

Building collective action through social dialogue

A CAAGI story of change | March 2017



Some adolescent girls in Northern Nigeria have limited choices and opportunities to live productive lives as they are hindered by issues of early marriage, lack of access to education and economic empowerment

About Collective Action for Adolescent Girls (CAAGI)

CAAGI is a two-year pilot project structured to work with faith actors and faith based organisations to improve the choices and opportunities for adolescent girls to live a productive and meaningful life.

The project seeks to advocate against religious and cultural norms limiting adolescent girls' development.

Location: Kaduna state, Nigeria.

Duration: April 2016 - March 2018

Funded by: Christian Aid

Partners: Development and Peace Initiative (DPI) and Gender Awareness Trust (GAT).

Facilitating social dialogue

The collective Action for Adolescent Girls Initiative (CAAGI) has opened up spaces for dialogue and problem solving among community members. Through its activities, the project is facilitating a platform for communities to openly discuss issues that concern them. This includes the three issues that CAAGI is addressing – early marriage, lack of access to education, and economic empowerment for adolescent girls.

For Imam Sani, the chief Imam of Sabon Gayan community, after his initial engagements with the project, he identified these as issues within his community, and was able to talk authoritatively about these issues, without fear that his congregation would think that he was questioning the religion.

'I had never talked about the issues before CAAGI, but now that the project is here in Sabon Gayan, I am talking about it freely. [In] those days, you don't talk about it because it will be taken to mean you are questioning the authority of the religion,' he said.

He can speak authoritatively against the practices because he is able to reference the scriptures. This engagement in religious houses and the GEADOR forum have sparked social dialogue around these three issues for the first time, leading to new insights and solutions to things that were once the normal practice.

GEADOR is a safe space for men, women, young boys and young girls to discuss community development issues. It is clear from the interactions that these are social norms that are not acceptable to everyone in the

community, but there has been no prior opportunity to speak about or challenge them.

'People are really beginning to question some of these issues and so that is why you find out that people are really interested in training their daughters now. Even though the issue of poverty is a very big one and a challenge for a lot of people but the interest is becoming more than before,' says Imam Sani.

Rethinking social norms

Alice Augustine, the mother of 16-year-old Martha confirms Imam Sani's statement: 'If not for [my involvement in] GEADOR, I would have made the biggest mistake of my life, pressuring my daughter to marry early.'

A member of the GEADOR women's sub-circle in her community, her interaction with other women helped her to realise that her daughter had the right to make a decision about her life – whether to get married or not, a decision that had been taken for the 16-year-old without consulting her. Her training therefore made her ask her daughter what she wanted, and she realised that she wanted to continue her education.

Similarly, Alisabatu Babangida, a GEADOR facilitator, with a married 17-year-old daughter now regards marriage before the age of 18 as early and unacceptable. The GEADOR circles have met once a month since November 2016, and the women group has so far discussed the issues of adolescent girls and how their mothers can help. These discussions are helping people see the issues differently.

'It has happened to me, but I have never said it until yesterday when mallam [Imam] was talking. I know that I was involved in that problem, because of my daughter I married off,' Alisabatu said.

She continued: 'We talk about education in the circle because some of our children want to be educated, but they cannot because some parents do not have the means [money] to push [fund] their children in school, but

me, I want it for my daughter. She wanted to go back to school, but by then, we did not have the money, and that is the truth about it.'

On taking practical steps to support her daughter to improve the choices and opportunities she can access, she said:

'I will collect my daughter's baby so she can go back to school and her husband has agreed that it is fine for her to go back to school. Before the GEADOR training, I was not thinking about education for myself or for my daughter, but now I have even said that I am going to go back to school.'

Enabling collective action

Currently in Sabon Gayan community, not all women are part of GEADOR. In some instances, this is because their husbands do not let them come out, so GEADOR members are taking the initiative to convince both men and women to join the platform so that they can gain new insights about the practices of early marriage.

Alice says: 'Now, I am still planning that from now till June, I will gather some women on my own and teach them about early marriage. I will maybe also train them in one or two skills. I will teach them because if they have these small businesses they are doing at home they can have income to send their children to school because not all men have money to send their children to school.'

Before the introduction of the project in the community, women did not come together to talk about development issues. This has changed drastically, and beyond addressing the opportunities available to girls, it is facilitating collective action for broader community issues.



CAAGI is changing the way the girls are seen and valued within societies, and this has had a varying degree of positive outcomes.

For 16-year-old Martha, her mother's involvement with the project is helping her fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor. Despite the challenges of funds for her to continue onto a tertiary institution, her parents especially her mother have made the commitment to support her.

Martha currently teaches in a secondary school during the day and attends make-up training classes in the evening. She is doing these so that she can save up some money to attend university.

Testimonies showing how CAAGI has changed attitudes and improved girls' lives:

Alice Augustine (Sabon Gayan community): 'My dream for my daughter, I believe God that next year she will write JAMB, pass and go to school because she said she wants to be a doctor and I am supporting her with that.'

Yusuf Alhassan (Nasarawan Doya community): 'This project has helped me change the way I think about my daughters. I have three daughters (aged 14, 9 and 7), and I used to think they were of no use other than giving them out for marriage. With this thought, I withdrew them from school and was planning to give two of them (14 & 9) out for marriage, but when I became a member of GEADOR group, I cancelled the wedding and have taken them back to school.'

Saadu Musa (Nasarawan Doya community): 'I removed my daughter of 9 years from primary school for marriage but thank God for the teaching I got from the GEADOR group, I have stopped the marriage and she has gone back to school.'