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GIRL LED RESEARCH AND ACTION PROJECT

– A compendium of Impact Stories in Nigeria



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This compendium of impact stories is a testament to the courage, resilience, and leadership of girls who dared to question the norms that shaped their lives and chose to imagine a different future.

We extend our profound gratitude to the girls who participated in the Girl-Led Research and Action Project. Your honesty, bravery, and willingness to speak up transformed not only your own lives, but also your families, schools, and communities. These stories exist because you believe your voices mattered and proved that they do.

We sincerely appreciate the community members, parents, traditional and religious leaders who opened their doors, listened, and engaged in meaningful dialogue. Your openness to reflection and change created an enabling environment that allowed girls to lead and thrive.

Our appreciation also goes to the Girl-Led Advocates and mentors, whose dedication, patience, and belief in peer-led change ensured that girls were supported to research, organise, and act with confidence and clarity.

We acknowledge the invaluable partnership of BabaAzimi Foundation and Teenage Network Initiative for their commitment to amplifying girls' voices and embedding girl-led approaches into their organisational work.

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Above all, we express our deepest gratitude to ActionAid UK and the donors of the Girl-Led Research and Action Project, for its funding and technical support and belief in the leadership of girls. Your investment in girl-led research and action has made it possible for girls to move from the margins to the centre of decision-making, proving that

sustainable change is achieved when those most affected are empowered to lead.

Finally, we thank ActionAid Nigeria staff on this project, starting from the Business Development Team; Nkechi Ilochi-Kanny and Adedeji Ademefun for their support in ensuring donor requirements were met. We appreciate the Deputy Country Director/Director of Programme and Policy for taking the driver seat and steering this project to success. For the foot soldiers, who ensured continued success and engagement; Niri Goyit, Amina Aliyu Adamu, Anastasia Duru, Se-ember Oteyi, Paul Samuel, Ebelechukwu ChuxOnyekwere, Rolake Ogunfeitimi, Shadrack Ishaya, and Mubarak Haruna we thank you for your unwavering commitment to feminist leadership, youth-led movements, and the belief that girls are not beneficiaries of change, but drivers of it.

This compendium stands as evidence that when girls are trusted with leadership, communities listen and systems begin to shift.

Andrew Mamedu

Country Director, ActionAid Nigeria.



INTRODUCTION:

When Girls Take the Lead

For generations, conversations about girls' rights have often been led for them, not by them. But in parts of Jigawa and beyond, that story is changing. Through the Girl-Led Research and Action Project, young girls are no longer waiting for permission to speak they are standing up, organizing, and leading the charge for change in their schools, homes, and communities.

Funded and supported under ActionAid Nigeria's girl-led initiative, the project gave girls and boys the tools to research their realities, understand the root causes of inequality, and design solutions that work for them. Using participatory approaches such as the Body Map, Power Analysis, Community Mapping, and Intergenerational Dialogue Tools, girls were trained not just to identify problems, but to act on them tackling issues like early marriage, gender roles, period poverty, and unequal access to education.

The project became a mirror one that helped communities see what had long been hidden: the strength, intelligence, and leadership potential of their daughters. Parents began to listen differently; brothers learned to share responsibilities; and policymakers, once distant, began to open their doors to young advocates with bold ideas.

These stories capture that transformation. They are not just accounts of training and activities they are

stories of courage, discovery, and change. From Aisha, who found her voice and transformed family communication into Kudai, to Nazifi, a young boy who now champions equality, and Fatima, who discovered the power within her to lead each narrative reflects a personal revolution that rippled outward into communities and institutions.

Together, these stories remind us that when girls lead, change doesn't just happen, it multiplies.

Suwaiba Muhammad Dankabo

Deputy Country/Director of Programmes
ActionAid Nigeria



ACTIONAID NIGERIA:

Who we are

ActionAid Nigeria is an affiliate member of the ActionAid International Federation which is registered as a non-profit in the Netherlands with footprint in over 70 countries across the world. Federation members maintain strong relationships of interdependence and mutual accountability, ensuring a strong balance between self-rule and shared rule.

We collaborate with state and non-state actors (government, CSOs, movements, networks, allies, and other relevant stakeholders) and this collaboration works towards shifting power to the people, promoting equality, and redistributing wealth and power through a multidimensional, human-rights-based approach to development. We mobilise active agencies of people to confront unequal power relations that exclude them or others from decision-making and limit their access to and control over resources and opportunities.



VISION

A just, equitable and sustainable world in which every person enjoys the right to a life of dignity, freedom from poverty and all forms of oppression



MISSION

To achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication by working with people living in poverty and exclusion, their communities, people's organisations, activists, social movements and supporters.

VALUES



Humility



Independence



Integrity



Equity and Justice



Courage of conviction



Mutual Respect



Solidarity with the poor

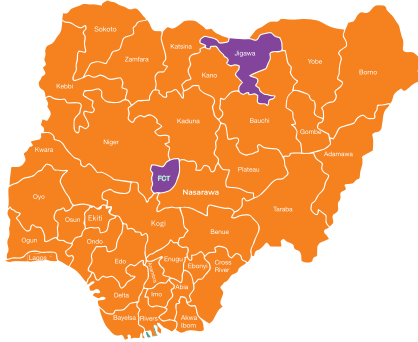


Climate Consciousness

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Girl-Led Research and Action in Nigeria

The Girl-Led Research and Action (GLRA) Project in Nigeria was built on a simple but transformative belief: that adolescent girls are experts in their own lives and must be at the centre of the solutions to the challenges they face. Rooted in ActionAid’s feminist, decolonial, and participatory action research approach, the project sought to shift power away from extractive, adult-led models of knowledge production and place it firmly in the hands of girls.



Implemented in Jigawa State and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), the project engaged adolescent girls aged 12 to 19 as researchers, analysts, advocates, and change-makers within their own communities. Working alongside ActionAid Nigeria and local partners BabaAzimi Foundation in Jigawa and Teenage Network in Abuja girls led the entire process: designing research questions, selecting participatory tools, collecting and analysing data, and translating evidence into community and policy-level action.

The project was developed against a backdrop of deep structural inequalities affecting girls in Nigeria. In many parts of northern Nigeria, fewer than half of girls attend

school, and nearly one in two is married before the age of 18. Harmful gender norms continue to prioritise boys’ education, restrict girls’ mobility, and silence their voices within households and public spaces. These challenges are further compounded by poverty, heavy unpaid care responsibilities, limited access to sexual and reproductive health information, and weak enforcement of protective laws such as the Child Rights Act and the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act. Despite existing policies, the gap between legislation and girls lived realities remains wide.

Within this context, the GLRA project recognised lived experience as legitimate knowledge. Rather than positioning girls as beneficiaries or victims, the project affirmed them as political actors with agency, insight, and collective power. Using participatory tools such as body mapping, daily activity charts, community mapping, storytelling, power analysis, and intergenerational dialogue, girls explored issues shaping their everyday lives including early marriage, access to education, menstrual health, gender-based violence, inheritance rights, unpaid care work, and perceptions of girls’ worth.

Central to the project was a power framework that strengthened girls’ power within, power with, and power to. As the research progressed, girls reported increased confidence, stronger leadership skills, and deeper solidarity with peers and allies. They began challenging long-held beliefs that normalised inequality and questioning the silence surrounding girls’ issues. In Jigawa, this led to conversations within families about girls’ education and shared household responsibilities. In the FCT, girls spearheaded dialogues on menstrual health and inheritance rights, engaging parents, peers, community

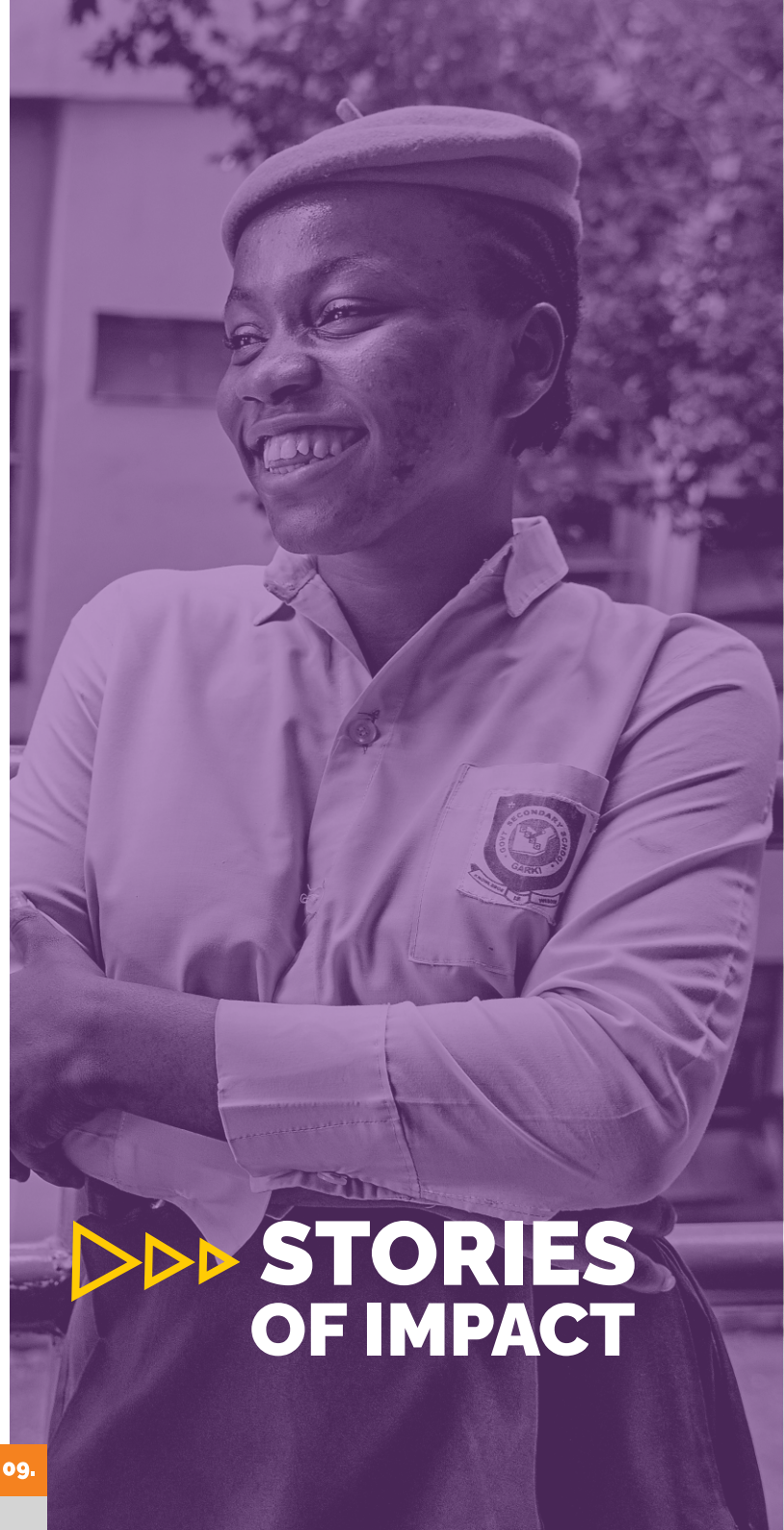
leaders, and government officials.

Importantly, research intentionally flowed into action. Equipped with evidence they generated themselves; girls moved into advocacy engaging traditional leaders, school authorities, community stakeholders, and policymakers. Their recommendations addressed both immediate needs, such as access to menstrual hygiene materials and safe learning environments, and systemic change, including girls' participation in decision-making and equitable resource allocation. In several communities, this advocacy resulted in concrete commitments, including increased attention to girls' needs in local planning processes and discussions around policy and budget inclusion.

Beyond tangible outcomes, the Girl-Led Research and Action Project demonstrated what becomes possible when girls are trusted to lead. It disrupted dominant narratives that portray girls as passive or in need of rescue, replacing them with stories of courage, analysis, and collective action. The project affirmed that sustainable social change is not only about laws and policies, but about transforming relationships, norms, and power.

As reflected in this compendium, the Girl-Led Research and Action Project did more than generate data, it nurtured a generation of girls who understand their rights, believe in their voices, and are actively shaping the futures of their communities. Their journeys stand as powerful evidence that when power shifts to girls, change becomes not just possible, but inevitable.

Niri Goyit
Women's Rights Specialist



STORIES OF IMPACT

FROM SILENCE TO STRENGTH:

Aisha's Journey of Voice and Change

Eighteen-year-old Aisha Yisha from Kudai community was once a shy girl who barely spoke to her parents. For years, her family's way of communication was through a small chalkboard a symbol of silence and distance. Whenever Aisha had something to say, she wrote it down. Words spoken directly were rare, especially between her and her father.

Like many girls in her community, Aisha faced a world shaped by early marriage, period poverty, unequal chores, and rigid gender roles. School attendance was irregular, and confidence among girls was low. But everything began to change the day Aisha attended a community sensitization session organized under the Girl-Led Research and Action Project. She watched two young girl advocates speak boldly about the challenges girls face, their passion sparked something deep within her. Determined to be part of that change, Aisha joined an art competition and won. That moment marked the beginning of her journey as a Girl Advocate.

Through training and mentorship, Aisha learned about intergenerational communication and how to bridge the gap between parents and children. Armed with this knowledge, she took a bold step: she walked up to her father and spoke, breaking a 20-year-old silence in her family. The board that once carried written words of fear and distance became a tool for learning, where Aisha and her siblings now teach and learn from one another.

Her new confidence spread through her home. Using tools from training on gender roles, Aisha opened her mother's

eyes to how much unpaid care work girls carry. Today, her brothers share household chores equally. With more time to herself, Aisha now reads, learns life skills, and dreams bigger than ever.

Her mother, once skeptical, now marvels at her transformation:

”

Aisha used to be so shy,” she said. “Now she speaks with confidence and helps others understand. Our family communicates better, and even the boys now do chores.

“

Aisha's story is a testament to what happens when girls are empowered to speak. Once silent, she now stands before her community, leading conversations on girls' rights and inspiring others to find their voice.

Her message to girls everywhere is simple but powerful:

”

Never be silent about your issues. Speak up. Be open. Be confident.

“



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FRANCISCA'S JOURNEY TO CONFIDENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Seventeen-year-old Chukwuma Francisca lives with her mother in Kagini, a community in Abuja's Federal Capital Territory. She is the only girl child of a single parent, and her mother, who has raised her on her own, often considers her as the joy of her world. Francisca attends Government Secondary School, Kagini, where she serves as the head girl. In that role, she helps maintain discipline, enforces school rules, and works to create a friendly environment where students can learn comfortably. Her teachers and classmates see her as confident, smart, and dependable, these are qualities that she describes that has grown in her and that she has cultivated over time. Francisca takes pride in setting a good example for others. She loves learning and says that every day at school brings something new to discover, which keeps her motivated and eager to grow.

Growing up in Kagini, Francisca faced challenges that many girls in her community also experienced. Like many girls in her community, she has faced barriers that make it hard to stay in school and focus on her education. One of the biggest challenges is menstrual hygiene. Many girls, including Francisca, have had to miss classes during their periods because they could not afford sanitary pads or did not know how to manage the pain that comes with menstruation. She remembers the discomfort and embarrassment that came with it, and how she and some of her schoolmates stayed home for days each month because of the pain. Beyond that, Francisca has also seen how traditional beliefs in her community often hold girls back. In her own family, she watched her mother lose her share of inheritance simply because she is a woman, a reality that left a lasting impression on her and made her question the fairness of such practices. For a long time, Francisca didn't feel confident enough to talk about these issues. She often stayed quiet, unsure if her voice would matter, however, as she grew older, the unfairness she saw around her began to push her to think differently, planting the first seeds of courage that would later grow through the opportunities she found.

Francisca first discovered the Girl-Led Research Project when she overheard some of her classmates discussing about it in school. Curious, she asked them what it was about and was told that the organization was looking for girls who could speak up and work with them. They directed her to the teacher in charge, Ms Loveline, and when she met with her, she was told there was a chance to join the group. With her mother's permission, Francisca became part of the project and fully engaged in the training. She learned to identify challenges affecting girls, including menstrual hygiene and period poverty, and gained practical skills in managing menstrual pain and making reusable sanitary pads. She also explored sensitive issues like inheritance sharing, understanding how traditional rules often favored males over females. As part of the project, she led step-down trainings for over 50 girls, taught them how to make reusable pads, and helped organize a community rally on World Menstrual Hygiene Day to raise awareness about menstrual health. These experiences strengthened her confidence, teaching her not only to speak up about problems but also to lead initiatives that brought real solutions, inspiring other girls to believe in their own voices.

Today, Francisca's story is one of growth and transformation. Through the Girl-Led Research Project, she has become more confident, outspoken, and passionate about creating change. She no longer associates menstruation with shame and now speaks freely about it with her classmates, teachers, and even community members. She confidently trains other girls on how to make reusable sanitary pads and shares knowledge about menstrual health and hygiene. Her courage has made her a role model for many girls in Kagini, showing them that their voices matter. Her mother has also expressed how proud she is of the young woman Francisca has become, she is more responsible and is a true leader both at home and at school. For Francisca, the Girl-Led Research Project did more than teach her skills; it gave her a voice, a sense of purpose, and the belief that she can inspire change in her community.





BREAKING BARRIERS:

How Nazifi Became a Champion for Change

At just 16, Nazifi from stands out, not just for his skill in electronics repair, but for his empathy and courage to challenge harmful gender norms. Born into a large family of fifteen children, Nazifi grew up in a culture where boys were valued more than girls. In his words,

”

In my community, boys are always prioritized. Girls are seen as less.

“

Even with his interest in electronics, Nazifi faced challenges at home. His older brother discouraged him from pursuing his passion, insisting he focused only on school. Dependent on his brother, Nazifi obeyed reluctantly until the day he attended a Girl-Led Research and Action Project sensitization session in July 2025.

During the training, Nazifi learned about family relationships through the intergenerational tool, and something changed within him. He realized he had the right to express his dreams respectfully and that communication could transform relationships. Armed with this confidence, he approached his brother again. This time, he spoke from a place of understanding and purpose.

His persistence paid off. His brother not only agreed but gave him ₦20,000 to start a small kiosk for electronic

repairs. From that humble beginning, Nazifi's life took a new turn. After school each day, he repaired appliances, earning about ₦5,000 weekly, enough to buy food items for his family. Soon, his savings allowed him to buy cows for grooming and open a game shop, expanding his small business.

But Nazifi's transformation didn't stop at economic empowerment. The training also reshaped his mindset about gender roles and equality. He began helping with house chores, a duty he once believed belonged only to his sisters. Now, he takes pride in supporting them and encourages other boys to do the same.

Inspired by his example, another boy from Kudai, Rabi, also changed his attitude. Once known for mocking and fighting girls, Rabi now calls himself a He-for-She advocate, teaching other boys to respect and protect girls.

“I now understand that girls deserve respect and equality. I support them in house chores and speak up against violence,” said Rabi.

Through the Girl-Led Research and Action Project, boys like Nazifi and Rabi are reshaping what it means to be young men in their community and turning empathy into action and proving that real change begins with understanding.

HOW FAVOUR'S CONFIDENCE HELPED HER MOTHER FIND HER VOICE

In Pigba Sama, a community in the Federal Capital Territory, lives Madam Tuna, a middle-aged tailor and mother of bright and promising Favour Usman. She runs a small sewing business just in the corner of the and is well known among her neighbours for her skill and reliability. She spends most days behind her sewing machine, stitching clothes for families in the community and supporting her household through her work. Favour, her daughter, is one of the adolescent girls participating in ActionAid Nigeria's Girl-Led Research Project, implemented in the community by Teenage Network. Through her daughter's active involvement, Madam Tuna has become familiar with the project's partners and activities, and she now plays an indirect role in the Girl-Led Research work through her close association with her daughter.

A few years ago, Madam Tuna faced a painful experience that exposed the challenges women in her community often encounter. After her father's death, her family gathered to share his property, however, because she was a woman, she was not invited into the conversation. Several plots of land were divided among her brothers, while she was given only a few of her father's clothes. When she questioned the decision, her brothers told her she did not need a share of the land because she was married and would benefit from her husband's property. However, that was not her reality; according to their traditions, a man's property belongs to him, and wives have little or no legal or traditional claim to it.

This experience left her feeling powerless and excluded, and Favour, her daughter, saw how deeply it affected her. Witnessing her mother's silence and frustration made Favour more determined to use what she was learning from the Girl-Led Research Project to challenge such injustices. Through the project, Favour conducted research on issues affecting girls in her community, such as unequal inheritance sharing

and poor menstrual hygiene. She also learned about advocacy and how to use the findings from her research to raise awareness and push for change. Equipped with these skills, Favour was able to analyse her mother's situation and guide her on how to speak up for her rights. The research project not only gave her the knowledge and confidence to advocate for other girls, but it also created a platform where she could support her mother in addressing the injustice she faced, helping her realise that her voice mattered and that she had the right to demand fairness.

The Girl-Led Research Project created opportunities for Favour and her mother to speak up and engage directly with community decision-makers. One of the key platforms was an intergenerational dialogue that brought together girls, women, and community leaders, including royal fathers and traditional chiefs within the community. This activity allowed participants to discuss how unequal inheritance sharing is and other challenges affected them personally and collectively. For Madam Tuna, this was the first time she had ever spoken about her experience publicly. Before then, she believed women were not supposed to question family matters or speak directly to traditional leaders. However, with her daughter's encouragement and the indulgence of the community leaders, she gathered the courage to share her story, speaking openly about how she had been excluded from her father's inheritance simply because she was a woman. Although the kings and chiefs typically preferred not to involve themselves in family matters, they listened attentively, acknowledging her concerns and expressing support for fairness. Their words of encouragement gave Madam Tuna the confidence she needed to address the issue with her brothers, demonstrating how public dialogue and advocacy can empower women to claim their rights and challenge long-standing traditions.



After the dialogue, Madam Tuna summoned her family, including her brothers, to address the issue directly. Drawing on the confidence and knowledge she had gained through her daughter's encouragement and the experience at the intergenerational dialogue; she spoke openly about how she had been excluded from her father's inheritance simply because she was a woman.

Her courage in confronting them led to a revisitation of their earlier decision, and they agreed to give her a room in one of her late father's houses. However, because she lives with her husband, she decided to rent the room out for ₦150,000 per year. She uses this income to support her daughter's education, covering tuition and living expenses, which has made it possible for Favour to attend university. For Madam Tuna, the experience was more than a financial victory. It transformed how she viewed her rights and her voice, showing her that she could stand up for herself and challenge long-standing unfair traditions.

”

Before, I didn't think women could talk about such things,” she said. “Now I know we can.

“

Her story illustrates how advocacy training doesn't only empower girls, it can ripple through families and communities, creating real change for women who once felt they had no voice.

CHANGING MINDS, CHANGING FUTURES:

The Girls of Kudai Rewrite Their Story

In Kudai community, early marriage was once seen as the only path to honor. Girls as young as 14 were told that getting married before finishing school would protect them from “waywardness.” By the time a girl turned 18 and unmarried, she and her parents became targets of ridicule. Education, for many, was not a right, it was merely a way to pass time before marriage.

But that narrative began to shift in July 2025, when girls in Kudai participated in the Girl-Led Research and Action Project training. Through powerful participatory tools like the Body Map, Community Mapping, Intergenerational Relationships, Dismantling Power, and Activity Chart, the girls learned to see themselves and their rights differently.

For the first time, they understood the health and

emotional consequences of early marriage, including obstetric fistula (VVF) and maternal death. They realized that their lives could be more than domestic roles they could dream, learn, and lead.

Armed with new knowledge, confidence, and a sense of sisterhood, the girls began speaking up to their parents. The whispers of fear turned into conversations of hope. No longer silent, they began to envision new futures for themselves. Fatima now dreams of becoming a journalist, Rashida aspires to be a lawyer, while Aisha Ishaku hopes to own a thriving business someday.

Idatu and Aisha Sani see themselves saving lives as nurses, Nafisat wants to shape the economy as an accountant, and Aisha Adamu envisions a future in medicine.



Even Aisha Aliyu, who once thought marriage was her only path, now speaks boldly about becoming a successful businesswoman. For these girls, the project was more than a training, it was a rebirth of possibility.

They also learned to identify the barriers holding them back: lack of money and resources, early marriage, gender discrimination, and period poverty. One painful reality stood out menstrual pads cost between ₦650–₦700 per pack, a luxury many girls couldn't afford. Forced to use torn clothes, some missed school entirely during their periods.

Through the Activity Chart tool, they discovered that girls in Kudai did nearly all household chores, leaving no time to rest or learn new skills. After community sensitization led

by the Girl-Led Advocates, change began to ripple. Parents and boys started sharing chores now, 30% of boys support girls in domestic work.

With a few hours of freedom reclaimed each day, girls began learning vocational skills like baking, hairdressing, and bead making, gaining financial independence and self-worth. The transformation didn't end there. The girls have become advocates in their own right, extending the knowledge gained from the project to friends, siblings, and family members. Today, Kudai's girls are not waiting to be rescued. They are redefining womanhood on their own terms confident, educated, and empowered.



HOW GIRLS IN PIGBA SAMA ARE SHAPING THEIR COMMUNITY

In Pigba Sama, a community in the Federal Capital Territory, many girls face challenges that affect their daily lives, especially from accessing inheritance to managing menstrual health. Among those determined to make a difference are Favour Usman, a 20-year-old student of Nasarawa state University, and Precious Josiah, an 18-year-old who has recently finished secondary school and is awaiting university admission. Both girls were trained as researchers through ActionAid Nigeria's Girl-Led Research Project, which equips young girls to investigate the issues they and their peers face, and to advocate for practical solutions. Through the project, Favour and Precious have taken on the responsibility of not only gathering information from girls, women, boys, and community leaders but also creating strategies that address education barriers, unequal inheritance sharing, menstrual hygiene, and other challenges affecting girls in Pigba Sama.

This community is led by Chief Zakumi James, whose decisions shape many aspects of community life. Before the Girl-Led Research (GLR) Project was introduced in the community, girls faced numerous challenges such as limited access to education, poor menstrual hygiene management, and a lack of platforms to gather and express their concerns. One of the major issues identified during this project was the unequal sharing of inheritance. Traditionally, girls and women were excluded from inheriting property or family resources because of their gender, limiting their economic independence and access to education. Studies within the community also revealed that women were significantly less wealthy than men.

When the GLR Project kickstarted in the community, girls like Favour and Precious were trained as researchers. They

carried out research in the community, engaging girls, women, boys, parents, and community leaders to document these challenges, and organised activities that could help in bridging the gaps that they found. One of the most significant activities was the intergenerational dialogue, where girls, their allies, and community leaders sat together to discuss sensitive issues like inheritance sharing and girls' rights. Initially, there were tensions, the girls faced resistance from some community elders and even encountered challenges when they tried to hold meetings at the chief's palace due to security concerns and skepticism about their intentions. However, over time, the dialogue helped the chief and other leaders understand the impact of excluding girls from inheritance and the importance of supporting girls' education and empowerment. This experience changed Chief Zakumi James's perspective, making him more supportive of equitable inheritance and more willing to listen to and advocate for girls in the community.

Chief Zakumi James's outlook to the issue of girls has changed significantly since the introduction of the Girl-Led Research (GLR) Project. After witnessing how confidently the girls, including Favour and Precious, spoke up during community dialogues, he became more aware of the realities girls face and more open to conversations about their rights. He expressed admiration for their courage and now actively advocates for the education of all girls in the Pigba Sama community. For him, seeing girls lead discussions, challenge cultural barriers, and propose practical solutions to issues like menstrual hygiene and inheritance was eye-opening. It made him realize that empowering girls benefits not only them but also the community at large.



Initially, the chief considered inheritance sharing to be a family matter that did not require his intervention unless a woman brought a complaint before him. According to him, he could only act when such cases were formally reported, but many women, out of fear or cultural restraint, rarely spoke up. In his view, since no one had complained, there was no problem. However, through sustained engagement and dialogue with the GLR team, he came to understand that silence does not mean the absence of injustice.

Today, Chief James has made his palace a safe space for women and girls in the community. He has assured them that any inheritance-related and non-inheritance related complaints brought before him will be treated seriously and referred to his council of chiefs for resolution. He now believes that while he would not advocate for an equal 50-50 inheritance split between men and women, because he strongly believes that women also benefit from their husbands' inheritance after marriage, they must still be included in inheritance discussions and given a fair, meaningful share.

Chief James now uses his influence to encourage other traditional rulers to create space for women's voices in community matters. He advises fellow traditional leaders to listen to girls in their communities, give them space to speak, and support initiatives that empower them. This transformation demonstrates the wider impact of the GLR Project in Pigba Sama, one that has built the confidence of girls like Favour and Precious and inspired other traditional leaders to reconsider traditional practices, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive community.



TURNING AWAY FROM THE ALTAR:

Aisha's Bold Stand Against Early Marriage

The sound of celebration once filled Aisha Aliyu's home not because she had passed an exam or achieved something new, but because her family had found her a husband. For them, this was good news. For Aisha, it was simply expected.

At sixteen, she was set to marry her cousin, just as many girls before her had done. In her family, early marriage was not a question; it was tradition. Her mother, one of her father's three wives, had married young too, and so did her sisters and cousins. Schooling for girls ended where womanhood and marriage began.

But Aisha's quiet world began to shift one humid afternoon when a group of girls visited her community. They were part of the Girl-Led Research and Action Project, and unlike anyone Aisha had ever met, they spoke boldly about issues that were often whispered about — education, early marriage, health, and girls' rights. They talked about how young girls suffered from health complications like obstetric fistula (VVF) and how marriage too early could rob them of the chance to discover who they were meant to be.

Aisha listened closely, amazed not only by what they said but by who was saying it. "They were girls like me," she recalled, "but they spoke with so much confidence. They knew their rights. They understood their value. I wanted that kind of courage."

That evening, Aisha could not stop thinking about the words she had heard. For the first time, she questioned

what had always seemed normal. Why should marriage come before her own dreams? Why couldn't she continue her education?

Gathering her courage, she approached her parents to talk a moment that felt heavier than any exam she had ever faced. She explained what she had learned, the dangers of early marriage, and her desire to return to school. Her parents listened, first in disbelief, then with growing understanding. Days later, the unimaginable happened they called off the marriage.

Aisha is now back in school, determined to become a businesswoman and a mentor to other girls in her community. Inspired by the Girl-Led Advocates who changed her life, she now joins them in encouraging other girls to speak out, dream bigger, and claim their future.

”

I learned that silence keeps us where we are," she said. "But when we speak, change begins.

“

Aisha's story is no longer about a girl preparing for marriage it's about a young woman preparing for a lifetime of purpose.

JESSICA'S JOURNEY TO EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE GIRL-LED RESEARCH PROJECT

Jessica Nufi, a 14-year-old student in SS2 at Government Secondary School in Garki Area 10, Abuja never expected to be part of a programme that would change how she sees herself and the world around her.

Jessica first heard about the Girl-Led Research (GLR) Project in May 2025, when the senior mistress of her school called her to the administrative office. When she got in, the senior mistress handed her a consent form and explained that she should take it home for her parents to read and sign. Out of curiosity, Jessica read the form herself before giving it to her parents and discovered that it was about girls and how they could be empowered to speak up and take action on issues that affect them. Excited by what she read, she took the form to her father. He read through it, saw value in the initiative, and signed immediately, believing it would be a great opportunity for his daughter to learn and explore beyond the classroom. That marked the beginning of a journey that would later have a lasting impact on Jessica's confidence, mindset, and relationships with others.

On the first day of the Girl-Led Research Project, Jessica was unsure what to expect. "I thought it was going to be boring," she recalled, noticing that there were students from several schools and many 'adults' around. The participants gathered at ActionAid Nigeria's office, where they were introduced to the programme and trained on various topics. Despite her initial hesitation, Jessica quickly found the sessions engaging. The session covered important issues affecting girls, including menstrual hygiene, menstrual poverty, access to clean toilets in schools, and inheritance rights, giving participants the chance to discuss challenges they often face in their homes and communities. As the programme progressed, Jessica

became more involved, learning new skills and gaining a deeper understanding of the barriers many girls experience.

After the first day of the programme, Jessica and other researchers from her school became more engaged in the Girl-Led Research Project.



One of the most impactful activities for her was learning how to make reusable sanitary pads. She not only

learned to make her own but also shared the knowledge with other girls at her school and beyond. “Some of my friends even taught their younger sisters how to make it,” she said. The programme also gave her practical advice on managing menstrual health, including regular bathing, proper pad use, and tracking her menstrual cycle.

Beyond practical skills, the project significantly boosted Jessica's social skills and confidence. Before the programme, some peers saw her as unapproachable and proud; however, through the training, she has learned the importance of supporting and standing up for other girls. She also became very confident in discussing menstrual health and hygiene openly, even with classmates who had previously avoided such conversations.

Jessica also learned the importance of speaking up for herself. Recently, she approached her school principal to raise a concern about the hairstyle regulations at her school.

Students were only allowed to wear cornrows, and Jessica felt this was restrictive, especially since girls would spend several years in school under this rule. She also researched the issue and discovered that constantly wearing cornrows without proper care could lead to hair loss, this made her do more research and prepare a two-page document outlining her findings, she, accompanied by a classmate, presented her concerns to the principal. While he explained that the policy had been long-standing and partly decided by parents in earlier meetings, Jessica felt empowered that her voice was heard and taken seriously. The principal even called in the school counsellor to further explain the matter and ensure Jessica understood the reasoning behind the policy. This experience reinforced

her belief in the value of speaking up and advocating for herself and others.

Reflecting on her journey through the Girl-Led Research Project, Jessica's experience during this project has had a profound impact on her confidence, mindset, and relationships with others. She has learned that every girl, regardless of her background, has the right to speak up, pursue her dreams, and support other girls in their challenges. The programme taught her that menstrual health and hygiene are normal and important topics to discuss openly, removing the shame and embarrassment she once felt.

Jessica has also realized that girls face many barriers, from societal expectations to limited access to resources, and that empowering each other can make a real difference. Through the project, she has become more empathetic, approachable, and willing to mentor and guide her peers. Whether teaching other girls to make reusable sanitary pads, helping classmates understand menstrual hygiene, or advocating for change in her school, Jessica has embraced the role of a confident young leader.

She also has a message for girls everywhere; “believe in yourself, trust your dreams, and never let anyone stop you. You are as much entitled as your brothers. Only those who believe in their dreams can achieve it. The sky is just your starting point. That moon, that star up there, you can reach it one day. Your family's story is not your story. You have your own story to create. So, live it, believe in it, and build it.” For Jessica, the Girl-Led Research Project has not only equipped her with practical skills but has also given her the courage, confidence, and perspective to step into her own power and inspire change in her community.

RISING VOICES:

How School girls in Jigawa Are Leading Their Own Change

For years, silence defined the lives of many schoolgirls in Jigawa. They followed rules, did as they were told, and rarely questioned why boys seemed to have more freedom and more say. Fatima Abubakar, a 15-year-old student in Junior Secondary School 3, was one of them. Shy and reserved, she often chose the comfort of obedience over the fear of standing out.

Everything began to shift when Fatima joined a session under the Girl-Led Research and Action Project. Watching her peers speak about girls' rights and education stirred something within her a spark of courage she didn't know she had.

"Being part of the girl advocates changed me," Fatima said. "I can now speak up and say no when I need to. I have learned that my voice matters."

That spark grew brighter. Fatima became one of the voices on a local radio programme where she and other girls confidently discussed issues affecting them from menstrual hygiene to school attendance and leadership. The girl who once hid behind her friends now speaks at public gatherings, even addressing ministries in Jigawa State.

Her classmate Hafsat, 14 years old and passionate about becoming a lawyer, found her own transformation through the project's mentorship sessions. Initially timid and unsure, Hafsat was introduced to the Power Within tool, which helped her discover her inner strength and confidence.

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Before, I was scared of speaking," she admitted. "But I realized that the power to change things was already inside me.

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Now, Hafsat serves as the secretary of the girls' group, organizing activities and leading discussions on girls' rights. She even wrote a poem about the project and has

started drafting her first book a dream she once thought impossible.

Together with her peers, Hafsat led advocacy visits that resulted in a ₦120,000 donation from the Commissioner of Education to support other girls with dignity kits. The girls raised an additional ₦70,000 themselves, proving that youth-led change can be powerful and practical.

Muhibbat, a Senior Secondary 2 student, had a different awakening. "I didn't know girls had problems," she confessed. "People don't talk about it." Through the project, she began reflecting on her experiences and realized how much girls were excluded from decisions that affected them. She also saw how her male classmates' perceptions were shifting boys were beginning to share chores, listen respectfully, and treat girls as equals.

One of those boys, Ibrahim, shared how the project changed him too. "Before, I talked to girls anyhow," he said. "Now I respect them and help with chores at home. Girls' education is important it should be prioritized."

Teachers noticed the difference. The Vice Principal described how girls and boys now work together without tension, while the Principal, Mr. Godswill Uche, praised the newfound confidence among girls. "They no longer shy away from challenges," he said. "When given the opportunity, they show they can make a difference."

From quiet classrooms to public radio stations, the Girl-Led Research and Action Project has transformed ordinary students into leaders. Fatima, Hafsat, Muhibbat, and Ibrahim represent a new generation one that believes equality begins not in policy, but in everyday courage.

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We have learned that change starts from within," Hafsat said. "Once we find our voice, the world begins to listen.

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WHEN GIRLS LEAD:

The Ripple Effect of Advocacy in Jigawa

When the Girl-Led Research and Action Project began in Jigawa, many doubted that girls could lead advocacy—let alone hold the attention of policymakers. Even Hajiya Aisha, Executive Director of the BabaAzimi Foundation, was unsure what to expect. In her years of community development work, she had seen countless projects come and go, but none quite like this.

“At first,” she admitted, “I wasn’t sure the girls would be able to implement the project. I thought they might be too young to understand the issues or speak up in public.”

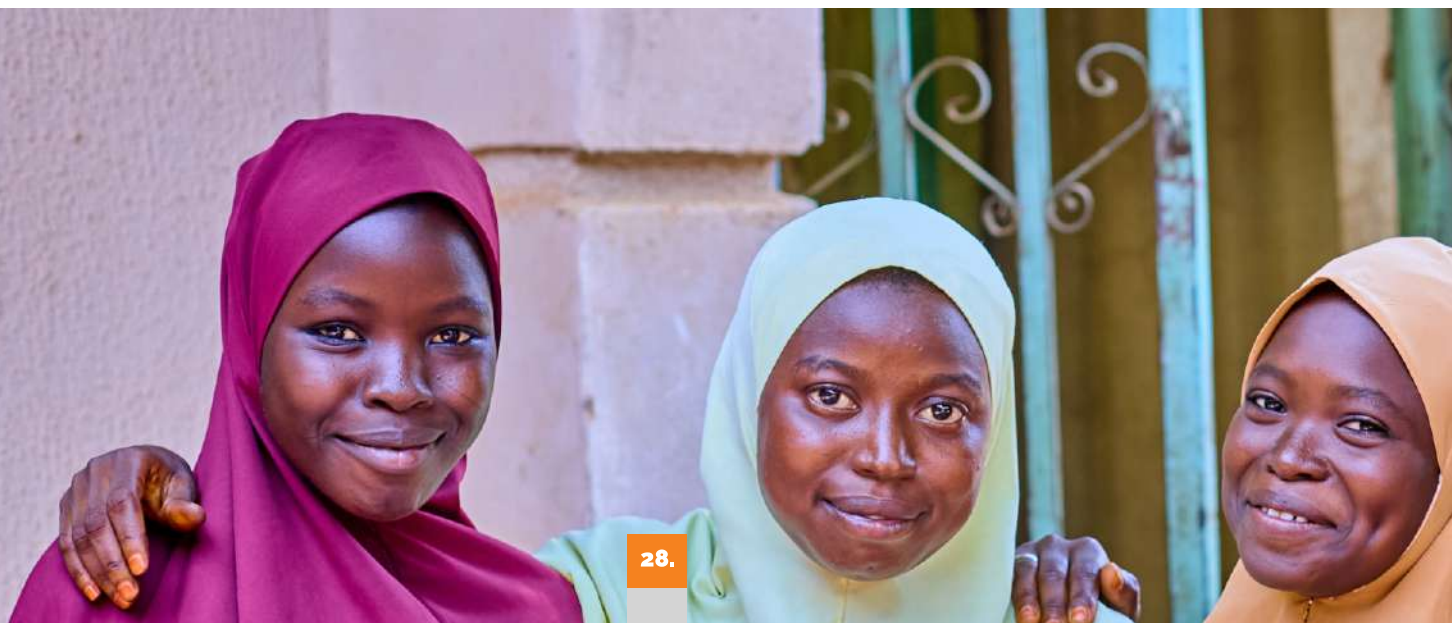
But that doubt quickly turned to admiration. The tools introduced during the training—like the intergenerational dialogue models and power analysis exercises—gave the girls a clear framework to understand their realities and to negotiate change. Hajiya Aisha watched in awe as these young advocates began leading conversations with

community elders, parents, and even government officials about girls’ rights, education, and safety.

“The tools made it easy for them to understand their task and their rights,” she reflected. “They learned to engage parents, policymakers, and community leaders with confidence and clarity.”

There were challenges, of course community backlash, fears about girls’ exposure, and even concerns from parents who worried about their daughters’ safety. Yet, through patient dialogue and continued engagement, those barriers began to crumble. The project didn’t just change the girls; it changed the way adults saw them.

Moved by their courage, BabaAzimi Foundation decided to integrate girls’ programmes into its organizational strategy, linking them with other interventions and designing a long-term plan to sustain girl-led advocacy.



The transformation reached the corridors of power. During one of the advocacy visits, Barrister Hauwa Zakar, the Permanent Secretary of the Jigawa State Ministry of Women Affairs, expressed her amazement.

“Since my years in public service, I haven't seen a project like this,” she said. “These girls speak for themselves confidently and clearly. This is the first real girl-led project in the state, and it's inspiring.”

Her words carried weight. The Ministry pledged to ensure that the voices of the girls would not fade after the project. Plans were made to take the girls' case directly to the Governor and to partner with UNICEF on training programmes for out-of-school boys and girls.

Support also came from the State Ministry of Economic Budget and Planning, whose representative commended the initiative and encouraged the girls to present their advocacy cases formally to the ministry. The ministry even promised to include a dedicated budget line for girls in the state's upcoming budget cycle, a major win that started

with the voices of teenagers who once feared speaking in public.

From the grassroots to government desks, the Girl-Led Research and Action Project became a movement one that proved that advocacy doesn't depend on age, but on awareness and courage.

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This project has taught us,” said Hajiya Aisha, “that when we trust girls with leadership, they don't just follow they transform everything around them.

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What began as a simple training in a quiet community has grown into a wave of policy conversations and organizational reform. The voices of young girls are now reshaping the way institutions think, plan, and invest reminding everyone that true advocacy begins when the most unheard find the courage to speak.



PHOTO REEL

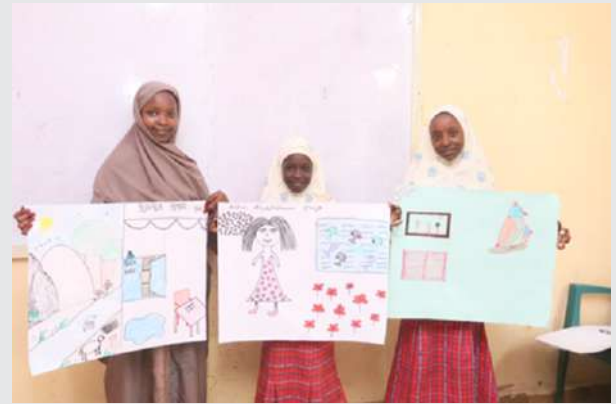


Girl's advocate presenting the research issues and their demands during the zonal public hearing on the special seats bill for women in Kano, Nigeria



GLA Community Sensitisation in Kudai Community Photo: credit Sabina Photography/ BAF 2025.





Girls from Golden Light school who participated in the Art competition



Girls Advocates courtesy visit to Technical Working Group on Ending GBV in Jigawa state



Girl led Advocates visit to Jigawa state Nigeria, Ministry of Women Affairs.



PHOTO REEL



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