



## Forging a partnership to transform standards in health worker education in Northern Nigeria



*This success story describes the role this partnership played in transforming the training and practice of nurses and midwives in Northern Nigeria*

The partnership that blossomed between the Women for Health (W4H) programme and the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria (NMCN) was a critical success factor supporting efforts to scale up the impact of W4H's interventions in Northern Nigeria. It also played a key role in revitalising and strengthening the NMCN, ensuring that it has the capacity to continue to raise standards in health worker education throughout Nigeria. This success story captures the evolution of this partnership and what was achieved as a result – and signposts the future direction for the NMCN now that W4H has ended.

The main achievements of this partnership were:

- ◆ **Improved relations between health training institutions (HTIs) and the NMCN.** The HTIs now see the NMCN as a partner in improving standards. The NMCN has begun to provide supportive supervision to HTIs across the whole of Nigeria and better understands its role in helping HTIs to improve and meet accreditation standards.
- ◆ **Improved standards of health worker education.** Initiatives introduced to raise standards at HTIs by W4H have been adopted by the NMCN, including Student Centred Learning, E-Learning and formal training for preceptors who teach students practical clinical skills. Pass rates in W4H-supported HTIs have improved strongly.
- ◆ **Improved information relating to students and HTI performance.** W4H supported the introduction of computer-based Student Information Management Systems, which NMCN subsequently adopted for national roll out. NMCN also introduced online submission of accreditation data to speed up the five-yearly accreditation review process.
- ◆ **A revitalised NMCN that has an ambitious strategic plan for 2018-2022.** W4H supported NMCN to develop this strategy and provided capacity development to help the Council implement it.

*“W4H have been our very strong partners for a long time. Before the programme, the schools of nursing and midwifery only had provisional status, and now across the six states all but one of the institutions have full accreditation, and student intake has increased. This is linked with improved performance, with pass rates up to 90%. I want to acknowledge with gratitude that things have improved enormously at the schools.”*

**Alhaji Faruk Umar Abubakar**, Registrar, Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria

## The challenge

The Women for Health (W4H) Programme (2012-2020) was created to address the acute shortage of female health workers in rural areas of five states of Northern Nigeria – Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Yobe and Zamfara. From 2018, the programme expanded into conflict-affected Borno state and areas of neighbouring Yobe affected by the insurgency – at the same time focusing efforts in the other four states on handing over funding, management and governance of W4H interventions to state governments and other stakeholders.

In its last two years, W4H also supported other states that wanted to adopt its interventions, such as the innovative Foundation Year Programme (FYP), which supports young women from rural communities to be able to qualify for places on professional health worker courses. Eight states that were not part of W4H are developing initiatives – and six Northern states are establishing their own versions of the FYP.

Established by Nigerian law, the NMCN is the only regulatory body for all cadres of nurses and midwives in Nigeria. The council's primary objectives are to ensure high quality of nursing and midwifery education in Nigeria, maintain high standards of professional practice and enforce discipline within the profession. Its functions are: designing, implementing and evaluating educational programmes; examination and monitoring of standards of nursing and midwifery practice in the country; and registration, certification and licensing of professional nurses and midwives. The NMCN is also responsible for the accreditation of health training institutions (HTIs) and indexing – setting the maximum number of permitted places on professional courses for nurses and midwives.

When W4H began in 2012, NMCN was short staffed and had limited funding (challenges that are still faced today).



The Council had weak institutional capacity, did not have a human resources (HR) plan, did not conduct performance management of staff and offered very limited training for staff. Functions in HR and finance were carried out manually on paper. In many ways, NMCN was typical of the Nigerian Civil Service. Individual accountability was an issue and there was a shortage of appropriately-trained and experienced technical staff.

In January 2013, W4H conducted a baseline assessment of the HTIs in the five intervention states and found them to be in a progressive cycle of decline. At that time, HTIs faced multiple, linked challenges: a shortage of funding, with no regular, committed funding and no control over their budget or spending; inadequate physical infrastructure, which was typically in poor repair; the quality of education was low, tutor numbers were low, tutors were not well prepared and lacked teaching skills; and graduation rates were low – external exam pass rates were typically around 60%, some were lower.

These factors combined to mean that only one HTI in the five states initially supported by W4H had full accreditation status. Many were operating on provisional accreditation status which severely limited the number of students they could enroll. At this time, the relationship between HTIs and NMCN was not positive – communication was not good, and HTIs saw the Council as a master to be obeyed, rather than a partner in producing well-qualified health workers.

## The response

In the early years of W4H, the programme's key priorities were establishing the FYP, and improving standards and the accreditation status of the HTIs. To achieve the latter, W4H worked with the HTIs to review the accreditation criteria and identify the issues that needed to be addressed to meet regulatory requirements. The HTIs needed improvement across the board: in the quality of teaching and the number of tutors; in governance and administration; in levels of funding from government; and in quality of the HTIs physical infrastructure and facilities.

W4H embarked on an ambitious programme to upgrade the HTIs in all of these areas, and then facilitated advisory visits from NMCN inspectors to give feedback on their progress towards meeting the accreditation criteria. By 2018, many of the HTIs had been formally inspected and achieved full accreditation and the total number of indexed places had more than doubled. A two-way dialogue between the colleges and the NMCN has been established and relations were much improved. W4H helped the NMCN better

understand the needs of the colleges and understand its own role and responsibilities towards them.

In 2017, the relationship between W4H and NMCN changed and became an active partnership. W4H had introduced into HTIs a number of initiatives that needed the support of the regulator: Student Information Management Systems (SIMS), Student-Centered Learning (SCL) and E-Learning. And through the closer relations with the colleges, the NMCN had identified issues that needed addressing: the need for training for preceptors (qualified health workers who demonstrate practical skills), the need to provide supportive supervision of qualified nurses and midwives, and the need to establish an online system for the colleges to submit accreditation information ahead of inspection visits. W4H provided support to NMCN to address these gaps.

The partnership between NMCN and W4H was aided by changes at the Council in 2017, with a new leadership in post that were keen to develop a strategic vision and plan. The new leadership was also keen to collaborate with W4H – and the NMCN requested support in developing a five-year strategic plan. The Council had not had a strategic plan before, nor had it been supported by any external organisation or programme.

W4H also worked with the NMCN to advocate for changes to the law that established the Council to appropriately

reflect the full scope of its role. Draft legislation amending the law nearly managed to be passed by the national assembly, thanks to W4H advocacy – but the bill did not get all the way through the process before the legislative session ended. NMCN needs to continue pressuring for this to happen – and for the funding it needs to fulfill its role.

*“The SCL programme is a new concept for Nigeria, which W4H has introduced, and now we are starting to roll this out nationally. W4H have supported us and strengthened the capacity of the council in many ways, such as in developing our five-year strategic plan, and in developing our IT systems. We are soon starting online accreditation so data can be submitted from the institutions directly to our database.”*

**Alhaji Faruk Umar Abubakar**, Registrar, Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria

## NMCN strategic plan 2018-22

W4H supported NMCN to produce its 2018-2022 strategic plan, which set out the Council’s vision to become a leading regulatory body responsible for producing high quality nurses and midwives. The NMCN began implementing the plan in 2018. It has five strategic objectives:

- ◆ **Objective one:** To provide transformational leadership that is accountable and transparent, promoting excellence in nursing and midwifery education and practice and contributing to achievement of national health goals.
- ◆ **Objective two:** To develop, monitor implementation and evaluate nursing and midwifery education programmes that will produce competent nurses and midwives in Nigeria.
- ◆ **Objective three:** To ensure that nursing and midwifery educational institutions are established and function in compliance with the standards of NMCN and in line with global best practice.
- ◆ **Objective four:** To provide leadership for evidence-based planning, research, monitoring and evaluation of nursing and midwifery training and practice in Nigeria.
- ◆ **Objective five:** To coordinate and manage human, material and financial resources of the Council in line with Federal Government policies in a professional and efficient manner for quality service delivery.

## The results

*“The collaboration between NMCN and Women for Health was fantastic. There was mutual respect. There was very good cooperation between the two organisations. We understood each other and the collaboration was mutually beneficial.”*

**Margaret C. Eze**, Head of Education, NMCN

During the final two years of W4H, the partnership with NMCN deepened and the two organisations worked together on a shared portfolio of initiatives – some of which were initiated by W4H, and some that originated with the Council. The initiatives were mutually reinforcing and supported W4H’s mission to improve the quality and capacity of health worker education in the Northern states – and in particular the production of female professional nurses and midwives to serve in rural communities. When the W4H programme ended in September 2020, NMCN was rolling out these initiatives across the whole of Nigeria. The shared initiatives are as follows:

### Student Information Management Systems

W4H introduced computer record keeping for student information into 24 HTIs in the six states it supported as part of the wholesale improvement programme that led to all but one of them achieving full accreditation status by 2020. W4H then worked with the NMCN to develop SIMS as a web application for HTIs to use – with the ICT unit in the Registrar’s office leading on this work. Over 200 of the 264 HTIs in Nigeria have had training in use of SIMS. Schools in the South West of Nigeria were due to be trained but this was delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since SIMS was first introduced in 2019, the Council and HTIs have benefitted from harmonised, up-to-date information on students – for the NMCN this information is crucial to being able to analyse, evaluate and take action that will enhance nursing and midwifery education in Nigeria. The roll out of SIMS in Nigeria is a major legacy of the W4H programme.

### Student-Centered Learning

W4H introduced SCL into the HTIs in the six Northern states alongside other efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning. SCL shifts the style of teaching from passive to active, encouraging students to learn how to learn. As well as providing refresher courses, W4H trained tutors in how to use SCL approaches – and then supported institutions to embed these new practices.

SCL is particularly important for rural health workers who will enter service and need to keep their knowledge up to date, with little professional support and few opportunities for

ongoing training. Taken together, W4H’s support for teaching quality in the HTIs had a significant impact – pass rates in final professional exams increased significantly. In some HTIs, rates had been as low as 35% – by 2020 many of the HTIs had graduation rates above 80%, and several achieved 100%.

The NMCN saw the impact of SCL in the six states supported by W4H and adopted it for national roll out to Nigeria’s HTIs. The Council also made it part of the Mandatory Continuing Professional Development Programme (MCPDP). To renew their licenses, tutors must undergo training in SCL. To roll SCL out nationally, W4H supported a cascade training model, in which 30 master trainers trained 180 zonal trainers, who in turn trained others at state level. NMCN has developed SCL modules, and reviewed nursing and midwifery curricula to ensure they are aligned with SCL principles.

### Preceptorship

When W4H began in 2012, most of the HTIs did not have preceptors, qualified nurses and midwives who teach and demonstrate practical clinical skills to students. NMCN identified this gap and, in 2018, asked W4H to support an initiative to address this. W4H supported NMCN to develop a preceptorship manual and training. To be a preceptor, a prospective candidate has to be nominated by the HTI in collaboration with the health facility where the practical teaching takes place. Once nominated, the candidate is trained (sometimes this is paid for by the nominating institutions) and NMCN issues a certificate recognising them as a qualified preceptor. NMCN is rolling out preceptorship training and certification across Nigeria. Refresher training for preceptors has become part of the annual zonal training. This initiative will improve the quality of professional health education – and the skills of future Nigerian health workers.

### E-Learning

W4H introduced E-Learning into all the HTIs supported by the programme. The programme developed a platform suitable for the Northern Nigerian context – where electricity supply is unreliable and internet connectivity limited: the system is powered by solar panels and batteries, and low-cost hardware chosen that runs open source (free) software. W4H also introduced E-Learning teaching content, which was developed by groups of tutors from the HTIs.

However, W4H discovered that – to be widely accepted by tutors who were not involved in developing the content – the NMCN needed to be involved to ensure it was of the right standard and conformed to the relevant curricula. During the W4H extension phase, professional e-learning content experts worked with NMCN to begin developing high-quality, interactive content that complied with and supported the curriculum. NMCN is developing more



content and rolling out E-Learning nationally – it needed W4H support to build internal capacity to be able to do this.

NMCN is now encouraging HTIs across the country to adopt E-Learning, though it has stopped short of making it mandatory for accreditation. For their part, many colleges across Nigeria have shown interest in E-Learning and have called for support – as well as improving standards, E-Learning offers HTIs the opportunity to increase their revenue by using their E-Learning classrooms as centres for national exams. The Covid-19 pandemic has also shown the importance of being able to provide online teaching.

Implementing E-Learning is challenging as many HTI tutors are not computer-literate – W4H found it had to provide ‘whole institution’ support for a period of years to successfully embed E-Learning. The NMCN has taken over ownership of this challenge and is determined to scale up E-Learning across Nigeria. The Council will need to put in place monitoring and support to ensure effective use of E-Learning is embedded in teaching practice.

### **Creating an humanitarian curriculum**

In 2018 W4H began working in Borno, which has been the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency for more than a decade and where hundreds of thousands of people have fled their communities and are living in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps and informal settlements. The violence has damaged an estimated 45% of health facilities and completely destroyed a third of them. A high proportion of the population has experienced violence firsthand – and incidence of trauma among the population is very high.

W4H had to adapt its approach in Borno – most notably in providing trauma counselling and psycho-social support for FYP students. W4H trained students, HTI staff and women community leaders from IDP camps in trauma awareness – and these in turn provided trauma awareness sessions for more than 10,000 IDP camp residents, and referrals to further support for those who needed it.

As part of this work, W4H developed a humanitarian curriculum for the FYP students, to ensure that they would

be equipped to support people in their communities when they returned to them as professional nurses and midwives. Other organisations working in Borno were working on humanitarian education and the NMCN was interested in aligning these initiatives to create a national curriculum.

NMCN has taken over responsibility for developing this curriculum further and developing appropriate training for tutors. The council plans to make the humanitarian curriculum available for the whole of Nigeria – though it faces challenges in taking the work to a final stage as W4H has ended, and none of the other organisations have been able to fund this work.

### **Supportive supervision, online accreditation**

W4H supported the NMCN to introduce regular supportive supervision visits to HTIs. This was part of W4H’s efforts to improve the relationship between the colleges and the NMCN. Previously, NMCN visits would only happen as part of an accreditation review inspection every five years. NMCN was keen to provide supportive supervision visits to help HTIs maintain their standards – and retain full accreditation. Initially the Council planned to carry out the visits annually, but has since decided to do them mid-way through the five-year accreditation cycle.

W4H supported NMCN to develop a tool for the supportive supervision team to use during visits. The tool has been approved by the Board of NMCN and teams have begun using it. W4H funded the initial round of supervision visits and provided tablets for data capture, with NMCN taking over funding subsequent rounds.

A related initiative is NMCN’s introduction of online accreditation, designed to make the accreditation process quicker and easier. It is also in line with the NMCN’s strategic objective to become at least 75% computer-based by the end of the planning period in 2022. W4H supported this effort before the programme ended, providing equipment for inspectors to use to data capture.

An online process will improve accreditation in two main ways:

**Objectivity:** Using an online system to input data where the criteria are clearly outlined makes it easier for assessor to know what evidence to find and what score should be applied. Also it prevents assessors from being influenced in their scoring by their colleagues – there have been cases where assessors change their views based on the assessment of other members of the committee.

**Faster, easier reporting:** Once the assessor enters the scores, a summary is automatically produced which makes it easier to collate all the results from all the assessors. The accreditation committee can then send the collated report to NMCN headquarters.

## Improved relations between colleges and the NMCN

W4H played a crucial role in improving relations between HTIs and the NMCN. W4H supported a transformation of the colleges that led to all but one of them achieving full accreditation – and to much improved pass rates in final professional exams. During this journey with the HTIs, W4H helped them view the Council and the accreditation process in a new way.

At the same time, W4H became a close partner of the NMCN and helped the council to view their responsibilities towards the HTIs differently – and the Council now sees its role as supportive and supervisory as well as being the regulator. The introduction of SIMS, supportive supervision and online accreditation has reduced the pressure felt by HTIs around the accreditation process and how they view the Council. The W4H-NMCN partnership also helped to solve a tricky issue in HTIs relating to the status and treatment of different categories of tutors in the colleges.

*“We have been working on a sustainability plan for when W4H ends, and we are putting in place measures so that we can sustain this good legacy and the successes recorded so far, such as higher intakes, higher standards and improved pass rates – all the achievements we have made with W4H support.”*

**Alhaji Faruk Umar Abubakar,**

Registrar, Nursing and Midwifery  
Council of Nigeria



## Next steps for the NMCN

NMCN is in a good position to sustain and scale up all the initiatives developed through the partnership with W4H. The programme supported and built the capacity of the Council in many ways and the partnership will be missed. The NMCN faces challenges – below are some of the steps needed to address them:

- ◆ **NMCN has limited operational funding and government support – it is under-funded for a national regulator. The council is a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Health – a status that is not well aligned with the scope of the Council’s role and its ambitions for the future. The law defining the status of the NMCN needs to be changed to reflect the full scope of its role in the education of health workers. NMCN and allied organisations should continue to advocate for the law to be revised – and for the allocation of adequate funding.**
- ◆ **NMCN institutional capacity is limited and needs development. Extra staff need to be recruited to effectively implement all the planned initiatives and meet the objectives of the strategic plan. Computer training is needed for all staff. Performance management needs to be improved and staff job descriptions need reviewing.**
- ◆ **The NMCN’s monitoring and evaluation team needs to develop performance indicators for all its the initiatives to ensure that the implementation is effective. Research needs to be undertaken to evaluate the impact of teaching innovations such as SCL.**



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