

Aisha's Journey from Voiceless Adolescent Girl to a Champion of Change in Nigeria

How CARE's Martawa Zuromaye project is transforming the lives of women and girls and creating leaders of social change

Aisha's Story

In the Yobe State of northeast Nigeria, in a context of protracted armed violence, instability, and insecurity, an incredible transformation has been quietly unfolding in the life of a young girl, Aisha.

Twelve-year old Aisha lived with her parents; she was the third of four daughters. Her life revolved around her family and her community, where harmful traditional practices and gender norms determined women and girls' pathways in life, usually without being questioned by anyone. Aisha, along with her sisters, grew up, knowing that their worth was tied to getting married soon enough, bearing children and abiding by these societal expectations. Child and early forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) were accepted norms in the community.

Her father was a strict man. Her eldest sister, Fatima, aged 15, got pregnant outside of marriage as she was in a relationship with a classmate. Her parents were furious when they found out, and Fatima was immediately taken out of school and married off to the father of the child; else, she would be disowned by the community. Fatima did not want to drop out of school but had no option. Fatima went off to her new husband's house. Aisha sorely missed her sister, and endured name calling and whispered judgements at school from her peers and community members, about Fatima's promiscuity, bringing shame and embarrassment to the family. Community leaders and their father decided to discontinue school for Aisha's elder sister who had just celebrated her 14th birthday. This was done out of fear that she would follow in Fatima's footsteps now that she had hit puberty. The family started to look for a groom for her.

Aisha knew this was what awaited her as well; she only had at most a couple of years to go to school, have fun with her friends and have some dreams about her own life. She wanted to break out of this shell but there seemed to be no hope at all.

“Marriage was the only thing I ever thought about. It's what every girl in my community does, so I believed that was my destiny too.”



Aisha grew up abiding by the societal norms around her.



She wanted to **break out of the pathway determined for her**, but didn't know how to.

A year later, CARE and partners, Trauma Healing Support Initiative (THSI) and African Youth for Peace Development and Empowerment Foundation (AFRYDEV), introduced a project - Martawa Zuromaye ('dignity and security') in the community. The project was dedicated to shifting harmful social and gender norms and empowering women and girls. Aisha came in contact with the project, and her life took an unexpected turn.

Over the course of two years into the project, Aisha engaged with the project's initiatives. Workshops, Social Analysis and Action (SAA) community discussions, and awareness campaigns on the harms of gender-based violence (GBV), including FGM/C and CEFM, facilitated by a Protection Committee, opening Aisha's eyes to the immense harms of these practices. The project built a safe space for girls like her: she could go to this space, could learn, share reflections, and build a new network of friends and peers who gave her the confidence and strength that things would change for the better.



Project initiatives: workshops, Social Analysis and Action (SAA) discussions, awareness campaigns



Project initiatives: Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS)

“The SAA sessions were a turning point in my life. They opened my eyes to the power within me and equipped me with the knowledge to challenge the status quo.**”**



Aisha wanted Amina to avoid the harms of being cut like she did, inspired to advocate for her community.

Aisha's parents agreed to delay Amina's cutting after Aisha's persistence and attending community discussions.



Now almost 15, Aisha worried about her future and the future of her sisters. Her youngest sister, Amina, had just turned 8, and she had overheard her parents discussing FGM/C for her. Many in Aisha's community thought of FGM/C as an obligatory practice to preserve a girl's honor and virginity, seen as a rite of passage into womanhood. Many continue to hold the belief that cutting reduces sexual drive and ensures girls remain chaste, marriageable, and faithful. Aisha and her older sisters had been around the same age when they each endured the excruciating procedure at the hands of one of the community elders.

She still remembers the fear and pain of being held down by her mother as the older woman cut her with a razor blade, and she is reminded of this burning pain each time she has to pee. Empowered by her newfound knowledge and confidence and with support from local partner organizations, Aisha decided to speak to her parents to challenge their ideas of FGM/C. Aisha wanted her younger sister to avoid the harms of being cut like she did and hoped she could be an advocate for her and other young girls. Her parents, especially her father, reacted with shock, but she persisted, politely but firmly. She talked of the consequences of cutting and eventually managed to persuade her parents to attend a workshop (organized by the project) to learn more about the consequences of FGM/C. Gradually her parents began to understand the severe physical and mental consequences associated with the practice, and agreed to delay her sister Amina's cutting as they continued to attend community discussions educating on the harms of both FGM/C and CEFM.



“What amazed me the most was seeing women in leadership positions making decisions and changing lives. I had never imagined women could have so much power and make such a positive impact.”

In April 2022, Martawa Zuromaye helped pass the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in the Yobe State. The VAPP Act banned FGM/C and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) and included the right to assistance for victims of violence. Amina did not have to undergo cutting anymore!

Aisha, now a vital member of her community's Protection Committee and the local GBV advocacy group, was overjoyed at this major win in their efforts to address GBV.

“I didn't want to keep this knowledge to myself. The SAA sessions inspired me to engage with my community. We organized meetings, discussions, and awareness campaigns using the SAA tools to shed light on the consequences of FGM, CEFM, and GBV.”

Having gained the trust and respect of her parents, Aisha is now able to directly influence household decision-making regarding her own future, and she was helping her sisters, too, find their own voice.

For the first time, Aisha feels hope for the future and can envision a range of possibilities for herself, no longer restricted solely to a future of early marriage, children, and abuse. With resilience, compassion, and understanding, Aisha has helped to transform her community and the lives of women and girls, including her own.



Empowered, Aisha is now an advocate in her community, and she can now decide her own path in life.

“Thanks to the Martawa Zuromaye Project, I now have a different vision for my life. I want to be a leader who empowers other girls to see their potential and achieve great things.”

Author: Christina Matta and Rakhi Ghoshal

Acknowledgments: We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the project staff and their ongoing dedication to providing quality programming, resulting in the extraordinary impacts of this project. We would also like to thank those in CARE who contributed to gathering participant interviews and stories that made this brief possible, with special thanks to Ozigi Abdullahi.

Designer: Christina Matta

Want to Learn More?

To learn more about the project, contact: Rakhi Ghoshal, Director and Global Lead, GBV – Gender Justice, CARE, rakhi.ghoshal@care.org

Ozigi Abdullahi, GBV Project Coordinator – Yobe Programs, CARE Nigeria, ozigi.abdullahi@care.org

A note about the methodology used in this brief: Aisha's story tells the journey of many young girls who were affected by Martawa Zuromaye. Based on the life-stories of many such young girls, this story helps capture different aspects of the project's intervention, expressed through the life of one character, Aisha.