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Women Lead in Emergencies (WLIE)

LEARNING BRIEF



BACKGROUND

In Northeast Nigeria, gender-based violence (GBV) has escalated due to ongoing insurgency since 2015, displacing approximately two million people. Women and girls face physical, mental, and sexual assault, as well as forced and early marriages. Approximately 1.4 million people require GBV assistance, yet prevention mechanisms and response systems remain weak. Additionally, women and girls are left to navigate a complex web of services delivered by various providers.

CARE Nigeria, with funding from the **Foreign Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO)** in partnership with Ekklesiyar Yan'Uwa A Nigeria (EYN) and NEEM Foundation is implementing the Strengthening Protection Services and Resilience (STEPsERN) to strengthen GBV response by enhancing mental health, psychosocial support, and sexual reproductive health services in Northeast Nigeria. A key component of this intervention is empowering women to lead change within their communities. Through the **Women Lead in Emergencies (WLiE)** approach, the project equips women with skills to advocate for improved services. The WLiE approach also ensures that **women's needs inform GBV-related services and decision-making**.

WOMEN LEAD IN EMERGENCIES (WLiE): LEARNING AND IMPACT

At its core, WLiE is not just about improving services—it is about empowering women at the grassroots level to lead. WLiE is a program model designed to support crisis-affected women taking on meaningful public participation and leadership in humanitarian and emergency contexts.¹ By equipping them with leadership and advocacy skills, WLiE enables women to hold service providers and local authorities accountable and ensure their diverse needs are met.

In Borno and Yobe States, CARE and EYN implemented WLiE as part of the STEPsERN project with significant results.

KEY FINDINGS:

"I have now been selected by the emir council to contribute to the decision-making within the community"
- Women's Foundation Group.

Women's groups identified the following as the most valuable aspects of the project:

- **Building Confidence Through Solidarity:** Participants reported increased confidence, particularly in engaging with male leaders in the community. They highlighted the degree to which the solidarity of the group model provided them with a strong foundation for developing advocacy skills and influencing decision-making.
- **Creating New Spaces for Women's Participation:** CARE's role as a facilitator of access to decision-makers was highly valued as it enabled women to gain legitimacy and influence in governance processes.
- **Supporting Women and Girls to Access Services and Reduce Risks of GBV:** WLiE empowered women to voice their concerns, strengthening accountability mechanisms for GBV services.



In addition, change is unfolding in alignment with the Women Lead in Emergencies Theory of Change, as women progressively build their agency, knowledge, and skills and put them into action. Each step reinforces confidence, creating a positive cycle of empowerment, as reflected in their testimonies.

1.1 KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Project results show increased awareness of rights and available services. This is vitally important because for services to be effective people must know how and when to access them. Women emphasized that understanding their rights has empowered them to speak out without fear, describing the training as an 'eye-opener' that enabled them to advocate for themselves and unite as equals.

The Rapid Gender Analysis on Power and Participation (RGA-P) conducted by CARE Nigeria and EYN in Yobe State provided clear guidance on where individuals can seek specific support. Meanwhile, the mid-term review (MTR) observed measurable improvements in community knowledge. For instance:

- Awareness of rights and services increased from 17.6% at baseline to 22.3% at midline.
- The mid-term review highlighted the need for further awareness-building efforts.

"It has given us knowledge about things we have never known about. The areas where we have been left behind as women and the opportunities that we have been denied." - Goodness Group

1.2 BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

A recurring theme in **women's testimonials** was the confidence gained through the project. Women reported a newfound ability to:

- Speak in public and engage with community leaders.
- Negotiate effectively with their husbands and male counterparts.
- Work collaboratively within solidarity groups to drive change.

Women particularly spoke about the importance of this collective dynamic, emphasizing how it created spaces to navigate disagreements and grow together.

1.3 ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS

WLIE groups successfully advocated for their needs with local authorities. Many women noted that before the program, they lacked **any formal avenues for raising their concerns**. WLIE gave group members the ability to create new spaces to lobby for action and ensure that their issues could be heard and addressed.



Testimonials

"Conflict management: When we have individual differences, we agree to disagree. After the disagreement, we come back together and hold each other's hand because we need each other."
-Goodness Group

"Before WLIE came, I couldn't stand in public and talk, but now I am the person presenting for my group. In our groups, many women were like me, before we couldn't talk, we felt shy to speak... [WLIE] is bringing out the best in us."
-Precious Group

"Without WLIE we can't face the community leaders, but WLIE training has paved the way for us to meet and discuss with the stakeholders. If not for WLIE none of us will start going to the leaders. We've been given an opportunity, and changes will come."
-Goodness Group

"The majority of us initially cannot approach the traditional leaders, but now we've been trained and feel confident and free to sit and deliberate on matters until we reach an agreement and understanding with them."
Kauna Group

"We have opportunities to advocate to the security agencies, now the community members feel free to report GBV cases to the security. We feel free to call the attention of the security personnel and they honour our invitation."
Favour Group

1.4 TANGIBLE ACHIEVEMENTS

WLIE is an action-oriented model, ensuring that women's participation leads to real change. We can see evidence of how the increased profile and legitimacy of women's actions can have important impacts on the lives of GBV survivors.

“We have access to the Safe space- not only the WLiE women but the women and girls within our community have access to this safe space... We can take survivors for treatment of rape cases within 72 hours after the incident. We have access to visibility which makes our work easier, and the community accepts us easily.” - Haske Group

Beyond changes in the responsiveness of services WLiE group members have also found that they are more **proactively involved in decision-making processes**, they are actively engaged as part of broader community decision-making.

“We have connections to the stakeholders and the Emir’s palace. Whenever our attention is needed on an issue, they will contact us, and we will handle the case. I have been selected by the emir council and contribute to the decision-making within the community”. - Women’s Foundation Group

Women highlighted that these changes have significantly influenced how violence against women and girls is perceived and have improved the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks. While legal provisions for prosecuting perpetrators exist, widespread impunity has historically undermined their enforcement.

‘We have access to female lawyers² who strongly stood by us, in any GBV cases. These female lawyers play their roles seriously and ensure perpetrators are being prosecuted. We first report to the police station, then they will be channeled to the CID, and then the female lawyers come in to handle the case. The evidence is the number of jailed perpetrators, from this line.’ - Women’s Foundation Group

GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS AS REPORTED BY THE GROUPS

Since they came together through WLiE and began implementing their action plans, groups responded with the following:³

- Reduction in GBV cases, including early and forced marriage, due to increased community awareness and sensitization on its harmful effects. This has also led to improved access to justice and a higher reporting rate as more people become aware of their rights and available services.
- Reduction in street hawking among young girls thus a reduction in exposure to GBV.
- Women representing other women in the community.
- Women and girls increased access to sexual and reproductive health services.
- Access to speak to and engage with community leaders for women’s voices to be heard.
- Support from husbands, male allies, community leaders and religious leaders.

‘I am proud because now the perpetrators are being punished, and this is creating fear in whoever might think of committing rape’.

-WLiE Male Ally from Potiskum

1.5 SHIFTING MINDSETS

One of the greatest successes of WLiE is its role in **challenging gender norms**. By engaging **men and boys as allies**, the program fosters a cultural shift toward gender equality. WLiE participants have particularly highlighted how WLiE helped to **shift mindsets about the roles of women and girls, in the household and within communities**.

² Community based paralegals to support women and girls access services and justice for GBV are a component of the wider STEPSERN project framework.

³ These outcomes cannot be attributed to WLiE approach alone but through the combination of the work of the WLiE groups with the other components of the STEPSERN project.

MALE ALLIES

WLiE group members identified male allies within the community and invited them to participate in reflection sessions on gender and power dynamics, as well as in planning WLiE-led community initiatives⁴. Through these discussions, male allies expressed pride in publicly supporting WLiE groups and highlighted the positive changes they have experienced or observed in their communities as a result of WLiE's actions.

CONCLUSION

WLiE has empowered women and girls with **greater awareness of their rights** and the **confidence to lead** in their communities and in decision-making spaces; engaging men and boys (and community leaders) to have increased awareness of and to act in support for women and girls' rights.⁵

To **truly address the root causes of GBV**, women must be supported to **have a voice in decision-making and leadership**. Sustained advocacy, continued community engagement, and strengthened accountability mechanisms will ensure that the gains achieved through STEPSERN are not only **maintained but expanded**.



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⁴ The WLIE methodology includes as part of its six activity areas, reflection sessions with the WLIE group members, development and implementation of action plans by WLIE groups, and the engagement of men and boys in project activities.

<https://www.careinternational.org.uk/what-we-do/crisis-response/women-lead-in-emergencies/>

⁵ Under the STEPSERN project, WLIE was implemented alongside additional activities to reduce GBV and increase access to GBV and health services and justice.