they were at fault and where they felt the men were at fault in

hindering their daughters from attending school.

We then begin community mobilization programs targeting the parents so that they see the importance of education. We do that by meeting the men to discuss with them how to resolve the issues that their women claim are the reasons why their daughters do not attend school. We also encouraged them to form a committee within their communities that would ensure the girls in the community have access to quality education. We facilitate a process in which the young boys in the community be involved, in these committees to ensure their sisters go to school as they are sometimes the ones who brainwash the girls into marriage either as older brothers or as suitors. In the committees we encourage the men understand the importance of educating their daughters and the health risks associated with marrying them off early. We also enlightened them that educating their girls is not a privilege but a right. We train community members to conduct advocacy and demand for this right from the government. We also target community leaders so that they will learn about the health challenge that girls can face as a result of early marriage.

Once the environment is enabling, in GCC we being to mentor our girls to study hard, keep to themselves, avoid bad friends, promiscuity and other bad influences, so that they can be a good example to other girls in the community also their parents would be proud of sending them to school and not regret, that is why we emphasize life skills. We also use girls only camps as safe spaces to empower the girls

By creating an enabling environment and also working with the girls we made them the center

of our programs. Our girls have now been empowered, they stand up, speak out and are committed to continuing their education instead of marrying under-age.

***Hajiya Umma Iliyasu Mohammad***



*Group discussion at the GCC life skills camp*

## Empowerment for girls' education at the Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative (IWEI) - A story of innovation

We are Yusuf Nuhu and Amina Hanga of the non-governmental organization, Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative (IWEI), we worked in Ajingi local government in this project - Building Collaboration, Partnerships and Political Commitment to Delay Early Marriage and the Onset of Childbearing in Northern Nigeria.

To delay early marriage and the onset of childbearing in Northern Nigeria, our major innovation is that we employed the use of advocacy. From the onset of this project, we took up the role of advocating to the key stakeholders to delay early marriage. By looking at the situation in our community here up North, you would realize that



*Engagement with fathers of adolescent girls*

certain legal and policy instruments can be used to achieve the goal of delaying early marriage. So we took a look at policy and laws, within Kano and thought to adopt the “Child Rights Act” and modify it to suit our way of life in a document we call the “Child Protection Bill.”

We believe that this intervention is unique because not every non-profit has the skills to engage government in the North on advocacy to achieve their desired goal. Many organizations working in girls working to delay early marriage use education to solve a problem. They provide books and probably provide scholarships. Now these are things that are visible and can be used directly by the community, as opposed to using policies for which policy makers are the sole target. Advocacy is not essentially bringing direct material gain to the people but rather makes use of something within them (policy) to provide what they need (quality education) and indirectly delaying early marriage.

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It is a big challenge talking about child marriage in Northern Nigeria so we had to strategize and re-strategize before we could go into the community. In the end, we had to come up with the idea of sending their daughters to complete secondary education hence the innovation, enacting a binding law that would enforce them to do so.

Results from a survey conducted by IWEI in 2010 showed that members of the Ajingi community especially the women, are not deeply educated and they mostly marry out their daughters at the age of 14 years. Most of the time, these girls are pulled out of school to be given out in marriage and only a very few of them get to complete their secondary education. However, we realized that the problem was not only peculiar to Ajingi but to the whole state so we thought we need to widen our intervention. We realized that there is no law





*Engagement with female Islamic scholars*

to back up the education of a girl, so that is why we are focusing on such a Bill.

To get the Bill passed the stakeholders we engaged are the members of the Kano State House of Assembly; the Ministry of Women Affairs, from where the Bill originated; the Kano state Ministry of Education (MoE); and Kano state Ministry of Justice (MoJ). To modifying the section of the Bill on Education, we engaged the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), the Kano State Senior Secondary Schools Management Board (KSSSMB), the Zonal Education Board, and other important stakeholders such as traditional and religious leaders. So far, the Bill is about to be reviewed. Our initial plan was to adopt the section on education, restructure it and get it passed but now the Commissioner for Women Affairs, Barrister Zubaida Shariff has suggested that we review the Bill and get it passed. Getting the Commissioner to pick an interest in this Bill is a success story for us.

We intend to pursue the passing of this bill, even after Ford foundation and with the Ministry of Women Affairs as the main driver. Therefore, we need to advocate for a law that would ensure that girls are sent to school and we need to keep working with the *Ulama* and the traditional leaders to sensitise the community (parents) on the importance of education.

***Yusuf Nuhu and Amina Hanga***



*End of project evaluation with adolescent girls*

