

**Action
Health Incorporated**

DARING TO DREAM



LISTENING TO OUT-OF-
SCHOOL ADOLESCENT GIRLS
IN MAKOKO, LAGOS



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This publication is based on interviews conducted with out-of-school adolescent girls in Makoko, Lagos by Action Health Incorporated (AHI), a Nigerian non-governmental organization dedicated to improving the well-being and development of adolescents.

The publication highlights the lived realities of adolescent girls within urban slum communities in Nigeria. Beyond the label-“out-of-schools”, these are girls who have individual dreams about a better life and a brighter tomorrow. They face a myriad of daunting challenges and have specific needs. Programmes aimed at improving the well-being and lives of these adolescents must take cognizance of these needs and respond to them in strategic and creative ways that make the desired impact.

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Introduction

One in every five out-of-school children in the world is in Nigeria – and at both the primary and secondary levels, girls are more likely than boys to be out-of-school (UNESCO 2012).¹ The most recent data count a staggering five million Nigerian girls out-of-school; unlike in most countries, in Nigeria, this number is actually climbing (UNESCO 2014). Girls who cannot attend school are denied a basic human right to education and to contribute fully to society².

Where are these girls? They are in the poorest communities: an analysis of data from the 2003 and 2008 Nigerian Demographic and Health Surveys published by UNICEF (2012) found that 64.4% of Nigerian children from families in the poorest quintile were out of school compared to only 4.8% from families in the richest quintile. In Nigeria, families living in extreme poverty are not only in rural areas; tens of millions are living in the country's rapidly expanding cities. Indeed, Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, hosts close to one hundred "urban slums" (Njoku and Okoro 2014).

The girls growing up in these settings are trying to survive, and often have little or no say over their lives. In the Lagos Lagoon fishing communities, girls denied education are likely to be caring for family members or trekking long distances with trays on their heads, full of fish or other wares they are hawking for their parents or husbands. An offer from an older male to buy off her entire tray of goods in exchange for sex can be tempting for a girl who is hungry, tired, and eager to get off the street and the scorching heat. Without access to even primary-level education, many girls cannot spell their own names. Those who are out-of-school and married are at special risk of social isolation.

At the root of this problem is the intersection of poverty and gender norms. Although basic education is tuition-free in Lagos States, there are other significant costs related to school attendance including payment for transportation, meals while at school, uniforms, textbooks and other supplies. For a family struggling at the edge, an illness, death, or move, keeping a child enrolled may prove an overwhelming strain. While these factors affect boys as well as girls, in a society with strong preference for sons, difficulty paying these school-related costs translates into privileging enrolling sons over daughters.

¹ Fully 32.4% of primary-school-age girls are out of school, compared to 26.9% among boys (UNICEF 2012).

² *Educating girls is an investment in the whole society. A UNICEF (2014) summary reports that "Providing girls with an education helps break the cycle of poverty: educated women are less likely to marry early and against their will; less likely to die in childbirth; more likely to have healthy babies; and are more likely to send their children to school . . . Evidence shows that the return to a year of secondary education for girls correlates to a 25 per cent increase in wages later in life."*

Gendered patterns in school enrolment vary depending on the setting (Psaki 2015). For example, in fishing communities on the Lagos Lagoon, a number of factors are at play. A girl's contribution to household labour and care-giving is typically seen as the priority; sending a daughter to school every day is seen as having few payoffs. Even if a girl is enrolled, extended absences to attend to domestic burdens can cause a girl to fall behind at school, and often result in her being held back one or more years. Some girls leave school when – often to their great dismay and dread – they become pregnant or marry (see *Child Marriage*, page 18).

Finally, in many places, there are trepidations about the school environment itself: concerns that teachers are too few or that some are apathetic, fears of sexual assault and harassment on school grounds or en-route to or from school, a lack of female teachers, and inadequate privacy for toilet facilities.

Despite the overwhelming vulnerability of out-of-school girls, whose chances of participating successfully in the wider society are remote, the majority of the existing programmes are focused on in-school learners. In Nigeria, even as governmental and non-governmental efforts gradually strengthen public sector education, relatively few programmes target out-of-school adolescent girls, whether married or unmarried (AHI 2011). These girls simply “fall through the cracks”—their needs overlooked—because they are outside the main system of services reaching young people.

Efforts to promote the rights and assets of out-of-school girls around the world are generating important lessons. One lesson is the need to design programmes specifically for these girls—starting with learning what their precise needs are and how those needs can best be met (Bruce 2012). In most cases, girls need an array of offerings to address and surmount the complex challenges in their lives. Another lesson is the importance of safe, girl-friendly spaces for girls to build supportive relationships and social assets, and to nurture their strengths and rekindle their dreams.

In Makoko, a marginal fishing community within the capital city of Lagos (see page 7), out-of-school girls are getting a chance at a better life. The Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme – implemented by Action Health, Inc. — is working exclusively with out-of-school girls, building their social, financial, and cognitive assets. For girls who are still of school age, the programme seeks to support their re-entry (or for some, first entry) into the education system -- enrolling them and subsidizing the non-tuition costs related to schooling, including books, uniforms, etc. In addition, older adolescents have the opportunity to learn a trade. The programme also offers informal education -- from literacy training to sexual and reproductive health information. All of the girls also benefit from social support in girl-friendly spaces.

For the sixty girls who are currently participating in the Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme, the challenges of poverty and extreme gender inequality do not disappear. But the two years they spend in the programme give them a chance — not only to re-ignite their dreams, but to make them a reality. In the following pages, they share their stories.







A Snapshot of Makoko

Makoko is a fishing settlement along the enormous Lagos Lagoon, with houses built both on coastal land and on stilts over the lagoon itself. According to Chief Raymond Adekunle Olaiya Akinsemeyin — the community leader known as the Baale, Makoko was a farming community established by his forebears in the nineteenth century. Because the land was covered with special Akoko leaves used in the coronation of kings, it was given the name Makoko.

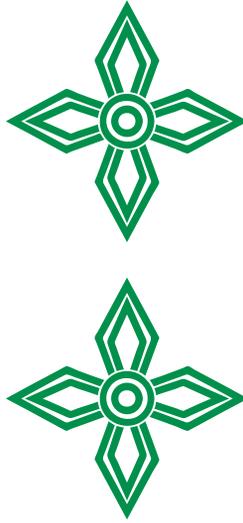
A steady influx of migrants from rural areas (as well as from fishing communities in Badagry and neighbouring Benin Republic) has led to crowding and sanitation problems, inadequate public services, unstable employment opportunities, and crime. Today, most families live in houses known as “face-me-I-face-you” residential quarters, where each family occupies a room or two and where several families and individuals share a bathroom. Transport around Makoko is primarily by canoe, and small businesses – shops, hair salons, and the like – can be found right on the water. Many of the migrants face language barriers, speaking neither English nor fluent Yoruba (the major indigenous language spoken in Lagos).

School enrolment is low in Makoko, especially for girls. One 2006 report found that despite economic hardship, many Makoko parents who do educate their children send them to local “private schools”, which they view as of higher quality than public schools (Tooley and Dixon 2006). Whether or not they attend school, many girls work hawking fish or other goods, caring for family members, and fulfilling other household tasks.



“ If you are not learning a trade or any vocation, boys will just make a mess of you. ”

— Deborah Adewoye



An Income Of Her Own

“After I lost my father, I dropped out of school, in JSS 3³, due to lack of financial support. My mother has eight children, six for my late father and two for my stepfather. I am responsible for anything I need—food and clothing, even underwear—to sustain me while I’m still learning.”

For Deborah Adewoye, earning her own livelihood will offer not only self-sufficiency, but a greater measure of safety and dignity. She explains that earning an income will ensure that she is not financially dependent on handouts from boyfriends or other males. “If you’re not learning a trade or any vocation, boys will just make a mess of you. If a girl snubs [the boys], they arrange and rape the girl. And the same guys would turn around and make fun of her. For girls who are bold enough to tell their parents, they report to the Baale⁴ and some of them just scold the boys.”

At the Makoko Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme, Deborah is learning fashion design. And her picture of the future has opened up. She says, “I desire to have enough resources to also be in a position to give to other people, so I can stop being a burden to people around me.”

“When I was younger, I dreamt of becoming a soldier because I admire their uniforms. But now, whenever I see my mates who are learning fashion design, I say to myself that I am also learning fashion design; through this, one day I will also be great in life.

“My dream now is that one day I will also be free, own my shop and have my own life.” ■

3 Junior Secondary School Level 3. This is the third year in secondary school

4 The Baale is the traditional community head in Yoruba communities in Southwest Nigeria

Girls' Livelihoods

Having a livelihood – one's own means of support – helps girls ensure their subsistence; it also increases their bargaining power in marriage and over their fertility. Around the world, vocational programmes for out-of-school girls are also providing mentorship and social support. Helping girls open savings accounts is another powerful step – an independent account is empowering and helps a girl envision and plan her future.

One lesson from livelihoods programmes is that many girls benefit from a phased approach. This can start with safe spaces, opportunities for individual savings, life skills and health education, and financial literacy training; as girls become more adept, goal-oriented savings, business skills, and micro-credit programmes may be appropriate (Amin 2011). The Makoko Empowerment Programme is currently reaching girls at the starting end of this journey toward successful livelihoods.

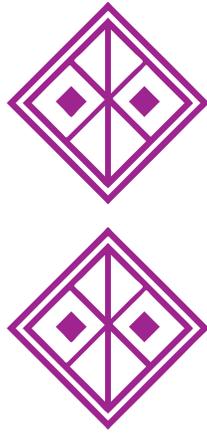




“ Most times, when I’m
going to school, there
is no food to eat. ”

—Rebecca Ogunsakin





Not An Easy Road

“When I had to drop out of school, I was always worrying.”

Rebecca Ogunsakin first lost her mother, then the company where her father worked as a security man went out of business and shut down. As the oldest of five children, Rebecca became responsible for her siblings and had to drop out of school.

Action Health Inc’s Makoko Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme is providing vital financial and moral support that has enabled Rebecca to return to school. But it’s still not an easy road for Rebecca.

One problem is hunger. Explains Rebecca, “We don’t have money to pay rent and most times, when I’m going to school, there is no food to eat.” And the road ahead is a long one: Because of the earlier disruption to her studies, she is catching up for lost time and must still complete primary school. A child who does finally return to school may feel discouraged or uncomfortable at the age gap between herself and her younger classmates who have been steadily enrolled and progressing academically. At the Makako Empowerment Programme, helping a girl return to school involves more than paying much-needed costs related to school attendance. It also means providing counselling, mentorship, and moral support—and, of course, helping ensure that the girl will not go to school hungry. ■

Malnutrition, Gender, And Sexual / Reproductive Health

While extreme poverty means that everyone in the family may lack food, in many societies, girls (and their mothers) eat only what remains after the male family members have eaten. Adolescent girls are growing more rapidly than at any time since their first year of life; if living in poverty, they become particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and anaemia. Moreover, malnutrition that stunts girls' growth leads to inadequate pelvic size, increasing subsequent risk of obstructed labour and fistula during childbirth (Chong 2004).

The girls enrolled in the Makoko Empowerment Programme openly talk about chronic hunger. At times, it is this sheer hunger that leads them to transactional sex. With a safe livelihood, girls can feed and protect themselves.









Overcoming Challenges

“I have never been to school”, says Dupe Hunpeyanwan. At 17 years of age, Dupe is already married and raising a child.

“I was born here in Makoko. My father had five wives. He was a fisherman, while my mom and the other wives were trading. I am the only surviving child of my mother.” Weeping, she explained, “My father was shot at the waterside a few years back when Lagos State Government wanted to demolish the houses on water. Since then, things have not been easy.” With no one to teach her vocational skills, Dupe sold *adoyo*⁵ on the street in front of her mother’s house.

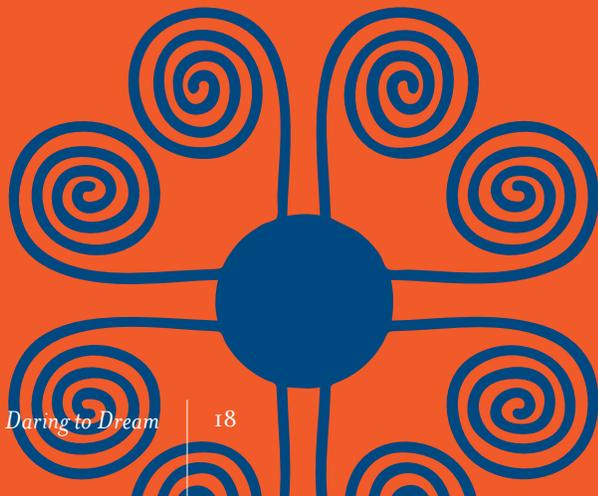
“I got pregnant, that was when I moved in with my husband’s family”, Dupe explained.

Dupe’s life remains full of challenges. Asked about her needs, she answered, “Food and clothing”. But at the Makoko Girls Empowerment Programme, Dupe is beginning to overcome her challenges. She is learning to read and write, as well as a vocation as a hairdresser. She is also able to meet with other married girls and adolescent mothers who help serve as a support system in girl-friendly spaces. Her self-confidence and hopes are blossoming. ■

5 A local drink for children

Child Marriage

Every day, 38,000 girls around the world marry. The link between child marriage and schooling status is strong. Among 20-24 year old women in Nigeria, 39% of girls were married off or in union before their 18th birthday. 17% are married before they turn 15. Only 2% of married girls aged 15-19 are in school, compared with 69% of those who are unmarried (Population Council 2004). Married girls also suffer greater risk of social isolation, domestic violence, and sexual violence than those who complete more schooling and marry as adults. In addition, they may be pressured to bear children right away. Aside from vocational training, some of the ways that the Makoko Empowerment Programme supports married girls are by providing opportunities for them to come together in girl-friendly spaces, to build their self-esteem, and to learn about ways to protect themselves from unintended pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

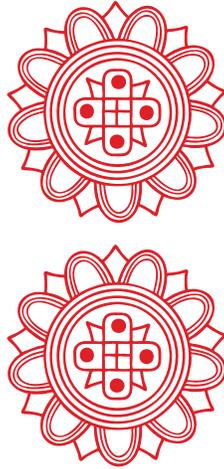






“ The father of my baby still does not really accept the child. No. Whenever he passes by, he doesn’t greet me. He just walks away...”

— Cecilia Anthony



Anxious For The Future

Cecilia Anthony dropped out of Primary 5 after the death of her father.

"To assist my mother, my aunt brought me from Cross River State to Lagos. My aunt said she would enrol me in school. But when we got to Lagos, she did not talk about school any more. Since then, I hoped to resume school, but it was not possible. I have been helping my aunt sell slippers here in Makoko".

"I needed money and the father of my baby gave me N300 (less than \$2). He took me to a friend's nice house and he forced me [to have sex]. After I discovered that I was pregnant, he denied responsibility. We went to the Baale and he still denied it. It was not until the Baale said they would take us to swear before a river that he admitted that he is responsible for the pregnancy."

Cecilia learned about the Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme, where she is learning to be a hairdresser. Gaining her own livelihood, she will be less vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the future.

"The father of my baby still does not really accept the child. No. Whenever he passes by, he doesn't greet me. He just walks away. I really wish to stay and complete my training programme but my family insists that I go back home to Ogoja".

Cecilia, who intends to leave her baby boy with the parents of the baby's father, is anxious about what the future holds for her. Yet she holds on to her dream of becoming a hairdresser. ■

Unwanted Sex, Unintended Pregnancy, Early Childbearing

Cecilia's story is an extremely common one. For example, 43.2% of out-of school girls aged 10-19 in Iwaya community (nearby, and similar to Makoko) are sexually active (AHI 2011). As is true globally, the girls most likely to become pregnant are those who are out of school (AHI 2011a, p.3). These girls typically lack knowledge about, or access to, condoms or other means of protection. Moreover, they often lack negotiating power in sex, whether a girl is married or unmarried. In addition, married girls often experience pressure to bear a child. For all these reasons, sex is mostly unprotected, leading to high rates of STIs, as well as pregnancy. Survey data from the slum community of Iwaya found that "nearly a quarter of girls have been pregnant by age 17 and 40% by age 19." For adolescent girls, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the second cause of death globally (WHO 2014), with those living in extreme poverty at greatest risk.

Few girls enrolling in the Makoko Empowerment Programme have knowledge about how to protect against STIs or pregnancy, and many have little understanding of their fundamental rights to live free from sexual coercion and to protect their health. Education about these issues is key to building girls' agency as subjects of their own lives, starting with controlling their sexual and reproductive health.





“ I need people who can support me to further my education. ”
— Martina Žosupevi





Nurturing Her Dream

Martina Žosupevi has had a dream since she was in primary school – to have a career in mass communications. She dreams of working with Lagos Television (LTV), adding, “I like talking to people”.

Martina is not to be underestimated. She has already managed to complete her secondary school education, and she credits her dad with helping her feel that she is special and has great potential. She adds, “He talks to me.”

Martina knows that continuing her studies will not be easy. “My father may not be able to provide all that I require to further my education. I need people who can support me to further my education”, she explains.

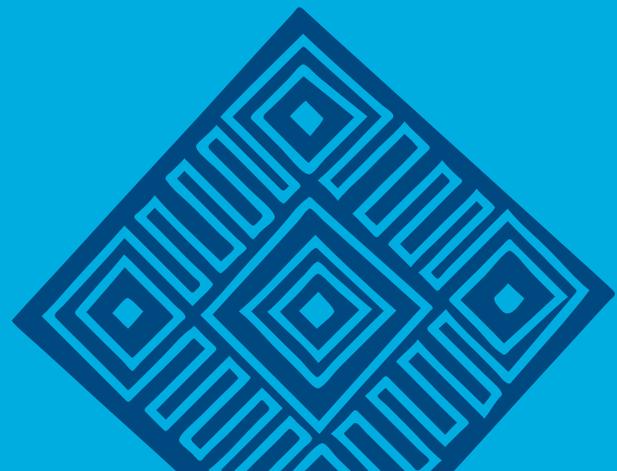
For now, Martina is enrolled in the Makoko Girls Empowerment Programme. She hopes that eventually she will be able to gain admission to university, study mass communications, and pursue her career in television.

Martina also had advice for her peers. “Girls should focus on their studies. And those learning vocations should concentrate, and stop mingling with unserious men”. ■

Social And Personal Assets

Many adolescent development and empowerment programmes have adopted an asset-building approach that recognizes the different types of internal and external resources young people need to succeed. While out-of-school girls clearly need to develop financial and other tangible assets, they also need less tangible social and personal assets. For example, self-esteem and agency are important personal assets. Social assets—such as family support, trusted friends and mentors, and group membership—are valuable in themselves, and in turn, can enhance self-esteem.

Martina comes with strong family support, an important social asset. But the Makoko Empowerment Programme staff recognise that many out-of-school girls lack adequate family support. Hence, the staff invest heavily in building compensating social assets through mentorship and group formation. And the staff report that of all the changes they see in the girls, the biggest impact is on their self-esteem and confidence, which had been so eroded by their lived realities.







“ I never attended school. . . I know things will be better when I complete my vocational training. ”
— Clemass Sokenu



Things Getting Better

Clemass Sokenu talks about her family: "My father is a fashion designer. He has two wives. My mother has five children. She sells pâté."⁶

Clemass' two brothers both attended school. Unlike her brothers, Clemass, her twin sister Clematine, and a third sister -- are all out-of-school. Clematine dropped out in primary two (second grade) because of the non-tuition costs associated with schooling; Clemass explains, "I never attended school at all. I was told that my twin sister and I refused [to attend], I never wanted to. [So] I was hawking pâté." Hope for a better life was remote.

Today Clemass and Clematine are both enrolled in the Makoko Girls Empowerment Programme. Following in her father's footsteps, Clemass is training in tailoring and fashion design. She says, emphatically, "I know things will be better when I complete my vocational training. I want to own a shop outside Makoko, in a location like Yaba." ■

6 A popular snack made with flour

Son Preference, Gender Inequality, And Access To Schooling

In many countries, pressure to produce sons is strong. For example, in Nigeria, women whose first child is a girl have (and desire) more children and are less likely to use contraceptives (Milazzo 2014), compared to women with male first-borns. Such parental preference for sons goes hand in hand with girls' lack of parity in education. Parents who view their sons as having more economic potential — e.g., because males enjoy preferential access to formal employment and stronger inheritance rights, while daughters tend to join (and contribute to) their

husbands' extended families — often see less rationale for educating their daughters. Moreover, the expectation that girls fulfil household responsibilities directly competes with their attending school. When cash is in short supply, the first to be withdrawn from school are the girls. According to UNICEF (2014), Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest proportion of countries with gender parity. In the end, of course, failing to educate girls not only denies them a basic human right, but also perpetuates inequality and undermines the whole society's economic and social progress.









Community Leaders Concerned About Girls' Safety

While out-of-school girls in Makoko are vulnerable to various hardships -- hunger, living away from one's parents, early marriage, unintended pregnancy, and early childbearing – a nearly universal difficulty is anxiety over their physical security and safety. Walking about selling fish or other wares, they are likely to pass by groups of unemployed young men playing cards and drinking; even those adult males working as fisherman may be at leisure in the afternoon, since their work is mostly done in the early hours of the day. Girls report being subject to constant harassment as well as rape, gender-based violence (such as slapping, kicking, choking, burning), and emotional abuse (Action Health 2011a). Many are vulnerable to sexual coercion, trading their bodies for food, transport, school related expenses, and protection.

Several local leaders are speaking out about girls' bodily safety, and about gender norms that normalize chronic sexual harassment and exploitation of girls by males in the community. Olope Janvier is the Community Development Association (CDA) Chairman for the Houses-on-Lagoon section of Makoko. Janvier is frank in expressing his grave concern about the problem of sexual violence, both by boys and by working adult men:



“ Our major challenge lies with the boys around; they harass and rape our girls. There's even one [boy] now that I am determined to take to court on the issue of rape. The girls need people who can keep advising them because . . . the boys deceive them and before you know it, they get pregnant. . . Most of them don't accept responsibility for the children they have fathered. Some would say I will only accept the baby after delivery. ”

Chief Raymond Adekunle Olaiya Akinsemeyin, the Baale of Makoko, concurs. He explains that most of the young men are jobless, noting:

“ They spend their time watching pornographic movies and then they go chasing the girls and getting them pregnant.” “We [in Makoko] are building a lawless society. Our girls are being dominated and harassed by these lawless men.” . . . When I came in (to power), I started arresting them [the culprits] and (the sexual harassment and violence) subsided (for a while) but it has started coming back. ”



Both men recognize that the issue of security is part of a constellation of quality of life issues in Makoko. For example, Janvier is respectful in seeking to encourage parents to enrol their children in school and in serving as a role model. “The parents are trying (to do what is right) but they are desperate. We at the CDA advise them to send their children to school (even if they also) go to fish... They know that some of our Baale’s children are in the universities, and sitting the (university entrance) exam”.

For his part, Baale Akinsemeyin recognizes that endemic violence against vulnerable girls is linked to a larger fabric of social disintegration and violence, commenting, “Before I came here, criminals used to rob and kill on every environmental sanitation day⁷. There was so much lawlessness that criminals were glorified”.

Both of these leaders, while working to curb crime and to hand sex offenders over to the police, also support the efforts by the Girls Empowerment Programme to change norms. Janvier concludes, “We need people who can help us sensitize these children. Akinsemeyin concurs, commenting, “We will need to do a lot of sensitization for our people”.

⁷ The Lagos State Government has designated the last Saturday of the month as environmental sanitation days. Movement is restricted between 7a.m. and 10a.m. so that citizens can spend this time cleaning up their homes and living environment





Daring To Dream Again

Out-of-school adolescent girls are typically the least-served and one of the most vulnerable members of society. They deserve to exercise their basic human rights, to overcome persistent discrimination and insecurity, and to fulfill their potential. The chance to develop their personal, social, and economic assets can also enable them to and contribute fully to their societies (Lloyd 2013; FMoH 2007 - 2011).

The lessons from Action Health Incorporated's Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme in Makoko resonate with those of similar programmes serving out-of-school girls living in conditions of extreme poverty in other parts of the world. A multi-dimensional approach is necessary to equip these girls to overcome the multiple challenges and disadvantages they encounter and to successfully make the transition to adulthood. This includes ensuring girls' rights to:

Formal Education and Literacy Programmes: Support for school-age girls to return to school must include resources to cover school attendance related expenses and meals.

Girl-friendly Spaces: All girls need safe places where they can meet and discuss issues affecting their lives; those who are married are often the most isolated.

Social Support and Mentoring: Given the lack of support most girls have, mentoring and counselling are often needed to enable girls to keep on the track they have set for themselves.

Financial Literacy and Livelihoods: Vocational training, financial literacy, and business for girls who are above school-age needs to be supplemented with resources as girls complete their training and establish themselves in their new vocations (e.g., hair dryers and other tools for hairdressing). Girls are also being encouraged to look beyond traditionally female vocations and to consider higher demand and better paying vocations. Some programmes emphasize the value of helping girls open their own savings accounts, no matter how meagre.

Girl-friendly Health Services: Health services must be affordable, accessible, safe, and confidential. Girls who are pregnant or lactating – whether single or married – have special health needs. While all sexually active girls need to be able to protect their health, married girls are often at the greatest risk of early pregnancy and of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Education: The most effective curricula against unintended pregnancy and STIs emphasize the social context of young people’s lives (Haberland 2015). Girls need chances to reflect critically about how gender norms affect their self-esteem, opportunities, safety, and well-being. Education should stress human rights, including the right to food, to live free of physical violence and sexual coercion, to education, and to delay marrying until they are adults.

The Makoko Empowerment Programme provides girls with many of these services. But girls also need strong support from the community, support that is beginning to grow in Makoko. In addition to the example of the community leaders in championing education and in challenging sexual and gender-based violence, ordinary Makoko residents play a role. Some refer neighbour girls to the programme. Others play a role as foster parents for those girls who are particularly desperate for support with their physical, emotional, or developmental well-being. Those who return to school (or are marginally attending) often need extra attention from teachers, counsellors and other mentors. Religious organizations, too, can play a key role in providing mentoring and support. For out-of-school girls working hard to exercise their rights and to better their lot, community support makes all the difference.

Like out-of-school girls everywhere, those in Makoko have dreams. They desperately want to escape poverty. They want to learn, not to be out hawking while other adolescents are studying or in training for a vocation. They want to feel more confident about themselves. They want to be safe. They want to return to school and keep studying to become journalists or doctors—or to learn a trade that will allow them some meaningful income of their own. They want the respect of their community members and leaders. They want to believe in their futures.

Given a chance, these girls can breathe life into their dreams.



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