



## The Abolition of “Money Woman” Tradition (Child Marriage) in Obanliku LGA of Cross River State.

Promising practices from the Spotlight Initiative Male Engagement Program for GBV/SRHR/HP Reduction in Nigeria.

# Male Engagement Program for GBV/SRHR/HP Reduction



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**Acronyms**

<b>AIDS</b>	<b>Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome</b>
<b>CRA</b>	<b>Child Rights Act</b>
<b>DSVRT</b>	<b>Domestic &amp; Sexual Violence Response Team</b>
<b>TRC</b>	<b>Traditional Rulers Council</b>
<b>TCC</b>	<b>Traditional Council of Chiefs</b>
<b>MDGs</b>	<b>Male Dominated Groups</b>
<b>NML</b>	<b>Network of Men Leaders to End Violence Against Women</b>
<b>YG</b>	<b>Youth Groups</b>
<b>FCT</b>	<b>Federal Capital Territory</b>
<b>FGM</b>	<b>Female Genital Mutilation</b>
<b>FGM/C</b>	<b>Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting</b>
<b>GBV</b>	<b>Gender-based Violence</b>
<b>HIV</b>	<b>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</b>
<b>HPs</b>	<b>Harmful Practices</b>
<b>NDHS</b>	<b>National Demographic and Health Survey</b>
<b>NGO</b>	<b>Non-Governmental Organization</b>
<b>OECD</b>	<b>Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development</b>
<b>PHCs</b>	<b>Public Health Consequences</b>
<b>SGBV</b>	<b>Sexual and Gender-Based Violence</b>
<b>SIGI</b>	<b>Social institutions and Gender Index</b>
<b>SRH</b>	<b>Sexual and Reproductive Health</b>
<b>STI</b>	<b>Sexually Transmitted Infection</b>
<b>TOR</b>	<b>Terms of Reference</b>
<b>UNFPA</b>	<b>United Nations Population Fund</b>
<b>USAID</b>	<b>United States Agency for International Development</b>
<b>VAPP</b>	<b>Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act</b>

**SRHR**

**Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**

## **1.0 Introduction and Background.**

Despite Nigeria's ratification of the United Nations' CEDAW and adoption of various laws to promote and protect the rights of women including VAWG, there still exists widespread discriminations against women and girls because of a combination of cultural and structural challenges. Legislative mechanisms and institutions which are expected to protect male and female citizens are gender insensitive as they give more credence to men. There is also a general lack of implementation of anti-discrimination legislation as well as a dearth of general awareness of laws viz a viz the predominant influence of cultural and religious norms. All these hinder the enforcement of legislation on inequality and marginalization of women.

Nigeria practices a Federal System of government that empowers states to domesticate their own laws. Useful laws and policies (such as the National Gender Policy, and the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act) at the Federal level that prohibits all forms of violence and harmful practices against women and girls are not embraced for domestication by all the states. Where they do, the legislation and policy are watered down in many instances and this fuels gender injustice issues across the states, including child marriage.

According to UNICEF (2022), an estimated 44% of girls in Nigeria are married before their 18th birthday and the country also records the 11th highest rate of child marriage in the world. Defined as marriage before the age of 18, child marriage is a problem with multifaceted dimensions and consequences. Child marriage robs girls of their childhood and threaten their lives and health. Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to remain in school. They have worse economic and health outcomes than their unmarried peers, which are eventually passed down to their own children.

Child brides often become pregnant during adolescence, and this comes with the associated risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth – for themselves and their infants. The practice can also isolate girls from family and friends and exclude them from participating in their communities, taking a heavy toll on their physical and psychological well-being. Because child marriage impacts a girl's health, future and family, it imposes substantial economic costs at the national level too, with major implications for development and prosperity.

The African Centre for Leadership, Strategy and Development (Centre LSD) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established under Nigerian law to build strategic leadership for sustainable development in Africa. The mission of Centre LSD is to work with forces of positive change to empower citizens to transform society. Centre LSD is renowned for leadership development, capacity building (process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that individuals, organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in the fast-changing world), strong systems and structures, good programming approaches and strong values. Centre LSD has remained the national secretariat of the Network of Men Leaders to End Violence Against Women in Nigeria (NML) since 2013. The network has worked extensively on issues of women's rights - particularly on Sexual & Gender Based Violence and harmful traditional practices across the 6 geopolitical zones of Nigeria.

### **Child marriage among the Becheve**

Among the Becheve people of southern Nigeria, a cultural tradition called *Ukeyi Ngoolo* (Money woman) has predisposed thousands of female children to infant marriage for many years. Becheve is made up of about 40 villages on both sides of the border between Nigeria and Cameroon in Cross River State, with a population of about 60,000.

The *money woman* tradition involves infant marriage and use of female children for repayment of debts owed by their parents or as return for favours done to their fathers. Most times, the children are given out even before they are born, and from the age of 9, they are taken from their parents and given as wives to the men that bought them. The object for which the girls are sold range from a piece of land, goat, bicycle, yams, or even a few bottles of beer. The cost of some of these items, for which the girl-child is exchanged for could sometimes be as low as five thousand Naira (\$12). Families of both parties enter an oath that makes it impossible for the money woman to leave the family she is sold to, no matter the form of sexual and gender-based violence she experiences. A money woman is considered a property of her husband's extended family. She gets inherited by a chosen family member upon her husband's death. In most cases, the inheritors of money women force them into prostitution and use them as sex slaves.

The agelong culture has made life miserable for thousands of girls in the community and subjected them to mental and psychological torture all their lives. There are estimated 5,000 survivors of the money woman tradition currently in Becheve community.

The money woman culture started hundreds of years ago. The idea behind it was for men to have young girls to take care of their emotional and domestic needs in old age. A money woman is bound to remain in the family house to take care of her husband. She remains the property of the family after the husband's death.

### **Approaches used to end child marriage in Becheve**

In implementing the "Spotlight Initiative Male Engagement Program for Gender Based Violence and Harmful Traditional Practices Reduction", Centre LSD worked with different stakeholders within the communities, including men (who are often the perpetrators of GBV), traditional rulers (who are the custodians of customs and traditions), religious leaders (who are the mouthpiece of God and interpreters of religious text), and youth groups (who are the energy of the society). Engaging with these diverse group of stakeholders ensured that everyone who had any form of power to influence the change we seek was involved in the project's implementation.

The project was implemented in 5 Local Government Areas (Calabar south, Calabar Municipal, and Obanliku in Cross River State; and Ikorodu and Yaba in Lagos states) in Nigeria. The locations were chosen because of the prevalence of various forms of gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices based on primary data collected during the design phase of the spotlight initiative in Nigeria.

Stakeholders identified and mapped for the intervention included the Paramount Rulers of the 3 Local Government Areas (LGAs), clan heads, local chiefs, youth leaders, religious leaders, leaders of male dominated groups, male advocates, and opinion leaders. The stakeholders were selected because of the influence they have in the community to bring about the change we are advocating

for. Stakeholders were engaged using a purpose-designed “Training Manual for Men and Boys on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) and Harmful Practices (HPs)”<sup>1</sup>. Modules treated include: Understanding Basic Concepts and Terminologies, Social Construction of Gender (Femininities and Masculinities), Securing Our Communities Against SGBV and HPs, and Forming Collectives and Taking Action. 99 opinion leaders, 61 key informal decision makers and leaders of male dominated groups were empowered through training on the use of the manual. The beneficiaries were formed into 8 Networks of Men Leaders to End Violence Against Women (VAW).

The 8 networks were formed to provide men a platform to advocate and provide guidance and direction to ending violence against women and girls within their communities. Male leaders who are members of the network were involved in advocacy, providing guidance and direction, and highlighting good practices and deploring bad examples. Members of the network contribute to mobilization and change in the culture, attitudes and behavior that perpetuate all forms of violence against women; motivate and encourage mobilization and action by men as well as women to contribute to preventing violence against women; actively advocate for zero tolerance of violence against women and girls of all ages; promote publicly, through the media, and other avenues as appropriate, a positive role model of men preventing violence against women and girls; and support women’s and men’s organizations and networks and, through leadership and by example, support their efforts to end violence against women and girls.

In addition, Centre LSD strengthened existing community structures such as the traditional council of chiefs (by building the capacity of their leaders and exposing them to best practices) to serve as advocacy platforms for promoting gender equitable norms, attitudes, and behaviours in the focal communities.

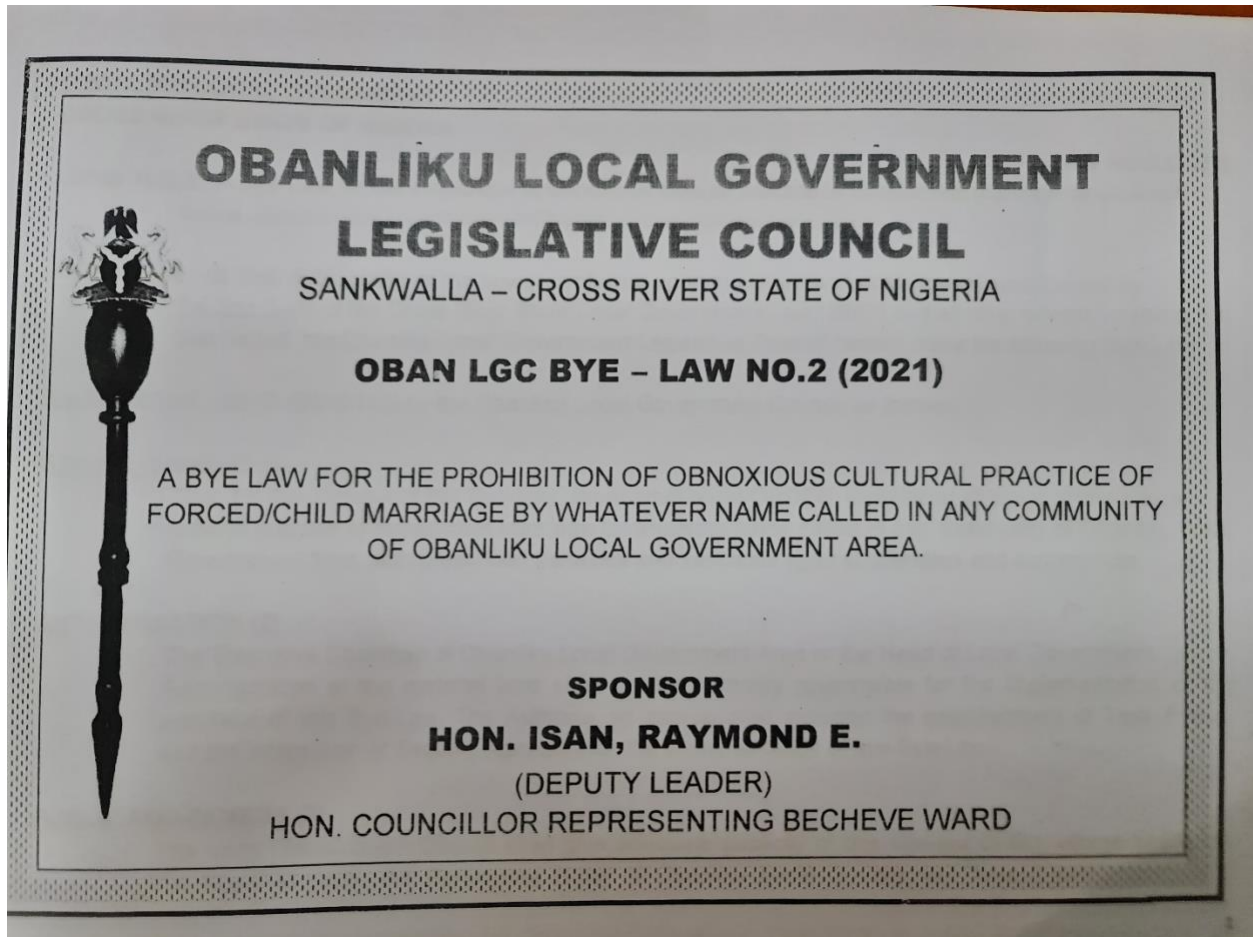
### **Successes registered through the intervention**

The project was a major contributor to community actions that led to many historic, and impactful results which changed the trajectory of gender justice for women and girls in the focal communities. Significant successes were evidenced in behaviour change, high-level commitments, and pronouncements towards outlawing the harmful traditional practice of child marriage.

A resolution was reached on the 20th of August 2020 by the Clan head, council of chiefs and all the village heads in Becheve community in Obanliku LGA to abolish the age long “money-woman” tradition which involved infants’ marriage and use of female children for debt settlement. This opened a new lease of life for women and girls in Becheve. A world press conference was held in Calabar on September 17, 2020, to publicly announce the abolishment of the practice by the Paramount Ruler of Obanliku LGA, HRM Uchua Amos Item, and his council of chiefs.

To give the pronouncement a legal backing, the legislative council of the local government area has passed a by-law for the prohibition of the obnoxious cultural practice of child marriage by whatever name called in any community in Obanliku Local Government Area. At least three young girls who were victims of the “money woman” tradition have been freed. And many more girls have been prevented from becoming victims.





There was also a pronouncement by the Paramount Ruler and his council of chiefs abolishing all other forms of harmful traditional practices, including harmful widowhood rites, widow inheritance, female genital mutilation, male child preference, and denial of inheritance to female children. The council also agreed to start coronating deserving women as village heads and traditional rulers.

The story of Chief Egunu Williams – A 75-year-old man from Nzonsor village in Belegette community in Cross River State, who had a change of mind as a result of Centre LSD intervention to let go of the money woman he received as a repayment for the debt a friend owed him, is one of our success stories.

*“I was sitting in my house one day when a man from my village came to me for financial assistance. That his younger brother was seriously sick and needed medical attention but no money to take him to the hospital and that he needed a loan of NGN25,000 (\$60). Few days later he came for another loan of NGN10,000 (\$25) which I gave to him, everything amounted to the sum of NGN35,000 (\$85). Few months later I went to him requesting for my money, but he was unable to pay back. He gave an option of a money woman in exchange for the loan, which I accepted. The girl was his sick brother’s daughter, and she was brought to me by her family.*”

*The name of the young girl is Egunu Emelda, and she was just thirteen years old. She was married against her will as she was very young and innocent. She was not in school. We were married for seven years. I didn't enrol her into school, rather she joined me in farming. She was not involved in any business, just farming and serving as a full housewife. It was not a happy marriage as she married me not based on her wish, and I was far older than her. She bore two daughters for me. The money woman marriage is not a good tradition. The girl is underaged and doesn't love me. She was defiled at a young age. The tradition brings poverty and underdevelopment to community(ies). The tradition started from our forefathers. My father, uncle, and brothers practiced it too.*

*I have never attended any training organized by spotlight but one of the village chiefs and my son did and came out for sensitization. The chief was always talking about it in our council meetings. I started hearing about it in 2020 and some flyer was distributed too. I learnt that this tradition is barbaric and has brought poverty to our community because our children are not trained in school, reasons being that men are busy saving money to marry money women instead of training their first wife's children to school. I was influenced by the messages and decided to grant the girl freedom to stay or leave. She chose to leave. I felt relieved and I have peace of mind now because there were too many troubles in my house. Her parents are happy but scared too, fearing that I will one day ask them for my money. I didn't ask them for refund and will never ask them for refund. They came to me some weeks back that she said she wants to go to school, and I gave them my support promising to give her financial support. I will support my son, the chief and Spotlight Initiative to spread the message around the communities in Becheve Ward.”*

Survivors of the "money woman" practice like Emelda are referred to other partners on the Spotlight project for second chances in education, economic empowerment, and psycho-social support.

### **Challenges faced in implementing the intervention**

A number of challenges were faced in the process of combating the harmful practice of child marriage as follows”

**Demand for refund of bride price:** According to the tradition, wives married off as money women were sold in exchange for debts owed or unreturned favours. Now that the tradition has been abolished, some of the creditors (husbands) are demanding for a repayment of the debts owed by the families of the wives married as money women before they could release them. Since there was no written note containing the amount of money or the monetary equivalence of items exchanged, settlement may be challenging.

**Economic empowerment for survivors:** There are limited funds to empower the money women who have regained freedom with economically viable life skills to fend for themselves and be self-reliant. The fear of this has made many of the victims to remain with their captors.

**Fear of attack:** Many of the victims who were given the option to leave their captors declined the offer because of fear of spiritual attacks. There are believes that if the victims leave without the consent of the captors or without a refund of the “bride price”, she and her offspring will die in mysterious circumstances.

## Lessons Learned

**Working with existing structure:** Experience showed that it is easier to create change by strengthening and working with existing structures than creating new ones. This is especially true for interventions with limited funds and short durations. In the implementation of the project, the Centre worked with existing structures such as traditional council of chiefs, youth progressive unions, market men and women association, and other groups.

**Documentation and follow up:** Every commitment should be documented and followed up. The Centre ensured that every commitment made by stakeholders at any fora during the project's implementation was documented and followed up until it's implemented.

**Accessing the right stakeholders:** Harmful traditional practices can be changed if the right stakeholders are engaged in a manner and language they can relate with. Even though the main target groups in our intervention are men, women and girls were involved in all our engagements to ensure that they are part of the solution.

**Pushing for ownership:** Community ownership of both the process and outcome of interventions is key to obtaining sustainable results.

## Recommendations

1. **Operationalization of the provisions of the by-law:** Operationalizing the by-law for the "prohibition of obnoxious cultural practice of forced/child marriage by whatever name called in any community of Obanliku Local Government Area" enacted as a result of our intervention is critical to addressing the challenges arising from the abolition of this HP. For instance, one of the provisions in the by-law is the establishment of a task force committee made up of clan heads, village heads, selected age grades and religious leaders to ensure the complete elimination of the practice in all the villages in the LGA. It is therefore recommended that additional funding be made available to Centre LSD to support the Local government in operationalizing the bye law and monitoring its implementation.
2. **Education and economic empowerment survivors:** Economic empowerment and adult education should be provided for survivors of the HP to find their footing and integrate with the larger society. The program to address this should be jointly developed with the local government authority to ensure sustainability.

## Conclusion

The abolition of the "money woman" tradition that involved the use of female children as objects for repayment of debts owed by their parents and relatives is a major win for the Spotlight Initiative and the people of Obanliku. The consequent enactment of a by-law by the local government legislative council has officially made the practice an offence in the entire local government area.

However, to ensure that the practice is eliminated within the LGA, there is need to operationalize the provisions of the by-law and embark on rigorous public education throughout the LGA.

Ending child marriage requires terminating the problem at its root. It involves leveraging and harmonizing the instrument of the law, community efforts and the good standing of leaders of sociocultural institutions. The approach deployed in this project has shown that endemic and dysfunctional aspects of cultural traditions in Nigeria, which harbor and encourage gender-discriminatory norms can become history if a similar approach is introduced.

## **References**

Child marriage threatens the lives, well-being, and futures of girls around the world (June 2022)  
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