

No Longer Left Behind:

Paving Pathways to Empowerment for Marginalised Girls



**Action
Health Incorporated**

“Ensuring that girls are able to exercise their rights, can pursue their education and have the skills and opportunity to join the workforce is essential for their own well-being, and a critical foundation for the health and prosperity of families, communities and nations” – UNFPA Executive Director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin

Worldwide, research shows that investing in the poorest girls in the poorest communities is a vital strategy for interrupting intergenerational poverty, promoting better health outcomes and achieving fertility goals.

However, thousands of the most vulnerable and marginalized girls across Nigeria are seriously under-represented in conventionally configured development efforts—youth programmes, economic empowerment ventures, HIV-prevention programmes, and social participation initiatives. Even where programmes exist, girls residing in poorly-resourced communities especially, those

who are out-of-school, in exploitative labour, not living with parents, are married and/or with children are denied access to opportunities to gain key competencies and assets that adolescent girls need to fulfill their potential and effectively participate as full members of society.

To break this cycle of “planned poverty” and poor SRH indices for adolescent girls, Action Health Incorporated (AHI) in collaboration with the Lagos State Ministry of Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation and funding support from UNFPA addressed the comparative sexual and reproductive health and rights disadvantages faced by 370 out-of-school adolescent girls aged 17 – 19 in Ilaje-Bariga, Otto and Sari- Iganmu, three of the over 100 slum communities referenced in the 2012-2025 Lagos State Development Plan. The initiative used a combination of interventions which have been empirically proven as cornerstones of empowering out-of-school adolescent girls i.e.: improving their sexual and reproductive health and increasing their income generation potential, as well as promoting their agency to contribute to change in their community.

Programme Objectives:

- To improve the marginalised girls' sexual and reproductive health knowledge and capacity to access services.
- To enhance their income generating skills and place them on the path to financial independence.
- To support their ability to serve as change agents in their communities.

Profile of Out-of-School Girls in Lagos Slums

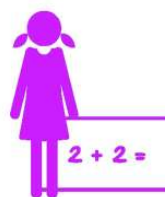
Educational Attainment



1 in 4
has never attended school



1 in 3
completed JSS3



1 in 3
of those who ever enrolled
never made it beyond
primary school

Sexual & Reproductive Health



1 in 2
has initiated sexual
activity



1 in 5
has been pregnant
or has had a child
before



1 in 3
has experienced
forced sex



1 in 10
is married

Livelihood



Girls' labour/contribution
to household income is
prioritized above schooling



4 in 5
work but they are often
not paid or are paid only
in-kind



Pressure to provide an
income for themselves or
their families also leads
many girls to engage in
transactional sex with
older men.



Improving Girls Sexual and Reproductive Health

One of the biggest barriers that adolescent girls face on the journey to self-actualization is the lack of access to accurate and factual information about sexual and reproductive health and where to access related services. Each of the 370 girls in the programme participated in the Taking Charge of My Sexual Health Classes. Through the trainings, the girls better understood their reproductive system, its functions and the diseases that can affect it. They received new knowledge that most were unaware of before the training, ranging from information about menstruation, how pregnancy occurs and contraception. By the end of the training, the girls could clearly identify effective modern methods of contraception, as opposed to the methods they mentioned at the beginning of the training which included: drinking mixtures such as lime and potash, *alabukun* (locally made pain relief drug) and *Seven up*, *Karaole* (locally made herbal mixture), water and salt etc. They were also linked with the closest Primary Health Care (PHC)/ service provision site in the community and during the excursion they learnt how to access available services.

I have learnt a lot about menstrual cycle, how to prevent unwanted pregnancy and how to prevent sexually transmitted infections. I also learnt about different types of contraceptives. I have told my boyfriend about the importance of using condoms and even if he does not agree to use a condom I will use the female condom. – Victoria Felix

I have learnt a lot about my reproductive system as a girl. I didn't even know that a girl has separate openings in her body for menstruating and for urinating. I now know how to take better care of myself - Azeez Kaosara, 17





Increasing Girls' Income Generation Potential

Having income generation skills is vital in helping girls ensure their sustenance. Through participation in this initiative, each girl completed a vocational training programme of her choice from the four options available - Catering, Bead Making, Make Up and Head Gear Tying, and Soap Making. Knowing that many of the girls do not have their births registered or any type of formal identity cards, they were all registered with the National Identity Commission to further facilitate the girls' access to critical services. With this means of identity, a personal bank was opened for each girl in her name, to encourage a savings culture as she sets up her business or get formally employed. Every girl also received a business start-up kit (equipment & initial supplies) thus opening up channels through which they would begin to generate income, and paving the way to financial independence to break the cycle of vulnerability to transactional sex.





Girls' Agency in Advancing Family Planning

Empowered with accurate sexual and reproductive health information, the girls in the programme have also become agents of change in their communities. Using the strategy of community-based outreaches, the girls were supported to map their communities and identify locations where they could easily reach out to young people.

Working in small groups with older community-based family planning distributors serving as their guides and mentors, the girls are able to reach their peers with much-needed information and contraceptives. Collectively, they have reached out to over 20,000 young people with sexuality information and non-prescriptive family planning commodities.

Need for Leadership with Empowering Girls

Implementing this initiative demonstrated the urgent need for action by stakeholders, to prioritize marginalised adolescent girls' continuing lack of access to basic services, exposure to harmful practices, violence, abuse and denial of their human rights and dignity. Ensuring that no girl is denied her right to pursue her education, access health services as well as acquire the skills required to join the workforce and be guaranteed a decent livelihood is the responsibility of global and national leadership. Success will require galvanizing the combined action of governments, development partners and the business sector.



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