

## The dRPC's 21 years of Engaging Muslim Opinion Leaders to shift beliefs and practices related to the Rights & Health of Women and Girls in Islam in Nigeria, 2003-2024



The Nigerian Ambassador to Egypt, Alhaji Gali Umar, participates in the graduation and award ceremony of Nigerian delegates at the completion of the peer-to-peer learning visit, Photo credit, ITRFP, Alexandria



Peer to Peer learning is interactive and based on site visits and shared learning. Photo of Nigerian delegates at Center visit in Cairo. Photo Credit, CEO, Peter Singer's Newsletter, Grand Challenge Canada, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013

### Introduction

The development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC), a local Nigerian non-profit formed in 1993 by Lecturers from Nigerian Universities, has specialized and deepened its expertise to design and anchor peer-to-peer learning study tour events in Egypt targeting Muslim Opinion Leaders (MOLs) from 12 states in Northern Nigeria. The dRPC's journey as a leading Nigerian non-profit facilitating learning on gender issues related to MOLs started in 2003 with funding from the Packard Foundation through a grant to the Institute for International Education (IIE). The dRPC views MOLs as **traditional and Islamic leaders holding positions of influence derived from formal authority structures (traditional or modern) or through charismatic leadership based on their Islamic knowledge, teachings, and modeling of Islamic leadership**. MOLs can be male or female, young or mature.

Since 2003, the dRPC, working in collaboration with our partner, **the Institute for Training and Research in Family Planning (ITRFP)**, has identified, trained, and provided mini-grants and technical support for over 162 leading MOLs from 12 states in Northern Nigeria to address misconceptions and communicate correct messages on the Islamic perspective on: - the ideal age of marriage for girls; the rights of the Muslim woman to access maternal health services for facility delivery; to also access family planning services; and the duty of the Muslim parent to immunize their children; and on HIV/AIDS. Over a 2-week peer-to-peer learning period in Alexandria and Cairo, the Nigerian MOLs meet with and hold engaging discussions with scholars at the following centers of learning on Islam, women's rights, and health:

- Sheikh Al-Azhar, Al Azhar University
- International Islamic Center Population Studies & Research, Al Azhar University
- The Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) registered at the Ministry of Social Solidarity under registration number 780 in 2004
- The Ministry of Social Solidarity
- National Council for Women 11 Abdel Razzak El-Sanhoury St. Nasr City
- Darul-Ifta'a (Egyptian Islamic Advisory on Islamic legal research in Egypt established in 1313 AH / 1895 CE), where Nigerian delegates meet with the Grand

Mufti of Al-Azhar and the Sheikh Al-Azhar, the most revered Muslim scholar in Egypt and across the Muslim world

- Muslim Woman Association in Damanhour
- UNFPA and UN Women Egypt

### **The Packard Foundation/ Institute of International Education (IIE), 2003- 2007**



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The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, through the Institute of International Education (IIE), supported the dRPC in implementing the Leadership Development Mechanism for the Mobilization of Maternal Health Program between 2003 and 2007. Throughout the timeline of the program, the dRPC identified and supported 57 Muslim opinion leaders (42 male and 15 female) to attend the peer-to-peer learning 2-week events in Egypt. MOLs were drawn from Bauchi, Borno, FCT, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara States.

MOLs returning from Egypt were supported through LDM mini-grants to design and implement group and individual projects for a duration of between 4 and 6 months. The mini-grant selection and approval process was rigorous, with external consultations with experts throughout Nigeria. The collective reach and impact of LDM MOL mini-grant projects were estimated to reach over 102,000 of the faithful, changing their knowledge, opinions, beliefs, and practices related to the right of women to access maternal health and family planning services. The EOP Evaluation of the Nigeria LDM Program by the Research Center for Leadership in Action, New York University, singled out the MOL component among the multiple components of the program for special mention as the most impactful in the Nigeria program. The Nigeria input report of the LDM multi-country report detailed, measurable evidence of changes in beliefs and practices amongst MOLs, their apprentices, policymakers, and the Ummah in general. Sustainable networks were formed, new associations of Muslim medical doctors for maternal health, and radio programs were rolled out to enlighten the population on women's rights to maternal health, including accessing Family Planning.

**See the evaluation report here** and **<https://drpcngr.org/evaluation-of-the-leadership-development-for-mobilizing-reproductive-health-program/>**

### **USAID/Nigeria, 2009-2011 and 2011- 2013**

In 2009, the dRPC responded to a competitive RFP from USAID/Nigeria to apply for funding through the mechanism of a Cooperative Agreement anchored by World Learning to implement the Leadership Development for Family Planning / Reproductive Health for Traditional and Religious Leaders.



This project was partnered with a second project for which there was a separate RFP funded through another Cooperative Agreement for the Leadership Development for Family Planning / Reproductive Health for Political Office Holders of Bauchi, Niger, Sokoto, and Zamfara States. The dRPC's two applications were successful, and the dRPC was awarded two Cooperative Agreements for the grant award period from 2009-2011 and a second period from 2011 to 2013. Over the period 2009 to 2013, 50 male Muslim opinion leaders from Bauchi, Sokoto, Niger, and Zamfara states attended four 2-week peer-to-peer learning events at the ITRFP in Alexandria, Egypt. Peer-to-peer learning events, once completed, were followed up by the implementation of Individual Action Plans and the collective Implementation of State Action Plans.

The end of project evaluation by USAID pointed to significant achievements of this project in communicating messages that changed attitudes and practices related to reproductive health. The EOP report noted that **"The Traditional and Religious Leaders (TRLs) in the dRPC Project promoted and improved RH and Birth Spacing environment through a variety of ways...."** Based on the responses the Team received from the TRLs, it is apparent that the dRPC Project equipped and empowered them to confidently inform their congregation about RH and Birth Spacing. When asked to describe the difference in their messages before and after the dRPC Project, one leader said, **"I used to discuss about maternal health issues even before the coming of dRPC, but I only started to include Birth Spacing in my messages after my interaction with dRPC."** Another leader said, **"...before (dRPC Project), my messages were on family relationships and general health, but now (they are) more specifically on child spacing."**

All the TRLs interviewed by the Team stated that they give messages related to RH and Birth Spacing to their congregations during lectures, sermons, and preaching. Often, the RH and Birth Spacing information is discussed explicitly, while sometimes, the information is embedded in the larger context of their sermons, counseling, and pronouncements. Messages cover topics related to birth spacing, maternal health, ANC, and deliveries. A few TRLs recorded their messages on audio tapes for wider dissemination and practiced what they preached; as one individual put it, **"I produced a lecture on tape specifically on ANC visit, and demonstrated (the teaching) by sending my own wife for ANC visits."**

( <https://drpcngr.org/usaaid-evaluation-of-drpc-project-3/> pages 23-24)

[See the evaluation report here](#)

### **Mali exchange visit for female Islamic Scholars & MOLs from Northern Nigeria to visit MSH Mali projects 2010**



To ensure the representation of female Muslim Opinion Leaders, a complementary intervention was designed and funded by Management Sciences for Health in 2010, targeting 16 female Islamic scholars to undertake peer-to-peer learning of MSH projects in Mali. The delegation consists of 16 Female MOLs, four from each state of Sokoto, Zamfara, Niger, and Bauchi, selected from various Islamic women's organizations such as the Muslim Sisters' Organization, and Women in Da'wah, and the majority of them were from the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigerian (FOMWAN). They are active members of the Islamic propagation association, where they engage in preaching from one location to the other in various parts of their states, particularly to their fellow women. The main purpose of this tour was to share their experiences with Malian Female Islamic Scholars in an MSH USAID-funded project on women's health-related issues. FBOs such as Association de soutien au Developpement des Activites de Population (ASDAP), and the **United Association of Female Muslims (UNAFEM)**.



Group photo of Female MOLs with ASDAP and UNAFEM officials after the opening ceremony. Mali study tour, ASDAP office Bamako, 20 July 2010. Photo credit, MSH



Following the learning visit from 18<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> July 2010, the returning Female MOLs were supported by the dRPC to implement individual and state action plans. The USAID EOP Evaluation found that Female religious scholars trained by the dRPC told the Team they, too, provided RH and birth-spacing messages to their audience and are now more confident in doing so. ***"With the knowledge I gained, I can now stand in front of women to address them on health-related issues,"*** said one female religious leader who had been to Mali on a study tour organized by the dRPC. The TRLs listed a range of messages they preach and teach, which include the dangers of 'rurutsa', the practice of Birth Spacing, the importance of ANC visits, and a large number of topics that directly or indirectly touch on RH and Birth Spacing (EOP Report, 2017:24). The EOP evaluation team interviewed all 16 Female MOLs to further explore the effectiveness of MSH component and concluded that:

The female religious leaders made significant contributions to improving the enabling environment in RH/Birth Spacing. Based on the responses from the FGDs with the community members and the KIs with the *female* religious leaders, the Evaluation Team learned that:

1. The female religious leaders now have more knowledge, skills and drive in advocating for RH and Birth Spacing during outreach sessions with women in their communities.
2. Couples trust the female TRLs often and seek their counsel on RH/Birth Spacing matters.
3. Female TRLs seem to have a strong sense of gender understanding and other contextual factors when referring couples to appropriate resources for RH/Birth Spacing services.
4. Some female religious leaders have utilized their leadership training on RH/Birth Spacing to improve their teaching skills at Islamic schools (e.g., giving public lectures for women at events organized by the Muslim Key Informant Interview with a Female Students Society) where they are able to *Religious Scholar* influence students, and through these young students also influence their families and communities.
5. Some female religious leaders have been empowered by the project to the extent that they reportedly debated with their male counterparts during the RH/Birth Spacing Leadership project training on issues of women's and children's health" (EOP Report, page 25)



Photo credit, USAID Evaluation Report

( <https://drpcngr.org/usaaid-evaluation-of-drpc-project-3/pages> 24-25)

**[See the evaluation report here](#)**

## Grand Challenges Canada, 2012-2014 and 2014- 2016

Grand Challenges Canada, a founding member of the Saving Lives at Birth funding platform for maternal and neonatal health, took the brave step of teasing out and supporting the dRPC's



Grand Challenges Canada  
Grands Défis Canada



Muslim Opinion Leader of the SLaB project engaging CHEWS in Katsina state on the Islamic position on RI, 2016

application from amongst thousands of applications that were largely focused on technological innovations. The first dRPC award identified and supported 15 MOLs to attend the 2-week peer-to-peer learning event; 10 MOLs attended the second 2-week peer-to-peer learning event. The first project identified the most conservative and resistant MOLs who spoke out publicly against the state's FP and MNCH programs. They were identified and supported in the dRPC's transformative leadership

intervention. The second project took a different approach by identifying and supporting a new cohort of MOLs who were supported to engage conservative Muslim health providers who were found to be unsupportive of the state's FP and RI programs within the PHC system in baseline studies.

Midline and EOP Evaluations of these two projects provided evidence to demonstrate the achievement of project objectives, outcomes, and impact. Proof of concept was also provided through the projects' MEAL system. At the end of the second project, in 2016, over 71,880 clients received counseling on MNCH services and Islam from the trained providers, CHEWS.

Summative assessments of the achievements and impact of this project are captured in these publications:

- National Public Radio - Via @NPR: Once Opposed To Maternal Health, Islamic Scholars Become Champions <https://n.pr/2avYXVm>
- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15570274.2015.1075760>
- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17441692.2018.1473889>

## The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, from 2016 to 2019

BILL & MELINDA  
GATES foundation

The BMGF Seattle Office awarded an innovation Grant to the dRPC to strengthen and support the Office of the Emir of Kano, **His Highness Mallam Muhammadu Sanusi II, the Emir of Kano**, to facilitate his championship role for routine Immunization, maternal health, and Girls' Education awareness creation in 14 LGAs in Kano state. The project called, **Traditional Leaders for Women and Girls in Northern Nigeria** had 2 objectives: 1) To enable the Emir to meet the community leaders, members of the communities, and the Primary Health Care Workers in order to communicate to them key messages for improvement of Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health (MNCH) services in the LGAs; 2) To assess and initiate steps in addressing the problems related to MNCH and Girl Child Education faced by community members. The implementation strategy of this project was anchored around the institutionalization of an Emir's health committee to support and provide technical assistance to the Emir of Kano and to anchor his outreach to 14 LGAs. This project gave birth to the Emir's Kano Emirate Council Committee on Health (KECCoH). To strengthen the capacity of KECCoH, a 2-week peer-to-peer learning opportunity was

supported by the dRPC in collaboration with our partner, the Institute for Training and Research in Family Planning in Alexandria, Egypt. The study tour, **Health Mobilization and Advocacy in Muslim Majority Communities for 17** KECCoH members. **The tour aimed to** strengthen the capacity of KECCoH members to address religious and cultural misconceptions related to maternal and child health care services. During the tour, KECCoH members interacted with traditional and religious institutions on their roles in creating demand for improved maternal and child health services in Egypt. They also shared experiences and best practices in working with government agencies and NGOs to create demand for improved maternal and child health services in Egypt. The end of peer-to-peer learning evaluation found a 25%, 42%, and 50% increase in KECCoH delegates' capacity in the areas of – 1) The Islamic approach to MNCH, 2) Communication strategies for social change, and 3) Advocacy techniques for navigating MNCH & GCE barriers. Evidence of the impact of this project is that as of 2024, KECCoH continues to serve a strategic role in mobilizing communities for MNCH and Girls' Education in the state. KECCoH provides strategic support to UNICEF and other donor-funded RI. As part of the dRPC's mandate to provide institutional capacity building for KECCoH, KECCoH was supported to secure and renovate the former British Council premises, which were given to it as permanent office space, by the Kano Emirate Council. They were provided with well-furnished and fully air-conditioned offices, a conference hall, a standby generator, and other equipment that would facilitate the day-to-day activities of the committee. KECCoH utilizes the office by holding their meetings on the premises. **His Highness Mallam Muhammadu Sanusi II, the Emir of Kano, visited and opened the renovated office premises.**

#### Ford Foundation, 2024 to 2025

The dRPC is continuing its good work engaging MOLs to catalyze them as change agents in Muslim-majority states in Northern Nigeria. For our new project with a two-year timeline, the dRPC will again identify MOLs and support them through the peer-to-peer learning process and the implementation of action plans. This intervention focuses on MOLs role in GBV prevention. With funding from the Ford Foundation, the MOLs for GBV Prevention project will engage 24 Traditional and Muslim Opinion Leaders from Jigawa, Kano, Kaduna, and Zamfara States, supporting them to change attitudes, beliefs, and practices of the faithful, Islamic bureaucracy such as Hisbah and secular government agencies responsible for implementing GBV laws and policies. This intervention also has an ambitious objective of strengthening in-country capacity to design and deliver peer-to-peer learning events by identifying and supporting a local Nigerian organization to replicate the work of the dRPC's Egyptian partner.

**Ford Foundation**

#### Impact Stories – MOLs profile and achievements 2003-2024

In 21 years of dRPC programming with MOLs, the activities and pronouncement of the scholars have created an enabling environment for the passage of gender equality facing laws in states – the Child Rights Act, the Violence Against Person Prohibition Act, and Child Protection Laws. MOLs have established and run more than 50 new radio programs on women's rights in Islam, on the Islamic position on the age of marriage, and on the importance of girls' education. MOLs completing the peer-to-peer trainings in Egypt have joined advocacy platforms with secular CSOs to advocate to state governments with messages to budget for and implement laws protecting women and girls. They have formed and lead Islamic Health associations; and have shaped and

added enlightened components into the work of Hisbah Boards and other state Islamic agencies. At the National level, MOLs were supported to participate in National consultative forums on women's health, gender equality Bills, and keeping girls safe in schools. The President of the Senate personally recognized and congratulated dRPC-supported MOLs for attending public hearings on safe schools and girls' education in 2022. The dRPC, in a consultancy role with the World Bank, supported 15 MOLs to participate in the validation Workshop of the National Gender Policy coordinated by the World Bank. At this workshop, which was held in May 2012, MOLs participated actively in group work sessions, shaping the language and making recommendations on strategies to increase acceptance, domestication, and implementation of the National Gender Policy.



Photo Credit, dRPC's Consultancy report to the World Bank, July 2012

Since 2003, the dRPC has positioned MOLs as gender champions to support health and rights programs of state and federal governments and of international development partners. Some of our 62 MOLs include:

- The Former Federal Minister of Communication & Digital Economy under the Buhari administration
- The Former Commandant of Jigawa State Hisba and the Chief Imam of Takur Mosque
- Professor in the Department of Arabic at Umaru Musa Yar'Adua University
- The District Head of Gagi in Sokoto State, Sarking Yakin Gagi, who is also the Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Association for the Advancement of Family Planning in Nigeria, and UN FP Champion
- Four Executive officials of the Emir's Health Committee and Health Advisor to the Emir of Kano
- The current Humanitarian Affairs Officer, UN-OCHA
- 4 Founding Members – Islamic Medical Association
- The Chief Imam of Annur Mosque in Abuja
- The Current Honourable Commissioner of Religious Affairs, Sokoto State
- Clerk of Sokoto State House of Assembly
- Director-General of Niger State Bureau of Religious Affairs
- Special Adviser to the Katsina Governor on Al-Majirai
- Chief Imam of FUT Minna Mosque, who is also the Head of the Department of Science Education and the Deputy Coordinator of the Students Support Services Unit at the Federal University of Technology Minna, Niger State.



- Chief Imam Sarki Muhammad Bashar Mosque Daura and Principal College of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Daura, Katsina State
- Female scholars have become national and state Amiras of FOMWAN, and 4 have formed faith-based associations

Most MOLs (approximately 48%) who participated in dRPC-supported peer-to-peer learning events over the years have progressed in their career at the head of secular and religious MDAs across Muslim majority states in Northern Nigeria and have also taken up positions at national level; 12% died including 4 who were killed by Boko Haram for preaching against the movement; 10% retired; and 25% who are holding similar or the same positions; and 5% who cannot be reached.



**MOL delegates at Al-Azhar in Cairo, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2024**

In January 2024, the development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC) launched a new project - Muslim Opinion Leaders (MOLs) for GBV Prevention in Northern Nigeria, designed to address the increasing rates of GBV identified by the dRPC in a 2023 baseline study. This study identified increasing rates of rape, especially of minors; reproductive coercion; physical violence; abandonment of families; increased restriction of movement of women and girls, justified by the high cost of transportation; abduction for forced marriage; child

marriage; and abandonment of female children.

Our new project builds upon 22 years of dRPC's work engaging MOLs, strengthening and positioning them to communicate, advocate for, and model change to prevent GBV. With new funding from the Ford Foundation, this project targets male and female Muslim Opinion Leaders (MOLs), equipping and positioning them to use their influence to shift attitudes, behavior, and practices among the faithful, to guide the interpretation of religious laws in state religious bureaucracies such as Hisbah Boards; and to increase commitment within secular government MDAs to implement policies and laws which empower women and girls, protecting them the norms which uphold GBV.



**MOL delegation with the Grand Mufti of Egypt in Cairo, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2024**



**The Emir of Kano, His Royal Highness Muhammad Sanusi II in a meeting with the MOLs on GBV prevention in Northern Nigeria, 9<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> December 2024**

The goal of the MOLs4GBV Prevention project is to strengthen the leadership skills, capacity, and commitment of MOLs to champion religiously accepted and sustainable activities for the prevention of GBV through the adoption of new knowledge, beliefs, and practices related to the Islamic perspective of women's rights and of GBV must be prevention.

24 MOLs from Kaduna, Kano, Jigawa and Niger States are participating in this current phase of the GBV Prevention from Islamic Perspective Project.

16 Males Islamic scholars and 8 Female Islamic scholars are participating in the current phase of the project



## About Us

The development Research and Projects (dRPC) is a secular, non-partisan, and non-political registered civil society organization formed in 1993 by Lecturers from Nigerian Universities and registered in 1994. Formed against the background of military rule, the dRPC set out to strengthen the capacity of local civil society organizations and civic leaders to position them as informed and capable development actors in the policy process as advocates, as awareness creation actors, and as participants in the monitoring and evaluation process. To complement the dRPC's capacity-building work with CSOs, the dRPC is also committed to engaging government MDAs, strengthening the capacity of officials to champion partnership with CSOs and of bureaucracies to be participatory, inclusive, and responsive. Gender is a key, sustained, and priority cross-cutting issue in all the dRPC's work.

**For more information** about the dRPC, visit us at [www.drpcngr.org](http://www.drpcngr.org) and our social media platforms

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