



## IMPACT STORY



# ARRESTED FOR BEING RAPED: CHANGING HARMFUL LAWS AND NORMS IN NIGERIA

Photo: Patrick Rose/UNICEF

At just 13, Halima\* didn't really understand that she was pregnant. In fact, she was almost eight months along when some neighbours noticed her pregnancy and relayed the information to the police. Upon questioning, Halima revealed that she had been raped by a neighbour—but instead of receiving support, she was arrested and prosecuted for adultery.

Halima was charged under Sharia Law, a legal system that governs parts of northern Nigeria. Unlike her attacker, she pleaded guilty to the charges and was sentenced to a six-month jail term or a fine of 6,000 Nigerian naira—a sum her family could not afford. "I had given up and resolved to watching my daughter wallow in pain and shame daily," said Halima's mother.

Halima's fortunes changed when the magistrate involved in the case attended a Spotlight Initiative-supported orientation on the importance of protecting girls' and women's rights. Recognizing that Halima was both a child and a survivor of sexual violence who should not have been punished, he referred her case to a pro-bono lawyer attending the orientation session. The lawyer was then able to have the alleged perpetrator arrested, as well as support Halima to deliver the baby safely. "Halima was 9 months pregnant and had never attended antenatal care," said the lawyer. "She was brought to Maryam Abacha Women and Children Hospital where I coordinated the mobilization of resources to save her life."

### FAST FACTS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NIGERIA

- 30% of women aged 15-49 have reported experiences of sexual abuse, with a marked divide between girls and women in urban (33%) and rural (24%) areas.
- Nigeria has the highest number of child marriages, with an estimated 22 million child brides as of 2018, which accounts for 40% of all child brides in West Africa.
- Child marriage in Nigeria is enabled by poor education, a high rate of out-of-school girls, poverty and insecurity. Some parents see child marriage as a form of protection from violence and promiscuity.

Halima has since been moved to a safe house so that she can bond with her baby and live free from fear of reprisal: "I am happy for the support, I want to go to school and be a lawyer," she said.

Stories like Halima's highlight the need to change the laws and attitudes that normalize violence against women and girls. In Nigeria, more than 17 per cent of women experience violence in their lifetime, though the true statistics are likely much higher. More than 43 per cent of girls aged 20 to 24 were married or first in union before the age of 18.

Although the government has made significant efforts to ensure justice for survivors of violence, child rights law is lacking in the state of Sokoto, where Halima lives. Nigeria enacted the Child Rights Act in 2003, but requires that each of its 36 states domesticate the act—something Sokoto is yet to do.

To help overcome these challenges, the Spotlight Initiative is investing in strengthening protections for women and children experiencing violence at every level. Training sessions like the one attended by the magistrate in Halima’s case are being conducted for social workers, police, healthcare workers, teachers and civil society organizations to help them better meet the needs of survivors. “The case of Halima is one of too many,” said Pius Uwamanua, Child Protection Specialist at UNICEF in Sokoto. “The Spotlight project has facilitated several interventions for survivors as the culture of silence is gradually breaking off. We see it unfolding—a vision where all women and girls are free from violence and harmful practices.”

The government’s capacity to collect, collate and manage data—a critical step in changing and strengthening laws—is also being built through training sessions on child protection information management systems.

At the community level, gender-sensitization sessions are being held in communities to help end negative social norms and harmful practices that perpetuate violence.

It’s only through a sustained, multi-sector response to violence that girls like Halima will get the justice and bright future that they deserve.

\*Name has been changed to protect survivor

This story has been adapted from the [Spotlight Initiative website](#).



Community sensitization on ending violence against women and girls in Sokoto, Nigeria. Photo: UNICEF Nigeria

## PARTNERS FOR CHANGE








The **Spotlight Initiative** is a global, multi-year partnership between the **European Union** and the **United Nations** to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. Country-level implementation is led by the United Nations Resident Coordinator, in partnership with UN agencies, European Union delegations and civil society organizations.

The Spotlight Initiative in Nigeria is implemented by **UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, UNDP** and **UNESCO** across 6 states in 6 geopolitical zones of the country. The Initiative works closely with the **Government of Nigeria**, the **EU Delegation**, civil society organizations, private sector, and media partners on law reforms, capacity building, service provision, changing knowledge and attitudes, civil society organization engagement and gender-based violence reporting.

In 2019, the Spotlight Initiative reached around **1.2 million** people as part of public outreach initiatives. The programme not only challenged the culture of silence, but also amplified the voices of more than **3,000** women and girls who stood up against rape, battery and physical abuse.

Within the Initiative, **UN Women’s** contribution focused on strengthening women’s coalitions and women’s movements to advocate for the passage of laws and demand efficient gender-based violence response services from the government and duty bearers. Early gains and achievements include the establishment of the **Nana Khadijah Centre**, the first Sexual Assault Referral Centre in the Northwestern part of Nigeria.

### FOLLOW UN WOMEN AT:

-  [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)
-  [www.facebook.com/unwomen](https://www.facebook.com/unwomen)
-  [www.twitter.com/un\\_women](https://www.twitter.com/un_women)
-  [www.youtube.com/unwomen](https://www.youtube.com/unwomen)
-  [www.instagram.com/unwomen](https://www.instagram.com/unwomen)