

# VISION, OPPORTUNITY AND PARTICIPATION

Selben Penzin, Sightsavers' Senior Programme Manager for Eye Health in Nigeria



Spectrum Markets is proud to continue supporting Sightsavers' Nigeria Childhood Blindness Project which, in 2022 alone, screened 227,532 children for eye health issues, carried out 198 cataract surgeries and provided 1,006 pairs of spectacles. To mark International Women's Day 2023, Sightsavers' Senior Programme Manager for Eye Health in Nigeria, Selben Penzin, explains how this work is improving prospects for women and girls in Nigeria.

## Could you tell us about your role at Sightsavers?

My name is Selben Penzin. I work for Sightsavers in Nigeria as the Senior Programme Manager for Eye Health. What I do is to manage the eye health portfolio in Nigeria. I am responsible for the strategic planning and management of all the resources that come to support eye health and I make sure all the resources available for providing improved eye health to Nigerians are properly dispensed and accounted for. In my role, I support local partners to make eye health more accessible to the target beneficiaries.

## Historically, what has access to healthcare and education been like for women and girls in the communities in which Sightsavers works?

Nigeria has an abundance of eye health personnel in some regions. However, in the areas where we work (northwest Nigeria), there is a huge population and very little eye health services. For girls, there are only two tertiary level health providers for the entire population. This has made access to eye health services really difficult for girls and women. In some communities, there are assertions that boys are prioritised over girls in access to services. We have identified in our programme that more boys are encountered in the hospitals than girls.

## How does the Nigeria Childhood Blindness project improve access to education for young women and girls?

With this in mind, the Nigeria Northwest Child Eye Health Project supported the two existing tertiary eye health hospitals with upgrades to better serve the needs of the children. With the support of our donors, we were able to purchase several pieces of equipment to improve safe surgery for children and also train specific cadres of health workers on child eye management. We have worked with our partners in the various ministries of health to select predominantly female teachers and health workers where possible, to train and provide directed screening to girls. Through our radio awareness programmes, we emphasise the need to have girls attend the hospitals and screening services. We have also been engaging with similar programmes in the project area to reach out to girls with disabilities and to ensure they are not left behind in access to education and school vision screening. We believe that if the female teachers are trained, they will be better able to understand the unique needs of girls in schools. If girls are provided with the correct treatment for their eye conditions, they will be able to perform better in school.

## And what impact have you seen from this improved access to education?

We have seen some girls who had dropped out of school because of severe vision problems return to school after visual restorative surgery. There is really no limit to what these girls can do now that they have better eyesight. If given better access to quality education (which Sightsavers is supporting through the DID-funded Inclusive Education project for instance), these children can be all that they aspire to be.

## What are the career prospects for women and girls involved in the project, and how does the project impact those prospects?

Integral to the SDGs is the need to promote gender equity, where discrimination on the grounds of being a woman or a girl is a human rights issue. We know that in some settings, the likelihood of having a lower earning capacity is much higher among women. Addressing the needs such as personal interests, challenges, expected goals etc. is strategic to the attainment of career aspirations for women and girls. Therefore, this project has tried to ensure full participation of girls and women where possible. For the girls, having better eyesight means they can participate maximally in school and social activities, thus removing any barriers that may limit their ambitions. Though it's a little too soon to tell, we are hopeful that in the near future we will be able to hear stories of girls who have attended better schools and have become professionals and academics as they desire. Many of the classroom teachers we have trained are women. Armed with the skills these women have acquired, they will be able to begin a self-perpetuating cycle of better inclusion and opportunities for girls.

## Could you tell us about how Sightsavers is promoting the right to political participation?

The Nigerian Government passed the disability act into law in 2019 to protect persons with disabilities from needless discrimination. The Marrakesh Treaty was ratified by the Nigerian government and the African Disability Protocol (ADP) of 2023 promotes a society where the rights of people with disabilities are promoted and protected. This will provide a huge platform where the participation of persons with disabilities is protected. Sightsavers has worked closely with the Nigerian Disability Commission to strengthen advocacy towards ensuring these giant strides were recorded. Sightsavers has also been supporting the Association for Women with Deafness in Nigeria to develop safeguarding practices for deaf girls and women and protect them from undue exploitation and harm.

## How does this impact the lives of women in their communities?

I believe that these are baby steps we are taking, we will gradually hear the voices of women participating actively in political and economic activities in their communities and equitably address the needs of women and girls. It is all about closing the gap in gender roles. The saying, "Information/knowledge is power," is a clear example of how these frameworks are gradually going to impact on women in their communities. If these women have the knowledge about the equity-driven goal of the SDG, they are more able to break free from their gender-assigned limitations. These frameworks will provide an opportunity for meaningful engagement and collaborations for women in different communities.

I worked closely with Bilkisu Yakubu, a member of the Advocacy for Women with Disabilities Initiative (AWWDI) through the DID-funded Inclusive Eye Health Project in Nigeria. Through the work we did, Bilkisu led the steering committee for a project that recorded numerous changes in the disability world. She was outspoken in interactions with traditional rulers and top government officials and is currently working with her team to develop a 5-year strategic plan for disability inclusion in her district.

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