**A Case Study of the Braid Me Project**

Rachel Mujong, a student at the University of Passau, is not only a policy researcher but also a passionate child advocate. Our paths first crossed during the recently concluded "Project Management Summer Academy," organized by Weltweit. Initially, we were merely roommates, but I soon became intrigued by her commitment and passion for her project, "Braid Me," a unique initiative aimed at supporting young girls in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Abuja, Nigeria. I was drawn to this project, not only because of its focus on empowering girls but also because of the deep sincerity in Rachel’s presentation of her vision. It was clear that her dedication went far beyond a simple project; it was a mission to make a lasting difference in the lives of these young girls.

**Finding a Problem to Fit the Solution**

As Kajo Stelter highlighted in his lecture on participatory methods in project management, involving beneficiaries in the planning and decision-making processes fosters more sustainable solutions. The "Braid Me" project embodies this approach, as Rachel’s group frequently exchanged ideas on refining the project based on feedback from the very girls they aimed to support.

“I decided to spend my 25th birthday with the young girls in the camp. I got a team of volunteers, and together we treated and braided the hair of 60 beautiful girls,” Rachel shared (Mujong, 2024).

Her decision to spend her birthday braiding the hair of IDP girls was more than just a celebratory act; it was a transformative moment for both Rachel and the girls. By physically engaging with these girls, she gained firsthand insight into their daily struggles and aspirations.

“In that moment, I found myself in these girls' shoes, and I realized two things: the victims of conflict are not only those who die during it, but also those who live through it,” Rachel reflected (Mujong, 2024).

This profound realization was the genesis of the "Braid Me" project. Rachel saw beyond the physical act of braiding hair. For her, it became a means of connection, self-expression, and empowerment for these girls, many of whom had lost much of their sense of identity and hope.

**From a Birthday Celebration to a Girl's Empowerment Project**

In African culture, hair carries deep significance. As Sossou (2002) explains, hair in Africa serves many purposes: from aesthetics and social status to cultural and religious expression. For many African girls, having well-groomed hair is synonymous with confidence and self-esteem. Conversely, unkempt hair is often viewed as a symbol of defeat and neglect. Recognizing this, the "Braid Me" project evolved from a simple birthday celebration into a full-fledged initiative aimed at restoring confidence and dignity to these displaced girls.

Through braiding the hair of IDP girls, Rachel and her initial group of volunteers helped bring back a measure of confidence to the young girls. The physical transformation led to a psychological one—boosting the girls’ self-esteem and sparking a desire to move beyond their circumstances. This positive outcome strengthened Rachel's resolve to turn her birthday act of kindness into a sustainable project for empowering more girls across IDP camps.

**The Story of Babyia**

One of the most compelling examples of the project's impact is the story of Babyia, a girl displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency and ethnic conflicts in northern Nigeria. At the start of the project, Babyia appeared with unkempt hair and a defeated expression, symbolizing the internalized effects of her traumatic experiences. After receiving her braids, she was transformed—not just outwardly but emotionally. Her smile returned, and her energy levels rose, a stark contrast to the girl who had first entered the camp.

In the second phase of the project, Rachel’s team went beyond simply braiding hair. “This time, we were more strategic with how we used the time. It became a moment of connection, where the girls opened up about their experiences, fears, and dreams,” Rachel noted (Mujong, 2024).

The project had evolved into a safe space where these young girls could express themselves freely. The simple act of hair braiding became a therapeutic experience, allowing the girls to share their stories and begin the healing process.

**A Peace Initiative Through Empowerment**

The "Braid Me" project is more than just an initiative focused on hair; it is a vehicle for restoring confidence, instilling hope, and fostering self-sufficiency. At its core, the project intersects with two of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being. Through the therapeutic session of hair treatment and styling, the project helps these girls regain their sense of identity and become role models for younger girls.

Rachel’s vision extends beyond the initial 60 girls she worked with. "Each girl would become a role model for others, showing them that they, too, can have a different and better view of life beyond their traumatic experiences and backgrounds,” Rachel explained (Mujong, 2024). Her ultimate goal is to replicate the "Braid Me" project across all IDP camps in Nigeria, empowering young girls and transforming lives one braid at a time.

In conclusion, the "Braid Me" project represents a unique and impactful approach to empowering young girls affected by conflict. By addressing both their emotional and psychological needs through a culturally significant practice, the project goes beyond traditional aid programs. It offers these girls the opportunity to heal, regain confidence, and envision a future filled with possibilities.