

**P3.3. Adolescent Early Marriage in Northern Nigeria: Case Study on Development of Effective Training Materials for Community Advocates - Halima Ben Umar**, Population Council, Abuja; **Murtala Umar**, Population Council, Abuja; **Chris Ogedengbe**, Population Council, Abuja; **Andrew Karlyn**, Population Council, Abuja

*E-mail: humar@popcouncil.org; benumar2000@yahoo.com*

**Background/Significance:** Early marriage is an important contributor to HIV exposure and other negative reproductive health outcomes for adolescent girls across sub-Saharan Africa, and northern Nigeria in particular. A large proportion of Nigerian girls are married during early adolescence, where the median age is 14.6 and 15.0 in the North-West and North-East geo-political zones of Nigeria respectively.

The HIV Prevention Project for Vulnerable Youth in Northern Nigeria, implemented by the Population Council, seeks to prevent new HIV infections via abstinence and marital fidelity through targeted prevention messages for pre-marital, married, divorced and widowed adolescent girls. Activities include individual peer counseling for young girls and training of community advocates at faith-based organizations (FBOs) throughout Northern Nigeria.

**Intervention/Activity Tested:** The case study presents a methodology for developing an effective and appropriate training manual on reproductive, maternal and sexual health issues for community-based advocates at FBOs throughout Northern Nigeria.

**Methodology:** Community knowledge and religious texts were used to develop a religiously and culturally sensitive Advocacy Manual for community advocates in Northern Nigeria. The manual was developed in collaboration with three Nigerian NGOs: Islamic Education Trust (IET), Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), and Adolescent Health Information Project (AHIP). These three organizations contributed grass-roots understanding of the cultural and religious context of Nigeria, and co-wrote the manual with the Population Council. The manual, which is comprised of 21 modules, incorporates and draws on religious texts, namely the Bible and the Koran, to deliver messages about behavior and sexual health. The manual addresses a range of issues including abstinence, STIs and HIV, safe motherhood, child spacing, gender violence and couple communication. The manual was completed in 2006, and has been used to train more than 500 community advocates in eight states throughout Northern Nigeria. The manual is translated into both English and Hausa.

**Findings:** A religiously and culturally sensitive advocacy manual was created to address often-taboo issues related to behavior and sexual, maternal and reproductive health. The Population Council has employed the manual in trainings of more than 500 community advocates throughout eight Nigerian states, and the trainings have been met with considerable success. Community advocates say that the manual is a practical and versatile tool for delivering health messages. In addition, the manual was considered so effective by the US Department of Defense (DOD) HIV Prevention program in Nigeria, that it incorporated the manual in its own trainings in host communities surrounding Nigerian military bases. The manual continues to be used in community advocate trainings throughout Northern Nigeria, and continues to offer a community- and faith-based approach to delivering health and behavioral messages to vulnerable youth.

**Lessons Learned:** Employing community knowledge and utilizing culturally relevant religious texts offers a useful methodology for creating training materials for community advocates in Northern Nigeria. In particular, this methodology offers a technique for introducing and addressing often-taboo behavioral, maternal, reproductive and sexual health issues.

Incorporating community knowledge and religious texts in the development process allowed for the creation of an Advocacy Manual that addresses taboo health and behavior topics in a religiously and culturally sensitive manner. This methodology offers a promising way to train community advocates in health-related subjects, and a way to reach Northern Nigerian communities with important health messages within their social and religious contexts.