



## “I refused to be silenced!”- Being an adolescent girl in Yobe State, northeast Nigeria

**A brief on how adolescent girls in Yobe state, Nigeria are leading and owning social change**

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A typical adolescent girl living in northeast Nigeria faces enormous constraints and barriers to her wellbeing. Securing a future for herself that is free of discrimination and violence, one where she shall thrive, is much harder than it sounds. Her position in life is influenced by the socio-cultural determinants that shape gender roles and expectations of girls. The hurdles are high and compounded by a protracted crisis with prolonged insecurity and risks of violence, poverty, food and water insecurity, and limited access to education. A deeply patriarchal society and oppressive systems reinforce debilitating practices such as EFM and FGM/C.

### Acronyms

AFRYDEV	African Youth for Peace, Development and Empowerment Foundation
EFM	Early and Forced Marriage
FGM/C	Female Genital Mutilation /Cutting
GBV	Gender Based Violence
SAA	Social Analysis and Action
S/GWI	Secretary office for Global Women Affairs
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
THSI	Trauma Healing Support Initiative
VAPP	Violence Against Persons Prohibition

## Martawa Zuromaye

People living in northeast Nigeria have endured varying levels of armed conflict since 2009. This has severely impacted their lives and exacerbated gender-based violence (GBV) in the region, including harmful practices such as Early and Forced Marriage (EFM) and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C). The five-year project – Martawa Zuromaye (‘Dignity and Security’ in the Kanuri language), implemented in Yobe state northeast Nigeria, is focused on addressing and reducing these different forms of GBV in the region.

Through generous support from the US Department of State, Secretary’s Office for Global Women Affairs (S/GWI), CARE, in partnership with local organizations Trauma Healing Support Initiative (THSI) and African Youth for Peace Development and Empowerment Foundation (AFRYDEV) implemented this project to address the root causes of GBV and strengthen individuals’ capacity to address GBV, mobilize community action to challenge negative gender norms that perpetuate violence, and support advocacy at the state level to strengthen existing laws.

Adolescent girls are underrepresented and excluded as allies and contributors in all sectors of society and have no voice in decision-making processes, including those that directly affect them. Many are forced to **marry early and face a high risk of being 'cut'**.

Adolescent girls also face aggravated risks of other forms of GBV, including physical and sexual violence from their intimate partners and marital family members, and harassment.

Girls' voices, ideas, and aspirations are often disregarded and those who try to overcome or challenge these norms face stigmatization and rejection. The resulting impacts on girls' lives are **profound and deeply scarring** – limiting their potential to excel academically, meaningfully participate in and contribute to peace and development processes, have healthy sexual and reproductive health outcomes, and enjoy a life with possibilities.

Despite these challenges, adolescent girls are **resilient, courageous, and highly motivated** to build safer communities and futures for themselves and those around them.



## **“I knew something had to change, but I did not know where to start from”**



**15-year-old Bukola** from Yobe, knows what it is like to grow up in a context of protracted conflict and instability, where harmful traditions and practices dictated her path in life and kept her silent and disempowered to try and change her situation.

But today, Bukola is in a very different place, and she feels transformed from a voiceless girl into a **powerful advocate, challenging harmful practices and inspiring change** in her community. In spite of the challenges, her **vigor and optimism** for the future has been renewed.



**How is Bukola leading change?** Bukola has gained **the confidence and skills to lead** actions to prevent EFM and FGM/C. She feels empowered to sensitize and mobilize her peers, family members and other community members – at home, in school and mosque settings, during naming ceremonies, weddings and other informal gatherings. She is also a member of her community’s Protection Committee and a local GBV Advocacy group, where **she feels included, respected and supported**. With support from local partners, she and others **are leading SAA** sessions themselves and directly **influencing household decision-making** regarding their futures. (See Adolescent Girl Learning Brief: Hearing from Local partners on how girls are Influencing decision-making around EFM.)

The best news is, there are many more like Bukola who are leading the change for us.

**How did Bukola arrive at this point?** Bukola’s arrival at this point was progressive. Martawa Zuromaye focused on **addressing harmful social norms through strong community engagement processes led by local partners**, which in turn paved the way for active involvement of several girls such as Bukola. The steps that contributed to Bukola’s pathways are:

"Before the SAA sessions, I felt voiceless and trapped in a world where harmful traditions dictated the path for many girls like me. I knew something had to change, but I didn't know where to start." - Bukola

In northeast Nigeria 48% of girls are married before they reach 15 and 78% married before age 18 ([State of the Nigerian Girl Report, 2021 Save the Children](#))

In Yobe State in North East Nigeria, CARE and its local partners has supported 3,485 adolescent girls through SAA sessions and in developing Action Plans.



Supporting Transformational change and unlocking her potential and voice



Supportive environment created by engaging powerful norm holders at the community made her feel safer to voice herself.



Building awareness about VAPP, laws and GBV, engaged her information and confidence about her rights



Increased confidence led to a desire to share the voice, space and awareness with peers around her.

## How does Bukola see the pathway of change?

Bukola shares that for other girls to be like she is, we need to work on the following:

- Adolescent girls need to feel safe (physically, emotionally) and supported by their families, peers, and community leaders before they take action. Having consistent support from local partners and Protection Committee members through coaching, debriefs and being there to help manage community pushback and difficult moments has been crucial.
- Equipping adolescent girls with the appropriate tools (through SAA) boosts confidence and quickly galvanizes advocacy actions.
- Providing initial resources for adolescent girl's Action Plans empowers their capacity to lead change - helping turn plans into concrete actions.
- Trust and solidarity among adolescent girls' flourish when they have a space where they can share, discuss, explore and challenge themselves safely and openly.

## “Yes, I faced skepticism and resistance”; backlash and challenges faced by Bukola

"Challenges were inevitable. Some were skeptical, others resisted. But the SAA sessions taught me resilience. I faced skepticism with facts, resistance with compassion, and I refused to be silenced" shares Bukola. Challenging centuries old practices like EFM and FGM/C is not without risk. Without the active support from local partners THSI and AFRYDEV, local Protection Committees and influential leaders, girls face mockery and even being driven out of their homes and communities. Adolescent girls' participation in GBV Risk Reduction analysis and ensuring they are never without the presence of partners, leaders and other champions during advocacy actions is essential to their safety and acceptance.



FGM/C is a deeply embedded cultural practice in Yobe. 51.8% FGM/C prevalence rate in Yobe State considered a 'Hot Spot' with an increasing burden among girls (UNFPA Situational Analysis 2021) AND: In northeast Nigeria 48% of girls are married before they reach 15 and 78% married before age 18 ([State of the Nigerian Girl Report, 2021 Save the Children](#))



A note about the methodology used to inform this brief: A number of project documents, including Baseline, RGA, Quarterly Reports, Post Activity Monitoring Reports, Brief, Indicator Tracking Framework, Testimonies and Success Stories, were reviewed, along with discussions with the project Team to pull out key or emerging learnings and, as possible, evidence related to Adolescent Girls, their actions and impact on their lives.

## Evidence of positive social norms change from MZ



**AGENCY:** 83% of those trained in SAA (including adolescent girls) retained the knowledge and skills and demonstrated positive shifts in attitudes and perceptions around GBV. Adolescent girls continue to actively advocate against EFM and FGM/C in the community.



**RELATIONS:** The change led by the adolescent girls against EFM and FGM/C in the community eventually coalesced to change the community's understanding of these issues and their approach towards them. Collective awareness of the harmful impacts of these practices, especially of the health and emotional consequences faced by survivors, led to reduction of these practices in the community.



**STRUCTURES:** Influential traditional and religious leaders in the community were positively impacted by these changes and are now leading the advocacy to reexamine and stop these practices. This shift at the level of norms and attitudes led to a reduction in early marriages and in FGM/C. The project could also strongly advocate with the State government to pass the Violence against Persons Prohibitions (VAPP) Act in Yobe state. This milestone was achieved in April 2022.

## We did come a long way!

In conclusion we draw your final attention to the powerful potential that adolescent girls in Nigeria are presenting with, to both lead and contribute to positive norm change in their communities and prevent GBV. Provided they feel they have a safe, supportive and nurturing environment and are equipped with the right tools, **girls' confidence, voice and leadership** emerge quite quickly. "I never thought my voice matters so much. SAA has given us a chance to speak up about our challenges and dreams. I feel more confident about making a difference in our community," signs off 15-year-old Falmata Abubakar. As the field team get ready to leave, done for the day, Aisha Garba, member of the local Protection Committee, and mother to yet another adolescent girl chips in – "As a mother, it warms my heart to hear my daughter and her peers expressing themselves. It's a reminder that we must actively support and nurture their aspirations." We feel humbled to hear this, to watch the change for ourselves.



**Resources:**

- [Learn more about CARE's Policy Advocacy and the VAPP Act, Martawa Zuromaye Advocacy Brief](#)
- [Learn more about CARE's Social Norms Approach](#)
- [Learn more about CARE's Social Analysis and Action Approach \(SAA\)](#)
- [Learn more about CARE's Engaging Men and Boys Approach](#)

**For More information:**

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