News
Q&As



St. Louis Sr. Clara Azubuike, former coordinator of a community-based rehabilitation program for persons with disabilities in Akure, Nigeria, now works at the Bakhita Empowerment Centre, where survivors of human trafficking find shelter and receive rehabilitation before they are reintegrated into the community. (GSR photo/Ayo Omotola)



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Visiting Akure, Nigeria, in 2025 feels like peeling back the plaster on a healing wound — it's about 48 kilometers from the tragic Owo church massacre of 2022, where gunmen stormed St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, killing dozens of worshippers in the Nigerian state of Ondo.

Sr. Clara Azubuike had also planned to be there. "I intended to join Pentecost celebrations at the church before we began to hear gunshots," she recalled, acknowledging a twist of fate that spared her life.

Azubuike had been working with the Sisters of St. Louis in Akure, southwestern Nigeria, leading interventions for persons with disabilities, particularly children and young women. Their programs focused on inclusive education, sexual and reproductive health rights and advocacy against sexual violence.

Despite Nigeria's 2018 Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act, a 2022 study by the Africa Polling Institute revealed that persons with disabilities still experienced discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence and marginalization from public participation — a sobering reality that fuels Azubuike's mission.

In 2024, Azubuike relocated to Lagos for a new mission at the Bakhita Empowerment Centre, where she now helps trafficked individuals rebuild their lives.

In this conversation with Global Sisters Report, Azabuike explored her journey from Ugbelle to Ikare and from Akure to Lagos, which offers a window into the power of love, service and hope for a better future.

***GSR*: Take us through your childhood; tell us about you and how you joined the sisterhood.**

Azubuike: My name is Clara Azubuike. I was born in Ugbelle, Ideato South Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria, in the autonomous community of Umuokala. I left my hometown at the age of 8 in 1973 to join my uncle in Lagos, where I continued my education. After completing secondary school, I began aspiring to [the] sisterhood.

What fueled the aspiration?

One day, a Sister of St. Louis, Patricia Ojo (now our current central leader), visited a friend in our parish, Our Mother of Perpetual Help, in Amuwo-Odofin, Lagos. She witnessed me singing the responsorial psalms, and when I was done, she said to me, "You sang well."

Aside from loving her outfit, her words struck me, and I told her I would love to be a sister. I started communicating with them. After this, I was invited for an assessment in 1990 at the St. Louis novitiate. A few weeks later, I was asked to resume my postulancy in Ikare.

Tell us about your community-based rehabilitation program and share the inspiration that birthed it.

I worked closely with Sr. Francis, who had a passion for vulnerable children, and one day, we encountered a girl who, we were told, became paralyzed after receiving an injection. I became associated with this mission, and eventually, the province asked me to take over the program, which officially took off in Akure in 2021.

The community-based rehabilitation program is an intervention program for people with disabilities. We show them love and care and educate the public about their special situation. We ensure that families, schools and communities embrace an inclusive and just society where the rights of persons with disabilities are respected. Additionally, we provide assistive devices, physiotherapy and surgeries for those who need them.

Can you tell us about the physiotherapy initiatives your team has provided and the impact these have had on beneficiaries?

We've helped many children access physiotherapy, and where needed, corrective surgery. The last was for a child with a club foot, whose condition was successfully corrected.

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How is your team addressing the ignorance and stigma surrounding disabilities, particularly within families and schools?

We've worked to create awareness in schools and communities, teaching families to see these children differently. For inclusion, we integrated children with disabilities into learning environments at St. Louis schools. We also set up a resource room where Sister Christy helps children with learning difficulties. However, it wasn't easy when we started.

What are some cultural or societal misconceptions about disabilities you've encountered, and how do you work to change these mindsets?

Many people believe children with disabilities are uneducable or cursed. Some parents are ashamed of them; hence, many are kept inside, while some believe that they should be starved to death. We tackle these misconceptions through awareness campaigns and education, helping families understand disabilities better and encouraging them to embrace their children.

How do you approach sensitive topics like sexual health education for young women with disabilities?

Young women with disabilities are among the most vulnerable. We teach them how to protect themselves and create awareness for parents, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding their children.

What gaps remain on the government side, and how is your program bridging these gaps?

The government has a major role in assisting children with disabilities, including providing financial plans and investments in their welfare. The law exists, but implementation is weak. Action and practical steps like funding schools, sponsoring health education and organizing programs that empower families should be taken.

Many families remain financially disempowered and lack access to the resources their children need. We fill these gaps in our small way by providing support, empowering parents and connecting with government officials to raise awareness.

What are the most significant challenges your team faces in providing these services, and how do you overcome them?

One of our biggest challenges is gaining parents' trust. Some financially unstable families expect financial support rather than awareness and care, and wealthier families often dismiss our work as unnecessary. To overcome this, we persist in the

good work and focus on educating and building relationships.

My background in early childhood education prepared me well for this mission; it taught me the value of patience, while my faith taught me persistence.

What has been your most rewarding moment in this work?

Seeing community members change [how] they see these special individuals is deeply rewarding.

Now that your work focuses on human trafficking, what are your hopes for the community-based rehabilitation program?

I started with nursery school, moved to secondary education, [and] then transitioned to community-based rehabilitation. Now that I focus on trafficking, my hope is that the program continues to expand and transform lives, fostering inclusion and opportunity for vulnerable children.

I'm confident that the work is in better hands now, as I handed it over to the same person from whom I took it, ensuring continuity and growth.