



## The changing world of the Uwar Daki:

*A reflection on how adolescent girls and community members are redefining their relationships with power, tradition and patriarchy*

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### Uwar Daki – the other mother

In the context of northeast Nigeria, socio-economic and cultural dynamics play a significant role in decision-making processes regarding the futures of girls in the community. Traditionally, a young girl has little to no say in things related to her own life. She does not decide how long she shall be allowed to go to school, when she shall be married off, and to whom. Her path in life is determined by influential people in her family and community.

One such person of significant power and control is her Uwar Daki (conceptually translated to ‘Foster Mother’ in English). Each young girl in the community has an Uwar Daki; the Uwar Daki is not related to the girls biologically and does not share the household.

The Uwar Daki is a woman from the girl’s community who forms a strong bond with her, holding much power and effect over her – at times even greater than her biological parents or other elders in her family. It is not uncommon for a girl’s parents to approach her Uwar Daki to help influence their daughter regarding certain aspects of her life. Often motivated by economic reasons as well to arrange a girl’s marriage, the Uwar Daki has an important stake in deciding her future. The relationship is strong, fortified by tradition, and complex. Depending on the approaches, perspectives and mindset of an Uwar Daki, she can influence the lives of girls in her community in both positive and also harmful ways .

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the description of an Uwar Daki is greatly simplified in this brief as it is beyond the scope of this document to capture the multidimensional nature of this relationship. In this region, a young girl might choose her Uwar Daki or an Uwar Daki could choose who she wants to ‘mentor’. While Uwar Dakis do conform to tradition and are commonly the bearers of patriarchal norms and practices, the entire relationship is not negative. There are positive aspects to this relationship as well, but this Brief focuses only on the changing relationship vis-à-vis EFM only.

Implementing partners for CARE’s Martawa Zuromaye project, Trauma Healing Support Initiative (THSI) and African Youth for Peace Development and Empowerment Foundation (AFRYDEV) have supported some of the most challenging and impactful change processes that directly affect adolescent girls and their future.

In this brief we learn about the world of Uwar Daki from Aisha Garba and Bashir Muhammad Yusuf of THSI, and Edoke Abdullahi Ogwuche of AFRYDEV. They walk us through the impact that adolescent girls are making especially regarding decision-making around Early Forced Marriage (EFM) by redefining their traditional relationship with the Uwar Dakis.

### ACRONYMS USED

- AFRYDEV** African Youth for Peace Development and Empowerment Foundation
- GBV** Gender-Based Violence
- CEFM** Child, Early and Forced Marriage
- FGM/C** Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting
- SAA** Social Analysis and Action
- THSI** Trauma Healing and Support Initiative

## Girls questioning the status quo

As Martawa Zuromaye progressed, its activities, especially Social Analysis and Action (SAA), enabled adolescent girls to feel confident to reverse the power dynamics, even if in small degrees, with their Uwar Dakis. The community engagement and activities also led to other influential people in the communities – such as religious leaders and parents, among others – supporting the girls as they began to question the status quo and seek to subvert it. The fact that several Uwar Dakis dealt with this questioning and subversion with an open mind and were ready to question their own practices and preaching, surely facilitated the success the girls met.



“The relationship between an adolescent girl and her Uwar Daki is based on trust, laying the foundation from which girls themselves can raise awareness and educate the Uwar Daki. In the community where I live and work some girls have managed to influence their own Uwar Daki now asks other girls and brings them to speak with their Uwar Dakis. I [in her role as a Protection Committee member] always join these conversations to offer support; these are important moments.” [Aisha Garba, 40 years old, and a Mother]

## Changing norms - one-degree at a time

Implementing partners, members of Protection Committees and others from the community are seeing – what they describe as – “incredible shifts” In what are deeply embedded traditional practices, including early and forced marriages (EFM).

*“For example, in one project location in Nguru the number of practicing Uwar Daki has reduced drastically due to a girl’s activism. Targeting and including such influential women as the Uwar Daki to participate in community level SAA sessions and other awareness raising forums has also helped pave the way for adolescent girls to influence the Uwar Daki. As girls are educated on the risks and harms associated with EFM and the laws pertaining to GBV, specifically the VAPP and Child Rights Act, they feel more and more empowered and motivated to prevent EFM from happening to them and to not drop out of school, which often happens once their marriage is fixed.” [Aisha Garba, 40 year old Mother.]*

## How are girls making this one-degree shift?

Adolescent girls are having and leading conversations with their Uwar Daki and also their family members, on early marriage, and how it affects them – psychologically, physically, emotionally. They talk about how it prematurely truncates any aspirations they have about their own lives.

Staff from the implementing partners are available for support and discussion with the girls whenever they hit any roadblock or backlash. This consistent support has been critical for the girls to be able to make these one-degree shifts, leading to visible changes in normalizing early and forced marriage in the communities.

“We also learned quickly how essential our support is to ensure the girls are safe from potential backlash when conducting any advocacy or sensitization actions. Equally important is for the girls to know there is understanding and support from local religious leaders also which provides girls a ‘safety net’ in case there is pushback from the Uwar Daki, or others in the community. We have witnessed some Uwar Daki actually break down in tears after learning from girls themselves their fears around marrying early and how detrimental it can be on their wellbeing. Many Uwar Daki commit to never committing these acts again.” [Christiana Dauda, Deputy Project Manager, Aisha Mohammed Kachalla PC, Salamatu Ahmed Jibo, PC, Aisha Adamu, PC, from THSI.]



The project has documented multiple cases where girls felt confident and empowered to withdraw from a marriage that was already arranged in order to continue with their education. Some of these girls went on to get university education. These ‘scattered’ incidents, went on to give confidence to some families who were never too convinced by the practice of early marriage of daughters, but would give in to community pressure. The one-degree shifts were soon changing norms.

“We have witnessed the withdrawal of girls from a marriage already arranged and instead allowed to continue their education – even up to the University level! We have also seen fathers decide not to support the marrying of their girls (as young as 13) after going through the SAA sessions. Before now adolescent girls did not have a say, especially in the family, to say no to EFM. Now many girls are able to raise their voice and say ‘I don’t want this for myself’ and parents are listening and saying ‘OK we understand your reasons’...before this was unheard of!”

## **A core ingredient of this success - SAA**

Partners, community members and girls themselves, confirm that the sensitization activities of the project, especially the SAA, have worked to build awareness among parents and community leaders about the terrible consequences of early and forced marriages on young girls.

The SAA sessions started by engaging parents, and traditional and religious leaders as key influencers. This was followed by sessions with adolescent girls and boys in separate settings. Ensuring parents and leaders are in favor of girls’ rights to a life free from violence has been critical to making it easier for adolescent girls to then have the space to reflect, plan and act. Working in this fragile context in Nigeria required the buy-in and permission from parents and leaders for adolescents to undertake any community level activities.

Girls developed their own action plans including strategies of approaching their respective Uwar Dakis, engaging them, and having a productive conversation without being confrontational.

“Honestly, we did not expect adolescent girls themselves to develop their own Action Plans (including approaching their Uwar Daki directly) from the SAA sessions! This has been an amazing breakthrough. Adolescent girls in our communities are leading and contributing to incredible change. Through their courage, confidence and resilience, they are inspiring countless others to stand up against EFM and other harmful practices and create a better future for themselves and their communities overall.”



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### **A personal note from MZ’s implementing partners - in solidarity with the cause**

*“As local partners who are from and know these communities so well, our role in supporting the girls with constant coaching and mentoring is essential. Through our deep understanding and cultural connection, we are able to work closely with all who have a stake in an adolescent girl’s future – ensuring girls are safe and remain motivated and supported by those around her.”*

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