

Addressing VAWG and Building Peace: A Case Study of a Grassroots Peace Club Initiative in Kano State

Background

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) continues to be prevalent across Nigeria, cutting across age, class, religion, ethnicity and educational status. Indeed, some studies have found that one in three young women aged 15 – 24 in Nigeria has experienced violence at one time or another¹. The situation is compounded by a deep-seated culture of silence and social stigma that makes it difficult for victims to report cases of sexual violence. This contributes to impunity and perpetuating the cycle of violence.



Peace Club attendees at a training session

Breaking the Culture of Silence through Community Safe Spaces

Recognizing the need to create an enabling environment for women and girls to speak-up on against violence in order to curb impunity amongst perpetrators and to facilitate an end to VAWG, Society for Women Development and Empowerment in Nigeria (SWODEN) with the support of the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), established 'Peace Clubs' for young persons in Kumbotso, Bichi and Doguwa Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Kano State. In Kano State, rape, wife battering, gender based violence related murder, poor access to women and girls health and educational services are common forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls with devastating effects on their physical, emotional and psycho-social wellbeing².

Peace Clubs present 'Safe Spaces' where young women and men acquire life skills such self-esteem, security consciousness, communications, negotiation, mediation and peacebuilding. The peace clubs are aimed at building a critical mass of empowered youth to speak-up to prevent and redress cases of VAWG. Peace Clubs are situated within formal and informal structures such as schools, places of vocational engagement and community meeting spaces. Anchored by community-based 'facilitators', each

¹ Gender in Nigeria Report (2012). 'Improving the lives of women and girls in Nigeria: Issues, policies and actions'. British Council, Nigeria, 2012.

²Salaudeen, A.G et al (2010) Assessment of Violence against Women in Kano Metropolis, Nigeria

Peace Club is affiliated with reputable members of society who act as mentors for the young attendees. This structure creates a conducive environment where young women and men learn how to forge healthy relationships based on trust and security.

The table below shows the classification of peace club members based on their age group.

	Formal (In school)	In-Formal (Out Of School)
	<i>Little sister club [10-13 years]</i>	<i>Little sister club [10-13 years]</i>
	<i>Big sister club [14-17 years]</i>	<i>Big sister club [14-17 years]</i>
	<i>Aunties club³ [18-24years]</i>	<i>Aunties club [18-24 years]</i>
	<i>Little brother [10-13 years]</i>	<i>Little brother [10-13 years]</i>
	<i>Big brother [14-17 years]</i>	<i>Big brother [14 -17 years]</i>

Results

Significant results have been achieved at different levels. Members of the Peace Club are demonstrating rising confidence and ability to report cases of VAWG. The initiative has contributed to the creation of enabling structures that enhance the documentation of cases of VAWG. The behavioural changes among peace clubs and the new institutions have impacted positively on community groups and institutions.

After several months of participation in Peace Clubs, members (especially girls) have become more self-aware and confident. They were more vocal during meetings and engaged in animated role play sessions during trainings. One of the results of the Peace Club initiative was the increased trust and sense of security amongst several female attendees who began sharing their experiences of gender-based violence perpetrated by relatives and individuals in authority who owed them a duty of care.

The reported cases of VAWG are being reported to the 'Observatory', which provides a virtual Safe Space for documenting anonymous reports of VAWG through an online platform accessible to the general public. The Observatory is supported by an Observatory Steering Committee (OBSTEC) composed of Civil Society representatives and professionals from law enforcement, educational, religious and health institutions who are responsible for facilitating remedial action in response to reports of VAWG.

The life-skills trainings of the Peace Clubs and the rule of confidentiality of the observatory structures have contributed to enabling Peace Club attendees to speak up and report incidences of VAWG without fear of negative repercussions. This has in turn improved the documentation of gender-based violence and has provided the needed information for the prosecution of offenders and rehabilitation of victims.

³ Aunties act as chaperones to the little sisters who may not be easily released by parents to attend the peace clubs due to cultural inhibitions

The effect of the Peace Club structure is not limited to the increased reporting of VAWG cases alone. The impact of Peace Clubs has been felt by educational institutions and communities where Peace Clubs are situated. This is the result of undertakings embarked upon by attendees to utilise their newly acquired skills not just for self-development, but for the development of their communities. To this end, Peace Club attendees have constituted advocacy platforms for addressing societal ills in their immediate communities and work to discourage negative peer influence by serving as role models on peaceful conduct. They have anchored several community dialogue meetings where issues pertaining to peacebuilding and the prevention of gender-based violence are discussed with stakeholders in the community to the admiration of all.

Speaking on these efforts, Mallam Balarabe Sule, the village head of Dadinkowa in Doguwa LGA reported that:

“We thank God for the coming of NSRP’s peace club, the entire Dadinkowa community are now feeling the impact of peace club, for instance their members are always in my house to report one case or the other, and with God’s support, members of peace club and I ...we are doing our best in resolving conflict, strengthening relations, building confidence, trust and peace among our community members”

One of the main initiatives of Peace Club attendees is their frequent engagement in mediation between conflicting parties in their communities. A case in point was involving conflict between two prominent politicians in Dadinkowa community of Doguwa Local Government Area which led to tensions in the area.

Murtala, a Peace Club attendee who had been alerted on the issue by his Mentor Musa Ado, mobilised his colleagues in the Peace Club to advocate for the constitution of a mediating group comprising reputable members of the community to address the issue. The group, under the leadership of Professor Dayyab Saeed, invited the politicians and their key supporters to a mediation meeting at the Bayero University Kano (BUK). The stormy session ended in a peaceful embrace between the politicians, and peace was once again restored.

Challenges

The initial challenge encountered was the reluctance on the part of parents, guardians and husbands to attend the Peace Clubs. This was due to feelings of suspicion as to the ‘real’ purpose of the Peace Clubs. Targeted sensitisation and advocacy efforts to key gatekeepers aided in allaying fears of all concerned.

However, as attendees began to evidence change in character and conduct, an increasing number of community members sought to have their children and wards enrolled into the Peace Clubs. This resulted in increased uptake of the Peace Clubs with attendant challenges of managing unexpectedly large turnout of attendees. In addition,

Peace Club Facilitators had to grapple with rising demands for economic empowerment which was not envisioned as part of the initiative. Managing expectations of community members and attendees who have begun to look to the Peace Club as a forum to meet all of the community's needs continues to pose a challenge to the initiative.

Lessons Learned

One of the key takeaways from the Peace Club initiative is the value of involving men and boys in efforts aimed at preventing and addressing VAWG. Experience from the Peace Club initiative showed that boys, when trained, acted as 'champions' for the cause against gender-based violence. This had a two-pronged effect of emboldening girls to speak up as it became clear that VAWG was not the norm for their male counterparts, and it also served to pave the way for discussions on VAWG in traditional spaces where women's voices are culturally excluded.

Another lesson learned was the value of ensuring buy-in of community members and key religious and traditional leaders in each community. The initiatives yielded more results where there was broad-based community acceptance and ownership.