



At a Glance

CENTRE FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

The Centre for Girls' Education (CGE), founded in 2007 and based in Northern Nigeria, is dedicated to expanding educational opportunities and delaying early marriage for adolescent girls. Through a blend of mentorship, life-skills training, and community engagement, CGE empowers girls to pursue education and shape their futures. Its approach integrates education with empowerment, drawing on local cultural and religious values to build supportive communities where every girl can learn, lead, and thrive.

CGE's programming is designed to shift gender norms that limit girls' potential, through a Safe Space model that provides adolescent girls with secure environments to develop literacy, numeracy, and life skills while building confidence and leadership. CGE simultaneously engages boys, parents, religious, and community leaders to challenge and transform traditional beliefs about gender roles, education, and marriage. This inclusive approach attempts to foster attitudinal change, strengthening community support for girls' education, and creating new pathways for equality.

Beyond community and school based interventions, CGE partners with government agencies, donor organisations, and research institutions to influence policy and strengthen educational systems. Its work has informed the

integration of life skills and gender-transformative approaches into curricula and it is contributing to efforts to provide free, safe, and quality education for girls. CGE stands as a leading voice in advancing girls' education and gender equality in Nigeria—combining evidence-based practice, policy advocacy, and community partnerships to drive sustainable, systemic change.

Founding Background

The Centre for Girls' Education (CGE) began as a joint program of the Bixby Centre, University of California, Berkeley, and Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. The partnership emerged from collaborative research between the two institutions which sought to address the urgent challenges facing adolescent girls in Northern Nigeria, including high rates of early marriage and maternal mortality, low literacy, and limited economic and social opportunities. In 2016, the Centre transitioned from a university-based collaboration into an independent, women-led and women-staffed nonprofit organization, formally registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Overview of Programs Offered

Pathways to Choice

Pathways to Choice is a two-year program that helps out-of-school girls ages 11–17 re-enter education or pursue livelihoods training while strengthening their self-confidence and life skills. The program begins with weekly sessions in safe spaces led by trained mentors, where girls learn

literacy, numeracy, reproductive health, financial literacy, and negotiation skills. In the second year, girls choose between returning to formal school or continuing with vocational education, supported by small grants and ongoing mentorship. Parents and community leaders are engaged through meetings and dialogues to reinforce family and social support for girls' continued education.

Married Adolescent Safe Spaces (MASS)

MASS reaches married adolescent girls ages 14–19, offering a supportive peer-learning environment where they can build literacy, reproductive health knowledge, and vocational and entrepreneurial skills. Sessions take place twice a week in safe spaces with childcare available, and include topics such as birth spacing, parenting, communication, and small business management. MASS seeks to enhance married girls' autonomy, health, and economic security, while also promoting positive relationships within households.

Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE)

CGE implements the Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment

Program as part of the World Bank's Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE). This in-school program provides leadership and life-skills training for girls ages 12–18, complementing formal education and supporting gender-responsive teaching practices. Mentors known as Malamas—many of whom are CGE graduates—facilitate sessions in over 1,000 schools, helping girls develop confidence, goal-setting abilities, and advocacy skills.

Girls for Health and Education (G4E&H)

Girls for Education and Health seeks to address the shortage of female health workers and science teachers in rural Northern Nigeria, and promote the economic empowerment, agency and voice of adolescent girls by supporting their transition from school to formal employment in health and teaching careers, which will increase women's access to health services and girls' access to education by increasing the number of female health workers at government health services and female teachers in rural schools.

Apprentice based Vocational Training Project (ABVT)

The ABVT is a vocational skill intervention program designed to empower rural adolescent girls with concrete business skills, life skills and vocational training skills with the goal to enhance their livelihood opportunities and to delay the age of marriage.

The EmpowerHer Education project

The EmpowerHer Education project addresses the significant barriers and inequalities preventing girls from accessing and completing 12 years of education in Kaduna state by advocating for 12 years of free and compulsory education for all girls. Through strategic policy advocacy, gender-responsive education sector planning, and community engagement, the project seeks to create a transformative impact, empowering girls to reach their full potential and contribute to the social and economic development of their communities.

Target Population

CGE's adolescent programs primarily serve girls ages 4–19, both in- and out-of-school, including married adolescents. The programs primarily target girls, but work with boys and men as part of broader engagement strategies. Programs also target policy makers and community members.

Relationship to Formal Systems

The Centre for Girls' Education (CGE) works within and alongside formal education systems rather than outside them. From the beginning, our goal has been to complement the work of government schools by addressing the social, cultural, and structural barriers that keep girls from accessing and completing formal education. We see ourselves as

both a bridge and a catalyst — helping communities connect to formal systems and helping the systems themselves respond better to girls' needs.

Our Safe Space model (life skills) has been successfully adapted by the Kaduna state government, through the Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE), where CGE serves as an implementing partner for the Life Skills component. Through this collaboration, we support the institutionalisation of gender-responsive and life skills education in government schools, mentor training for teachers, and the inclusion of girls' voices in decision-making processes. For scale-up and sustainability, CGE in collaboration with the Kaduna State Ministry of Education, has begun the process of institutionalising life skills into school curriculum — life skills become a permanent part of the formal education system.

Beyond implementation, CGE plays a key advocacy role in influencing education sector planning and policy reform. Our partnership with state and national education authorities has contributed to the integration of life skills and gender equity principles into curricula, the development of Gender-Responsive Education Sector Plans (GRESPE), and the promotion of policies for free, safe, and quality education for all. CGE strengthens the link between informal support systems and formal institutions by engaging ministries, schools, and communities. All these ensure that the gains made at the

community level translate into sustainable, system-wide change.

Program Structure and Duration

All CGE's programs typically last one to two years. Sessions occur weekly or biweekly and include structured learning, peer dialogue, and practical exercises. The Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment aligns with the school calendar and is delivered throughout the academic year in all government secondary schools in Kaduna and Katsina states.

Program Delivery

Each safe space is led by a Malama—a mentor or teacher trained by CGE who often comes from the same community as the participants. Mentors are supported by senior facilitators, community champions, and male facilitators for outreach to fathers and husbands. CGE has trained more than 750 cascading mentors, many of whom are the first women in their communities to work outside the home.

Curriculum

CGE's curriculum blends life skills, reproductive health, and vocational training with themes of gender equality, goal setting, and leadership. Content is adapted in consultation with religious scholars and community leaders to align with local cultural and religious values. The lessons are used to train mentors who deliver the content to girls in the safe spaces.

Geography and Reach

CGE operates in Kaduna, Katsina, Bauchi, Gombe, Borno, and Sokoto States in northern Nigeria, as well as parts of Niger. The organization reaches approximately 50,000 girls and their families each year and has served over 300,000 girls

cumulatively through its programs. CGE has trained partners in 5 other countries to date to adopt the model in their context, including Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Mauritania.

For more information, see:
centreforgirlseducation.org

OVERVIEW AND MISSION

Since its inception, CGE has focused on improving girls' access to education, delaying child marriage, and expanding pathways to empowerment through mentorship and life skills. Recognizing that formal schooling alone could not address the structural and cultural barriers girls faced, the Centre adapted the safe spaces model to the local context. These mentored spaces provide girls with opportunities to strengthen literacy and numeracy, gain reproductive health knowledge, build social networks, and develop the confidence and agency to make informed decisions about their futures. CGE's mission is to empower girls through education, mentorship, and life skills development while engaging families, communities, and religious leaders to foster an enabling environment for gender equity. The organization now reaches more than 300,000 girls across eight states in Northern Nigeria and the Niger Republic, with programs tailored for preschool, in-school, out-of-school, and married adolescents.



Approach to Shifting Adolescent Gender Norms

CGE's approach to shifting gender norms is grounded in academic support, mentorship, and dialogue that links girls' personal empowerment with collective reflection among families and community leaders. CGE works from the assumption that entrenched gender norms—particularly those governing early marriage, seclusion, and female mobility—cannot be transformed through external advocacy alone. They believe that real change must evolve through community-led processes rooted in understanding and trust.

At the heart of CGE's work are mentored Safe Spaces for girls—weekly group meetings facilitated by trained female mentors. These spaces offer more than academic support; they are seen as sanctuaries where adolescent girls gain critical life skills, learn about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and learn to voice their aspirations. In Northern Nigeria, many girls struggle to keep up with the academic rigor of secondary school because of weak foundational literacy and numeracy skills. By providing academic support alongside mentorship, the goal is to support girls to improve in school and rediscover the joy and confidence that come with learning. Additionally, mentorship plays a pivotal role in modelling new possibilities for women's participation in public and professional life. Mentors—often school teachers and sometimes graduates of CGE programmes—are known as *Malama*, or "teacher," a title of respect in Hausa culture. Through them, girls meet women engineers,

doctors, and teachers who are real examples of how education can change their lives.

Recognising that sustainable change requires the involvement of all, CGE recently piloted Boys' Safe Spaces as part of its allyship approach. These safe spaces engage adolescent boys in structured discussions on respect, equality, and positive masculinity, helping them understand the importance of supporting girls' education and well-being. Through mentorship and dialogue, the program encourages boys to challenge harmful stereotypes and become advocates for gender equity within their families, schools, and communities.

Equally central to CGE's approach is its deep engagement with community and religious leaders. Before entering any new community, CGE begins by meeting traditional rulers, parents, and teachers to discuss the importance of girls' education and how it can translate to a better society. Religious leaders are invited to reflect on Qur'anic and Hadith teachings that affirm women's right to education, helping communities see that supporting girls aligns with their faith and values. When leaders endorse the programme publicly and model positive behaviour, it encourages families to do the same—turning local champions into agents of change.

By combining mentorship, academic support, and engagement with religious and community leaders, CGE is gradually shifting social expectations—building communities where girls' education, leadership, and economic contribution are seen as vital to family and societal wellbeing.

THEORY OF CHANGE

How does CGE's programming attempt to shift adolescent gender norms?

CGE's theory of change begins with the belief that when girls are supported to learn, lead, and find their voice, they inspire families and communities to see new possibilities. CGE's programming seeks to shift adolescent gender norms not through confrontation, but through connection, mentorship, and dialogue that builds trust and demonstrates, through lived examples, that girls' education benefits everyone.

The process starts in the Safe Space: a nurturing environment where girls receive academic support, life-skills training, and mentoring from local women role models. These mentors help girls build confidence, communication skills, and a sense of agency. As girls begin to express their opinions, make decisions, and stay in school longer, families witness their competence and maturity — challenging traditional ideas about girls' roles and potentials.

At the community level, CGE engages parents, religious and traditional leaders in conversations that link faith, culture, and education, helping them reinterpret social norms in ways that affirm girls' rights. Religious scholars, for instance, review Qur'anic teachings that support girls' education and women's participation. Over time, this engagement nurtures a collective shift: from seeing girls' education as optional to recognising it as essential.

CGE's theory of change assumes that lasting transformation happens when change is owned locally. By combining girls' empowerment, community dialogue, and collaboration with formal systems like ministries of education, the model works at three levels — individual, relational, and structural. At the individual level, girls gain knowledge and agency; at the community level, social acceptance of new gender roles grows; and at the system level, policies and curricula increasingly reflect gender-responsive practices. Ultimately, CGE's programming aims to cultivate environments where girls can negotiate the norms that restrict their choices, where parents and leaders actively support their education, and where government systems reinforce equality through policy and practice.



Research and Program Evaluations

Over the past fifteen years, the Centre for Girls' Education (CGE) has invested deeply in learning from its own work. Its programs have been studied through more than five major evaluations, including two randomised controlled trials (RCTs), several mixed-methods assessments, and long-term ethnographic studies carried out with partners such as Ahmadu Bello University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Washington. This consistent partnership between implementers and researchers has helped CGE refine what works for girls in northern Nigeria.

One of CGE's early ethnographic studies revealed that many parents were pulling their daughters out of school not because they opposed education, but because poor school quality left the girls struggling to learn. This insight reshaped their approach—combining safe spaces with academic support and mentoring to help girls regain confidence in their abilities. Later evaluations, such as the Delaying Marriage through Girls' Education study, showed that girls in CGE safe spaces were 40% more likely to stay in school and twice as likely to delay marriage compared to those in similar communities without the program.

More recently, the Pathways to Choice RCT, conducted with over 3,000 adolescent girls across three states, found significant gains in school enrolment, literacy, and self-advocacy. Girls reported being more comfortable talking with parents and community leaders about their education and marriage

choices. Complementary qualitative studies, including the Married Adolescent Safe Spaces Evaluation, documented shifts within households including husbands and mothers-in-laws increasingly supporting young wives to continue education or vocational training.

Promising Practices

Operating in Northern Nigeria, where deeply rooted cultural and religious norms continue to endorse early marriage and the seclusion of women, CGE's work stands out for its ability to establish and sustain safe spaces for girls in a highly constrained environment. In communities where schooling is often perceived as incompatible with a girl's moral propriety and married women rarely appear in public, CGE has built trust through gradual engagement and collaboration with local leaders. In this context, sustainability depends on ensuring that those who are doing the work are people that the community trusts, and that religious and traditional leaders are involved from the beginning of every activity.

CGE's strategy of working within the cultural fabric rather than against it has been key to its success. The organization's leadership emphasizes that they collaborate with Islamic scholars and community leaders to adapt program language and ensure cultural legitimacy. This approach allows change to unfold gradually and reduces the risk of backlash in conservative religious communities. Importantly, CGE has also begun expanding its work with boys and young men, recognizing that change requires the involvement of all members of the community. Through mentorship and

dialogue, the program encourages boys to question harmful stereotypes, reflect on their own behaviors and expectations, and act as advocates for gender equity within their families, schools, and communities. This emerging work suggests that intentionally engaging boys alongside girls can strengthen community-wide shifts in norms and reinforce support for girls' empowerment.

Another promising element of CGE's model is its close and long-standing collaboration with universities, particularly the partnership between Ahmadu Bello University and the University of California, Berkeley's Bixby Center for Population, Health, and Sustainability, led by Daniel Perlman. This partnership has been central to developing an evidence-based approach that integrates

anthropological insight with rigorous impact evaluation.

Finally, CGE's layered mentorship structure, where former participants serve as Malama (teachers) and cascading mentors, extends the program's impact across generations. Many of these young women are the first in their communities to work outside the home, modeling new possibilities for girls' education and leadership. Through this community-grounded, research-informed, and culturally adaptive approach, CGE demonstrates how gender norms can be shifted not through confrontation, but through persistent, trusted engagement and the careful expansion of what is considered possible for girls in northern Nigeria.

