



FYP graduate, saving lives in her rural community



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 conflicted affected Borno. This success story tells the story of Hauwa Abdullahi, one of the qualified professional midwives recruited and trained with the support of W4H – and the impact she has had since returning in 2018 to serve in Tumfafi, the village in Kano state where she is from.

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Audu Magaji, Hauwa's father

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, 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.

The community

Tumfafi, a community of some 14,000 inhabitants in the Dawakin Tofa Local Government Area of Kano State, is in many ways typical of the rural communities targeted by W4H despite being just 15 km from the state capital city. In terms of access of healthcare, Tumfafi is served by a single health facility (a dispensary) and until recently none of the staff were from, or based in, the community. For many years, this facility was staffed by a very limited team of two female community health extension workers, one female junior health extension worker, a female dental technician and a male lab technician. There were no midwives or nurses based at the facility. This changed in 2018 when Hauwa Abdullahi, who grew up in Tumfafi, graduated from the School of Basic Midwifery in Dambatta and returned to serve her community.

The inhabitants of Tumfafi are predominantly subsistence farmers – the area's main economic activities are the rearing and keeping of chickens, goats and other animals, and farming and trading farm produce. Apart from the years spent studying 30km away at Dambatta School of Nursing and Midwifery,

Huawa has lived her whole life in Tumfafi – as part of an extended family of 18 people.

Hauwa's journey begins

Hauwa attended local primary and secondary schools. She left school in 2011 aged 15 with just three Senior



Secondary Certificate Examination credits. In 2014, she was accepted onto the year-long FYP 'bridging course' so that she could gain the two additional credits required for her to join the mainstream midwifery programme, before moving to the three month 'preparatory' FYP course, which enabled her to pass the entrance exam in 2015 and successfully transition to the three year midwifery programme at the School of Basic Midwifery in Dambatta.

Her journey into the FYP was not without challenges. Initially, community members tried to discourage her

father from allowing her to enroll due negative beliefs about further education for young women. However, her father believed in the process and allowed her to proceed. As Hauwa said to the W4H team in 2016:

“Initially the community members discouraged my father from allowing me to go with the fear that I might go wayward, but now they are all very supportive because instead they saw positive changes [in me].”

Becoming a qualified midwife

Hauwa began supporting pregnant women in her community during her clinical year at the midwifery school. She is now 23 years old and since she graduated she has been working in Tumfafi’s health facility. (She is currently working on a voluntary basis and is hopeful this will lead to a contract. In some W4H supported states all FYP graduates are employed by the state on graduation). Hauwa is the first trained midwife in her community.

“I had always wanted to be health worker; I am particularly interested in Obstetrics and Gynecology (O&G) so as to be able to help my fellow women. Pregnant women in my community are always consulting me; I go to their homes or consult with them over the phone,” said Hauwa.

In northern Nigeria, social norms prevent women from consulting with male health workers. Increased number of female health workers will lead to improvement in women’s access to and use of health services in northern Nigeria and help the country make progress towards achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in the region. In 2013, only 19.5% and 12.3% of deliveries in the North East and North West of Nigeria were attended by a skilled provider, compared to 82% in the South East and South West. Moreover, rural deliveries in the north were three times less likely than those in urban areas to be attended by a skilled provider.

Saving women’s lives

Thanks to her midwifery training and support from the W4H programme, Hauwa is now a valuable trained health resource in her own community and for neighboring communities such as Dandalama, which



is six kilometers from Tumfafi. In 2019, Hauwa helped 20-year-old Firdausi Hamisu successfully deliver triplets. Firdausi says she’s grateful to Hauwa for saving her life and that of her baby boys.

“Hauwa ensured my babies and I were in good condition even after my delivery; I see her as someone who is well-trained and is also doing her job very well,” says Firdausi.

Twenty-five-year-old Tijjani Da’u, Firdausi’s husband, is also grateful to Hauwa for the care and support she gave his wife. Firdausi had been in labour for two days before she was taken to the facility where Hauwa works.

“With our first child, delivery was without complications but with the triplets, my wife was in labour for two days and the community’s Traditional Birth Attendant (TBA) was helpless. So, we decided to go to the health facility,” recalls Tijjani.

Rabiu Usman has worked at the Tumfafi health facility for more than seven years; he says since Hauwa started working at the facility, attendance at Ante Natal Care (ANC) services had risen, with more women coming to the sessions Hauwa runs on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“Being a native of the community, Hauwa relates very well with the patients (women and their children) and doesn’t discriminate against them or judge them. They feel comfortable and free to speak their minds with her, hence the improved uptake of services,” says Rabiu.

Changing attitudes in the community

Hauwa is now a role model in her community and surrounding area, and is widely admired; her training as a midwife and support to pregnant women in particular is changing people's attitudes towards higher education for girls and women pursuing careers as professional health workers.

"Before now, girls were being withdrawn from school to be married-off; however, because of Hauwa's [exemplary] support to women, parents are now not only motivated to allow their daughters to further their education but also enroll them in science schools [so they can also become midwives]," says Lawan Aliyu, the village head of Tumfafi.

Audu Magaji is Hauwa's father who has also been a strong supporter of his daughter's quest to become a midwife. He says his motivation was borne out of his daughter's passion to become a health worker, who could support women not only in Tumfafi but also beyond.

"Hauwa has now become an inspiration to girls in the community; many girls are now studying sciences so as to be able to study health-related courses and become health workers," says Magaji.

Thanks to Hauwa's support to her during the delivery of her triplets, Firdausi – who holds only a primary school certificate – now says, if given the opportunity, she would also like to further her own education and also give her yet unborn daughters the opportunity to pursue higher education to become midwives. Tijjani, her husband, who has not been to school at all, says he now better appreciates the value of education.

A role model to girls

Since becoming a midwife, more and more girls in Tumfafi community want to associate with Hauwa, while mothers keep telling her they want their daughters to also become midwives.

"Because of her work helping pregnant women during emergencies before they are conveyed to the hospital, Hauwa is now admired by her peers and by younger girls in the community," says Lawan Aliyu

Eighteen-year-old Zainab Baba, who is currently studying Business Education at the Federal College of Education (FCE) in Kano says she admires Hauwa.

"I am impressed by Hauwa's conduct. Her work gives her the opportunity to help women hence our love for the work she does. If I had the opportunity to become a midwife, I would be willing to forego my business studies and pursue it – I have always wanted to be a health worker," says Zainab.

Eighteen-year-old Furaira Abdullahi, Hauwa's younger sister and mentee, has just graduated from Girls Science College (GSC) Garko and is now preparing to pursue a professional health course.

"I am always excited to see her in her uniform going to work, and I wish it was me!" says Furaira.

While enjoying her role in the community, Hauwa has set her sights on returning to education in the future. She is currently preparing to pursue a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing at Bayero University, Kano (BUK), after which she plans to become a lecturer, so as to help produce more midwives and nurses like her – and to help address the challenge of access to quality healthcare services for women in rural communities such as Tumfafi and Dandalama.



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