



FYP graduate, a rural community's first qualified midwife



Hadiza is the first qualified midwife ever to serve the Kunchi community. As well as her important role as a professional health worker, Hadiza is also a champion and a role model for other women and their families.

Access to maternal and neonatal healthcare is a serious challenge for families living in rural communities across northern Nigeria – and addressing this situation is the rationale for the UKAid funded Women for Health (W4H) Programme. Since November 2012, W4H has helped to increase the number and capacity of female health workers in the states of Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Zamfara, and Yobe – and since 2018 W4H has expanded into conflict-affected Borno. This success story tells the story of Hadiza Bala, one of the qualified professional midwives recruited and trained with the support of W4H – and the impact she has had since returning in 2017 to serve in Kunchi, the small rural town in Kano state where she is from.

The challenge

In the north of Nigeria, there has been a chronic shortage of female health workers – and at the same time social norms prescribe that women receive reproductive care from other women. The very low numbers of female frontline health workers, particularly in rural areas, mean that few government health facilities have trained midwives, health workers or female nurses. As a result, the region had some of the poorest maternal and newborn health indicators in sub Saharan Africa.

In response to this challenge, the UKAid-funded Women for Health (W4H) programme focused on a sustainable approach – recruiting young women already residing in the rural areas for training so that they return to their home community to provide culturally appropriate health services for girls and women. At the same time, the programme empowered these women to act as local champions, transforming attitudes to women and girls and helping to shift gendered social norms.

Since it began in November 2012, W4H has worked in five northern Nigerian states of Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Yobe, and Zamfara, strengthening stakeholders' capacity to address the female health worker crisis, improving the management, quality of teaching and gender-responsiveness of health training institutions, and engaging rural communities to support young women to train and practice as health workers. The W4H programme was extended to include the conflict-affected Borno state in April 2018.

W4H's key intervention is the Foundation year Programme (FYP), which is specifically designed to enable young women from rural communities to improve their academic credentials, study skills and confidence to be able to enter professional training offered by Health Training Institutions (HTIs). FYP graduates are 'bonded' to serve for an agreed period (typically two years) in a rural community after completing their studies.

Since W4H introduced the FYP in 2013, a total of 8,792 women have enrolled in professional health training in the W4H supported HTIs. By 2017, the first FYP supported students began graduating from professional courses – and since then a total of 423 FYP recruits have graduated (as of January 2020), of which 72% have been deployed to rural areas. In Kano state alone, more than 120 women from rural areas have been supported through professional health studies, and are qualified and currently practising in the rural health facilities in their respective communities: this success story examines the experience of one of them and her impact since entering professional service.

Hadiza's story

Kunchi in Kano state is a small rural town about 100km by road from the state capital. The town has one Primary Healthcare Centre (PHC), which serves the surrounding communities – Kunchi Local Government Area has some 111,000 inhabitants. The PHC has a functional antenatal care unit, but the frontline staff are typically posted from outside the community, as is the case with most rural PHCs – meaning that the level of service is limited and usually restricted to official working hours only. This situation changed in 2017, when Hadiza Bala, who is from Kunchi town, graduated from professional training.

Hadiza is the first qualified midwife ever to serve the Kunchi community and is providing various healthcare services at the PHC, such as family planning, antenatal care, attending deliveries and health talks for women. As well as her important role as a professional health worker, Hadiza is also a champion and a role model for other women and their families.

Hadiza completed her secondary education in 2010, and afterwards had little realistic hope of further study due to her circumstances. She got married after completing her secondary school education, had her first child and



was fully occupied in taking care of her family as a full-time housewife. However, a new hope and aspiration emerged when W4H came to her village in 2013 for an awareness raising session about the FYP. Hadiza was recruited to the programme and became one of first cohort of 102 students admitted to the newly established FYP programme in Kano State.

Hadiza's Commitment

Hadiza says she had always hoped to do more than be a full-time housewife – but it was the unmet health needs of women in her community, as well as her own experience as a mother, that led Hadiza to apply for a place on the FYP and pursue a career as a health worker. Women in the community around Kunchi often face issues in pregnancy and childbirth due to limited antenatal services, lack of skilled and qualified birth attendants and post-natal care.

According to her husband, Nura, Hadiza's dream to enter professional health training was supported by every member of the family.

"We all understood that it would be a great opportunity to have a woman from Kunchi community providing services at our local PHC", he says.

During over three years of studies in the health training institution, Hadiza received strong support (financial, material and moral) from members of the community including the village head, which helped her to complete her studies, and community hopes and expectations were high. Nura supported Hadiza's ambition by helping to take care of their baby and the home in order to allow her to focus on her studies. This support for Hadiza continues, with Nura taking charge of housework so as to enable her to work extended hours at the PHC.

Hadiza's professional service

Hadiza is currently one of the health workers serving in the Antenatal Care (ANC) unit of Kunchi PHC, and



the only one residing in the community (the other health workers commute). Therefore, she's often called upon to attend to pregnant women when services are required outside working hours. Previously when health services were needed outside working hours, pregnant women used to travel some 20 Km to Kazaure or Bichi. Since Hadiza entered professional service in 2017, this has changed.

Hadiza is described by her supervisor, Rakiya, as a very strong and dedicated professional, who always strives to give her best.

"Hadiza has been ever present in handling labour and deliveries, most especially when it does happen outside our work hours," says Rakiya.

Pregnant women attending the antenatal clinic told W4H that their experience has significantly improved since Hadiza started working in Kunchi's PHC. For instance, some of them recalled that it used to be difficult for them to get to the PHC early enough to be seen, as many of them had to attend first to their family before coming for antenatal care. However, Hadiza has eased the pressure as she's available beyond the regular work hours to ensure everyone is seen. Other patients recounted earlier occasions when they had arrived at the clinic outside work hours or at weekends and there were no health workers to attend to them.



Hadiza feels she has been able to improve the antenatal experiences of other women in the community. She recalls her own experience of being pregnant with her second child and being unable to get the appropriate care. This eventually led to a serious complication that took her months to recover from. She believes pregnant women have a lot to deal with already and the least she can do as a health worker is to provide services that would help them to go through childbirth without complication. Her motivation is to help and care for her fellow women in the community – being accepted and respected in that role by the women in her community has boosted her self-esteem and made her want to give more.

Hadiza - a model

Being the first Kunchi community member to become a professional health worker, Hadiza is a role model to women in the area, says Ado Muhammad, a member of the facility health committee. The committee has strongly supported local women who aspire to become health professionals, including by appealing to families to allow them to study. Inspired by Hadiza's success, many local parents are now keen to see their girls follow

a similar path, and already two young women from the community have enrolled in health training institutions through FYP.

The PHC reports that the numbers seeking antenatal service has significantly increased in Kunchi, mainly due to availability of services at times when many pregnant women are able to access them. "Since Hadiza started working at the PHC we are always assured of receiving antenatal services and this has encouraged all of us to attend the antenatal classes," says a pregnant woman interviewed at the PHC. Since Hadiza started, the PHC has been able to offer regular sessions on family planning and child spacing, antenatal care, and general health.

Challenges

Hadiza's journey has not been easy, she has faced hardship and sacrifices to qualify and enter service. When she enrolled on the FYP, she struggled to take care of her one-year old baby while also focus on her studies. She recalls how hard it was to switch between her different roles of wife, mother and student. In particular, she remembers the medical complications she experienced during the delivery of her second child, when she couldn't get help when she needed it. It was a situation that almost took her life, and that incapacitated her for some time afterwards – and it inspired her to become a qualified, professional midwife.

Since returning to her community, Hadiza has also experienced difficulties. After qualifying professionally, she had to work for nearly two years as a volunteer without remuneration, as the government did not employ her. Her motivation to help other women in her community, as well as the support of her family and the community, inspired her to keep working after she qualified. Her patience was rewarded and in August 2019 she was employed on a government contract.



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