

## Technical Brief

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Nigeria CUBS

Grassroots to Government: Gender-based Solutions for Nigerian Women

September 2014

This report was made possible through support provided by the US Agency for International Development, under the terms of Award No. GHH-I-00-07-00058-00. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Agency for International Development.

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**TECHNICAL BRIEF: Community-Based Support for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CUBS)**

# Grassroots to Government: Gender-based Solutions for Nigerian Women



Photo by Jessica Charles

*Launched in 2009, and funded by the President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Community-Based Support for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CUBS) project was designed to support the Government of Nigeria's National Priority Agenda for a coordinated approach to address the needs of orphans and vulnerable children. Implemented by Management Sciences for Health (MSH) in partnership with Africare, the five-year project worked in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (FMWASD) and its corresponding state ministries in 11 states: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Ekiti, Enugu, Gombe, Imo, Kebbi, Rivers, Sokoto, and Taraba. The overall goal of the project is to ensure sustainable access to care and support services for orphans and vulnerable children.*

*As noted in PEPFAR's 2012 Guidance for Orphans and Children's Vulnerable Programming, gender inequities affect the capacities, choices, and decisions made by women caring for vulnerable children around the world. This brief examines the gender-based solutions implemented by the CUBS project to benefit female caregivers and the vulnerable children they support.*

## **Addressing Gender-Based Inequities with Gender-Based Solutions**

In Nigeria, as in most countries, women and girls assume the bulk of the caregiving burden for those infected with HIV and children who have been left vulnerable or orphaned by AIDS. These responsibilities often prevent them 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 sexual and reproductive health, leaving them vulnerable to disease, 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.

Since 2009, CUBS has been addressing these challenges by working with orphaned and vulnerable girls and female caregivers, as well as civil society organizations (CSOs), and key stakeholders at the national, state, and community levels. In particular, CUBS has focused on improving 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. The CUBS project is currently supporting 10,000 young and adolescent girls and 10,958 female caregivers.

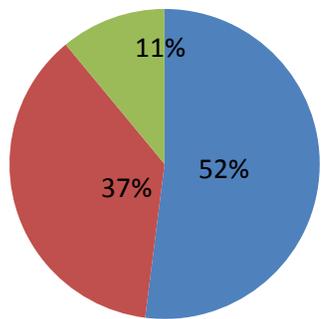


## Addressing HIV

In Nigeria, 1.7 million women over age 15 are infected with HIV, and the prevalence among young women aged 15 to 24 years is three times higher than it is among men in the same age group. Women represent 52 percent of people living with HIV in Nigeria, and men just 37 percent. 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.

Figure 1. HIV Prevalence in Nigeria



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

## Empowering Women and Girls through Health 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 participate. 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.

To improve health knowledge among adolescent girls, CUBS piloted “Girl Group Meetings” in 2012 in three project states – Bayelsa, Ekiti and Gombe – with the aim of promoting networking among participants and enabling them to transfer knowledge and information acquired during these meetings to others through a peer education model. By providing a safe space for group interaction, the meetings also served as a platform for improving self-esteem, developing life skills, and motivating the girls to aspire to attain their full potential.

Sixty five girls across the three host states attended the pilot program. Girls were provided with information on HIV and STI prevention, puberty, personal hygiene and self-esteem. In addition, the meetings brought the girls together with professionals (nurses, gender experts, lawyers, and academics) who spoke on a wide range of topics including forced marriage, rape, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, human trafficking, and child labor.

Following the pilot, the meetings were scaled up to cover a total of 10 project states: Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Sokoto, Kebbi, Gombe, Taraba, Ekiti, Delta, Bayelsa, and Imo. These meeting reached 6,712 girls across the 10 states.

With CUBS support, more than 38 girl groups have been established across the project states, where older girls meet monthly to network and further build life skills, and disseminate the knowledge received at the meetings to others in their communities through peer education.

### 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.

Photo by Jessica Charles



### Increasing Community Participation

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

To address this challenge, CUBS teaches leaders to consult women in the design programs and activities through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, or community forums. As a result, 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 changes have increased women’s participation in community-based activities in the CUBS’ supported states. Furthermore, more than 100 women have become members of their communities’ CPCs.

*“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*



Photo by CUBS staff

### Increasing Women's Earning Capacity

Nigeria's high HIV prevalence (4.1 percent) means that many 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. In partnership with Save the Children, CUBS also trained 38 CSOs to help OVC caregivers initiate cooperatives or voluntary savings and loans associations (VSLA) 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 CSOs have supported the formation of 92 VSLAs or cooperatives. Many caregivers have used the VSLA loans to start or expand small businesses. Through building these women's economic capacities, CUBS has helped them to meet the educational, health, and nutritional needs of more than 5,000 children in their care.

### 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 and early marriage; Educate the girl child; and 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.



## Protecting through Legal Support

In some areas of Nigeria, patriarchal norms exclude women from making decisions within the home and community and give males more authority over family assets. Because women and children are often considered the property of their husbands and fathers, 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 provide 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 reclaim assets that 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 the widow’s favor and restored the assets to her.



Photo by Jessica Charles

## Rescuing Ngozi from Abuse and Neglect

During the life of the project, CUBS conducted gender awareness trainings for 38 CSOs throughout Nigeria. Since participating in this training, one CSO, Foundation for God’s Love (FFGL), has been working to address discrimination against women in Enugu State. One strategy the CSO uses, learned through its CUBS training, 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 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.

Photo by Jessica Charles



## 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.

## Maintaining the Momentum

Although CUBS will close in 2014, the project will leave behind 38 CSOs and 116 child protection committees. In addition, the project has helped to establish 46 technical working groups, which are forums for the exchange of information and promotion of coherent, greater coordination and harmonization among stakeholders for the implementation of OVC programming at the states and local government areas levels.

Members of all these groups have been 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.



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