



## Program Brief

# Safe Spaces for Married Adolescents

Safe spaces are mentored girls clubs in the Sahel region, proven effective at teaching girls reading, math, family planning, and self-advocacy and other life skills. Married adolescent girls are at the bottom of the social hierarchy in rural areas of Nigeria and Niger, and their loss of autonomy threatens their health and well-being—even their survival. Safe spaces teach them critical skills and help them regain autonomy, leading to vastly improved outcomes.

## *Why Safe Spaces are Important*

Dedicated Safe Spaces for married adolescents serve the most isolated and vulnerable demographic of the rural Sahel: married adolescents ages 14 to 20. They have little or no access to education and little ability to make their own decisions. In the early years of marriage, their choices—even their movements—are more restricted than at any other time in their lives.

They face intense social pressure from their husbands and families to get pregnant within the first year, which the adolescents themselves often internalize. They have high rates of early childbirth, which can be fraught with health problems. **They are also at especially high risk for unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and maternal mortality.** Yet because of social norms, many health providers are reluctant to offer them family planning services, and many school administrators won't enroll them.



# How the Program Works

**OASIS and its local partners Centre for Girls Education and Lumière des Filles et des Femmes, offers safe spaces for married adolescents ages 14 to 20 in northern Nigeria and Niger.** The clubs meet two times a week for one year. Mentors create an environment where married adolescents can feel secure, connect with peers, learn life skills, and bridge gaps in their education.

Typically, married adolescent girls were never taught how to read or write, access reproductive health services, or stand up for their rights. But they learn to do all these things in safe spaces. They are encouraged to reflect and think critically about their lives and the world around them. The curriculum covers:

- **Literacy, numeracy, and business skills** — These are required skills for self-reliance. Not having them restricts girls' access to schools, health facilities, and livelihoods, keeping them dependent on their husbands
- **Life skills** — Safe space mentors teach girls nutrition, decision-making, communication, self-advocacy, as well as how to negotiate with their husbands, improve family nutrition, and build their social networks. These skills are needed to overcome the many disadvantages they face and express their aspirations
- **Sexual and reproductive health and rights** — Mentors use storytelling, role play, and small group activities to teach and engage the girls in discussion. Female health workers visit the safe spaces and safe space participants are also taken to visit health facilities. Each girl is connected with two female health workers from a nearby facility
- **Livelihoods and savings groups** — Girls are trained in climate-smart home gardens, animal husbandry, and the production of indigenous cosmetics, giving them opportunities to earn money. Participants form savings groups and contribute weekly into a joint fund, which girls can use to finance microenterprise or meet household expenses

Beyond skills acquisition, the program gives girls a sense of belonging and group solidarity, which are critical for a healthy transition to adulthood. It's designed to enhance the social, economic, and physical wellbeing of girls and their families. The program also works to build community support for delay of marriage, birth spacing, more education and training for married adolescents, and to shift institutional biases that deny them school enrollment and family planning services.

*"I gave birth to a baby girl during my first year of marriage. I had no idea about birth spacing then and soon became pregnant again. I was confused and even denied being pregnant. My first baby became very sick, thin, and then died because she didn't get all the care she needed from me."*

— PROGRAM PARTICIPANT







## What the Program Accomplishes

Safe space participants gain confidence and more freedom of movement, as they go to their safe spaces and savings groups. Often, husbands notice this change in confidence and become more willing to let them enroll in school. Over time, many become mentors in their own communities, and earn the name "malama", or "teacher", which shows other married adolescents that they can achieve their aspirations as well.

OASIS conducted a focused follow-up evaluation of 256 participants from the Centre for Girls Education safe spaces for married adolescents program in northern Nigeria and found remarkable changes in their lives. For example:

- Visits to health facilities increased fourfold
- Contraception use increased from 3% to 64%
- 94% reported talking to their husbands about reproductive health and family planning—up from 4% before they went through the safe space program
- 73% reported using what they learned from safe spaces on a daily basis
- On average, participants made six friends they feel they can turn to when needed

Evaluations over the last three years indicate that girls who went through the safe space program advocate more effectively for themselves on decisions such as desired family size, enrolling in school, or pursuing a livelihood.



*"I kept telling my husband about what I was learning in my safe space and explained the benefits of birth spacing in a very diplomatic way. I then asked him if he always wanted to come into a smelly room with children's urine everywhere and if he wanted me always breastfeeding without giving him the time and care he deserved. The next day we went to the hospital together and chose a method."*

— PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

# Safe Spaces for Different Age Groups

Safe spaces are effective in supporting girls at critical times in their lives, from preschoolers at risk of never going to school at all to out of school adolescents at high risk of early marriage. We have pioneered and tested multiple types of safe spaces designed for specific age groups. They include:

- Montessori-based preschool groups boost confidence and educational outcomes of the most marginalized girls living in communities that are less likely to enroll them in primary school at all
- Second Chance safe spaces prepare early adolescent girls who are out of school to reenroll at an age-appropriate grade
- Shops-based safe spaces allow girls to learn a trade through apprenticeship in shops and microenterprises, under the mentorship of local craftspeople and microentrepreneurs
- In-School Safe spaces help girls successfully transition to secondary school
- Girls 4 Education and Health recruits girls in their final year of secondary school to support transition to colleges where they study to become teachers and health workers

## Scaling the Program Up

Safe spaces are proven effective and ready for broader uptake across the Sahel. Our strategic priorities for married adolescents safe spaces program for the next five years include:

- **Successfully replicating the program in Niger**
- **Streamlining the program components so they're easier and more affordable for governments to implement**
- **Conduct a randomized controlled impact evaluation of the program in preparation for scaling up nationwide**



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