

THE EMPOWERED CHOICES PROJECT

Strengthening Skills and Agency Among Internally Displaced Adolescents in Abuja, Nigeria



CONTEXT

Pathfinder International, in partnership with the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), led the Empowered Choices project (2021-2022) in Nigeria, implementing a comprehensive program to improve the health and wellbeing of adolescents in Durumi Area 1 internally displaced persons (IDP) settlement in the FCT. The project worked to advance gender equality, strengthen girls' agency, and ensure healthy transitions to adulthood.

The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria has led to one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises with mass displacement, disruption of basic services, increased protection risks, and total loss of livelihoods. As of March 2022, 2.2 million IDPs were identified in the northeastern states of Nigeria, representing about 447,000 households.¹ Increased insecurity incidents have caused the people affected to seek refuge in other states, including the FCT, which accounts for 20,000 IDPs across locations including informal settlements and host communities.²

The conflict and displacement have affected 1.7 million women of reproductive age (15 to 49 years) across the country.³ This includes a significant number of adolescents who are now internally displaced and living in deplorable conditions that affect their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).⁴ For adolescents in IDP settlements, access to SRHR information and services is crucial as they undergo developmental changes in an unstable environment compounded by protection risks, including gender-based violence (GBV). The disruptive nature of the conflict has stripped many IDPs of economic security, leaving them dependent upon humanitarian assistance rendered by individuals, organizations, and the government. Displaced adolescents have limited opportunity to acquire skills within the camps, disadvantaging them when they return to society. Existing government and humanitarian initiatives have not given adequate attention to the SRHR of internally displaced adolescents to support their healthy transition to adulthood.

IMPLEMENTATION OF EMPOWERED CHOICES

IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS

Pathfinder International's Nigeria team designed a comprehensive adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) program to improve the wellbeing of internally displaced adolescents in the FCT. With a long history of collaboration in Nigeria, Pathfinder engaged stakeholders such as the FEMA—who helped identify the project location, considering access, security, and demographics—FCT Health Research Ethics Committee of the FCT Authority (FCTA), and the FCT Primary Health Care Board. The project team made an entry visit to the proposed location to discuss the Empowered Choices mission with settlement leadership to get their buy-in.

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Prior to implementation, Pathfinder's Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team conducted a needs assessment (in Hausa language, as most respondents are not fluent in English) to gain insights into the SRHR needs of the adolescents in the settlement. The process involved a focus group discussion and key informant interviews with 40 randomly selected potential program participants, 2 parents, and 1 camp official.

The assessment revealed low knowledge of SRHR among adolescents in the settlement—particularly on HIV and AIDS and GBV. The assessment also showed low knowledge among gatekeepers of gender equality and key SRHR information. The findings informed the development of a comprehensive SRHR curriculum for a peer mentorship program for 40 adolescents ages 10 to 19 who were randomly selected from households in the settlement.



Photo: Bayo Ewuola

1 "IOM Nigeria Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) North-East Nigeria: Displacement Report 40." Abuja, Nigeria: International Organization for Migration (IOM), March 2022. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/nigeria-%E2%80%94north-east-%E2%80%94displacement-report-40-march-2022>.

2 "Protection Monitoring Report on IDP Sites in Federal Capital Territory." UNHCR, NHRC, FEMA, 2015. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/48601>.

3 "Nigeria: Abductions, Armed Conflict, and Cholera: UNFPA and Partners Support Women at Grave Risk." Delivering Supplies When Crisis Strikes: Reproductive Health in Humanitarian Settings. New York, NY, USA: UNFPA, 2018. <https://www.unfpa.org/publication/delivering-supplies-crisis-strikes>.

4 Odo, Amelia N., Kabiru Musa, and Abimibola V. Oladugba. "Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs and Problems of Internally Displaced Adolescents (IDAs) in Borno State, Nigeria: A Mixed Method Approach." *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 24, no. 1 (March 2020): 87–96. <https://doi.org/10.29063/>

PEER MENTORING APPROACH

Adolescents' peer relationships influence their adoption of healthy behaviors and exposure to risks, including sexual risks, violence, and substance abuse. Interventions targeting this early stage are critical in shaping adolescents' behaviors and securing positive health outcomes. Peer education—the promotion of healthy behaviors for young people by young people—is the most evaluated youth engagement strategy in the health sector. Results show positive outcomes, including for peer educators themselves.⁵ A growing body of literature supports peer mentorship, incorporating individual and group activities that build skills and reinforce self-regulation, as an effective method to change health behaviors.⁶ Evidence also suggests that peer mentorship helps reduce vulnerability to poor reproductive health outcomes among adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

In conceptualizing Empowered Choices, Pathfinder drew from its experience implementing Act With Her, a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Elsa & Peter Soderberg Foundation-funded project, in Jordan and Ethiopia. Act With Her adopts a panoramic approach, engaging multiple sectors at the community, individual, and system levels to support adolescents with information needed for a healthy transition to adulthood. Act With Her informed Pathfinder Nigeria's engagement of adolescent boys and girls ages 10 to 19 in the Empowered Choices project using the national peer mentorship curriculum, which included age-appropriate information on SRHR and other topic areas, including goal setting, self-esteem, and life skills. The Act With Her project also informed the Empowered Choices methodology, which consisted of weekly peer mentorship and skill acquisition sessions for 6 months, facilitated by 4 peer educators and attended by 40 peers.

The sessions were conducted in a spacious community center with electrical fittings and good ventilation within the camp. This fostered a sense of safe space for the young participants. The weekly two-hour peer mentorship sessions alternated between discussion on the topics, Q&A, and games (board games, puzzles, football, skipping rope) at the end of the day to help the participants unwind and learn soft skills like teamwork.

SKILL ACQUISITION SESSIONS

Empowered Choices held skills acquisition sessions for adolescents—a crucial step to improve their social and economic wellbeing and SRHR autonomy. To address menstrual hygiene—which can compromise adolescent girls' school attendance and completion—Empowered Choices conducted a session on sewing, using, and maintaining reusable sanitary pads and distributed starter packs for personal and commercial use. These affordable, washable sanitary kits, produced from locally sourced fabrics, enable the girls to manage their periods both at home and in school. Participants also learned liquid soap-making and received production materials for practice.

These two skills-acquisition sections did not resonate with the adolescent boys, so the project trained them on shoemaking, providing them with both the skills and kits to practice the craft. Liquid soap and shoes are in high demand within the settlement and the nearby community, providing the adolescents with an opportunity to make economic gains in the trade.



Photo credit: Bayo Ewuola, Pathfinder International, 2022. An Empowered Choices project peer session is held in Durumi, an Area 1 IDP camp in Abuja to educate adolescents about STI management.

5 Patton, George C, Susan M Sawyer, John S Santelli, David A Ross, Rima Afifi, Nicholas B Allen, Monika Arora, et al. "Our Future: A Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing." *The Lancet* 387, no. 10036 (June 2016): 2423–78. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)00579-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00579-1).

6 Petosa, R. L., and Lauren H. Smith. "Peer Mentoring for Health Behavior Change: A Systematic Review." *American Journal of Health Education* 45, no. 6 (November 2, 2014): 351–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2014.945670>.

7 Plourde, Kate F., Nicole B. Ippoliti, Geeta Nanda, and Donna R. McCarragher. "Mentoring Interventions and the Impact of Protective Assets on the Reproductive Health of Adolescent Girls and Young Women." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 61, no. 2 (August 2017): 131–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.03.002>.

Nabunya, Proscovia, Fred M. Ssewamala, Miriam N. Mukasa, William Byansi, and Jennifer Nattabi. "Peer Mentorship Program on HIV/AIDS Knowledge, Beliefs, and Prevention Attitudes among Orphaned Adolescents: An Evidence Based Practice." *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 2015): 345–56.

Adeagbo, Morolake Josephine, and Kammila Naidoo. "Exploring Narratives and Advocating Support and Peer Mentorship to Improve HIV-Positive Adolescent Mothers' Lives in South Africa." *African Journal of AIDS Research* 19, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 231–41. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16085906.2020.1808486>.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Initially, the leadership of the IDP settlement prioritized food and security, failing to see the value of participating in the Empowered Choices project. Engaging with settlement leadership to seek buy-in was critical to mitigating this challenge by encouraging adolescent participation and ultimately encouraging project support and appreciation among parents, guardians, and mentors.

Furthermore, because of its proximity to the town, organizations have easy access to the IDP settlement. As a result, the project experienced a lot of disruption from philanthropists, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, and government agencies in the health and youth development sectors who were conducting activities simultaneously. These activities divided the attention of camp stakeholders and adolescent participants. To address this, Empowered Choices changed the session day from Saturday mornings to Sunday afternoons. This led to a noticeable decrease in interruptions.



Photo credit: Bayo Ewuola

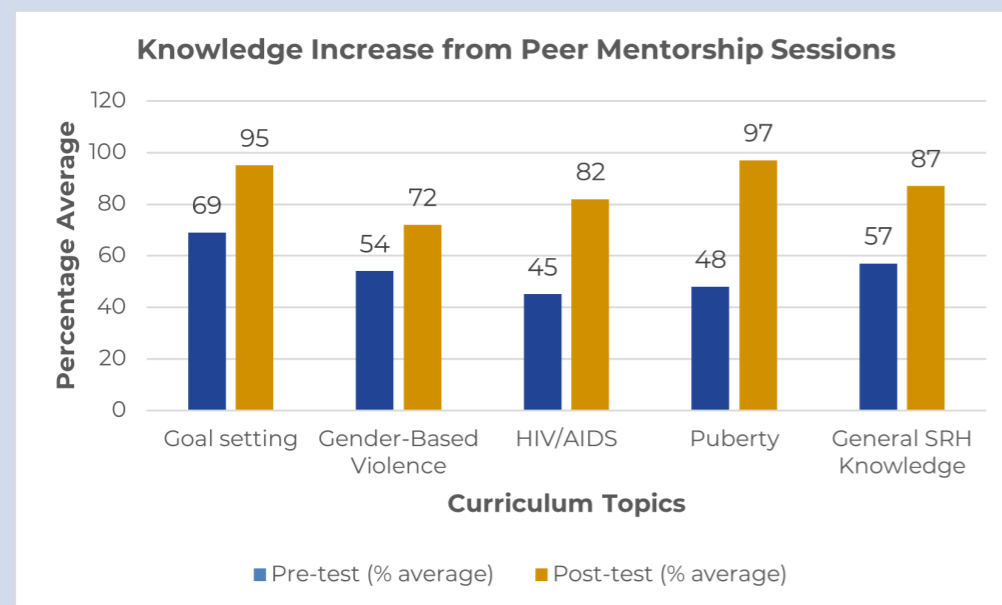
KEY FINDINGS

The Empowered Choices team conducted a post-test following the conclusion of the peer mentorship sessions (Figure 1). Results showed a 30% increase in SRH knowledge among participating adolescents compared to the pre-test. Knowledge about HIV and AIDS increased by 37%. Specifically, knowledge about HIV transmission grew by 55%; and knowledge about HIV stigmatization by 64%. The post-test showed a 18% knowledge increase in issues relating to GBV and gender equality; 83% of the post-test respondents believe that GBV can be prevented by promoting gender equality in their communities. In addition to the post-test results, the peer educators reported an observed reduction in violent behavior and improvement in interpersonal relationships among the adolescent participants.



Photo credit: Bayo Ewuola

FIGURE 1. Knowledge Increase from Peer Mentorship Sessions*



*Calculated using average of all correct answers by topic area in pre- and post-test

The adolescents' self-awareness and self-esteem also greatly improved, as all post-test respondents expressed the belief that goal setting is important to guide their decisions about the future and that acquiring formal education or learning a skill or trade would help them focus on their goals.

Dialogue sessions with parents and guardians revealed increased recognition of the importance of the

intervention. It was evident during these sessions that many young participants have closer relationships with their mothers than their fathers; mothers had more knowledge of the topics discussed in the peer mentorship program. Still, ASRH is rarely discussed in homes, communities, or formal education settings, signaling a need for ongoing programming to address the needs of adolescents.

They went through a series of lessons: training on goal setting, understanding puberty, personal hygiene, how to make sanitary pads.

You can hear that some of them talked about what they wanted to be in the future; some said they what to be doctors, soldiers, pilots, and engineers. It means they have dreams and potential.

It is our dream to make them achieve their potential.

— Dr. Amina Doray

Country Director, Pathfinder International Nigeria
via Radio Nigeria



Photo credit: Bayo Ewuola, Pathfinder International, 2022. An Empowered Choices project peer session is held in Durumi, an Area 1 IDP camp in Abuja to educate adolescents about STI management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementation of the Empowered Choices project shed light on the context and needs of adolescent IDPs and the impact of such interventions on their lives.

We recommend the following actions for policy makers:

- Implement the recently launched National Policy on Adolescent Development and Health, which protects the health of adolescents in conflict settings, including IDP settlements, by doing the following:
 - Domesticate the policy at subnational levels to protect adolescents;
 - Allocate funding to support adolescent health programming in IDP settlements; and
 - Engage multiple stakeholders (e.g., parents, camp leaders, FEMA) to forge sustainable support for adolescent health.
- Support peer mentorship programs across IDP settlements through partnerships with the National Youth Service Corps to support the health and development of young IDPs.
- Provide small-business loans to adolescent IDPs to enable them start and sustain economic participation.

- Ensure and improve referral systems from IDP settlement health centers to nearby health facilities to increase access to services and inclusion in reporting data.

- Integrate Family Life and HIV Education across public and private school curricula.

We recommend the following actions for implementing partners:

- Engaging key stakeholders in the IDP settlements, including parents and guardians of adolescents, is necessary to obtain their buy-in and cooperation for the success of the intervention.
- Creating safe spaces where adolescents feel free to interact is key to their learning. This includes an enabling environment where the rights of adolescents are identified and respected, and they are allowed to talk freely about SRH issues without fear or discrimination. These safe spaces are best established within the settlement but in secluded areas to avoid distraction.
- Incorporating fun activities such as sports and board games help sustain adolescent engagement and build their skills.

Project overview:

The ongoing conflict in northeastern Nigeria caused by the Boko Haram insurgency has led to one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, resulting in mass displacement, disruption of basic services, and increased protection risks. The Empowered Choices project reaches 10- to 19-year-old IDPs in one of the FCT of Nigeria's IDP settlements. Empowered Choices seeks to improve adolescent health and wellbeing and advance gender equality by giving adolescent girls the skills to make healthy transitions to adulthood.

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Photo credit: Bayo Ewuola, Pathfinder International, 2022. Empowered Choices peer session in Durumi, an Area 1 IDP camp in Abuja.

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