

Grassroots to Government: Gender-based Solutions for Nigerian Women

By, Sarah Amahson, CUBS' Household Economic Strengthening and Gender Advisor



In Nigeria, as in most countries, women and girls assume the bulk of the caregiving burden for those infected with HIV and children left vulnerable or orphaned by AIDS. These responsibilities often prevent girls and women from obtaining an education and developing income-generating skills. Exacerbating these problems are social norms that prevent some girls and women from accessing health information and services and severely limit their control over their sexuality, leaving them vulnerable to violence and abuse. Other cultural norms may deprive women and girls of economic resources and inhibit their ability to seek legal protection from exploitation or mistreatment.

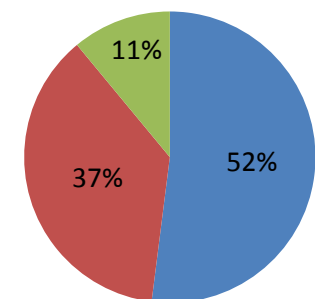
Gender-Based Solutions

Fortunately, since 2009, the PEPFAR-funded, USAID project, Community-Based Support for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CUBS), has been addressing these challenges by working with orphaned or vulnerable girls and female caregivers, as well as civil society organizations (CSOs) and key stakeholders at the national, state, and community levels. Implemented by Management Sciences for Health (MSH) in partnership with Africare, CUBS works to improve gender equality by empowering women, educating their families and communities, and working with government stakeholders to strengthen social services, expand support structures, and reduce barriers to care. CUBS is currently supporting 10,000 young and adolescent girls and 10,958 female caregivers.

Addressing HIV

In Nigeria, 1.7 million women over 15-years old are infected with HIV and prevalence among young women aged 15 to 24 years is three times higher than it is among men in the same age group. Among those with HIV in Nigeria, 52 percent are women and just 37 percent are men. Societal norms discourage HIV-positive women from revealing their status. Those who are HIV positive are often accused of adultery, abandoned by their husbands and families, and severely discriminated against by those in their communities. To ensure Nigerian women and girls receive the knowledge and care they deserve, CUBS trained 38 CSOs to provide HIV-positive women with female-focused health education and access to legal support, counseling, and housing assistance. These interventions are helping to make Nigeria a safer place for HIV-positive women and girls.

HIV Prevalence in Nigeria



- women over 15 years old
- men over 15 years old
- children under 15 years old



Empowering through Education

Many Nigerian women lack access to basic health information. Recent studies show that 33 percent of Nigerian men have a correct and comprehensive knowledge of HIV, compared to just 22 percent of women. Although schools provide children with health information, many Nigerian girls become pregnant before the age of 19 and drop out of school to care for their children. Furthermore, in some parts of Nigeria, women are discouraged from attending public health events or expected to stay home to care for their children.

To improve health knowledge among women, CUBS taught staff from 38 CSOs to facilitate health education sessions for their female beneficiaries. These sessions provided a new venue for girls, women, and out-of-school youth to access health information. Women were invited to attend these sessions with their infants and young children, making it easier for them to leave home. Since 2009, the CSOs have trained more than 3,000 OVC caregivers on HIV prevention and care, personal hygiene, contraception, nutritional health, the importance of breast feeding, and prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV. These trainings are now conducted regularly by CSO and community-based facilitators.

CUBS provided health information to adolescent girls by developing a peer education program and establishing 33 Girl Groups. After being trained by CUBS and its CSO partners, the peer educators and Girl Group facilitators reached more than 8,000 girls with information on HIV and STI prevention, assertiveness, self-esteem, puberty, and personal hygiene. These outreach activities are gaining popularity in the project-supported states and attract more adolescent participants each year.

“When I told my guardian that I was seeing blood coming out of my body, she told me I was pregnant and that I should say who was responsible. I was so afraid I didn’t know what to do so I kept it to myself wondering what will happen to me next. When it stopped [and I realized I wasn’t pregnant] I felt some relief but I still was not sure of what lay ahead... This [Girls Group] meeting really taught me a lot about [myself and my body]... I now know what to expect and how to address it as it comes. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.”

Lucy, Gombe Girl Group participant



Strengthening Support Systems

To strengthen support systems for women and girls, CUBS conducted gender trainings for 260 service providers, law enforcement agents, project implementers, state officials, and local government representatives. These trainings guided participants to identify gender-related needs in their workplaces and communities and develop corresponding solutions. Participants have committed to implementing a number of solutions including:

- Training male leaders and mentors to educate other men about the benefits of supporting women’s health and development;
- Recruiting and training women for leadership, management, and governance positions at the workplace and in communities;
- Inviting and encouraging men to participate in health programs with their partners to increase uptake of PMTCT, reduce maternal and child mortality, and prevent gender-based violence; and
- Improving the content and logistics of community meetings so more women attend and participate in discussions and decision-making.

“I used to dismiss gender talks... but now I know how development impacts women and men differently.... The knowledge will definitely help our programs work better.”
~ OVC program staff



Advocating for Women's Rights

Stakeholders in seven project-supported states have worked with CUBS to advocate for women and girls' rights during public rallies, International Women's Day events, and the Day of the African Child celebrations.

In 2013, female caregivers from four states of the Niger Delta joined community members in an International Women's Day rally where campaigners raised banners and slates reading:

- “Stop all forms of violence against women”
- “Give women a chance”
- “Stop female genital mutilation”
- “Promote girl child education”
- “Say no to wife battering”
- “Stop girl child early marriage”
- “Educate the girl child”
- “Empower women.”

In three other states, CUBS made community-based presentations on topics entitled:

- *Women as Agents of Change and Development,*
- *Identifying Harmful Social Norms and Practices that Increase Vulnerability of Women,* and
- *Legal Protection for Women and Girls.*

For the first time in many communities, Nigerian women are empowered to speak out publicly, constructively, and collectively about their right to health, education, and equality.

Increasing Female Community Participation

Although many communities arrange health services and education activities for women and girls, few women are consulted in the planning and design of these interventions. As a result, such activities are often offered at a time when females cannot attend or include content that does not speak to their real needs.

To address this challenge, CUBS teaches leaders to consult women in the design of community-based programs and activities. Such discussions can be arranged through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, or community forums. After these trainings, child protection committee (CPC) members, CSO staff, traditional leaders, and religious leaders have begun developing activities and information sessions on topics relevant to women, such as HIV prevention, reproductive health, parenting, and nutrition. Women also convinced leaders to hold these activities on days and at times when they could more easily attend and allow them to bring their infants and young children.

Since 2010, these minor adjustments have increased female participation in community-based activities in the CUBS' supported states. Furthermore, more than 100 women have become members of their communities' CPCs and many women now hold positions in their states' OVC technical working groups.



Protecting through Legal Support

In some areas of Nigeria, patriarchal norms exclude women from making decisions within the home and community and males have more authority over family assets. Because women and children are often considered their husband and father's property, violence and sexual abuse often go unreported and unpunished. As a result, many Nigerian women and children are in desperate need of legal support to assist them in child custody cases and protect them from physical and sexual abuse and disinheritance.

CUBS addressed this challenge by training community members to recognize when women and children need legal protection and help them access such services. Since the project began in 2009, CUBS has provided this training for more than 250 staff members from law enforcement agencies, civil society organizations, and local courts in 11 states. Since attending these sessions, trainees report that they have been able to support for more women and children in need of protection, and for urgent cases, make timely referrals to agencies offering legal support. These referrals have increased reporting of abuse cases and led to the prosecution of rapists and child abusers.

Legal aid is also helping women access assets that belong to them but have been seized by relatives or community members. In Rivers state, for example, a recently widowed woman reported that a male relative had seized all of her family's possessions and property. The CPC, newly trained by CUBS, resolved this issue in favor of the widow and restored the assets to her. Similarly, in Bayelsa state, a CPC chairman who had attended the CUBS training was inspired to initiate police action against a man suspected to be sexually abusing his daughter.



Rescuing Ngozi from Abuse and Neglect

CUBS conducted gender awareness trainings for 38 CSOs throughout Nigeria. Since participating in this training, Foundation for God's Love (FFGL) has been working to address discrimination against women in Enugu State. One strategy the project uses is partnering with the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) to provide free legal services to women and girls.

In 2012, FIDA provided legal support to Ngozi, a 25-year-old orphan and single mother who had suffered abuse and neglect her entire life. Ngozi was dedicated to an idol at birth by her parents, which denied her the rights to marriage, education, and a social life. She was an outcast and the property of the religious chief. As a teenager, she was abused by her brother.

Fortunately, in 2013, FFGL identified Ngozi and registered her and her child in their OVC program. After learning about her traumatic past, FFGL referred Ngozi to FIDA for further assistance. The team at FIDA helped Ngozi bring legal charges against her brother for abuse and gain freedom from her parents' oppressive religious practices. Within two months, Ngozi was able to leave her family home and her brother was sent to prison. To help Ngozi support herself, CUBS and FFGL provided her with alternative shelter and food. Ngozi now lives with her husband and two children in Benue State.



Advocating for Protection

OVC, especially girls, are at a high risk for early marriage, sexual abuse, violence, and child labor. Early marriage is still common in Nigeria, with young girls often forced into marriage and premature sexual relations, causing them increased health risks and exposure to HIV. By the time they turn 15, 20 percent of Nigerian girls are married, and by 18-years old, 40 percent are married. Among married girls age 15 to 19, just 2 percent are in school and 62 percent have already given birth.

To protect Nigerian children from these and other risks, CUBS helped 11 OVC technical working groups advocate for implementation of the Child Rights Act (CRA) in their states. This Act calls on leaders and stakeholders to prioritize the prevention and elimination of child marriage and sexual abuse, exploitation, and violence towards children. It also emphasizes the need to ensure that girls have access to education. Although the CRA was established in 2003, this is the first time the Act is being formally implemented to support and inspire state-level child rights discussions. CUBS' success in implementing the CRA is breaking the silence around injustices toward children and giving Nigerians the confidence and capacity to advocate for the rights of these young citizens.

Increasing Women's Earning Capacity Benefits Thousands of Needy Children

Most Nigerian women and girls assume caregiver roles within their families and communities. The nation's high HIV prevalence (4.1 percent) means that many of these girls and young women must care for AIDS patients, provide for households when breadwinners die, and take responsibility for AIDS orphans and vulnerable children in their community. The burden of these tasks often requires girls and young women to forgo an education, thus leaving them less equipped for work and income generation.

To improve caregivers' economic capacity, CUBS provided income generating skills training and small business start-up loans to more than 1,300 women. These activities enabled 500 caregivers to establish or expand small businesses that have increased their income. In partnership with Save the Children, CUBS also trained 38 CSOs to help their OVC caregivers initiate cooperatives or voluntary savings and loans associations (VSLAs) so they could better manage their increased incomes. VSLAs are groups of people who pool their savings so they have a source for lending funds. Members make savings contributions to the pool, borrow from it, and repay their loans with interest. Since 2009, the 38 CSOs have helped their caregiver beneficiaries form 92 VSLAs or cooperatives. Many caregivers have used the VSLA loans to start or expand small businesses.

CUBS' trainings, financial support, and VSLA formation have helped more than 2,000 caregivers improve their economic capacity, increase their incomes, and secure savings. Such skills have equipped these caregivers to meet the educational, health, and nutritional needs of more than 5,000 children in their care.

Maintaining the Momentum

Although CUBS will close in 2014, the project will leave behind 38 CSOs, 116 CPCs, and 46 technical working groups that are equipped and inspired to advocate for the rights of Nigerian women and girls. These leaders now know how to educate women and girls, link them to support services, improve their economic capacity, inspire their community participation, and welcome their leadership. The thousands of women and girls who have benefitted from this support are hard at work to sustain and expand these gains throughout Nigeria.



For more information, please contact:

Dr. Zipporah Kpamor, MD, MPH
Project Director, CUBS, Nigeria
zkpamor@msh.org