



Girls in safe space, Sokoto, Nigeria

Interviews with Drivers of Change

This interview is part of a series of talks with personalities from the nonprofit sector who are working in humanitarian action, on sustainable development and on peacebuilding.

Introduction

**HABIBA MOHAMMED:
MENTORING GIRLS
TO COMPLETE
SCHOOLING
ONE SAFE SPACE
AT A TIME**

The work of Habiba Mohammed, Co-Director of the Center for Girls' Education in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria, and her team has made life better for tens of thousands of disadvantaged girls.

Habiba shows how the education of girls can be at the heart of positive change in conservative societies with wide-spread poverty. Want to fight child marriage and reduce the risk of maternal mortality? Get the girls an education! Want to fight poverty? Let the girls complete schooling and learn vocational skills. And probably most importantly, provide the girls the opportunity to grow as individuals.

In an increasingly fractured world, there is a lot to learn from Habiba's community-based approach. Discover how she enlists the support of "Role Model Mothers" and "Community Champion" fathers to win over reluctant parents and overturn hostile attitudes. Find out what she has to say about patience, wild dreams and unruly girls.

Many thanks to Atalanti Moquete of [Giving Women](#) for introducing us to Habiba Mohammed. Giving Women offered technical support and mentoring to facilitate the transition of the Center for Girls' Education (CGE) to becoming an autonomous NGO. A Giving Women Project Circle team worked with Habiba to build a more solid organisational structure and create a more effective board. This enabled CGE to expand into five states in Northern Nigeria.

Habiba Mohammed: "The girls learn to say: This is what I want for myself!"

Interview by Claudia Witte

Early marriage or completing school

What problem are you addressing with your work?

We are addressing the problem of early marriage and the resulting risk of maternal mortality and morbidity. We do this by supporting girls to go back to school and to stay in school so that they are able to complete secondary education. If a girl completes schooling, her age of marriage will automatically be delayed.

In Kaduna State, it is not rare that girls get married at the age of twelve or thirteen and have their first babies by fifteen. Most of the girls that get married at such an early age, they don't even know what marriage is. They are getting married because that is what the people around them think they have to do. These girls, they don't have the information that will support them to take care of themselves and live a life that they want.

Why do girls not finish school? What's the problem?

The quality of education can be very low. In remote areas, it happens that the kids go to school for six years and at the end they do not know how to read and write. Some of them may be able to write their names and read maybe one or two words. In rural communities, some of the classes have 200 children and you hardly find a school that has less than 100 or 95 students in one class. We also have a



Video: Short self-introduction by Habiba Mohammed

a lack of training and re-training of teachers, especially in the rural communities. And then there is the issue of the teachers' pay. Teachers are not well paid and whenever they find a better job, they leave for that greener pasture.

In an interview that our Centre conducted, there was a woman that sent her first daughter to school and refused to send a second. When she was asked why, she said: "After six years, my first daughter cannot read and write. Why should I waste the time of my second daughter and sent her to school!" A girl that drops out of school just stays home and waits for a husband to come. We believe that if the child is really learning, the probability of staying longer in school is higher.

Key to success no.1: Safe spaces for girls

What solutions are you offering?

We are providing safe spaces for girls where we support them in their learning, so they will be able to stay in school or go back to school and pass the exams. We have trained mentors that will help the girls in the safe spaces with their literacy and numeracy skills.

For those girls that cannot continue or go back to school, we teach them entrepreneurship skills and different vocational skills that will help them to earn some

sort of living and help with the economy in their house. What we want to achieve with the safe spaces are so many things. Our mentors also provide information on adolescent reproductive health. Our girls do have information on adolescent nutrition and on gender-based violence. In the safe spaces, they are able to acquire different life skills like negotiation skills, like how to have self-esteem and how to be able to live a better life. They learn to use their voices to ask what is theirs, with respect and in a polite way. We're trying to support girls to be more confident when they talk with their parents: „This is what I want for myself!”

Habiba Mohammed

As Co-Director of the Center for Girls' Education, Habiba Mohammed (*1969) oversees all administrative, programmatic and financial aspects of the program.

She has a BA in English Literature, a Professional Diploma in Education, and a Higher Diploma in Guidance and Counselling, all obtained from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria.

Before joining the CGE as one of its first mentors, she worked as a teacher for 16 years. The Malala Fund appointed her as a Gulmaki Education network champion. Habiba is married and the mother of eight children.

Why safe spaces? What kind of dangers do girls face?

The danger is everywhere. There are physical assaults on girls, on their way to school, at school, even in their homes. Some girls who stay in extended families are sexually assaulted by their uncles or other family members. Our safe spaces are providing girls with a support network. When they go to school, because most of the schools are far from the community, they go in clusters so that they will be able to at least feel safer.

Lack of security is a challenge to the work we do. In Kaduna State, students are being abducted in schools and this shows that there is no safety in schools. We never had an incident of anyone ever kidnapped from our Safe Spaces and have been able to continue our work. When we go into any community, we talk and discuss at length with the community leaders and the religious leaders, and they are the ones that provide us with spaces. It may be a place in the community leader's house or in the religious leader's house or in a trusted person's house that will be as safe as

possible, where there will be no disruptions and where the girls will feel comfortable. We also use classrooms in the girls' schools.

Is the Center reaching out to all girls?

Mainly, the Center for Girls' Education is reaching out to the rural communities and the poor urban communities.

That is where our strength is. We are reaching the unreachable, the hard-to-reach girls, those that need our intervention the most. The majority of our work, like 75 percent of what we do, is in the rural areas.

We go for the most vulnerable girls that, we know, under normal circumstances wouldn't have the opportunity to go to school or to continue schooling. Most of them, you'll find them after completing primary school, staying at home and waiting for their husbands to come. But with our intervention, this trend has been changing because after finishing primary school, girls now move on to secondary school.

Wild dreams and goals

Do the safe spaces lead to the desired outcomes?

During our first year, an evaluation showed that before we started, only four percent of the girls that moved from primary to secondary schools actually went on to complete secondary education. But after our intervention, it was eighty-two percent. By now, some of our girls are already in university. And we have several girls that have gone through the College of Education to become teachers. And we have others, too, that have gone to the midwifery school. Girls that, even in their wildest dreams, wouldn't have dreamed of continuing with their education and becoming somebody in life.

How are the girls responding to the safe spaces?

At the start, the girls tend to misbehave a lot. They will sometimes just rush in as if they are fighting. They don't care about taking responsibility for their behaviours or respecting other people's privacy. Others are very timid and don't want to say anything. But after like three to six months, you find that those that are shy and don't talk are opening up. It's just like magic! You find the girls changing in the way they approach the mentors, the way they discuss among themselves, the way they now like to unite for whatever they

The Center for Girls' Education (CGE)

The CGE started in 2008 as a joint program of the Population & Reproductive Health Initiative, Ahmadu Bello University, Teaching Hospital in Zaria, Nigeria and the OASIS Initiative (Organizing to Advance Solutions in the Sahel) at the University of California, Berkeley. In 2016, the CGE registered as an independent nonprofit organization. Daniel Perlman, Research Medical Anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, co-directs the Center with Habiba Mohammed. The CGE is based in Zaria and has 123 staff from four states, Kaduna, Bauchi, Gombe and Sokoto.

want. They have goals. This is really something that makes us happy and helps us to stay on track and want to continue to work with them.



Girls during group work in safe space, Zaria, Kaduna State

Key to success no. 2: Female mentors

How do you recruit the mentors?

We always liaise with the local education authority and ask them to send us mentors from among the female teachers in the schools. We do as much as possible to support and train these teachers from the government schools so that they will become mentors in the safe spaces. And once they learn that there is a good stipend that they get from working in the safe spaces, you find them wanting to stay in those rural schools to continue supporting us.

Our supervisors check into the safe spaces once a fortnight to make sure that what is happening there is really what is planned to happen. For example, the topics that the mentor is supposed to cover and the way she uses the methodologies.

We organize mentor training sessions and review meetings every month when we sit down and discuss successes, challenges and the way forward.

Who are the so-called Cascading Mentors? What is their role?

We are using our old safe space girls as Cascading Mentors in their communities. A Cascading Mentor is a girl that has completed two years of safe space and finished secondary education. She supports the mentor.

We want the community members to notice the Cascading Mentors. They can see that those girls that people have been criticizing before for going to school, now have completed school and even became Cascading Mentors. The younger girls see them as role models and say: „I want to be like them.“ Even when they are married, the Cascading Mentors still continue to support the safe spaces. And most parents want their children to be like them because in the safe space they get a little stipend that supports them and their families.

In-school girls meet after school in a safe space in the school premises. Out of school girls meet in safe spaces provided by the community heads and religious leaders. Each group has about 20 girls.

There are safe spaces for girls :

- pre-school 3 - 6 year old
- in-school 10 - 14 year old
- out-of-school 10 - 14 year old (married & unmarried)
- in-school 14 - 19 year old (married & unmarried)

How it all began

How did you get into your present career?

When the Center for Girls' Education was created 2007, I was invited to be part of the start-up. At that time, I was still teaching in the morning at a secondary school in Zaria and in the afternoon, I worked as the very first mentor with fifteen girls in a safe space. From being a mentor, I became a coordinator and today I am co-director.

After starting my work with the Center for Girls' Education, I was invited as an exchange teacher by the US State Department's Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) Program. The training we got during our six weeks at Ohio State University was pushing me to go and do the work I am doing now. I believe that no teacher is untrainable and there are so many people out there that are even better than me, that need just a little push to do excellent and amazing things.

Key to success no. 3: Community-based work

What's the secret of your success?

The success of the Center for Girls' Education is built on our strategy of working with the community and the religious leaders. We always insist that the community and the religious leaders' children, their adolescent girls, should be part of the program. When the community members start seeing the children of their leaders as part of the safe spaces, they always allow their own children to take part. When we approach a new community, we go with some of the community leaders that are earlier beneficiaries and let them talk on our behalf: "This is what this organization came to do in our community, and this was the strategy, and this is how our girls benefited."

We created another strategy that involves the parents, the mothers and the fathers separately. In every community we have a group of about twenty women, mostly mothers of our girls, we call them „Role Model Mothers“. With them we talk about reproductive health, gender-based violence, about nutrition, and the importance of girls' education and the various careers that girls can pursue. We solicit the support of these women who talk to other mothers that are not part of this role model mothers club. Whenever there is a girl that wants to go to school and

the parents are stopping her, the "Role Model Mothers" will go as a group to talk to the parents and advise them about the importance of girls' education. They are our allies.

And as for the fathers or husbands, we call them „Community Champions“ and tell them that as champions, they need to make sure that their community is better than the next community. We always give references and tell them about other communities that have been very supportive of our work and about the number of girls that we have been able to reach and how the children have benefited. To some of these talks, we bring our girls and let them do the talking. They will say: „I was so, so and so before. And now this is what I have become and it has not stopped me from getting married at the right time. And I'm able to live a better life and to support my family economically.“ All of these things combined are motivating most of the communities to want to allow the girls to continue school.

Obstacles to change

It all sounds like smooth sailing. Did you meet with resistance?

Yes, in the beginning there was some resistance. There was even a community that sent us away. They said we were there not because we want to educate their children, but because we want to stop their children from marrying, or we want to change the religion of the children. But later, that same community started pestering us stubbornly, wanting to work with us. And so, last year, we went back to that community.

Initially, the community elders always say, why are you concerned with the girls? Why not boys? And when we ask them to see who is more vulnerable, they always say, yes, the girl child needs more support. So now it's no longer a matter of trying to persuade people. It's a matter of people wanting us to come to them.

Sometimes we have challenges with parents who prefer their children to be selling things in the market. They complain to the mentors: „You have kept my daughter away from home and this keeps her from getting the income that she is supposed to earn for us. So you'll have to pay for the difference.“ When the mentors report incidents like this, we go back to the concerned community, call a meeting and start a discussion without pointing the finger to anybody. We are saying, there is a general problem that we need to solve. And the participants will always give us a solution for any problem that comes up.

Is your job dangerous at times?

There are instances when we go to a community and find that people are pointing fingers at me and say: „This is the gang leader of those that don't want girls to get married.“ I am always in my hijab but some people would say: „This is the woman that wants to change the religion of our children.“ So it can be dangerous at times. But so far, I have never had any form of attack, only a few abuses, which I think it's OK, because no matter what you do, there are always some people that don't feel comfortable with it.

Funds & donors

Where do your funds come from?

The scale of what we are doing, the number of girls we can support throughout primary and secondary school, depends on what our grants can provide. Our funds come from donor organizations and private donors. When we started, we had grants from the MacArthur Foundation, the Packard Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Malala Fund, Ventures Strategies for Health & Development, Canadian Funds for Local Initiatives (CFLI) and others. By now, we also have private donors.

Recently we received a grant from the Commonwealth of Learning in Canada to train two hundred female teachers for the Teacher Network for Girls Education (TEN-G) project. Canada and Norway are supporting us through the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The EU-UN Spotlight



Out-of-school girls in safe space in Wuciciri community, Zaria

Initiative that works toward eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls also supports us through UNFPA. This is how we get our funding. Sometimes it is difficult and our proposals get turned down, sometimes we get the grants. That's how it is.

We have tried to obtain financial support from our government and get them to take up some of the safe spaces. But, you know, in this situation, it is always difficult. So far, we have not received any grant from Nigeria.

So what are your plans for the future? Reach even more girls?

Our dream is to see in all nooks and corners of Nigeria girls in school uniform, striving and wanting to go to school and staying in school and completing schooling, and for them not just to have the education, but to have other skills that will support them to live a better life.

We were able to scale to other states and hope to continue to do so. We have worked in Kaduna and Kebbi States and are presently still working in Kaduna state, and in Bauchi, Sokoto and Gombe States in Northern Nigeria through the UNFPA.

Lessons & surprises

What important lessons did you learn along the way?

One vital lesson I think is that one cannot do this type of work in isolation. You need people that support you. Sometimes, I don't sleep at night because I have a deadline to submit something, maybe a report, maybe we are working on a proposal. I often go a step further in doing what I am supposed to do. I did not take into consideration my personal well-being when I started this work. I never expected that because of the energy that I'm giving into my work, I may fall sick. But it did happen, and I had to be hospitalized. The doctors found out that my major problem is stress. And so anybody that I'm working with now, I always tell them that they should take care of themselves as they are taking care of others.

As for me, I am trying as much as possible to pipe down and do things in a way that I will not be too stressed. Before, I was always trying to make sure that I don't miss this and that, that I was in the office all of my days from morning till evening, always occupied. My only luck is that my children were grown up when I started this work.

Have there been unexpected developments? Things that really surprised you?

I did not expect what the Cascading Mentors are able to do. When we developed the idea of the Cascading Mentors, I just thought, when we get the girls to support the mentors in the safe spaces, they will not forget what

they have learned. By doing that, it turns out, the Cascading Mentors are showing the world: This is what I can do! And other parents now want their own children to be like them. So they are role model girls from the safe spaces, which was not the intended goal. It was a surprise for us when parents of younger girls came and said: I want my child to be like this. So please, I want you to enroll her in your safe space because these girls, their attitude is the type of attitude I want to see in my own girl.

The same surprise happened with the „Role Model Mothers” and the „Community Champions“. We did not know that their commitment would yield the results that we're getting. For example, during Corona, when we were doing virtual safe spaces through radio, the „Role Model Mothers“ and „Community Champions” would track girls that do not have radios. They organised that the girls could go to households with radios at specific times and attend class over the radio. The extra energy they are putting into supporting our programs took us by surprise.

Who are the unsung heroes of safe spaces?

At the Center for Girls' Education we are not good at singing our own praise. There are people in the U.S. who called me an unsung hero, but I cannot walk alone and pretend I'm the unsung hero. No, it's a collective effort with my team. Daniel Perlman, my co-director is our unsung hero. He puts his sweat and tears into this program to make it what it is today.

We have other unsung heroes among the parents who take an extra effort to make sure that all girls in the community are benefiting from the safe spaces. These parents check attendance and ensure that every girl is present. These may be small things, but those parents are doing something good. That's so unsung!

Influencers

What advice would you give to people who want to drive change and make their community a better place?

This kind of work, if one is not patient, if one does not have the passion for it, I don't think one can be able to do it because one has to be extremely patient. Sometimes things will happen and if you are not patient, honestly, everything will change.

My advice would be that they should not relent until

Impact in Numbers

Since its foundation, the Center for Girls' Education has reached more than 70,000 girls in four Nigerian states. It has created more than 3,000 safe spaces.

In the communities where it established safe spaces, the average age of marriage increased by 2.5 years and girls' secondary school graduation rates have grown twentyfold.

they have reached what they want to reach in life. So when they look back on their lives, they will be happy to see that what they have done has been impactful. So if they are patient, I think the sky will be their starting point and not their limit.

Tell us about the influences and experiences that made you who you are today.

My mother was a teacher and she had four of us children, three girls and one boy. She trained us to be educated. She always told us: „Education is the only thing I can leave for you.“ From the life, I and my other siblings are living, I understand that if we had not been educated or if our mother had not been educated, our life story would not be the same. I feel that as I am supporting my own biological children to get an education, I need to support every girl wherever she is.

More information on Habiba Mohammed and the Center for Girls' Education at www.centreforgirlseducation.org



Out-of-school girls in safe space in Wuciciri community, Zari