



A Transformative Journey to Overcome Gender Barriers:

Insights and Stories of Impact from Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's Women Empowerment Groups





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Acronyms

ACT	Artemisinin-based Combination Therapy
ANC	Ante-Natal Care
CBS	Childbirth Spacing
CCP	Center for Communication Programs
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CHIP	Community Health Influencers, Promoters and Services
CMAM	Community Management of Acute Malnutrition
EBF	Exclusive Breastfeeding
FCT	Federal Capital Territory
FP	Family Planning
GBV	Gender Based Violence
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IPTp	Intermittent Preventive Treatment for Pregnant Women
ISBC	Integrated Social and Behavior Change
ITNs	Insecticide-treated nets
LGA	Local Government Area
LLIN	Long-Lasting Insecticidal Net
MAM	Moderate Acute Malnutrition



Acronyms

MAUC	Mid Upper Arm Circumference
MCHIP	Maternal and Child Health Integrated Program
MNCH+N	Maternal, Newborn, Child Health, and Nutrition
MSCL	Mother's Savings and Loans Club
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
N	Naira
RH	Reproductive Health
SAM	Severe Acute Malnutrition
SBC	Social Behavior Change
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEG	Women's Empowerment Group



Contributors

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Introduction

This document shares lessons learned and inspiring stories from Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's Women's Empowerment Group (WEG) approach implemented in five States of Nigeria between 2019 and 2024.



"As the lead for the WEG initiative, steering this approach has given me a deep sense of purpose in the development sector. ...the tangible impact on WEG members and their community is mind-blowing. ...the pre- and post-assessments with women show improved gender equity, especially in spousal communication and household decision-making. Beyond Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria, I strongly advocate for replicating this impactful approach in other organizations."

Chizoba Onyechi , WEG Initiative Lead





The Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria Project

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria is a social behavior change (SBC) project implemented from 2018 – 2025 by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs with funding from the United States Agency for International Development. Its goal is to increase the practice of priority health behaviors related to malaria; maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition (MNCH+N); family planning and reproductive health; tuberculosis; COVID-19; and Global Health Security priority zoonotic diseases at national and subnational levels in collaboration with Federal and State Ministry of Health programs, departments, and agencies and other partners.

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria implements an integrated SBC approach to address priority health behaviors (see Box 1) and selected social and gender norms that drive peoples' ability to practice them.

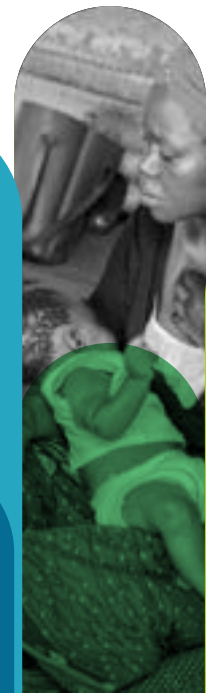
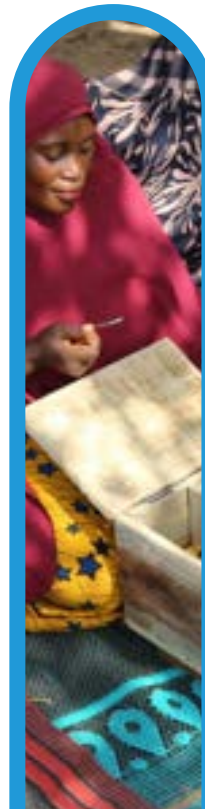
BOX 1: Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria Priority Health Behaviors

Maternal, Neonatal, Child Health and Nutrition Priority Behaviors	FP Priority Behaviour
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete at least four ANC visits and up to eight 2. Deliver at health facility 3. Full vaccinations per Nigerian policy 4. Provide essential newborn care 5. Initiate breastfeeding within 1 hour of delivery 6. Breastfeed exclusively during first 6 months 7. Infant and young child feeding for 6–24 months 8. Nutrition counseling for pregnant women <p>Seek prompt and appropriate treatment for:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Diarrhea 2. Acute respiratory infection 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use modern contraceptive methods
	Malaria Priority Behaviors
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sleep inside insecticide-treated nets (ITNs) 2. Take intermittent preventive treatment in pregnancy (IPTp) 3. Seek prompt care for fever 4. Test before treatment 5. Adhere to full course of Artemisinin-based combination therapy 6. Adhere to full course of seasonal malaria chemoprevention

Genesis of Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's Women's Empowerment Group Approach

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria conducted an MNCH+N formative assessment to inform its strategies, plans, and approaches. This included in-depth interviews and observations in people's homes, workplaces, health facilities, and other settings. The assessment took place in three states of northern Nigeria (Sokoto, Bauchi, and Kebbi) in 2019 and Ebonyi State and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in 2021. Key insights from the assessment indicated that:

- many women did not have the agency or ability to make decisions and act concerning pregnancy, childbirth, or child health care, and
- within families, gender roles and financial control factors drove care seeking choice and action, and outside families, care-seeking behaviors were influenced by peer pressure, expectations, and judgment about adequate care for children.



The project developed the WEG, also known as Hasken Mata (Women's Light) approach to address these issues by creating safe spaces outside the home, where groups of women support each other, become economically empowered, and learn about MNCH+N. Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria modified the successful Maternal and Child Health Integrated Program (MCHIP) model for Mothers' Savings and Loan Clubs to design the WEG approach, and piloted the adaptation in Bauchi, Sokoto, and Kebbi States. The pilot demonstrated WEG's potential to enhance women's agency to improve their health, the health of their children, and their capacity to generate income from small loans. It also showed that information about health behaviors can be embedded into group activities and that group membership developed leadership skills among its members.

The project rolled out the WEG in Bauchi, Kebbi and Sokoto States in 2019, and then scaled the activity to Ebonyi and FCT in 2022.



As of 2023, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria had formed **194 groups** with a total membership of **3,793**.

Description of Women's Empowerment Groups

The WEG model has three objectives:



Build the capacity and agency for women to adopt priority MNCH+N behaviors.



Increase women's confidence to discuss health and social issues with their spouses.



Provide opportunities for income generation and building new knowledge and skills among women in the communities.



“I had the privilege of supporting the WEG team across five states under the guidance of the WEG initiative lead. It has been a truly rewarding experience witnessing and documenting the positive transformations the WEG initiative has brought about for thousands of women. This impact extends beyond economic empowerment but also encompasses better health decisions and the newfound confidence they have gained. These empowered women are now agents of empowerment themselves, creating a sustainable ripple effect of positive change not only in their lives but also for other women, their children, spouses, and their community at large. I hope this strategy is adopted by other implementers.”


***Odinaka Precious Hammawa,
Program Assistant I-SBC***



Each WEG brings together a group of 15-35 women who are committed to their health and the well-being of their children and family. They are also willing to work as a group to obtain financial empowerment through savings, loans and by learning new skills. Groups meet on a regular basis to conduct the following activities:

- **Sharing and learning about MNCH+N priority behaviors:** During regular meetings, WEG members discuss, share and learn ways to adopt MNCH+N behaviors to improve their health and that of their families. A trained facilitator uses tools such as picture flipcharts, community health booklets, and other materials developed by the project to guide the discussion. Women also discuss social and gender norms that impact their ability to adopt healthier behaviors. This includes how to discuss health and social issues with their spouses and identifying cases of gender-based violence among women in the community.



- 
- **Contributions and loans:** The WEG meetings provide an avenue for women to support each other toward financial empowerment. To do this, the WEG provides savings and lending options to the members:
 - Weekly Contributions: WEG members contribute a fixed minimum sum to a group fund during regular meetings. Group members set the minimum contribution amount to allow the poorest members to pay reliably and regularly.
 - Emergency Funds: WEG members contribute to a separate pocket of emergency funds. When a member faces an unexpected health emergency, they can receive a non-interest loan from this fund.
 - Social Funds: The WEG allocates a predetermined portion of its contributions to a social fund. This fund is utilized for group oriented social activities, such as skill acquisition, nutrition training (for example food demonstrations), and covering literacy-related expenses for the groups.
 - Loans: Loans are money borrowed from members' combined contributions, on condition of being returned. The group furnishes loans from the emergency funds for health-related issues, social funds for social-related issues, and weekly contributions for business purposes only. Only business loans from the weekly contributions are paid back with interest. Loans from the emergency and social funds do not attract interest.
 - **Skill acquisition:** The WEG leadership team coordinates training for the WEG to build skills for income generation and healthy family practices. This empowers members to become economically independent and to better care for their families' wellbeing. Areas for training include nutritious food preparation, soap-making, hand hygiene, cooking oil production, and literacy.



The WEG groups are encouraged to link their activities with the broader community support ecosystem, which includes government departments, structures and initiatives, health facilities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and other relevant community structures. These linkages facilitate group legitimacy, identification of opportunities for group members, and problem-solving.

How WEG Changed the Lives of Women and Communities

The WEG approach works. When women are empowered, they have the confidence to control their lives and the health of their families. Increasing women's access to both health knowledge and finances and building their confidence allows them to have more independence and the ability to make decisions that serve their families' health.






“I have worked on various projects aimed at improving the acceptance and utilization of maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH), reproductive health (RH), and family planning (FP) services in different communities in northern Nigeria. However, the most remarkable outcome of my work was witnessing a shift in the agency of women in making decisions regarding their lives and their ability to connect the dots between health and financial freedom. I refer to the Women Empowerment Group (WEG) as a conduit that sustained this normative shift towards adopting and practicing health behaviors.”

Usman M. Inuwa,
State Coordinator, Bauchi State






The WEG approach has **built capacity and agency among women to adopt priority MNCH+N practices**. Findings from Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's 2024 post-cycle assessment show that WEG members have improved knowledge of priority health behaviors. There were also improvements in healthy behaviors overall including nutrition and provisions for moving women to health facilities for delivery (Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria Facility Routine data). Throughout the program, women shared and received resources and information about the importance of antenatal care (ANC) and were encouraged to attend ANC more often. Group members encouraged pregnant WEG members to attend ANC and held them accountable. During knowledge and skill sessions, women were encouraged to use locally available food, and participated in food demonstration sessions to make healthy, nutritious meals.

Since the establishment of WEGs, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria has seen an increase in uptake of priority behaviors such as ANC and facility-assisted deliveries. However, this increase cannot be solely attributed to WEG efforts. From October 2023 to February 2024, the WEGs were introduced to Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's community referral system. Through this system it is possible to measure the number of completed referrals to health services by WEGs. During the four month period, 75 women accessed antenatal services, four delivered in healthcare facilities, 84 adopted family planning methods, and 52 children received immunizations (Source: BA-Nigeria Quarterly Report).



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Participation in WEGs has significantly **increased women's confidence in discussing health and social issues with their spouses.** Before joining WEGs, only 10% of members had knowledge of health behaviors or could confidently discuss health while 17% reported contributing to household decisions. However, after participation in WEG, all members demonstrated some level of understanding of health behaviors. Group discussions on joint decision-making have helped resolve conflicts and facilitated conversations about family planning and other health topics with spouses. As a result, spouses have become more supportive of their wives attending health facilities for MNCH+N services, including delivery at health facilities (Source: BA-Nigeria Pre and Post Cycle Qualitative Assessment).



“I reflect back to how I met these women, not being able to make decisions about their health, that of their children, and being shy to discuss health issues with their husband. Now they are advocates of healthy practices in the home and community. I see the WEG as a game changer that gives women self-reliance, positive

self-esteem, and confidence to actively participate in community development. The WEG has opened the eyes of women to see that they can contribute not just to their families but to society at large. I am super proud to be a part of this journey.”

Habiba Isiaka, Program Assistant, Social Mobilization (Sokoto State Office)



WEG provided **opportunities for income generation and built new knowledge and skills among women** in the communities. During the period spanning from July 2022 to February 2024, 26% of Women Empowerment Group (WEG) members actively engaged in income-generating activities. Throughout this timeframe, WEGs collectively amassed N159,575,742 via weekly contributions. Among these contributions, N3,884,711 was designated for emergency funds, while N4,044,553 was allocated to social funds across all groups (Source: BA-Nigeria Quarterly Reports). According to the qualitative assessment, the skills acquisition approach led to personal development skills and opportunities for income generation. Women became involved in diverse industries (i.e. rice milling and petroleum jelly production). Some women reported using the skills they learned to create their own businesses or work for companies to provide for their families. With improved economic stability, many women were able to send their children back to school. At the State level, Village Savings and Loan programs have now been established in two ministries (Ministry of Women Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce and Industry) in Sokoto, Kebbi, Bauchi and Ebonyi State.



“To me, the Women Empowerment Group is a clear testament to the fact that women are excellent managers of economic resources. Through WEG, I was made to understand that economic empowerment is key to women's emancipation and that economically independent women have higher chances of contributing to household and societal decision-making processes. I must say that the WEG in Dass and Ningi local government areas of Bauchi State surprised men that economically independent women are pillars of happy homes. I strongly recommend the formation of WEG across our communities as the panacea to women's predicament.”

**Nura Bashir Faggo, Program Officer
I – Social & Behavior Change**



LESSONS LEARNED

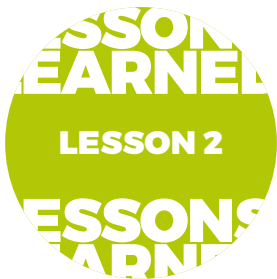
FROM IMPLEMENTATION





Involving and sharing success stories with local stakeholders, religious leaders, and spouses, helped build trust within communities.

The project involved local government stakeholders in designing the overall WEG approach, developing criteria for group membership, monitoring progress, and sharing in successes. These stakeholders, many of whom are men, participated in group meetings, which lent legitimacy to the groups and fostered support among men and local leaders.



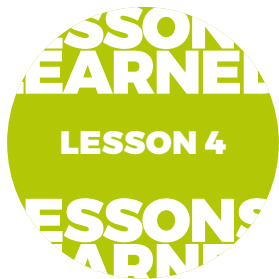
Fostering a supportive group culture where women shared their life experiences motivated members to adopt healthy behaviors.

WEG groups provided a cordial and empathetic space for women to share their concerns and experiences and resolve issues together as a group. This supportive environment encouraged women to hold each other accountable for health and financial practices and to serve as role models for the wider community. It also helped members to contextualize and put health information into action.



Providing hands-on skill building opportunities helped women to support their families and healthcare needs.

Through skill building workshops, group members learned and put into practice business and workplace skills that promoted financial independence and sustainability. In future, it may be helpful to incorporate incentives, such as stipends, subsidized drugs, and health care services, to encourage greater health behavior acceptance and referrals to health services.



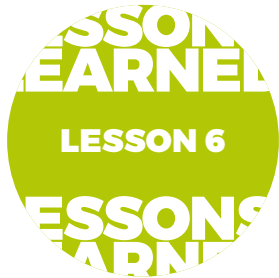
WEG is not a one-size-fits-all approach; women's needs in various contexts should be considered throughout implementation.

The content and emphasis of WEG should be tailored to connect with women's interests and lived experiences. For example, in some areas like the Southeast, we found women were more interested in health and nutrition than financial literacy.



WEG rules and regulations should allow a degree of adaptability according to groups' needs.

The WEG approach was implemented through a structured process, with defined rules and regulations, designed to ensure strong governance and accountability. As groups evolve over time, the rules and regulations should be adaptable, and groups should have the latitude to make changes.



A structured process for documentation, supportive supervision, mentorship, and feedback encourages accountability and health action.

The WEG documentation, monitoring and supervision system involved a structured process of supportive supervision, monitoring, and feedback. This allowed the project to monitor knowledge retention and utilization among women participating in WEGs; the engagement of stakeholders; and the quality of knowledge and skills sessions. Documenting and sharing findings encourages members to remain accountable, act as role models for the group and community, remind each other about health behaviors, and put health knowledge into practice.



Think about sustainability from the start and ensure it is part of the implementation approach.

From program development onwards, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria nurtured connections among the WEGs, health services, government agencies—particularly those involved in gender and health-- and community-based organizations. These partners acted as resource persons during skills building and knowledge sessions, monitored and mentored groups, and helped support funding opportunities for WEGs.



Include literacy and adult learning opportunities to make learning materials, knowledge sessions and documentation more accessible.

A large number of WEG members are not fully literate, making it difficult to teach accounting and other business skills, and to share documentation. Partnerships with ministries, like the Ministry of Education, can provide support for literacy and adult learning skills sessions. The project also used a variety of approaches to reach low literate women with health messaging, such as dramas, storytelling, song composition, etc. These also increased motivation and helped facilitate discussion on health topics within groups.



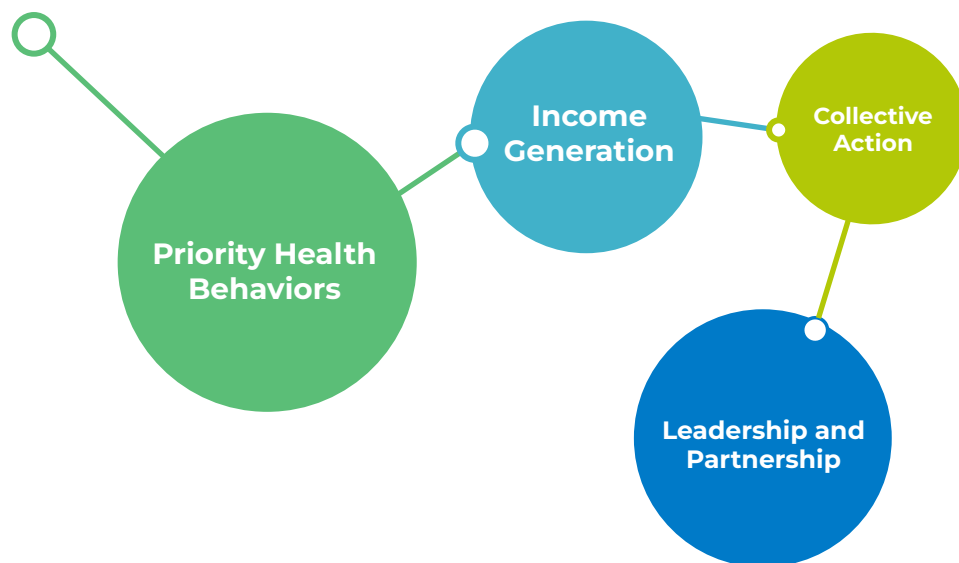


A COLLECTION OF STORIES



A COLLECTION OF STORIES

While implementing the WEG/Hasken Mata approach for five years (2019 – 2024), Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria collected stories of impact, growth, change, improved agency, health, and economic independence from women who participated. Selected stories are categorized into four broad categories:



PRIORITY HEALTH BEHAVIORS



Priority Health Behaviors

This is the foundation for which the WEG/Hasken Mata groups were formed. Women in these groups learned about MNCH+N from each other and from social and behavior change materials developed by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria. Sessions focused on priority practices like early and regular antenatal care to monitor the progress of mother and baby; delivering in health care facilities to drastically reduce factors that may lead to maternal or child death; spacing births for at least two years so the mother can take care of herself and her infant; exclusively breastfeeding for the first six months of a child's life, and introducing complementary feeding after six months; eating nutritious meals made from four main categories of food without breaking the bank; and improving spousal communication so that couples make decisions together about their lives, health, and well-being.

Here are some stories of success recorded by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria.



Improving Child Nutrition


📍 Hawa'u Daudu, an Internally Displaced Person, in Badau IDP Camp border community of Sifawa LGA.



When her community was attacked by marauding gunmen in 2021, 23-year-old mother Hawa'u Daudu fled her community to the Internally Displaced Persons' Camp (IDP) in Badau, undertaking the arduous 76 kilometer journey with her 16-month-old boy, Salim.

Badau is a border community of Sifawa LGA, where Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria carries out the WEG approach, of which Hawa'u's sister is a member. When visiting her sister in April of 2023, Badau witnessed a WEG meeting in action, one that would affect positive change in her and Salim's health.


During the meeting, the women held a food demonstration session. The session involved a facilitator



taking volunteers to be a part of a cooking team. The team demonstrated how healthy, nutritious meals can be made from locally available sources, such as guinea corn, millet, groundnut, soya beans, moringa, cow milk, using the Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria 4-star meal concept. The 4 star-meal concept is a meal plan where the servings at each meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner, or in-between meals) contain nutrients from four major food groups: animal products, grains, legumes and seeds, and fruits and vegetables. The experience piqued Hauwa'u's interest and she began to participate as often as she could.

During a meeting, a WEG facilitator took notice of Salim's small size. Hawa'u's son was smaller than most children his age. While this could be due to genetics, the facilitator wanted to ensure he was not malnourished. The facilitator used an MAUC (Mid Upper Arm Circumference) tape to measure Salim's arm. A MAUC tape is used to measure the nutritional status of children between six months and five years. The tape consists of three colors: red, yellow, and green. Red shows severe acute malnutrition (SAM), yellow is moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) and green indicates a healthy baby.

The tape revealed that Salim was severely malnourished. The facilitator referred Salim to the Center for Community Management of Acute Malnourishment (CMAM). CMAM provides outpatient care using ready-to-use therapeutic food for children 6 – 59 months with inpatient care for children with SAM who are under 6 months or between 6 to 59 months old with medical complications.



Hauwa'u could not afford to pay for the medical care Salim needed. The WEG was determined to get Salim help. They knew SAM could result in learning disabilities and poor scholastic achievement in the long run. Using their social funds, the group provided Hauwa'u with money for transport and assigned WEG members to follow up with her on a regular basis to ensure she was feeding Salim healthy meals, and that he was recovering.

"The WEG assisted me in bringing my child back to life. I now have a healthy child," Hauwa'u Daudu shared after several weeks of treatment.

Hauwa'u committed herself to learning as much as she could from the WEG. She returned to the IDP camp and went on to teach the women there how to create healthy, nutritious meals – such as the Tom Brown gruel commonly used for complementary feeding – using locally produced foods. Thanks to her hard work, many of the children at the camp are in good health. The women in the camp are overjoyed and grateful to Hauwa'u for her efforts and guidance.

"With the knowledge I have, my family and I live a healthy life, and I can teach and support other women and children," says Hauwa'u Dauda

Embracing Childbirth Spacing

📍 Jamila Yakubu, Member Da Sannu Zai Zama Babba
(Young Shall Grow) WEG in Dott, Bauchi State



Jamila Yakubu, aged 31, and her husband Yakubu Suleiman, 38, endured heartbreaking losses as their first four children succumbed to illness before their first birthdays. Married for 17 years, they faced the devastating reality that they had lost their children due to premature weaning, undertaken to ease Jamila's morning sickness during subsequent closely spaced pregnancies. This cycle of loss not only left them emotionally shattered but also posed challenges to their personal and environmental hygiene and strained their relationship.

“Immediately after they are weaned, the children fall sick from one disease to another, leaving them emaciated. That, coupled with lack of finances for their treatment, and eventually, they die.”

Jamila Yakuba

Although they were aware of childbirth spacing, Jamila and Yakubu believed the modern methods led to uncontrollable bleeding. This deterred Jamila and Yakubu from adopting a contraceptive method. However, in 2019, Jamila joined 19 other women to form the "Da Sannu Zai Zama Babba" (Young Shall Grow) WEG in their village of Dott, Bauchi State. During weekly meetings, and discussions guided by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria, they explored health issues like family planning.

“One day, we discussed family planning and its benefits to the child, the mother, and the family. That very night, I told my husband what happened and begged him to allow me to try childbirth spacing. At first, he was adamant but, in the end, he allowed me to try it, which was the turning point for us,”

Jamila Yakubu recalls.

Their decision to start using a modern family planning method marked a turning point for the couple. With three years between Jamila's sixth child, Shamsu, and his younger sister, Nana, their family witnessed remarkable



improvements. Shamsu thrived physically and mentally, benefiting from undivided attention, while Nana achieved milestones like walking at just 8 months old--a first in Jamila's experience.

Jamila's newfound freedom allowed her to devote time to her family and her cowpea cake-making business, meeting her WEG group's weekly contributions and helping to support her family. Through their journey of loss, resilience, and empowerment, Jamila and Yakubu emerged stronger, embracing the power of education, support networks, and informed decision-making to shape their family's future.



Changing Malaria Prevention Behavior

📍 Hafsatu Sirajo, airing her insecticide-treated nets (ITNs)

Earning just 3,000 Naira (less than three dollars) a month, Hafsatu Sirajo struggled to sustain her family's needs, especially during the rainy season when malaria struck her five children. Each bout of malaria threatened her children's health and drained her limited financial resources. Desperate for a solution, Hafsatu joined Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's Women Empowerment Group (WEG) to access loans and expand her business. Little did she know that she would gain much more than financial empowerment. During her WEG meetings, she also learned about valuable health preventive practices, including the use of insecticide-treated nets (ITNs) for malaria



prevention. Hafsatu recognized ITNs use as a potential solution to her family's recurring health issues.

Hafsatu and her family began sleeping under ITNs. This practice remarkably reduced malaria among her children—not a single one of her five children fell sick from malaria in the past year—a stark contrast to their previous struggles. This significant improvement brought peace of mind to her family and reduced Hafsatu's medical expenses.

Financially, Hafsatu's fortunes took a dramatic turn for the better after joining the WEG. Her capital base skyrocketed from N3,000 to over N60,000. Empowered by her newfound knowledge and financial stability, Hafsatu transitioned from a small-scale pepper and salt business to rice processing, securing a more sustainable income for her family.

“My original intent of joining WEG was just to get a loan, but I found solutions to my family's health challenges too. Learning about ITNs was a turning point. Now, we sleep under nets all year round, and malaria is no longer a threat. For the first time in 17 years, none of my children fell sick from malaria. We haven't even needed Panadol this year!” Hafsatu Sirajo

Promoting Exclusive Breastfeeding

📍 Amina Abdulwahab, WEG member in Paiko Community, Gwagwalada Area Council, Federal Capital Territory (FCT)

Amina Abdulwahab is a mother of 2 from the Federal Capital Territory's Paiko Community in Gwagwalada Area Council. She joined a WEG before the birth of her second child. She had not breastfed her first child and did not plan to breastfeed her second. Her mother-in-law discouraged the practice, and Amina thought breastfeeding would be too stressful.

During WEG group meetings, Amina learned about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding for the



first six months of life, starting from birth. The lessons Amina took from the WEG group meetings changed her perspective on children's nutrition.

Armed with a deeper understanding of the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, and support from other WEG members, she exclusively breastfed her second child for six months. Amina noted a definite difference between her second and first child. Her second child is healthier and stronger.


“I am grateful that I joined this women's empowerment group, otherwise I would never have considered exclusive breastfeeding. My child is in excellent health and very brilliant. I have never had to take him to the hospital. It feels like a dream because it is common in our community for young children to become ill frequently, especially when they begin teething,” Amina shared with Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria. ***“I am overjoyed, and I wish I had exclusively breastfed my first child.”***

Changing Complementary Feeding Practice

📍 Rukaiya Adamu, WEG Member, Paiko Community
Federal Capital Territory (FCT)

Rukaiya Adamu, a mother of two from the Federal Capital Territory's Paiko Community, had a toddler she was breastfeeding, but she was not aware of the best complementary foods to introduce when her child reached six months of age. In her community, the prevalent practice was to feed infants with pap (corn pudding). Exclusive breastfeeding was not widely practiced.





Similar to Hauwa'u, Rukaiya joined the WEG in her community. During weekly meetings, she learned about optimal complementary feeding practices and providing nutritious meals for her children. When her son reached six months of age, she began introducing complementary feeds.

Initially, she faced challenges preparing complementary foods that her son would eat. However, during her group's food demonstration, she learned how to properly prepare them. Rukaiya put her newfound knowledge into practice and noticed significant improvements in her son's health compared to her other children. Rukaiya continued incorporating other complimentary meals she learned about during group meetings, and son's health thrived.

“I am grateful that I became a part of this women's empowerment group. I have learned a lot about health, I am able to practice these behaviors at home, and I have seen significant changes in my household,” Rukaiya shared with joy.

Protecting Health During Pregnancy

📍 Mrs. Igberuo Uzoamaka, Member of Favour WEG in Ndegu Amainyima village, Ebonyi State



Like many women in her community, Mrs. Igberuo Uzoamaka, a subsistence farmer and mother in Ndegu Amainyima village, Ebonyi State, did not know about potential risks during pregnancy and the importance of ANC. Her journey towards awareness and empowerment began when she joined the Favour WEG.

In Favour WEG, the women learned about the benefits of attending early antenatal care and about intermittent preventive treatment during pregnancy (IPTp), which prevents Malaria. Both behaviors resonated with Igberuo. They also learned about warning signs during pregnancy and the need to deliver with assistance at a health facility.

With her newfound knowledge and support from the WEG, Uzoamaka promptly attended ANC, and began sleeping inside an insecticide-treated mosquito net. She also started eating a balanced diet for a healthier pregnancy. Igberuo also decided to deliver her baby at the health facility.

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“The Women Empowerment Group has been a guiding light throughout my pregnancy journey. I am now aware of the risks and the importance of seeking timely care. My baby and I are healthier because of it,” Igberuo says enthusiastically.




Addressing Danger Signs in Pregnancy as a Gateway to Other Priority Behaviors

📍 Maryam Maigari, WEG member, Kalgo community in Kebbi State



During her first 2 pregnancies, Maryam Maigari, a 24-year-old from Kalgo community in Kebbi State, did not attend ANC. She was unaware pregnant women needed these services to detect and prevent possible complications for mother and child.

In the third trimester of her third pregnancy, Maryam experienced dizziness, lightheadedness, pale eyes and hands. Even though she hadn't experienced these symptoms with her other pregnancies she did not understand these to be 'danger signs' that require health care.



Danger signs include symptoms such as a severe headache, swollen hands and feet, acute stomach pain, bleeding from the vagina, difficulty breathing, and seizures that indicate a pregnant woman is experiencing complications and requires health care.

While dealing with these symptoms, Maryam still made the time to attend WEG meetings. During one of these meetings, a WEG facilitator discussed the benefits of attending ANC at least four times during a pregnancy. The facilitator spoke about 'danger signs' and the urgency of visiting a health care facility when dealing with them. It was at that moment that Maryam realized what was happening to her. She spoke with the group about it, and they encouraged her to visit the nearby health facility immediately.

The visit to the health facility revealed Maryam was anemic, which explained her pale hands and the dizziness she felt. She was placed on medication to improve blood production and the doctor outlined the types of food she should eat to facilitate a healthy pregnancy. The goal was to ensure she would not need a blood transfusion during delivery. The type of foods the doctor spoke of were the same ones included in the Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria 4-star meal concept, a discussion Maryam had participated in during the WEG meetings.

“I never knew about the 4-star meal. But because of my joining WEG, I know the benefit,” Maryam was eager to share

Another WEG meeting taught Maryam about homestead gardening, a practice which would allow her to grow plants with high nutritional profiles and ultimately

provide her with the foods she needed to maintain her health and prevent anemia during her pregnancy. Together with her husband, they began farming on their compound.

“Now look at my vegetable garden. I eat from it, my family eats from it, and I even give it to my neighbors. I want to expand my vegetable garden so I can sell and generate income for my weekly WEG contribution since my husband now assists me in taking care of the garden, and he is in support. I want to say a very big thank you to Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria for bringing WEG to our community. This is an eye opener to us women and our husbands.”

Maryam addressed the danger signs in her pregnancy and learned methods to prevent them through nutritional practices that not only benefit her, but others in her community. Maryam’s vegetable garden has continued to grow providing many bountiful harvests. Other WEG members have started their own vegetable gardens as a friendly challenge, but also as a way to ensure Kalgo community has availability to locally sourced food. They hope their efforts will help prevent complications among other pregnant women.

Breaking Barriers for Safe Motherhood

Patience Nwaguru, WEG member, Amainyima village of Ekpelu ward in Ikwo LGA




In Amainyima village of Ekpelu ward in Ikwo LGA, a community shrouded in misconceptions and traditional practices, Patience Nwaguru became a catalyst for transformative change. In the village, pregnant women faced the daunting prospect of delivering babies in barns, a practice rooted in a lack of awareness about the benefits of facility delivery with skilled birth attendants.

Patience recalls the challenges haunting her community. ***“We didn't know any better.***

Delivering at home was the norm, and the makeshift delivery spaces were far from ideal, she shares. The

community's approach to cord care was equally concerning, with harmful substances like toothpaste, charcoal, and even engine oil being used--a tradition passed down through the generations.



One significant barrier to change was the reluctance of spouses to allow their wives to deliver at health facilities. The perceived expense of facility deliveries dissuaded them from agreeing to the practice. This resistance, coupled with deep-rooted cultural norms, contributed to a staggering rate of maternal and child mortality and morbidity.

The turning point came with the introduction of the WEG approach by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria. Patience Nwaguru, a dedicated member of Star WEG, found herself at the forefront of a transformative journey. The WEG weekly meetings and facilitation sessions opened her eyes to the importance of safe deliveries at health facilities and the critical role of skilled birth attendants. Patience became an advocate for change. She not only embraced the concept of facility delivery for herself and family members but established her own WEG, called Success WEG, and took it upon herself to educate other women in the community. Breaking through the barrier of resistance from spouses, Patience highlighted the long-term benefits of investing in the health and well-being of mothers and infants, while assisting women in her community to adopt and practice essential RMNCH+N behaviors.

Today, Patience Nwaguru stands as a living testament to the idea that barriers can be broken.

"I want every woman to experience a safe and healthy childbirth. The WEG approach showed us a different path, one that leads to better outcomes for both mothers and babies," Patience says with pride.

As Patience continues her advocacy, she embodies the spirit of breaking barriers for safe motherhood. Through Patience's resilience and the ripple effect of her actions, Ikwo LGA is witnessing a transformative shift—one birth and one cord care practice at a time.


Advocating for Maternal Health

📍 Rashida Abdullahi, WEG facilitator in Kafin Dan Yaya community, Ningi East Ningi LGA, Bauchi State Receiving an award of Recognition from BA-Nigeria Bauchi Community Capacity Assistant



Kafin Dan Yaya is a community in Ningi East Ningi LGA in Bauchi State, where people believed women should deliver at home. If the woman died during labor, she was to be buried in the room where she had gone into labor. Rashida Abdullahi is a WEG facilitator in this community. She conducted an advocacy visit to the community leaders after learning the importance of facility delivery for women. She was against the practice of home delivery. It stood as a barrier to the uptake of health facility services and endangered the lives of pregnant women and their children.

She faced opposition from Adamu Ibrahim, a scholar in the community who strongly disagreed with modern health practices and service uptake.



His mind would be changed when his wife, Karima, joined one of the newly established women's groups in the community called “Mukaru da Junanmu Hasken Mata.” The name, a call to action to cater to their health and well-being, became a rallying force for the women. Rashida was one of its facilitators, and she urged the women in her group to take a stand against home deliveries. After attending the group’s weekly meeting for a time, Karima began to share the ideas she was learning. She was noticing positive changes from the behaviors she had started practicing as a result of discussions at the WEG meetings, behaviors such as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and sleeping inside an insecticide-treated net. Soon enough, Karima began to speak with her husband about ANC visits and facility delivery.


Over time she convinced the scholar Adamu Ibrahim. He eventually consented to Karima attending ANC services and assured her that their baby would be delivered at a health facility when she was due. Adamu went a step further, supporting her facility visits financially and even attending two sessions with her. This change in behavior can be attributed to Rashida’s desire to break social barriers negatively affecting women's and children’s health.

Sowing Seeds of Empowerment. Nurturing Positive Health Behavior

📍 Mrs. Blessing Peter, community facilitator and member of Ayenajeyi Haske Mata



Mrs. Blessing Peter, a community facilitator, and member of Ayenajeyi Haske Mata, residing in Angwan Hakimi of Orozo ward, initially struggled with prioritizing health behaviors and lacked a saving culture despite participating in other community women's group. Through the introduction of Ayenajeyi Haske Mata using the WEG approach, Mrs. Peter was educated by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria on the priority health behaviors and the significance of saving. Formerly a small-scale farmer, she often neglected to reserve produce for her family's use. However, upon realizing the benefits of saving after receiving a modest share-out in 2022, Mrs. Peter began selling grains and learned the importance of financial prudence.



Ahead of the 2023 cycle, Mrs. Peter discussed with her husband the possibility of increasing their weekly contribution to 1500 Naira. This decision was influenced by her dedication to monitoring nutrition and utilizing the MUAC tape for her children, resulting in improved health outcomes. As a result, she became one of the highest contributors during the 2023 share-out, using the funds to enhance her farm's capacity and establish a grain storage and trading business. Additionally, Mrs. Peter cultivated a vegetable farm for family consumption and initiated her own group, Apajeshi, comprising 20 members. Mrs. Blessing Peter's transformative journey underscores the power of education and community support in fostering positive behavior change. Through Ayenajayi Haske Mata, Mrs. Peter has not only embraced a saving culture but also instilled positive health behaviors within her family, thus contributing to their overall well-being and empowerment.


“Experience is the best teacher and learning from it makes you a better person and be in a better space. The Ayenajayi Haske Mata group helped me to have the culture of saving and investing in the family by adopting positive health behavior.” Mrs. Blessing Peter

Improving Joint Decision Making for Family Health

📍 Cynthia Ogali, WEG member, Ndegu Amainyima, Ekpely ward of Ikwo LGA

In Ndegu Amainyima, a small village in the Ekpely ward of Ikwo LGA, it was a challenge to get sick children the healthcare they needed because of a particular cultural practice. The community frowned upon women seeking medical care for either themselves or a sick child without the husband's permission. It was believed all decisions regarding women and children should be made by the husbands. This hesitancy to seek prompt healthcare led to avoidable complications and, sometimes, death. A core tenet of WEGs is the importance of joint spousal decision making when it comes to the health of a woman, her pregnancy, the health of the expected baby and that of the whole family. By discussing these things,





couples can make decisions together, understand one another better and improve the well-being of their family.


Joint spousal decision making is something Cynthia Ogali, a mother of 2 young children, learned in her WEG. When her children fell ill, she was hesitant to seek medical attention without her husband's permission. The cost of going to a healthcare facility also worried her, especially when she depended on her husband for her family's financial needs. Thus, she turned to traditional remedies to treat her children.

After joining the WEG, Cynthia learned the importance of seeking prompt medical care for childhood illnesses and how critical spousal communication is. Her WEG meetings emphasized the benefits of early diagnosis and treatment. Cynthia realized a delay in seeking medical help could lead to losing her children.

Cynthia decided to speak to her husband, Sunday, about what she had learned. Sunday was open to the discussion and quickly convinced joint decision making would improve the chances of his wife and children surviving when a health emergency arose. He agreed that their children's well-being is a shared responsibility and timely medical care is crucial. The two decided to make health-seeking decisions jointly.

“Before, I used to hesitate and worry about the costs and what the community would say if I visited the health facility without permission from my husband. But now that my husband and I know that our children's health comes first, we can manage together. We are grateful to the WEG for showing us the path to better health for our children,”

Cynthia adds to this.



The discussion changed their lives and their children's lives for the better. Now, whenever the children are ill, Cynthia and Sunday consult with one another and visit a nearby health facility as soon as possible. Their united front in health-seeking decisions has resulted in early diagnosis and timely treatment of illnesses and improved their collective health significantly.

Sunday Ogali proudly says

“the Women Empowerment Group taught us that making decisions together is not a sign of weakness but strength. Now, we prioritize our children's health and well-being as a team.”

INCOME GENERATION STORIES




From savings to Financial Independence

📌 Branded petroleum jelly product of Ayenajeyi WEG



Embracing priority health behaviors begins with a level of financial freedom, which is why the WEG approach emphasized income generation activities. WEGs encouraged women to develop savings habits, take (and repay) loans to start businesses, and helped women to acquire skills that are useful in running micro businesses. Skills such as bookkeeping, so the women can track cash inflow and outflow and better manage their money.

During WEG weekly meetings, group members made contributions to core savings, repaid



loans, and allocated funds to the social and emergency funds. Some women contributed as low as N100 while others contributed up to N1,000. The amount they contributed depended on their financial means.

WEGs used social funds to support activities that focused on community development. An example of such an activity is when a member of the Ayenajeyi Women Empowerment Group volunteered to teach her group members how to make petroleum jelly. The WEG group utilized their social funds to purchase the necessary raw materials and chemicals. Through this activity, they produced petroleum jelly and sold it to community members. Altogether, the group generated N26,000 from this activity, and some members used their newly acquired skill to start their own petroleum jelly businesses, further increasing their economic independence.

Improving Economic Power and Encouraging Peaceful Households

📍 Aishatu Usman and Zuwaira Sabi'u, WEG Members in Dott, Dass LGA, Bauchi State



Aishatu Usman (37 years old) and Zuwaira Sabi'u (45 years old) both live in Dott in Dass LGA of Bauchi State. Their stories share a lot of commonalities. Both women live in polygamous families with two co-wives and their husbands are farmers. In their households, they depend on their husbands to provide for them. When there are multiple wives, the husband's earnings are divided among them. If the husbands can bring in a lot of produce or money from sales, the wives are provided with a fair share which covers their needs. When husbands are unable to provide



enough, which often is the case, the wives and children are forced to compromise. This often leads to conflicts among co-wives.

Aishatu and Zuwaira ran small businesses to supplement the income their husbands provided but were struggling to run them successfully. Both had inadequate capital, no savings, and no access to loan schemes. When they joined 17 other women in the village of Wasa Farin Girki, an upshot of the Hasken Mata WEG set up by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria, things changed.

Every week Aishatu, Zuwaira and the other members of the WEG held meetings to discuss maternal and child health issues. During these meetings they also contributed from their small businesses into a savings scheme from which members could collect and repay loans. At the end of every saving cycle, group members held a share-out ceremony during which members were given the total contributions they had made over the cycle.

Aishatu and Zuwaira participated in three share-outs, through which they saved hundreds of thousands of Naira. The two invested their savings and used the money to support their families.

“During the last share-out held on December 15, 2022, I got N450,000, with which I bought fertilizer against the coming rainy season, paid my child’s school fees, and set up a groundnut and palm oil business,”

shared Aishatu.

This was a noticeable increase in the amount she received from her first share-out, in which she saved only N45,000. Zuwaira put the money she had saved back into her business. The resulting profit enabled her to support the construction of her first child's house after he married in early 2023.


Established in 2018, the WEG in the Dott Community has snowballed from the initial Hasken Mata into 21 groups with over 600 members. Each of these members learn about priority health behaviors and have contributed to a pool of savings from which they can take loans to expand their businesses. Altogether, the 21 groups generate more than N1,500,000 monthly and cumulatively shared out around N11,000,000 in 2022.

“In my entire life of over 60 years, it was during one of the share-outs by these groups that I saw N1,000,000 in cash!” the village head of Dott, Alhaji Suleiman Dauda, shared during one of the share-outs.

In addition to economic empowerment, the WEG concept has brought a semblance of peace into the women's homes. When a group member quarrels with a co-wife or husband they are fined N1,000. Additionally, with women more focused on improving their sources of income and caring for the needs of their families, they have less time to spend fighting with their co-wives.


From Dott ward, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria scaled up the WEG initiative to 50% of wards in Dass LGA with a goal of improving health and economically empowering more women in rural areas of Bauchi State.

Increasing Incomes for Rural Nigerian Women

 Amina Yakubu, WEG member, with the grinding machine she purchased with her savings

In Yeldu Arewa LGA of Kebbi State, Amina Yakubu, a mother of six, had a small business selling tiger nuts. Her husband also ran a small-scale business. But despite their best efforts, they were finding it difficult to pay hospital bills, the children's school fees and meet other family needs. Things were so difficult they were even struggling to afford food.





When Amina learned of a WEG in her area and their goals, she decided to join. She contributed what she was able to--which was not very much--and waited for the day when she could take a loan from the group to expand her business. It was a huge sacrifice for her, especially when her family's situation was not immediately improving. Amina persevered though, and at the first share-out earned enough money to buy a grinding machine, which sells for around N115,000.

The machine became a vital source of income in addition to the grain and nuts she sold, and as a result she was able to send one of her children back to school. Her child had been unable to attend school because they could not afford the fees. She also used the money in other ways to support her family's needs like paying for hospital bills.

“I want to say a very big thank you to Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria for introducing this beautiful thing [WEG] into our community. Look at me... I was able to buy a grinding machine and use it to assist and support my family in almost all areas, and I am seeing the benefit. I even advised my friend, who is in the same women empowerment group as me, to use her money after the second share-out to buy her grinding machine. She did this and is enjoying it, too.” Amina Yakubu.

Amina's business expanded and she no longer struggles to attain the bare minimum.

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“I am planning to get an additional grinding machine. I am very happy. Thank you, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria.”

Amina has come to understand women's empowerment as a collective effort. She reached out to a relative who was in dire straits and employed her to oversee the grinding machine. This relative, Hauwau Sani, joined the WEG and began to save as Amina did. In time, she too took a loan from the group and bought her own grinding machine. She is now able to support her family.




From Dependent to Provider:

The Iteshi Monica Story

📍 Iteshi Monica, Member Star WEG, Ebonyi State



In Inyimagu Ameka Village in Ikwo LGA, Ebonyi State, lives Iteshi Monica, a housewife with three children. Monica was entirely dependent on her husband. She possessed no income of her own and contributed little financially to the upkeep of her family. Her husband was emotionally abusive-- he did not like how dependent she was on him. Her life changed for the better when she enrolled in Star Women, a WEG in the Ekpelu ward. Monica knew it was going to be tough participating in the micro-savings and loan aspects of the WEG. She worried it would worsen the friction with her husband, but



she was also determined to save what she could until she could access a loan. After weeks of consistent savings, Monica's efforts paid off. She secured the loan she had been aiming for and opened an engine oil business.

Monica's house stands on a major road where cars often break down because of poor maintenance and require engine oil. Additionally, due to constant power outages, homes and businesses in the area use power generators. These generators require constant servicing and, during that servicing, need engine oil. Monica saw a need and decided to build her business around it.

Her business model worked, and Monica began to make money from it. With income from her engine oil business, she now helps her husband provide for their family. Her business success has also boosted her confidence and strengthened her relationship with her husband.


“Joining Star Women changed my life and gave me the tools to empower myself and others. I am now a proud business owner and lead WEG facilitator, and my family’s health and well-being have greatly improved.” Iteshi Monica

Offia Iteshi, her husband, is in full support of the Star Women WEG. He credits them with helping his wife create a livelihood and for the impactful knowledge on life-changing health and nutrition they have imparted which has positively affected his family's lifestyle, hygiene, and health-seeking behavior. Iteshi Monica has since established her own WEG called the Peace WEG. She


oversees it as lead facilitator and empowers other women to make informed health decisions, as well as providing access to unrestrained but monitored crowd-funded micro-savings and loans.

Empowering Women Towards Financial Freedom Through Skill Acquisition

 Ramatu, Habiba Abubakar Member WEG Facilitator



Like Monica, Ramatu Bako is a mother of three and was entirely dependent on her spouse for her family's financial needs. While she and her husband did not experience the same friction as Monica and her husband, Ramatu saw the need to contribute financially as the Nigerian economy worsened.




The implementation of the WEG in the FCT was the opportunity Ramatu had been waiting for. Through the Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's WEG approach, Ramatu had the opportunity to learn about healthy behaviors and economic empowerment.

She was selected as a community facilitator, setting up her own WEG after being trained by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria. As a member of the community facilitator's group, she could request a loan and did so to start a liquid soap business--a product she had learned to make during a skill acquisition activity. In many communities, women face barriers that limit their access to education and skill development. These barriers include limited resources, gender stereotypes, and societal roles that prioritize domestic responsibilities over personal growth. The WEG hosts skill acquisition sessions quarterly which provide opportunities for the women to learn something new.

Ramatu worked hard and used the profit from her liquid soap business to start an akara (bean cake) business beside her house. She also bought melon seeds and stored them until the price increased, selling them for a profit.

“The WEG approach has increased our awareness significantly. I have never been a beneficiary of any intervention, and I am grateful to be a member of the WEG in my community. I have gained extensive knowledge about health and how to adopt healthy behaviors. I also explore businesses in my community and participate in income-generating activities.” Ramatu Bako



The WEG approach has transformed Ramatu's life, helping her move from a state of dependence to independence and financial stability. It provided access to new opportunities and instilled her with the confidence to open multiple small businesses. Ramatu is now able to help her family navigate financial burdens and can also cater for her own personal needs as well as those of her children.

In the same community as Ramatu, Habiba Abubakar similarly benefitted from the WEG group. Habiba believed starting a business required a large amount of capital and was unaware of income generating activities within her immediate community. After joining the same WEG as Ramatu and obtaining a loan, Habiba also started her own soap business. The business thrived and she is now able to financially support her family. Habiba decided to spread her knowledge and share it with other women in the community so they too could become independent.

“This WEG has changed my life. I no longer depend on my husband for everything. He has been supportive, ensuring that I run my business effectively. I never anticipated having this financial freedom, and it came unexpectedly,” Habiba Abubakar

Nurturing Entrepreneurship

📹 Utulor Mercy showcasing her new business from a skill acquisition session

Utulor Mercy believes in giving back to her community and is a dedicated volunteer at the Inyimagu Primary Health Center. Her commitment to helping others and making a positive difference in people's lives has earned her the respect and admiration of her community.

Mercy decided to attend a WEG skill acquisition session, enthusiastically immersing herself in the training because she was excited about the prospect of learning something new. It was during this session that she discovered her passion for beauty products. One of the products she was taught to make,



and which she found herself drawn to, was shampoo.

It didn't take Mercy long to become proficient in shampoo production. She began experimenting with different natural ingredients, testing out the recipes on herself and noting the remarkable improvements in her hair's health and appearance. She decided to take it one step further and approached nearby hair salons to gauge their interest in her all-natural, locally produced shampoo. To her delight, the salons appreciated the quality of her shampoo and its uniqueness. They were eager to sell it to their customers.

“The WEG unlocked my potential and gave me the confidence to pursue my passion. Now, I'm not only helping people through my volunteer work but also contributing to my family's financial well-being,” says Utulor Mercy.

With the support of the WEG, Mercy is now both a volunteer with a giving heart and a skilled entrepreneur. Her shampoo venture is flourishing, providing her with an additional source of income and supplementing what she is earning through her volunteer services. Through her business, Mercy also empowered other women, in particular adolescent girls, by providing opportunities for employment and skill development.

Benefitting Both Husband and Wife

📍 Sa'idu Abdullahi, his spouse Bilikisu, and their daughter



Sa'idu Abdullahi, a 45-year-old driver in Yeldu community, Arewa local government area of Kebbi State, was tired of struggling. The car he used for his transportation business was old and in constant disrepair. When it wasn't in the shop, whatever money he made from customers was used to offset the bills the car had accrued, and it was hampering his ability to provide for his family and pay for medical bills.

When his wife, Balkisu Umar, heard about the WEG, she wanted to join. Sai'du supported her but at the time didn't think much of the WEG. All he really knew was that his wife was contributing a little of the money from her small business to the group. After the first share-out his

wife participated in, Sai'du was astounded by how much she had earned in six months, and he saw how her business expanded when she invested the money in it. Sai'du decided to add to her weekly contributions, and they began to save money as a couple. At the second share-out 6 months later, Sai'du and Balkisu collected N250,000. Sai'du sold the old car and, using the money he had earned from the car sale together with the money they had accrued from the WEG, bought a better car for his transportation business.

“Honestly, I am grateful to Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria. I am grateful to the women empowerment group. I can provide for my family. One of my sons got sick, and I was able to take him to the hospital, pay the bills, and buy medication for him. As a result of all this, anything I am doing or want to do, I discuss with my wife first before deciding. Thanks to Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria.” Sai'du Ab'dullahi

Sai'du is especially glad that his wife's financial advancement led to their collective financial growth. He continues to encourage his wife in her business goals.

COLLECTIVE ACTION STORIES



Transforming Health Through community Partnership


📍 Ezza Grace, Chairperson of Star Women Empowerment Group.



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“Preventable health issues are not just challenges; they are opportunities for us to come together, break barriers, and empower our community. Through collaboration and awareness, we can create a healthier and more resilient future for all.”

Ezza Grace, Chairperson of Star Women Empowerment Group.



The WEG approach recognizes the power of partnerships and collaboration to affect collective health improvement. WEGs collaborated with Ward Development Committees (WDCs), Social Behavior Change – Advocacy Core Groups (SBC-ACGs), Community Volunteers (CVs), and health service providers in primary healthcare centers. Together, they advocated for increased investment in health services, engaged community leaders, and educated young girls on reproductive health and nutrition. The result was improved access to healthcare, increased immunization rates, and empowered individuals who made informed decisions about their health. Through unity and collective action, WEGs are contributing to sustainable change.

Uniting for Change

📹 Food demonstration skilled acquisition session in Nigi Ward

In Dass and Ningi LGAs of Bauchi State, over 50 groups with 968 members have worked hard to improve their communities' health. Their efforts encompass individual and family health, financial support, help for underserved orphans, vulnerable children





and widows, and support for religious leaders.

The WEGs used their social funds to improve childbirth outcomes in their communities. They provided funds to 268 pregnant women who could not afford health care so they could attend ANC and deliver in health facilities. The WEGs in Dass and Ningi also donated N168,000 to eight health facilities in their communities for routine antenatal drugs that were offered to pregnant women at no cost. They awarded bath bowls and detergent to women who attended and completed ANC and delivered at health facilities.

The Das and Ningi groups have organized 90 community-led food demonstration sessions, during which they teach pregnant women, caregivers of children under five, young adolescent girls, and lactating mothers how to use locally available resources to meet their daily nutritional requirements using the 4-Star meal concept. In the process, they identified and referred 164 children with SAM to nearby health facilities for treatment. They also supplied complementary foods—most notably the highly nutritious Tom Brown powder—to 450 children under the age of five years with moderate acute malnutrition. During fasting and festive periods, they furnished food and clothing worth over N300,000 for orphans, vulnerable children, and widows.


Additionally, WEGs have aided community work and repairs such as renovating and donating prayer mats, kettles, offering boxes, and chairs to their various places of worship. WEGs also supported victims of flood and fire outbreaks in their communities to get back on their feet.

A Community's Love Embraces a New Life

📍 Ogodo Mercy, Show the Light WEG member and surrogate mother



Nneka was a young woman full of hopes and dreams who tragically passed away while giving birth to her child. Her sudden death left the community in shock and grief stricken. Upon learning of Nneka's death, Show the Light WEG came together to ensure the baby's well-being, and provide the love and support that Nneka could no longer give.



The WEG members sprang into action, collecting contributions from within the group to support the child's financial needs. They recognized that the newborn required constant care and nurturing and searched for a wet nurse who would be willing to nurse the baby until maturity.

Ogodo Mercy, a member of the WEG, stepped forward to become more than just the baby's wet nurse. She became her surrogate mother. She selflessly took on the responsibility of nurturing the child as her own, ensuring the baby never lacked love and care. Other WEG members also offered their assistance, helping Mercy with daily tasks and ensuring the child's needs were met. They formed a support network around Mercy and the baby, providing comfort during challenging times and celebrating the joys of each milestone achieved.

Through their collective efforts, the WEG demonstrated the value of community and the power of empathy and love. The child, now surrounded by a loving and nurturing environment, is thriving, and has become a cherished member of the community.


Reflecting on their journey, Mercy tearfully shares ***“I am grateful for the WEG's support and for trusting me with this precious life. Together, we are giving this child the best possible start in life, just as Nneka would have wanted.”***

Ensuring Women Attend Health Facilities during Pregnancy

WEGs in Bui, Kebbi State, presenting healthcare commodities to the facility in-charge



In Yeldu community the health facility frequently ran out of routine drugs for pregnant women which discouraged women from seeking ANC services. Community volunteers (CVs) were constantly mobilizing and educating women on the importance of going for ANC, taking routine drugs (folic acid, etc.) and the importance of using chlorhexidine, but when the women went to the health facilities, these commodities were not often available.



“I went to the health facility two times for ANC during my pregnancy, and all the health workers could tell me was that there were no routine drugs to give me. They were all finished. She told me that I would have to buy what I needed. I didn’t have enough money to buy them. And when I could raise the money, they were not available in the patent and proprietary medicine vendor near me.” Hamida Mustapha, a community member.

The local WEG contributed from their social and emergency funds to make these health commodities available. As news spread that the commodities were now available and women could access them for free, there was a surge in facility attendance for ANC, delivery, childbirth spacing, and other maternal and child health-related services.

“A WEG member who happened to be my neighbor told me that there are ANC drugs available in the health facility because their group contributed to the health facility. I went to the facility, and I am so happy I have been getting my drugs whenever I go for ANC. Now that I have been put to bed, they also gave me chlorhexidine for free, donated by WEG for my child’s cord care. I would love to join WEG so I can give my contribution to help others. Thanks to WEG, I am so happy!” Hamida Mustapha.

When two other WEG groups saw how happy the women of their community were that they had access to ANC, the group also contributed folic acid and chlorhexidine to the health facility. Similarly, five WEGs in Bui, Kebbi State, formed a coalition to provide childbirth spacing commodities worth N90,000 to their health facility so that women in their community could access these products for free. They saw their community's needs, worked with the healthcare facility managers, referred women to the facility, and delivered the commodities to them.

Collectively Producing Complementary Foods for Malnourished Children

📍 Alheri Hasken Mata during a skill acquisition session on Tom Brown Powder making in Yeldu ward, Arewa LGA



Alheri Hasken Mata is the WEG Facilitators' group in Yeldu ward, Arewa LGA, Kebbi State. During community screenings, they noticed that many under five-year-olds suffered from moderate acute malnutrition. Community volunteers counseled mothers of these children to buy complementary food for their children, particularly Tom Brown Powder.



Tom Brown Powder

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations describes Tom Brown Powder as 'a supplementary food powder made from a blend of locally available roasted soya beans, groundnut, guinea corn, maize, millet, fish powder, and local spices. The ingredients are mixed and typically prepared as porridge for weaning babies. Tom Brown is a cost-effective solution against malnutrition; it is highly nutritious, locally produced and processed, quick and easy to prepare, readily available, accessible, affordable, and accepted by local communities.'

Unfortunately, the cost of Tom Brown Powder is prohibitively expensive for many parents. At health facilities, a single pack of Tom Brown costs N150 and the pack only provides two to three servings which covers the needs of a child for a single day. Mothers with malnourished children cannot afford to spend this amount every day.

Alheri Hasken Mata wondered if they could solve this problem. Could they learn to make Tom Brown Powder, package it in larger sizes, use it as a group business venture and sell it at a cheaper rate to their community members? They all agreed it was a worthwhile endeavor, one that would benefit their community and WEG. The WEG invited Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria to train them to make Tom Brown Powder. After training, the women made their first samples in a larger size and were successfully able to sell it for N100 a pack, a N50 decrease from the packs offered at the health facilities.

Now, women in the community prefer the Tom Brown Powder produced by the Alheri Hasken Mata WEG because it is more value for money. As a result of their efforts, the communities' children are inching closer to the green line of health on the MUAC tape used to measure malnutrition in children.



The WEG's Tom Brown Powder production venture led them to a nine-month-old boy, Aminu Sani, who was experiencing MAM. His mother had passed away and left him in the care of his aunt. The WEG offered to give the boy free packs of Tom Brown Powder for 3 months. Today, Aminu is over a year old, and is growing well thanks to the Alheri Hasken Mata WEG.

“On behalf of Alheri Hasken Mata women empowerment group in Yeldu, we are saying a very big thank you to Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria for taking their time and energy to teach us how to make the Tom Brown powder, which is really helping our community women and families. Now our community members can get Tom Brown at an affordable price. As a group, we will teach other women empowerment groups how to make Tom Brown as we have learned and seen the benefits,” a member from the Alheri Hasken Mata WEG shared.

When two other WEG groups saw how happy the women of their community were that they had access to ANC, the group also contributed folic acid and chlorhexidine to the health facility. Similarly, five WEGs in Bui, Kebbi State, formed a coalition to provide childbirth spacing commodities worth N90,000 to their health facility so that women in their community could access these products for free. They saw their community's needs, worked with the healthcare facility managers, referred women to the facility, and delivered the commodities to them.





LEADERSHIP & REPRESENTATION STORIES



Leadership & Representation Stories

Each WEG has a governance and management structure that defines how the group should be run internally. Each group chooses a leader who Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria trains to influence others to adopt priority health behaviors, save money, improve their sources of income, and facilitate better spousal communication.

Perhaps more critically, WEG members are groomed to become leaders outside their groups, developing the ability to influence positive behavior change in the larger community. To this end, women selected to join WEGs possess the following qualities:

- They are respected in their community.
- They are patient and good listeners.
- They are fair, just, and considerate of others.
- They have a positive personality.
- They are hard-working and intelligent.
- They are open to other people's ideas.
- They possess a basic level of literacy (specifically, the ability to read and write in English, Hausa, Igbo, or Ajami).
- They have a primary school certificate.
- They have time to spare for group meetings.


These qualities allow members to contribute meaningfully to conversations around MNCH+N, the need for women's agency as they navigate their lives and economic advancement, and larger conversations around how these ideas positively affect familial, communal, and even national growth and development. The women of all WEGs across Bauchi, Ebonyi, Kebbi, Sokoto, and FCT demonstrate these qualities and possess varying degrees of leadership in their communities, as the stories below share.

A woman wearing a red hijab is smiling warmly at a baby she is holding. The baby is wearing a pink headband and a light blue dress with a floral pattern. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a mud-brick wall.

Building Confidence to Take Up Leadership Roles

📷 Khadijah Hashimu and her baby

Social norms and gender bias in northern Nigeria have had a significant impact on the lives of women. Gender bias has placed men in leadership positions and at the core of decision-making in most rural communities. Authorities in both the public and private spheres regularly limit women's influence in decision-making processes, including those that affect women's health and well-being.



Khadijah Hashimu and Binta Sabo are WEG facilitators in Dass and Ningi LGAs, respectively. After joining WEG, they demonstrated good character, enthusiasm, and confidence as they led their groups as facilitators. News of their character began to spread in their communities and the community leaders decided that Khadijah and Binta could become part of the community's committee on welfare and other matters arising. They were invited to interact with other relevant stakeholders in their community, make contributions and suggestions, and speak on decisions that benefit women's health and social well-being.

This was a big move by the community leaders. In the past, women were not allowed to sit in the elders' council meetings at the village head palace.

Community leaders were willing to change age-old traditions because they realized that these women--Khadijah and Binta--displayed exemplary leadership.

This was shown in their ability to influence women to take up priority health behaviors, contribute financially to household upkeep, and work with their spouses to maintain family dynamics.

Today, Khadijah and Binta sit in on council meetings, discussing community concerns and issues, and promoting ideas for positive change among women, children, families, and the entire community.

These two women demonstrated quality leadership because they had one thing in common: the training and experience they gained through the Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria WEG approach.



Repairing Families through Leadership and Influence

📷 Halima, WEG facilitator, engaging a community member

In Kebbi State, Halima has grown to be a respected member of her community. She leads her own WEG wherein she encourages women to respect their husbands, seek their partnership on issues relating to health, and contribute towards household issues.

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“We didn’t just want to get information about savings and loans. Many of us are already saving one way or another. What was important to me was how wives and husbands could stay together in peace and work hand-in-hand to ensure their family is healthy and grow economically,” Halima explained.

When she walks the streets, she is always greeted in a friendly fashion, a sign of respect for the help she has provided. Her reputation has grown so that even children recognize her and have started talking about the priority behaviors they have seen her exhibit.

One day, Malam Lawali Isah, a man in her community, reached out to her and asked if he could speak to her about his marital difficulties. He had heard of the way she encouraged women to act in their homes and he hoped she could help address the issues he was dealing with. He was on the verge of ending his marriage and speaking to Halima was a last resort.




Empowering Women Inspiring Change

📷 Nwaoba Clementina, Ward Development Committee member, Ikwo LGA

Nwaoba Clementina is a member of the Ward Development Committee (WDC) in Ikwo LGA of Ebonyi State. She has always been passionate about issues concerning women and a driving force behind women's empowerment in her community.

When the first WEG was established, Clementina was appointed as the lead facilitator. With her guidance and



support, the group flourished. She led by example and encouraged other women to form their own groups. Clementina's dedication was not limited to supporting others—she was also a trailblazer.

Clementina understood the importance of addressing the specific needs of adolescents in the community. She took the lead in establishing the first adolescent empowerment group, focusing on issues relevant to young girls and providing a safe space for them to share their thoughts and concerns. Through her role as a facilitator, Clementina organized and conducted numerous awareness campaigns and community outreaches that tackled critical health and social issues, ranging from reproductive and maternal health to the importance of education and gender equality.

Clementina's commitment and leadership have had a profound impact on the lives of women and young girls in the community. Her efforts have empowered women to come together, discuss priority issues, and collectively take steps towards positive change.

Reflecting on her journey, Clementina says, ***“being part of the Women Empowerment Group has been a life-changing experience. Witnessing women supporting and uplifting each other has strengthened my belief in the power of unity.”***

Clementina's exemplary leadership and dedication to empowering women and adolescents not only elevated the status of women in the community but also inspired others to take charge and advocate for their rights. Her story stands as

testament to the transformative impact of women's representation and leadership in community development initiatives.

Usually, marital issues are kept within the family. If problems become unsolvable, they can be brought before a traditional or religious leader to either resolve the issues or facilitate the dissolution of the marriage. Halima spoke to Mallam Lawali and told him to give her some time to reach out to his wife and see what she could do.

Halima invited Mallam Lawali's wife to join her WEG, where they discussed spousal communication for the health of the family. As a WEG member, Halima reminded them that quarreling with their husbands, co-wives, or other members of the community would result in a fine for the erring member.

Mallam Lawali started to notice a change in his wife's behavior. She began seeking his support in what she did.

"I have benefited from the women empowerment group personally. It has let me to live in peace with my wife. And now, she is growing her business and contributing to the family," Mallam Lawali was happy to share.




Halima's influence as a leader has helped women grow and flourish in their community. When asked what she would do when Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria closed out its operations, she described leadership and influence as essential to sustainability.

“Even if Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria is not here anymore, we will continue to live like this. We have built a lifestyle with the lessons we have learned from the women empowerment group,” Halima shares.

Building Self-Confidence

📷 Nwali Amarachi and Baby

Nwali Amarachi once struggled with low self-esteem and self-doubt. Amarachi is a trader, a mother of one, and devoutly religious. She experienced a transformational change after joining the Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria Women Empowerment Group in the Ikwo LGA of Ebonyi State. Through peer support and mentorship, Amarachi gradually gained confidence in herself and her abilities.



With the WEG's encouragement, she took part in skill-building activities, including group facilitation sessions, meetings with other sub-groups, skill acquisition sessions, and food demonstration exercises. All of this helped in bolstering her interpersonal communication skills and ultimately enhanced her confidence. Today, Amarachi is the lead facilitator of her own WEG, Adorable Women Empowerment Group, composed of 16 members. She has also spearheaded several awareness campaigns on priority health behaviors while helping women in her community make informed choices for their well-being.

"In the past, I used to be very shy and doubted myself constantly, but the Women Empowerment Group believed in me, and that made all the difference. Now, I am confident in my abilities," says Nwali Amarachi.

Amarachi's remarkable journey from self-doubt to self-assurance shows the power of collective support in building a strong and confident individual.

A woman in an orange hijab stands on the left, gesturing with her hands as if speaking. A group of women in various colored hijabs (blue, orange, white) are seated on the right, listening attentively. The background shows a simple, light-colored wall and a dirt ground. A decorative blue and green wavy pattern is visible on the far left edge of the page.

Ramatu Conducting a session on priority health behavior

In Kebbi State, a similar story unfolded with Ramatu. Painfully shy was one way to describe her. She rarely spoke in front of women and never spoke when men were present. This behavior was reinforced by social norms that prevented women and men from mixing in social settings.

However, as she learned about priority health behaviors during her Miyetti Allah WEG Zagga meetings, she started to speak to other women and, gradually, men in her community. This started because, during the WEG meetings, leaders and members rotate the sharing of health messages so everyone speaks to the group at one point.

Ramatu practiced public speaking with her husband and the women of the group, and her confidence built. One day she was asked to speak to a gathering of community members on some of the health behaviors they had discussed in their group. She was nervous, but she decided it was something she would do, and she did it--surprising herself and the women who knew her.

Ramatu continues to use community gatherings to reach men and women with critical information aimed at promoting the adoption of positive social and gender norms in their communities.



