



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2025 AND THE CASE FOR DONOR FUNDING FOR GENDER PROGRAMS

- REFLECTIONS FROM A NIGERIAN
NGO-
by
development Research and Projects Centre
(dRPC)

As the world celebrates International **Women's Day 2025** around the theme "**Women's rights are human rights**", March 8th is being marked at a time when many are asking tough questions about the utility of using Western taxpayers' money to fund gender facing programs for gender equality in countries such as Nigeria in the global south. Questions heard include: did they tell us that gender equality is a felt need? Or, is it not a fact that traditional, cultural and faith leaders, as rights holders, do not want Western models of gender equality and will implement their own version of women's rights at their own pace? And finally - what can we learned from Afghanistan?

All valid questions. Questions for which answers can be drawn from the compelling case of one non-profit working for 23 years to shift gender norms in states with Muslim majority populations in Nigeria, using donor funding. Between 2002 and 2025, the development Research and Projects Center (dRPC), local Nigerian secular non-profit leveraged funds from five donor agencies to do the unthinkable, train conservative Muslim Opinion Leaders to be



champions for women's rights, health and the prevention of gender-based violence. The dRPC set out on this 23-year journey in 2002 with its first grant awarded, strangely enough by body of the US Congress - Institute of International Education (IIE) through funding by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. For 10 years, between 2002 to 2012, the dRPC collaborated with partners in Egypt, to conduct study tours using peer-to-peer adult learning methodologies to transform over **100** of the most influential and conservative Nigerian MOLs to be champions

for change. Through debates, discussions they arrived at an informed consensus about Islamic precepts and injunctions related to women's rights and health. When Packard Foundation closed out its Nigeria program and LDM IIE program came to an end, the dRPC fought hard to weave its Muslim Opinion Leader Champion development component of work into new projects funded by Grand Challenges Canada; USAID/Nigeria LDT project; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded Traditional leaders support project; and most recently the Ford Foundation funded Prevention of GBV project (2024-2025).



Were these 23 years of investment in the dRPC's innovative gender norms shifting work a waste of taxpayers' dollars? Another big question for which evaluation after evaluation report produced by independent assessors engaged by funders over the years offer up convincing answers of success; of impact; sustainable change; and proof of concept. The IIE 2011 evaluation conducted by the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA), New York presented a comprehensive documentation project successes in terms of norms shifting and personal stories of transformation of MOLs who were "members of Islamic medical associations and Muslim doctors, members of Sharia Commissions or similar agencies throughout Northern Nigeria, independent Islamic scholars". Similar findings were documented in the USAID 2014 evaluation and were captured by a National Public Radio story in 2016.

The then CEO Grand Challenges Canada Peter A. Singer O.C. captured the successes of the dRPC's work with MOLs when he said that

"this unique and impressive project was designed to address this challenge directly, by engaging with religious leaders to leverage their involvement and support, rather than attempt to circumvent or contest it. The goal is to increase the demand for maternal and neonatal health services in poor, conservative communities with dominant Muslim populations. Specifically, 14 conservative religious leaders participated in a study tour to Egypt. Working alongside prominent Egyptian religious and medical scholars, participants received information about the importance of maternal and neonatal health, and the compatibility of these objectives with their faith...Signs are amassing that these same religious leaders are now advocating maternal healthcare and health interventions during pregnancy. Such results have attracted interest."

As the dRPC's work has now evolved to address gender-based violence with support from Ford Foundation funding, new cohorts of Muslim Opinion Leaders are deeply engaged counselling the faithful; mediating domestic conflicts; preaching in mosques and on radio programs; and hosting call-in radio programs on the reality and harm of gender-based violence, reaching millions of listeners.

After 23 years of programming in this frontier area with dollars from donors, a new model of organic, sustainable and community respectful change has emerged. This is a model that is effective; cost effective; and responsive. It is also a teaching model for all those in the global north and south who believe in bottom-up, incremental change which meet people where you find them. Is this a good investment of development assistance? Yes, it is. Should development assistance be rolled back from supporting such a frontier area? Resoundingly, no it should not. Would the entire world benefit from sustained investment in such programming areas. To answer in a word



– **YES.**

References

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