

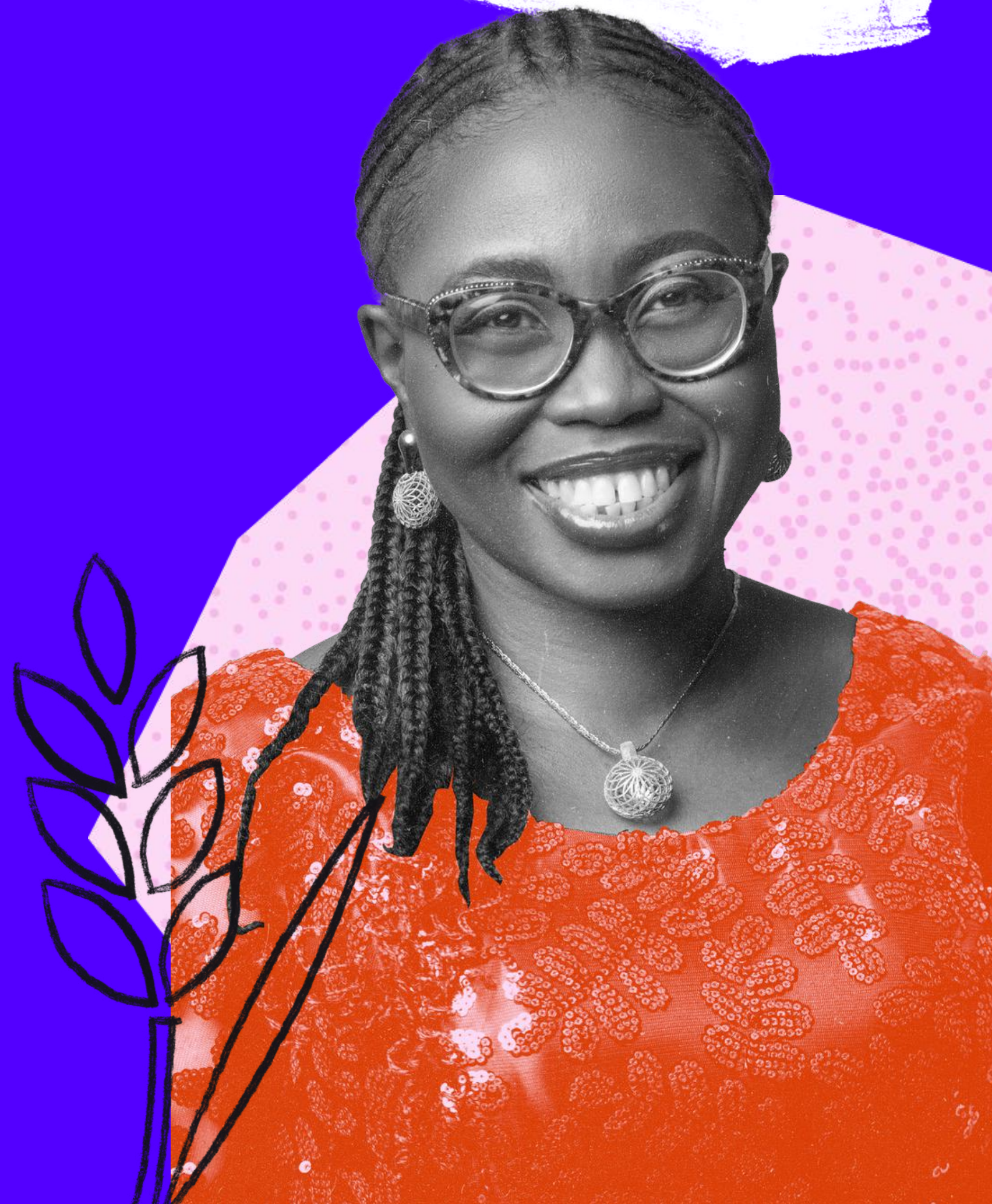


UN TO END
TRUST VIOLENCE
FUND AGAINST WOMEN
AND GIRLS

30 YEARS

Chinyere Eyoh

Sexual Offences
Awareness &
Response Initiative
(SOAR)
(Nigeria)



“

‘You cannot shave a person’s head in their absence.’

That is a Nigerian proverb, and I say it in almost every interview because, for me, it captures how we work. You cannot decide what women and girls need without them in the room.

I survived incest as a child. It happened over eight years, in the 1970s, in a culture where silence was expected and I had no vocabulary to tell my mother what was happening to me. I came through it largely alone, and years later I wrote a book about my experience.

At the launch, one of my speakers leaned over and said: you could start an organization with this. Something clicked. I had already sat with women who were telling me, sometimes for the first time in decades, what had been done to them as girls, and I felt helpless in the face of what they had endured.

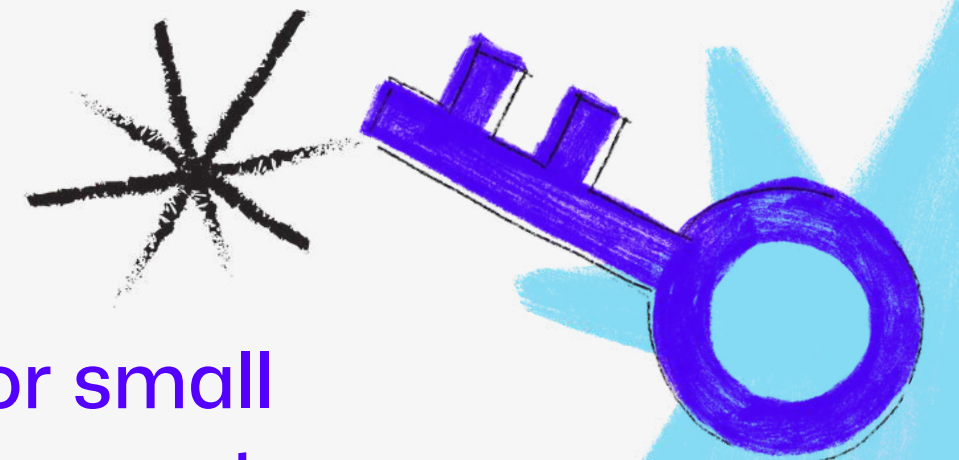
In 2011, I started with a laptop and two or three people who believed in my story. A few years later, I left a ten-year career in the civil service to give myself fully to this work.





We began working in schools, because that is where children were. But we saw again and again that much of the violence was happening behind closed doors, including sexual abuse within families. A 2014 national survey found that one in four girls had experienced sexual violence before the age of 18. Telling people simply to stop was not enough; we had to understand and address what was driving the violence.

We knew we needed to take the work into communities. But we had never tested that approach before.



Then, in 2017, I saw that the UN Trust Fund had a funding window for small organizations, and we applied. They believed in the dream, in the concept, in what we could see was possible, before there was any evidence for it.

That first grant gave us the confidence and resources to take that step. We hired staff and tested a community mobilization model that went beyond awareness-raising: girls had safe spaces where they could talk about violence and their rights, while we worked with traditional leaders, community members and young people to challenge the norms that allowed sexual violence to continue and take concrete action. Community child-protection committees were established as part of that response, becoming a pillar of the model.

With a second UN Trust Fund grant in 2021, we adapted it to displacement settings in Benue State, reaching around 1,900 displaced adolescent girls and engaging more than 500 men as advocates for healthy masculinities and violence prevention. Communities that had treated sexual violence as a private family matter began referring survivors for support. And in spaces where women had traditionally been “seen and not heard”, they took leadership roles in child-protection committees and advocated for girls.

Those changes may never make national headlines. But they are what keep me going.

Thirty years from now, I hope every girl gets the chance to smile and live out her dreams

Chinyere Eyoh, Founder and Executive Director of SOAR Initiative, has more than 25 years of experience in child protection advocacy, community mobilization and survivor support.

A survivor advocate and author, she founded SOAR in 2011 to support child and adolescent survivors and advance community-led approaches to preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence.

