actionaid

STORY COLLECTION on SLCVAWG

COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

PROJECT

ABOUT THE SLOC VAWG PROJECT

Strengthening the Capacities of Local Women's Rights Organisations to Combat Violence Against Women and Girls **(SLOC VAWG)** Project, is a 3-year project funded by Ford Foundation to support Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) in their work of advancing gender equality in Nigeria. Specifically, the project seeks to provide technical and financial supports to WROs as they seek to challenge oppressive socio-cultural norms and practices that exacerbate gender-based violence (GBV) and the fear of it across 3 states -Gombe, Imo states and the FCT. Through capacity building and sub-granting, the project works towards improving organisational and institutional capabilities of WROs to strategically design, implement and manage actions on GBV for vulnerable women and girls thus contributing to women and girls living with reduced violence and fear of it in project states.

The SLOC Project is at the end of its second year, and targets 12 women's rights organisations comprising six NGOs and 6 CBOs respectively. These organisations are empowering and partnering with the communities they serve to address harmful traditional practices that exacerbate violence against women and girls.

Using a multi-pronged approach to community engagement, they are working with community level committee, girls and boys school clubs, women peer education circles, men groups, faith-based groups, age-grades and traditional councils among others to shift harmful archaic and patriarchal perceptions that put women and girls at risk. Through strategic community wide awareness creation, interrogation of the origins of these practices, elimination of some of them and setting up sanctions to curb future actions, the SLOC-VAWG project partners across Gombe, Imo States and the FCT are beginning to record significant success and change.

Partner: **Honor Birth Foundation**

Sixty-One-year-old Sandra Abraham, mother of one, whose marriage hit the rocks had returned to live in her father's compound. This could have accounted for why her cousin deemed it fit to take over the landed property meant for Sandra's son.

Sandra's son had asked his mother's cousin, Peter, to help him purchase 4 plots of land measuring 200ft by 100 ft in total. However, the land was bought, but the power of attorney was prepared in Peter's name. Upon realizing that Peter was not willing to hand over the property, Sandra had no other option but to raise overt demand for possession and custody of her son's real estate worth three million naira (NGN 3,000,000).

Sadly, her demand was met with physical violence. Sandra was brutalized, stabbed in the palm, and left with a bleeding face by Peter. In a community governed by byelaws that support denial of property for women, what hope is there for poor Sandra?

DEEPLY ROOTED HARMFUL NORMS

At the inception of the Strengthening Local Women's Rights Organisations to Combat Violence Against Women and Girls' (SLOC-VAWG) project in Oforola and Olaukwu communities of Owerri West Local Government Area, Honor Birth Foundation conducted community mapping through a townhall meeting to determine the level of incidences of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) affecting women and girls in the communities. With support from community women, youth leaders, existing women groups, and religious leaders, several harmful traditional norms were unanimously identified and linked to existing community byelaws guiding the communities. These include:

- Harmful widowhood practices
- Osu caste system
- High bride price
- Denial of property rights for women and girls
- Abandonment of and abdication of responsibilities for female children upbringing to their mothers
- Exclusion of women in leadership and decision making including on matters that concern them.
- Wife battery
- Unequal education opportunities for male and female children
- Rape, Incest, and physical assault.

In view of the above, 52 members of the Eze cabinet were sensitized on harmful cultural practices and its effects. This was followed by grassroots mobilization of women, community vigilantes, youth leaders, and the president generals for awareness creation in the two communities.

Having realized the need to review the community byelaws, the traditional rulers selected and assigned 15 stakeholders drawn from the project communities to conduct a review of the byelaws in light of identified practices that impede the realization of women's rights in the 2 communities; and this birthed the "Opi" Committee which means "The Whistle Committee."

All names have been changed
Prolonged mourning period, widow bethrothal, trial by ordeal, forced shaving of hair, restricted mobility during mourning period, disinheritance.
The Osu Caste System is an ancient practice in Igboland that discourages social interaction and marriage with a group of people, referred to as Osu (outcasts). This is because they dedicate these Osu people to the Alusis (deities) and are thus seen as inferior to the Nwadiala (free-borns).

A NEW DAWN

On March 23rd, 2021, the Opi Committee was inaugurated. This comprises members of women groups, a member of the Imo state House of Assembly, Owerri West constituency, the 2 palace secretaries, the Regent of Oforola Ancient kingdom, the Vigilante coordinators for the 2 communities, the male and female youth leaders, and the president generals.

Staying true to the inaugural responsibility of the committee, the byelaws were thoroughly reviewed and clauses that promote rights violation for women and girls were extracted. The revised document was duly signed by the two traditional heads and the palace secretaries after which it was presented to Honor Birth Foundation. This marked the beginning of an end to rights violation backed by socio-cultural traditions in Olaukwu and Oforola Ancient Kingdoms.

To this end, 44 persons comprising 20 village heads, 13 women leaders, youth leaders, religious leaders and their wives were taken through a 2-day training on the new provision of the reformed byelaws which was corroborated with a public declaration on the validity and adoption of the reformed laws in June 2021 by Eze Appolo Ekeocha, the traditional ruler of Olaukwu community, and Prince Augustine Chika Obichere, Regent, Oforola Ancient Kingdom. This laid the foundation for reporting of rights violation by Olaukwu and Oforola women and girls.

The Opi Committee, however, moved beyond a review committee to become an accessible community response entity on rights violation for women and girls. Structurally, the committee elected a chairman, a secretary, a public relations officer, a media representative, and a treasurer. These conducted series of awareness creation activities on breaking the culture of silence and combating gender-based violence in the two communities.

It is against this backdrop that Sandra scurried away with her battered and bloody body to Honor Birth Foundation to report her case. She was escorted to the Police station after which she accessed medical care. However, the chairperson of the Opi committee requested that the committee be allowed to handle the case first with a pledge that the case would be reverted to the police if the committee could not handle it. The committee swung into action with investigations which revealed that Peter bought the plots in his own name. On the verdict of the committee, he was made to pay for Sandra's medical bills, sign an undertaking for her safety, prepare new powers of attorney in Harry's name with Sandra as a signatory, and hand the documents over to Sandra as a lawful custodian of the property.

Cases that cannot be handled by the Committee are reported to Honor Birth Foundation who makes referrals to relevant response centers such as the National Human Rights Commission, International Federation of Female Lawyers, Ministry of Women Affairs, the Social Welfare Department, and the Police. The traditional heads also have the responsibility of adjudicating on some of the cases with the reformed byelaws as a guiding document.

The Opi committee meets twice weekly to respond to reported cases of VAWG but spontaneously responds to cases that require immediate response such as Rape, Defilement, Indecent assault, wife battery and eminent threat to life of survivors. The committee is well known by the Police Area Command as they ensure that criminal cases are referred to the state. In its 12 months of existence, the committee has tried 18 non-criminal cases with 11 concluded and 7 ongoing cases.

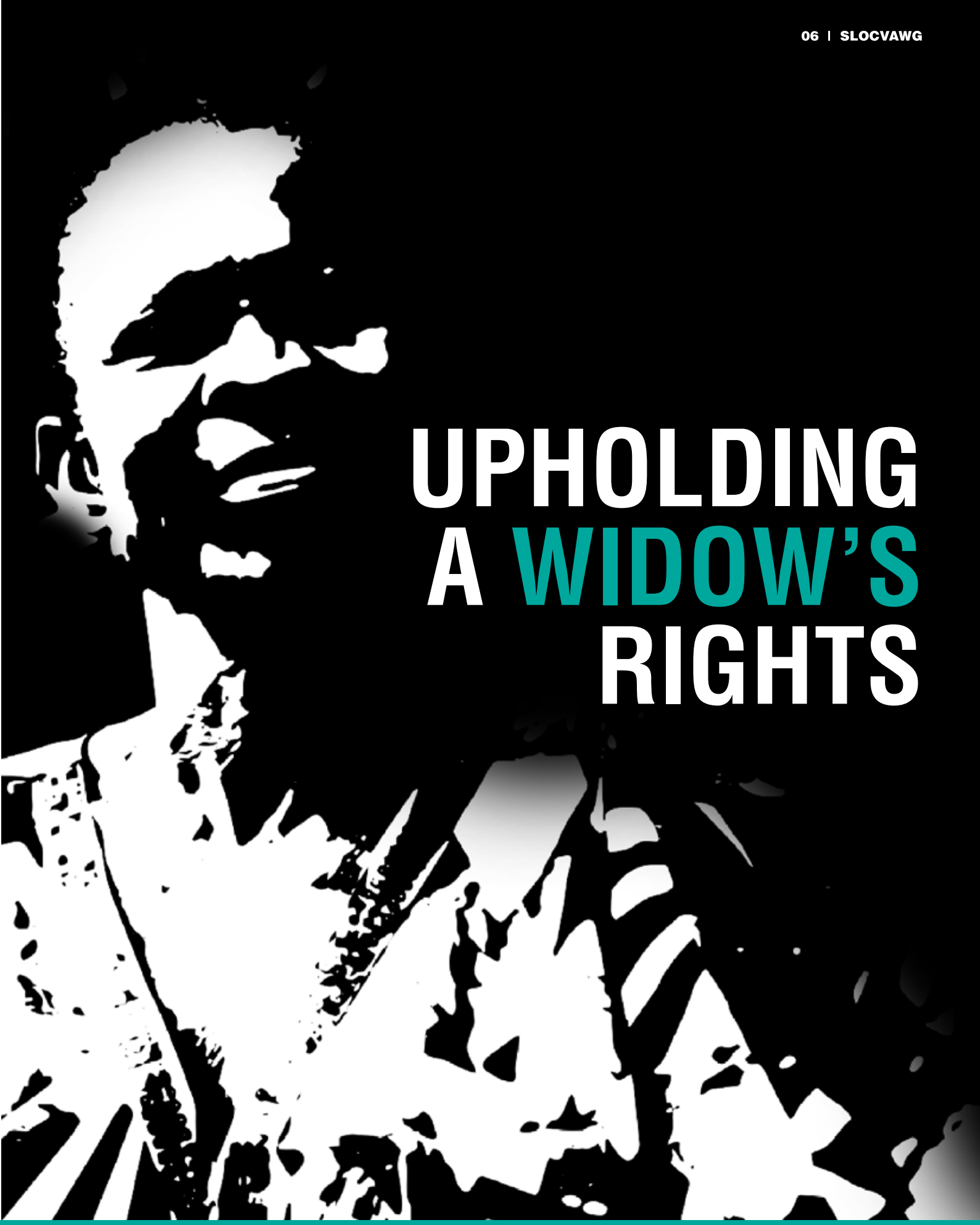
The committee has an established identity reflected in identity cards, crested T-shirts, and letter headed papers. Their verdicts are well documented with copies given to the plaintiff, the accused, the traditional rulers of the 2 project communities, Honor Birth Foundation, and a copy for the committee for reference purposes.

It is safe to affirm that women and girls in these two communities are now aware of their rights and the culture of silence is gradually fading as cases that previously attracted victim blaming are now being reported to the police through the committee. The success of "Opi" has moved the Eze to pledge that the committee will be established in all the communities in Owerri west L.G.A.

"Actionaid Nigeria and the Opi committee have given me a pride of place in my father's house. They (my family members) have come to know that as a daughter of the family, I have property rights in the family and in the property of my son". - **Sandra Abraham**

"The culture of silence is broken totally. We speak out, ActionAid has opened our eyes to know our rights. The saying that a woman is seen and not heard is no longer obtainable. We now demand for our rights; right to own land, house, property.
In our father's compound and in our husband's house we have rights to defend".
- **Lady Stella Chukwu**, *a female member of the Opi committee.*

"When I was elected as a traditional ruler, I promised my people that I will work towards a peaceful community where everybody irrespective of age, religion, sex will enjoy equal rights and protection.
I have always said that the coming of ActionAid Nigeria SLOC Project to my domain is a nominal coincidence, I have longed for people of similar ideals.
I give my full support to the SLOC project. Women now live peacefully with their husbands, sons-in-law and girls are fully protected against harm".
ActionAid Nigeria SLOC project needs to last for another ten years in Olaukwu community".
- *His Royal Highness,* **Eze Appollo Ekeocha,** *Olaoma I of Olaukwu Community.*



UPHOLDING A WIDOW'S RIGHTS

Partner: **Communal Care Centre, Oguta, Imo State**

Mrs. Annabel Ugwu is a petty trader and a widow from Ngegwu Village in Oguta. Her 28-year-old marriage without a child ended when her husband died in January 2018 after a protracted illness. While her husband was alive, they jointly built a two-bedroom apartment inclusive of a store where they both lived until his death.

One day Mrs. Regina Akpan , a married woman with 6 children, presumed to be a 5th cousin to Christiana's late husband and an Immigration officer, came in from Lagos to occupy Christiana's living room. Initially, Annabel thought it was just a short visit but after a while, she realized that Regina had come to stay there permanently.

Regina started intimidating and harassing her verbally and otherwise. Making her cook, wash her clothes and even her under wears, also threatening to throw her out of the house since she had no child, telling her that she (Annabel) does not have any right or inheritance in the family.

Annabel became psychologically traumatized, withdrawn and emotionally imbalanced, until a member of Oguta VAWG Response Team (OVRT) identified her during his sensitization programs in the villages, and brought the case to Communal Care Centre (CCC). The OVRT is an initiative of CCC as part of efforts to create a grassroots support structure for survivors of violence. It is a 10-member committee comprising representatives from the traditional ruler, women group, men

group, religious group, youth group, community vigilante, gender unit of the police and social welfare department.

"We immediately invited Annabel to get further details of the case from her. She informed us that Regina not only took over the living room but used nails to block her access to the living room, removed all her things in the corridor and warned her to keep away from the sitting room that the house belongs to her and her children." -OVRT Member

"The committee summoned Regina on phone, but she refused to honor our invite. The matter was reported to the traditional ruler of Oguta community who also invited her, but she also declined. The traditional ruler advised us to take any appropriate action to help Annabel."-OVRT Member

The National Human Rights Commission was officially contacted to intervene. After turning down the first invitation, the Commission sent a reminder through CCC stating that appropriate actions would be taken if she failed to honor the invitation. This made Regina unsettled as she had begun sneaking out of the house in the morning and returning late in the night. With the help of a surveillance team, her hiding place was discovered, and she plead that the matter be handled within the family. Nevertheless, she was asked to honor the invitation and make her request directly to the commission.

Two days later, Annabel had access to her property and now enjoys a good frame of mind, looking happy doing her petty business. Regina packed all her belongings out of the house.

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Name has been changed

KNOWLEDGE LIBERATES

– A COMMUNITY IN 'DISTRESS'

Partner: **Kningtingale Women Health Initiative**

Women and girls of Lalaipido community of Shongom Local Government Area of Gombe state have had their fair share of violence and injustice encompassing rape, battery, harmful widowhood practices, denial of inheritance, male child preference, exclusion from education and decision making at family and community levels among others.

The fact that nobody cared to address these issues made the community vulnerable to being terrorized by a gang of notorious boys headed by the son of the village head (Dagaci) who is a known serial rapist. As such, reported cases were never prosecuted because of the influence of the chief. Sadly, a 10-year-old girl had been his victim for years. According to her parents, he had brazenly raped her multiple times without recourse.

Things took a new turn in Lalaipido when Kningtingale Women Health Initiative introduced the SLOC-VAWG project to the community. Through rigorous sensitization and awareness activities using flash mob/drama, street announcements, rallies, radio jingles, and talk shows, the community became informed and empowered to combat violence against their women and girls. The sensitization effort was also supported with capacity building for traditional and community leaders, religious leaders, women, and women peer educators, schoolteachers, heads girls of schools, men and boys, and security personnel within the community.

In October 2021, the head of the gang raped the 10-year-old girl once again. Her mother, being a member of the women peer education group, and her father, a participant in the male engagement sessions, were both determined to get justice this time around. Hence, they mobilized community members who acted and insisted that the case must be escalated to the state level. Demonstrating increased knowledge on referral pathways, the case was report to the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, after which it was transferred to the state Central Investigation and Intelligence Division (CIID). The perpetrator was arrested, and he confessed to all the heinous act he had been committing to young girls in the community. He was charged to court, prosecuted, and sentenced to 27 years in prison.

This case served as a deterrent to members of the gang who were left with no choice but to sheath their swords as cases of rape have declined in the community. As opposed to a minimum record of four (4) cases weekly, the community now records at most one (1) case in a month. This also boosted the confidence of community members to report cases of violence against women and girls which is gradually breaking the culture of silence in the community as the women from the peer education group continue advocating, sensitizing, and lobbying for community bylaw reforms and women inclusion in decision making. This will ensure that their voices are heard and that there are documented penalties for violators. Knightingale Women Health Initiative is also intensifying activities of the SLOC-VAWG project to continue creating a conscious thought in all communities of intervention so that community structures will be strengthened to challenge and end all forms of violence against women and girls.

THE POWER OF COLLECTIVES

Partner: **Teenage Network**

Goodness became an orphan at 6 years of age; therefore, she leaves with her grandmother who is a peasant farmer in Pigba-sama community. Her grandmother had limited resources and could hardly provide her needs. This made her a target for pedophiles in the community; they would seduce her with as low as forty naira (NGN 40) to have sex with her.

In March 2021, Teenage Network conducted a baseline assessment in Pigba-Sama community for the SLOC-VAWG project. Part of the assessment revealed that 70% of the community girls and women believed that survivors of child molestation are to be blamed with Goodness cited as a typical example of a wayward child.

Based on the findings of the assessment, Teenage Network began a six-week Girls' academy for adolescent girls in the community in April 2021. The objective was to educate them on their sexual and reproductive health rights with focus on why abuses should be reported and how abuses can be reported. This was done concurrently with monthly women meetings to change the perspective of community women on victim blaming. Goodness willingly joined the girls' academy and demonstrated eagerness to learn about her sexual and reproductive health rights. She was actively involved all through the 6 weeks duration and received answers to her numerous questions while supporting her peers to speak up during the sessions.

During one of the sessions, Goodness and other girls stated that they did not know cases of sexual harassment could be reported and doubted if they would get the necessary support from their parents and other community stakeholders. As the lessons deepened, the girls became more enlightened and intolerant to sexual abuse. Following series of advocacy meetings with the women groups, men groups, and the community council of Elders, the girls were encouraged to report cases with the assurance that they would get the support of community members.

Five months after the conclusion of the Girls' Academy training, Teenage Network got news from the community that Goodness reported a 70year old man who attempted to molest her to the community police and was actively supported by the women leader to ensure that the 70-year-old man was arrested.

The 70year old man was arrested and detained for three days, after which the district head banished him from the community. Teenage Network rewarded Goodness with a year supply of sanitary pad to encourage other girls to speak up.

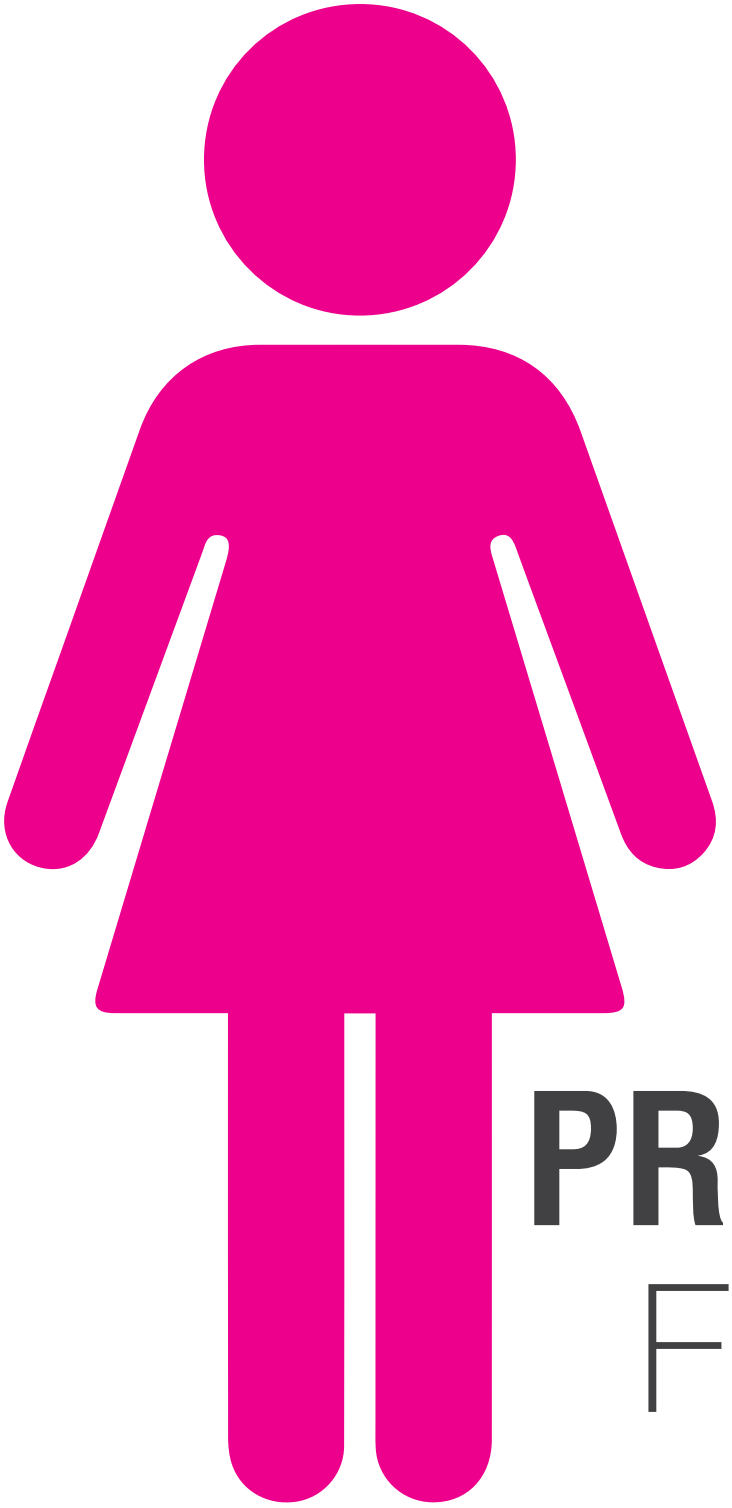
Teenage Network is following up with the community to ensure justice is served.

Name has been changed

"I got to know that I can really report any man that abuses me during the training and that the police can do something about it. This gave me the confidence to report to the community police." -Goodness

"When I heard about the incidence, I guided the community police to the Man's house. I told them that Teenage Network has trained us to respond to this kind of cases; my certificate is with me if you want to see it, this man must be punished." -Tuna Usman, Women Leader

"I was surprised by the wisdom Goodness deployed in reporting this sexual assault. It was later I got to know that Teenage Network has trained girls in the community on how to report cases of rape. In fact, I'm very impressed and we the community police would like to partner with Teenage Network." - Leader, Community Police Group



RIGHTS PROTECTION FOR GIRLS

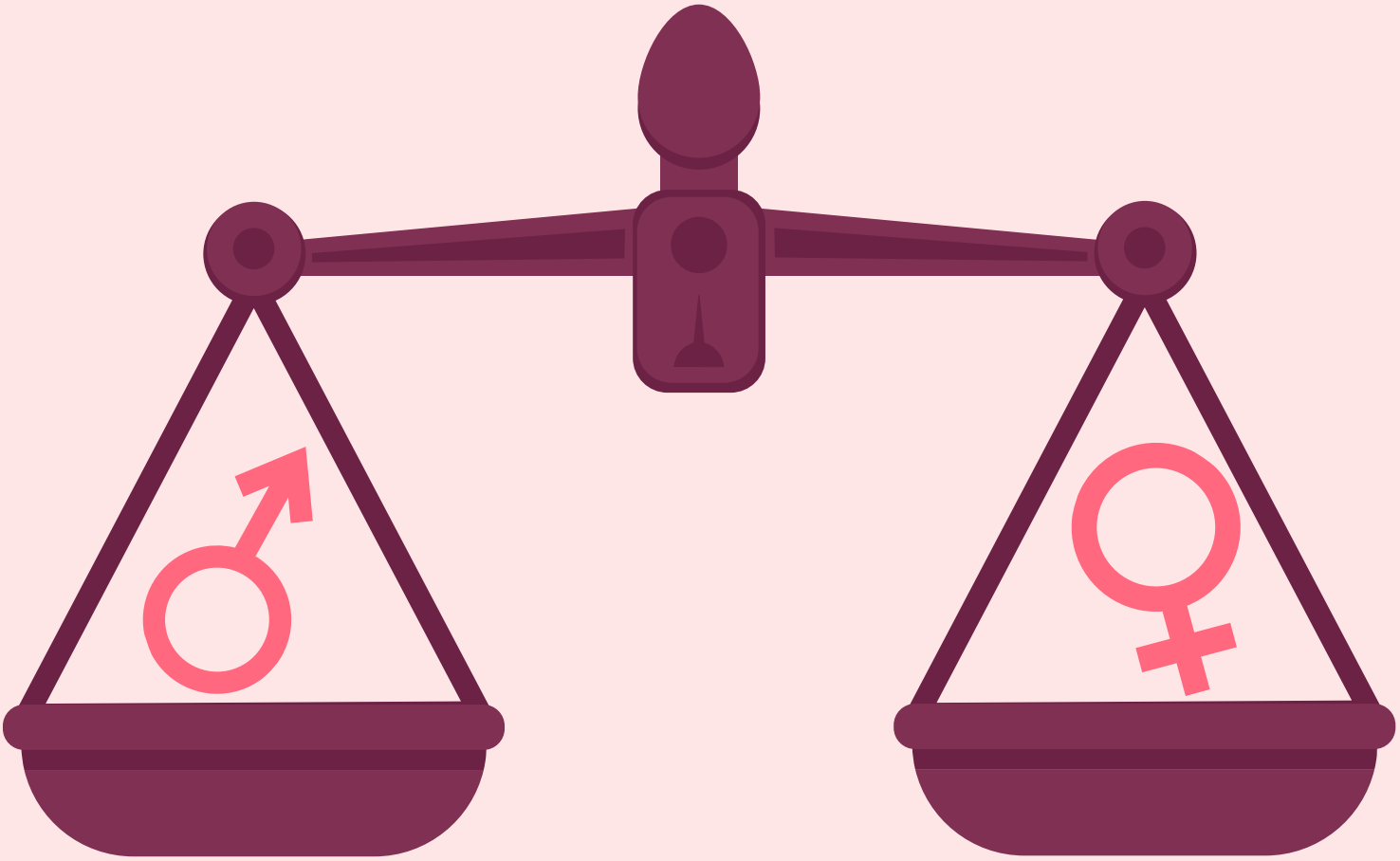
Partner: **FAIDA Community Development Initiative**

In Garko community, the Barema culture is the norm. This is a practice that involves the hiring of girls to work as laborers on distant farmlands for daily stipends. Apart from the disruption in their education, this practice fuels sexual violence. Within a 12-month period, five rape cases that affected girls working on the farmlands were reported. This is coupled with meagre stipends of less than a dollar daily, and sometimes, they do not get paid at all. In addition to the Barema culture, girl child hawking was also rampant in the community which has made some girls susceptible to rape.

With the introduction of SLOC-VAWG project to the community, FAIDA Community Development Initiative sensitized and trained the women, community leaders and community response team on the various forms of GBV, its impact, and the rights of the girl child to education. In addition to other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) identified, Barema and Hawking were amplified by the adults in the community as forms of GBV that should be controlled.

Garko community members came up with byelaws that girls should neither be sent on Barema nor allowed to hawk during school hours or late evenings. If the girl child must go on Barema, it must be after school hours, and she must be accompanied by one or two elders in the community to ensure their safety until they return. The girls are also not allowed to go for hawking in risky places and entering homes and places where they could be vulnerable and taken advantage of. These are documented and publicized by the community leaders. Parents found breaking the law were brought to the village community head for sanction and banned from any decision making in the community which is more effective for them as against the fine of two dollars they were made to pay. In addition, community vigilantes have also been engaged to watch out for the safety of girls and serve as watchdogs for those who may break the law.

To meet the economic needs of families, the girls and their mothers were trained on packaging of local foods to enable them to have a source of livelihood that will replace the Barema custom.



ECONOMIC JUSTICE TO COMBAT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Partner: **FAIDA Community Development Initiative**

Customarily, women in Lawanti community are financially dependent on their husbands who is seen as the provider for the household. This, however, made the women susceptible to socio-economic and physical violence.

Part of the SLOC-VAWG project intervention in the community is the introduction of the women peer education group. Learnings from the peer education sessions exposed the women to the importance of financial independence and control over resources. This strengthened their resolve to begin a village savings and loans scheme within their peer group. As a result, group members have been able to save and access interest free loans as startup capital for their businesses, while the community women not part of the peer education group can access the loans but with interest. These women now sell food stuff to the community members and have gotten some form of livelihood.

Women in Garko community also had the same challenge so much that women would drop the account number of their husbands or brothers for payment of transportation stipends during project activities. The SLOC-VAWG project, for the first time, made them realize the need for financial independence. A total of 250 women in that community commenced bank accounts opening process and 33 women now run their businesses as a result of the exposure gained from the project.

As a result of this intervention, 243 women now have personal bank accounts (132 women have accounts with united bank of Africa UBA and 111 women opened accounts with Heritage bank). This caught the attention of the community leaders especially with more women making efforts to open bank accounts. To show his support, the community head engaged the services of a staff of United Bank of Africa (UBA) and Heritage Bank to provide technical support for community women interested in having bank accounts.

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