



# Humans of REACH:

Most Significant Changes from the Reaching and Empowering Adolescents to make informed Choices for their Health (REACH) programme.

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## Saving Young Girls from Early Child and Forced Marriage: Amina's Story\*

**As Amina goes back to school, she now looks forward to a better life with better choices.**

*“My life has changed for the better and my dad will not force me to get married till I finish my school...”*

Amina (not her real name) lives in Kulani community in Balanga local government area of Gombe State, Nigeria with her parents and siblings. The major source of livelihood within her household is farming which is done mostly for commercial purposes. For the 16-year-old, farm work was considered to be very tedious as she had to trek a long distance, approximately 30 minutes, with her parents every day to the farm. She was constantly forced by her parents to assist in farm work and was considered to be a very stubborn child.

Although Amina had completed her primary school education, her father was reluctant to continue sponsoring her education because he was eager to give her out in marriage. Aware that her two elder sisters had been married off between the ages of 15 -16 and not wanting to suffer the same fate, Amina began to act rebelliously towards her parents.

Relief came in 2018 when the REACH programme began to implement its interventions within her community. She was enrolled in the Adolescent and Sexual Reproductive Health (ASRH) safe space and fully participated in the learning sessions for 9 weeks. At the safe space, facilitators reported that Amina displayed a willing disposition to learn and that she was never timid.



The impact of the programme soon began to manifest in Amina as she reported that from her learnings from the safe space, she felt more inclined to respect her parents and willingly assist them in the farm.

Surprisingly, when her father began to notice the positive changes in her behavior, he made her a promise to not give her out in marriage as he did with her elder sisters. Given the chance to continue her education has opened up a world of opportunities for Amina. Expressing her gratitude towards the programme she said:

*“Thank you, Save The Children, I love you all. My life has changed for the better and my dad will not force me to get married till I finish my school because of the positive behaviors I have been exhibiting to my parents and community members.”*

In communities with high rates of early child and forced marriage which usually results in early child bearing, low educational attainment and discriminatory gender norms significantly affects the ability of girls and boys to make the right decisions for their lives. By implementing interventions that help to curb this practice and get more girls into schools, the REACH programme is creating an enabling environment where adolescent girls can increasingly make informed decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health and rights.



The programme also had a positive impact on Amina’s father who was formerly a proponent of early child marriage.

*“The life of my daughter has changed positively and this changed my perception in terms of early marriage”,*  
he concluded.



## The Transformation of a Gatekeeper into a Change-maker!

**Mallam Mohammed is now supporting his daughter ensuring that her dreams come true in addition to playing is role as a protector and caregiver.**

*“I have seen many changes in her and I am willing to sponsor her education to the height she desires, I have also started giving my children equal right irrespective of sex.”*

In the northern part of Nigeria, parents are traditionally considered as the most important gate-keepers and enforcers of social norms within their households. Often times these norms are discriminatory and significantly affect the ability of adolescent boys and girls to make informed choices around their sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Mohammed Madaki, a father of two REACH adolescent beneficiaries is one of such gatekeepers. He lives in Dukku local government area of Gombe state had formerly aligned with such discriminatory norms.

*“As a father, I have always thought that a girl’s education ends at 14 years, and after this age she should be married off, irrespective of love for the man or the man’s age. I also use to think that girls should not take health decisions for themselves because they are meant to be controlled by their fathers or their husbands.”*

Like many parents in the region, Mohammed had placed more focus on his son, Hassan and was of the opinion that boys could not participate in domestic chores. Mohammed’s perceptions however began to change when the REACH programme began implementing its interventions in his community. He enrolled his son and daughter, Hassan and Hajara into the REACH safe space programmes after hearing positive stories from other beneficiaries within the community who testified of the changes they had seen in their children. The safe space sessions have been designed to provide gender appropriate empowering, age and life stage-specific ASRHR content in a non-threatening and stimulating environments for adolescents.



In no time, Mohammed began to notice a change in his children.

*“I started noticing some positive changes in my children, they started doing the house chores together without attributing the chore to a particular gender, going to school together and even eating from the same plate. The most drastic change was in my 12-year-old daughter Hajara who particularly started talking about her dreams and how she does not want to get married at 14 but wants to finish her tertiary education and become a medical doctor. She also said she would decide when to get marry and whom to marry.”*

This came as a surprise to Mohammed as he revealed that his children usually never got along and they had never really been aspirational about their future especially Hajara who he had planned to marry off after she completed her junior secondary school. In retrospect, Mohammed revealed that in the past, he had not treated his daughter fairly.

*“I made Hajara to think that house chores are meant for a girl child and she has to learn it so that she will be able to manage her husband’s house, on the other hand, I trained the boy to be lord over his sister even if he is younger than her. I did not know this behaviour made my children grow apart and disrespect each other.”*

Life has however changed for his daughter. Since her enrollment into the Choices safe spaces, Hajara has found a new thirst for knowledge and enthusiasm in learning. This in contrast to the past when she did not care about getting good grades or going early to school. Now, Hajara among the best five students in her class and is on her way to achieving her dreams to becoming a medical doctor in the future.

REACH continues to work with parents, community members and leaders to increase their knowledge on how to positively change social and gender norms in favour of married and unmarried adolescent girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights.

## Shifting gender biases among health service providers to improve access to adolescent-friendly SRH services.

**Altine now offers counselling and support to adolescents seeking SRH services in the health facility.**

*“REACH has helped both very young and older adolescent boys and girls in Bambam community because they now know it’s their right to access Sexual Reproductive Health services in the facility”*

Altine Bitrus, a 49 years old health worker in Balanga local government of Gombe state has been working with young adolescents, through the REACH programme, to teach them more about rights in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. One of the key outcomes of the REACH programme is to improve access to high quality, gender-responsive and adolescent-friendly SRH services for unmarried and married adolescent girls and boys. To achieve this, the programme provides capacity building to health workers and PPMVs in a bid to reduce health services provider bias, especially gender bias that hinder adolescents from accessing essential ASRH services.

Shifting these gender biases among health care providers has been one of the most significant changes of the REACH programme. Altine revealed that before she joined the programme, she had considered adolescent access to SRH services to be a taboo.

This has however changed as she stated,  
*“My perception has changed ... and whenever adolescent girls visit the facility for abortion, we counsel them on the pregnancy and how to use preventive measures using family planning measures.”*  
As a result of this, Altine reveals that adolescents in the community now feel confident to access these health care services.



*“Now, there is high traffic in collection of family planning measures especially from the sexually active adolescents. I also counsel them and stress the importance of abstinence if they are not active.”*

Altine who also doubles as an ASRH female facilitator for the REACH programme now provides one-to-one counselling to both male and female adolescents without any bias and also counsels couples on the importance of family planning and spacing.

Shifting gender bias among health care providers is an efficient way to improve access to adolescent-friendly SRH services. The REACH programme continues to work through capacity building trainings of health workers and PPMVs to reduce these biases that hinder adolescents from accessing essential SRH services.

## Saving Young Girls from Early Child and Forced Marriage through Education: Zainab's Story\*

Zainab is making better choices by getting an education and achieving her dreams!

*“When a person is educated, many doors open to her. You can have everything and that is the only way someone will achieve his dreams”*

Zainab (not her real name) lives in a rural community in Talata Mafara local government area of Zamfara State. She lives with her father, who is the district head of the community, and her large polygamous family that consists of her mother, step mother and nine siblings (two elder brothers, five elder sisters and one younger sister). Zainab's older siblings are all married and she spent most of her time supporting her parents in the farm and in rearing animals, which is the basic means of livelihood in the community. She did not attend school like most of the girls in the community and only boys were allowed to go to school. A major barrier that prevented community members from enrolling their children into school was due to the lack of a school building and the closest school was located in a neighbouring community which is quite far away. According to Zainab, two girls from her community had been enrolled into the school but one was subsequently married off before she could complete her education.

In 2018, REACH began implementing its interventions in her community and in a bid to make the programme acceptable to the community, Zainab's father (the district head) enrolled her and her younger sister as well as some cousins into the CHOICES safe space sessions. As she began to participate in the safe spaces' activities, Zainab began to feel the need to express her hopes and dreams and soon decided that she wanted to be educated. She spoke to REACH facilitators to meet her parents and discuss the issue of allowing her attain formal education in another community.



During the school vacation, the facilitators met with Zainab's father to discuss with him about allowing his two daughters to attend school and complete their education. As the district head, Zainab's father pledged to lead by example and promptly agreed to enroll his daughters and encourage other members of the community to do same.

Zainab is now in primary one and she goes to school without a uniform and a little bag with one exercise book which she uses for all the subjects. However, this does not deter her as she is determined to achieve her dreams of becoming a doctor, so that she can help sick people especially those in her community and help her parents with a better life. Her school teacher also attests to her determination as he revealed,

*“Zainab has the zeal of learning, she asks questions in class and pays attention to whatever is being taught in the class.”*

Education remains a powerful strategy to ending child marriage. The longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married before the age of 18 and have children during her teenage years. The REACH programme continues to promote girl-child education within its implementing communities in order to create an enabling environment where adolescents can have improved knowledge and attitudes around their sexual and reproductive health.



## Making Her Voice Count: Fatima's Story\*

Fatima is making an impact on her community with her voice and choosing to be educated.

*"I am happy that my father includes me when making decisions concerning my future."*

Growing up within a polygamous family in the town of Talata Mafara in Zamfara State, 14-year-old Fatima (not her real name) quickly took up entrepreneurial skills by learning and applying the art of henna design on women and girls within her community. Her father, who works as a civil servant with the Agency for Mass Education, manages to provide for his 2 wives and 15 children with his monthly salary. Nevertheless, Fatima has been able to support her family especially her younger siblings from the proceeds of her henna business.

However, as the sixth child of her father, Fatima was never considered to be an integral member of the family in terms of decision making within the household as her older siblings were considered to be more knowledgeable. Her life soon took a positive turn when the REACH programme was introduced into her community in 2018. The programme was well received by members of the community who aligned with its goals and Fatima was promptly enrolled by her neighbor who was also one of the programme's facilitators.

Fatima fully participated in all the CHOICES safe space sessions and came away with new knowledge on how to make informed choices that would positively affect her life. Looking back after her graduation from the safe spaces, Fatima explains that the programme increased her knowledge on how to effectively communicate with her parents. She said that after a series of take home activities from the safe spaces which she shared with family and friends, her father was impressed by the outcomes of the programme and the impact it had on her. Fatima revealed that her father now consults her for her views on decisions being made within the household saying,

*"I am happy that my father includes me when making decisions concerning my future".*



The REACH programme, through its safe space sessions has significantly contributed to the lives of adolescents within these communities by empowering them to make informed and good decisions for themselves. The programme has also been able to set Fatima on the path to achieve her dreams. She explains that the program also made her realize that she has the power to achieve her dreams and explore her potentials to make a good living. She is no longer ashamed to ask for support or assistance from people in order to achieve her goals. Her father, who was also inspired by REACH, pledged to support his daughter by stating, *"I will make sure that my daughter continues her education."*



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