

## SUCCESS STORY

# “As free as a bird” – Thanks to USAID fistula care project

### USAID boosts hope for Nigerian women by providing fistula repair surgery

Until August 2008, thirty-two-year-old Elizabeth (not her real name) had lived with fistula for half of her life. Long after giving up hope of a remedy, she heard on the radio that women could receive fistula surgery at the Faridat Yakubu Fistula Center, Gusau in Zamfara state as a result of U.S. assistance through USAID.

Obstetric fistula condition is the result of prolonged labor without prompt medical intervention, causing a hole in a woman's birth canal which leaves her with chronic incontinence and in most cases, the loss of the baby. Women in this condition are stigmatized among their peers and by society in general.

Elizabeth left her home in Owerri, south-eastern Nigeria and traveled about 800 kilometers to Gusau in search of treatment. After a successful operation, she was determined to give back to the program that helped her so much; she recently told her story on Nigeria's "Health Watch" radio show, which has listeners nationwide. Through radio programs like this, USAID also finds opportunities for women like Elizabeth to spread the word that those living with fistula do not have to suffer endlessly because fistula can be repaired.

The incidence of obstetric fistula in Nigeria is unknown, but the Nigerian *National Strategic Framework* for fistula prevention and control estimates that between 400,000 and 800,000 women are affected. Nearly half of worldwide fistula cases occur in Nigeria, with between 50,000 to 100,000 new cases each year. U.S. Government assistance has supported fistula care to strengthen the capacity of the health care system at facility and community levels to address the challenge of obstetric fistula in five states in north-western Nigeria. The project's overall objective is to increase access to, and use of, high quality fistula prevention, repair and reintegration services, and to promote the use of maternal health care and voluntary family planning. Since the project commenced three years ago, 2,822 women have received fistula repair surgery.

#### **Elizabeth's Story**

“When I was pregnant at age 16, not once did I go to the doctor for prenatal care. I had my baby at home with the help of two women in my village that helped me deliver on the floor. I labored for two days. This was how I got fistula.



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“At first I did not do anything because I did not know what was wrong. I did not go to the hospital and was afraid of the offensive odor. My husband left me. My mother was at my side, but I would stay away from other people. I was unhappy. I thought there was no way out; this is the kind of life I will live.

“After the fistula I could not work again, and I did not go back to school. I just stayed at home doing nothing. Because of fistula, people called me names—saying that I was dead already, because I smelled like a rotten animal. At times, I wanted to drink poison, because it was just too much.

“Then one day I was listening to the radio, and there was an announcement about fistula treatment. I called in as soon as I could and they advised me to go to the hospital. I left home with only a small bundle of clothes. I was alone, and I didn’t have food. But the hospital in Zamfara state took care of me. When I got there, I found they had two big wards and the place was filled with women of all ages—some had lived with fistula for 30 years. And all of us had been rejected by our people.

“But at the hospital they put a smile on your face. Since the day I got there, I had no regrets: they were just so caring. After the surgery, they have a rehabilitation center, where they train you in tailoring and knitting. They make sure you are happy and can do something in life; you will not be idle again.

“I want to tell others: if you have this problem come out, don’t hide yourself. No good can come of that. Look at me — I would have died in silence. But today I am cured. Come out and get help. You will be happy because you did.

“Before I was embarrassed, but now I am as free as a bird in the air. I thank the USAID fistula care project for sponsoring the radio program and for making my treatment free. May God continue to bless them. I have a new life.”