



# Halima and Hajiya Zainab's Education Journey: Empowering Girls through Safer Schools



# VOICES

Halima stands out as the only girl in her village pursuing secondary education. Just like other girls in her community, when it was time to proceed to Senior Secondary School, she was confronted with numerous reasons to drop out. Her decision to continue her education was a courageous one, considering the cultural norms that underpinned the struggles of girls her age. In 2021, a PERL survey identified hindrances to girls' education like security, socio-cultural norms, poor facilities, and safety. In her village, societal pressures often compelled girls to marry early, leading many to drop out of school. Despite the gossip, whispers and side looks to the extent of outright exclusion, Halima had the full support of her family and the encouragement of her school principal.

Hajiya Zainab, a principal with 24 years of experience teaching and managing schools has struggled with the realities of safeguarding girls to ensure they not only complete but thrive in school. When Hajiya Zainab was introduced to PERL's safe space initiative, she latched on to it. Started through a framework for establishing safe spaces, the initiative is intended to improve the safety and well-being of girls in schools. It identifies measures such as creating awareness, establishing conducive learning environments and facilitating targeted funding for girls' education.

Through surveys, organising dissemination sessions, engaging various stakeholders, and facilitating the application of safe space principles in schools, the foundations for the implementation of the framework were established. In collaboration with the PLANE programme, follow-up training on safeguarding for principals to empower and enhance the understanding of their roles in mitigating barriers to girls' education was conducted. Before the training, Hajiya Zainab was uncertain about what to do to improve girls' retention. The safe space training helped her articulate tangible actions and with guidance from the safeguarding action plan, she is working to address concerns such as girls walking long distances to school, engaging in hawking, and facing security threats. To mitigate these risks, she coordinates with vigilante groups, the police, and other stakeholders, establishing a social responsibility framework for the girls' commute.

"Despite all the fears and constraints, you tend to be engrossed with being a teacher and a Principal, until the awareness of safe space prompted me to venture into other areas."



**GSS Bunkure**

She said the situation calls for more than being a Principal and refraining from waiting for the government on every issue. "I now know better," Hajiya Zainab said, with a sense of clarity of her wider responsibilities. However, parents burdened by economic constraints and social pressures, still insist that their daughters engage in hawking before attending school. Hajiya Zainab, acknowledging the complexities of this situation, is exploring alternatives to accommodate these girls. Hajiya Zainab's efforts are leading to positive outcomes, including improved safety, her students are more informed about safeguarding practices and are using the reporting mechanisms for bullying put in place. Further, following in Halima's footsteps, several girls have returned to school.

Routine discussions with parents who do not want their children to come to school because of hawking are now in place. Suggestions on possible cash incentives to parents to raise their businesses, so they allow their daughters to go to school instead of hawking have been forwarded to the government. The impact of the initiative is beyond Hajiya Zainab's achievement. 500 other Principals of Senior Secondary Schools across Kano, that have been put through the safeguarding training are also devising measures to make their schools safer through learning from the PERL-supported Safe Space Initiative. Halima has now written her qualifying exams and is well on her way to enrolling for tertiary Education.

"We want all the children in Bunkure and nearby villages to acquire formal education and to be self-reliant after their secondary education."

This story is also about many more resilient girls across Kano State pursuing education in challenging circumstances. It is estimated that the safeguarding protocols being implemented in schools are providing a more supportive environment to unlock the full potential of over 6,000 girls like Halima. Hajiya Zainab's closing words and a peek at her actions seemed to have uttered a plea: *"The faint cries and dreams of girls in schools may fade away unless they can be safe, trust their teachers enough, and depend on their communities to come to their aid."*

**Contact Address:**

- 📍 10 Bobo Street  
Maitama, Abuja, Nigeria
- ✉ [info@perlnigeria.net](mailto:info@perlnigeria.net)
- 🌐 [www.perlnigeria.net](http://www.perlnigeria.net)
- 📺 Find us on Facebook
- 📘 [www.facebook.com/perlnigeria](https://www.facebook.com/perlnigeria)



The Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) is a five-year public sector accountability and governance programme, funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The programme provides support to governments in the core areas of policy development and implementation towards delivering public goods and services; supports citizens to engage with these processes and facilitates evidence-based learning and advocacy.

The opinions expressed in this leaflet are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.