

Breaking the silence in Nigeria



In Nigeria, Raising Her Voice has gained the support of civil society organisations, activists, local and national politicians, and the media. Attitudes towards violence against women are slowly but surely changing. More and more women are reporting cases of violence, signalling an end to the 'culture of silence' previously maintained by survivors.



Background

Despite being the largest exporter of oil in Africa, Nigeria is one of the poorest countries in the world, with almost 55 per cent of its citizens living on less than US\$1 a day. It also ranks among the 20 countries with the widest gap between rich and poor. Approximately 64 per cent of Nigerian women are living in poverty, compared with 48 per cent of men. Violence against women is widespread, but is considered a 'private' matter and is rarely reported; even when reported, culprits are rarely punished due to lack of appropriate policies and laws. Women represent less than seven per cent of elected representatives at national, state, and local level.

Raising Her Voice is engaging women and men from different sectors of public and community life to participate in project activities, particularly advocacy-skills training, in order to have more influence in decision-making from local to national level. The project is also enabling policy-makers to understand, recognise and integrate the concerns of poor women into policy formulation, and to increase poor women's participation in governance.

Objectives

Oxfam is supporting Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) to work with the African Union (AU), the Nigerian Government, other national civil society organisations, and the media to uphold women's rights in Nigeria. The overall goals are to:

- Achieve domestication of the African Women's Rights Protocol in Nigeria, with provisions turned into law, by 2012.
- Enhance the capacity of civil society and women-focused organisations to promote the rights and interests of poor women in governance.
- Empower poor women to understand and assert their rights to participate in decision-making processes and bodies.

"Discrimination against women is a mindset... We want to shape [young people's] mindsets... so that when they become leaders they will be able to make policies and laws that favour women and help to end discrimination against women in Nigeria."

Hadeezah Haruna-Usei; Raising Her Voice Coordinator

Achievements

The 'target group' for project activities includes 240 poor women leaders of community-based umbrella groups; 100 traditional and religious leaders, and government representatives; and 100 young men in communities across the country. Achievements include:

Synergy and strengthened coordination among civil society organisations

The Raising Her Voice Coalition comprises 17 gender-focused organisations with nationwide coverage. By working together they have been able to lobby for the development of a Gender and Equal Opportunities Act, now before Parliament, which, if successful, would see enactment of a comprehensive legal provision in line with the Protocol.



More women reporting violence

A major emerging impact is the increased reporting by women and the media of gender-based violence. This is a significant breakthrough in a country where poor legislation, stigma and discrimination have combined to create a 'culture of silence', which has led in turn to impunity for perpetrators. Institutions and communities have publicly committed to taking action against violence against women, and a shift in mindsets is taking place.

Media and political support for women's rights

A core group of electronic and print journalists have committed to push for domestication of the Protocol and to highlight women's rights issues in the media. By working closely with the media, allies of the project have challenged sensationalist reporting of violence against women, and encouraged journalists to demand that perpetrators be brought to justice. Nigerian National and state parliamentarians have become more aware of the need to address gender imbalances to achieve sustainable development, and are showing greater knowledge of the Protocol and its provisions. More male legislators are supporting women's rights, as demonstrated by the number of them openly supporting a Bill to prohibit gender-based violence. To date, 27 influential men and women, including many politicians, have pledged to be 'gender change champions' and have made public declarations of support for gender issues.

Women claiming their rights

More women are getting involved in advocacy and demanding accountability from parliamentarians. For example, during the '16 Days of Activism' against violence against women, Raising Her Voice organised a protest march to demand laws that protect women. Highlighting the case of Grace Ushang Adie, a victim

of gender-based violence, hundreds of women marched to the National Assembly. As a result, the House Committee on Women's Affairs organised a public hearing, where the various institutions involved in Grace's case were asked to 'answer' to Nigerian women.

Ending the culture of silence

During the annual '16 Days of Activism' against violence against women, Raising Her Voice organised a mock tribunal, where women spoke publicly about their experiences of violence. Although some victims used an alias and requested not to be video-recorded, about 90 per cent of the women confidently and openly testified. This had the dramatic impact of increasing the women's self-esteem and confidence, as well as exposing the devastating consequences of violence against women. Rosemary was among those who shared her story: *"Violence against women is real. As an acid bath survivor, I testify to that. It is not just the physical abuse but also the psychological trauma I go through whenever I realise I have to face society wearing this face. With the support I have been receiving from WRAPA, I am finding it easier to cope."*

Lessons

- Working with the media as strategic allies is helping to keep the project in the public view.
- Given the limited knowledge of the project target group, the use of local media and the simplification and translation of the Protocol into local dialects has been crucial.
- It is worth making concessions if it helps achieve the desired result; for example, by changing the name of the 'domestic violence against women' Bill to 'domestic violence against persons'.
- WRAPA have found it most effective to seek incremental changes and to work at multiple levels; for example, working with state assemblies to pass integral laws on issues raised in the Protocol, as well as slower momentum to domesticate the entire Protocol at national level.
- It is vital to work through male 'change agents' to increase support for women's rights.

Nigeria is one of seven countries under the Raising Her Voice Pan-African Programme promoting the acceleration of the African Women's Rights Protocol.

Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

