

Lessons Learned Report

Grandmother leaders: A resource to improve the lives of adolescent girls

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GRANDMOTHER LEADERS: A RESOURCE TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The goal of the project, ***Grandmother Leaders: A resource to improve the lives of adolescent girls***, was to strengthen the knowledge and leadership role of grandmothers, building on their traditional advisory role, to promote improved adolescent girls' health and well-being, with specific emphasis on early/forced marriage (EFM), teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation (FGM). All of these problems are prevalent in the Velingara area of Senegal where the project was carried out.

To accomplish this goal, project activities focused on training grandmother (GM) leaders, given their influential role within families and communities related to the education and well-being of girls. The innovative **“Under-the-tree Leadership Training for Grandmothers to Promote the Well-being of Adolescent Girls”** includes four two-day training sessions, or modules. For each module, a set of participatory learning activities was developed specifically for use with illiterate GM leaders. All sessions are facilitated by female community development workers and adolescent girls participate in some activities during after-school hours.

Training sessions were organized in 23 sites, in which 230 GM leaders from 43 adjacent villages and urban neighborhoods participated in the non-formal under-the-tree education/training sessions. The training aimed to increase the capacity of GM leaders, both individually and collectively, to take action within their own communities to protect and promote girls' well-being. Sessions were designed to elicit critical reflection and dialogue between participants, and include activities such as role plays, discussion of case studies describing typical situations and problems, and discussion of drawings, photos and testimonials from grandmothers in other communities.



Grandmother leaders play “Wisdom of Grandmothers” game, which elicits dialogue on girls’ developmental issues.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

OBJECTIVES

The project included three key objectives:

- increase grandmothers' knowledge of both risks and optimal practices related to EFM, teen pregnancy and FGM;
- empower grandmothers to play an increased role in promoting the health and well-being of girls at family and community levels;
- strengthen communication between grandmothers and adolescent girls.

To accomplish these objectives, training modules were designed to improve the knowledge and skills of GM leaders related to 5 thematic areas:

1. self-confidence in their leadership role;
2. solidarity and understanding between grandmothers;
3. physical and psychological development of adolescents;
4. effective communication skills with teenage girls;
5. collaboration with other community actors (traditional leaders, religious leaders, teachers, health workers, etc.) to take action in favor of girls, and children in general.

ACTIVITIES

Under-the-tree learning activities were organized around the five thematic areas. Following are examples of some of the activities carried out with the GM leaders during training.

Theme 1: Strengthen the self-confidence of GM leaders.

Activity example: Discussion of different types of leadership, e.g. participatory, democratic vs. directive, dictatorial

- Using drawings of a directive/dictatorial leader and of a participatory/democratic leader, the GM leaders identified the characteristics of each and discussed the attitude of other community members toward the two types of leaders, which type of leader is more beneficial for the community, and whether most leaders they know are dictatorial or participatory.



GM leaders participate in a role play on different types of leadership.

- Two role plays of a meeting of GM leaders to plan a village clean-up day were carried out depicting the two types of leadership. GM leaders were engaged in discussion about how they felt in each of the role plays and what conclusions they drew about which type of leadership is preferable and why.

Theme 2: Increase the ability of GM leaders to strengthen solidarity and understanding between grandmothers.

Activity example: Broken circles team-building exercise to develop collaboration between GM leaders

- Each participant receives an envelope containing several parts of a circle. The objective is for each person to construct a complete circle, but no one receives all the pieces



Grandmothers learn about the importance of collaboration with the “broken circles” exercise.

necessary to do so. The rules of the game are that each person can give pieces to other participants but cannot take pieces from others. As the exercise proceeds, participants realize that they must think about other participants, see what pieces others are missing and share pieces with them. At the end, the GM leaders drew conclusions on the importance of collaboration in working with others to accomplish any task.

Theme 3: Increase GM leaders’ knowledge about the physical and psychological development of adolescents.

Activity example: The board game called “The Wisdom of Grandmothers” to stimulate discussion on both “traditional” and “modern” ideas on the risks for girls/adolescents who are victims of FGM, EFM and teen pregnancy.

- The game consists of multiple cards that elicit discussion between grandmothers on various issues related to FGM, teen pregnancy, EFM and girls’ education. In the “*Who do you agree with*” cards, two different opinions on an issue, such as whether Islam recommends FGM, are presented and participants discuss their ideas supporting one or the other of the opinions. “*What would you do*” cards promote active discussion among participants about how they would react to different situations. For example, one card states, “A young girl says she plans to quit school because she wants to look for a husband”. The game is used in each of the 4 sessions while the cards included in each session vary.

Theme 4: Strengthen GM leaders' skills in communicating with teenage girls.

Activity example: Discussion of the traditional approach to communicating with children based on “fear and scolding” and an alternative approach based on “listening and dialogue”

- GM leaders discussed two drawings showing: 1) a grandmother scolding her adolescent granddaughter; and 2) a grandmother listening attentively to the adolescent girl. Participants talked about the difference between the two approaches to communicating with girls, which approach is more frequently used in their communities, and the advantages and disadvantages of each for developing good communication with girls.
- Two sketches were used. The first depicted a grandmother scolding a girl for staying out late at night to attend a dancing party in a dark place and the second depicted a grandmother asking the girl to think about what she did and if she sees any risks involved in attending dancing parties in dark places. Participants were led in discussion about the different approaches, how the girl felt in each case, and lessons they can apply to their own communication with girls in the future.



Discussion on effectively communicating with adolescent girls through listening and dialogue.

Theme 5: Increase communication and collaboration between GM leaders and other community actors (traditional leaders, religious leaders, teachers, health workers, etc.) to take action in favor of girls, and children in general.

Activity Example: Discussion of various problems that arise in communities and that require collaboration between different community members



- Various case studies describing problems that can occur in communities are read to the GM leaders and they are asked what they would do to solve them. For example: In a school playground there is a huge beehive in a large tree. Participants are asked what they could do to solve this problem and who else in the community they could involve in doing so. During the four training modules, numerous “problematic situations” were presented and the GM leaders reflected on what they could do to solve them.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Qualitative documentation and interviews with GM leaders have revealed that significant changes were achieved in each of the thematic areas, contributing to the attainment of the 3 key project objectives. These accomplishments are supported below with quotes from training participants.

Strengthened self-confidence of the grandmother leaders

GM leaders demonstrated an increased sense of individual confidence and empowerment to speak out and to take action within their communities.

“Confidence is what really gives us the power to be involved in the protection and the development of the girls. Now, I am able to approach any parent or community leader and talk with them about a concern I have regarding one of the girls and what we can do together to address the issue. Before, I wasn’t able to do so.”

Grandmother Sakiliba



“Confidence builds power. Since I have become more confident, thanks to these training sessions, I no longer feel any sense of hesitation, particularly when there is something that needs to be done or said. I no longer bow my head when speaking before a group of men. Quite the opposite, in fact; I always feel relaxed now when talking in a group because I feel more confident.”

Grandmother Diabou

In addition to building confidence, a key quality of a leader, GM leaders have increased their leadership knowledge and skills, which will assist them to more effectively mobilize others in the community.

“A leader needs to listen and to discuss and exchange ideas with her group in order to accomplish something of significance. She must approach others and encourage discussion on all topics of concern to the community, and also make suggestions.”

Grandmother Diabou B.

“Everything that we have learned is of great benefit to us. Today, we are more than just ordinary leaders. We have become true leaders that know how to help our communities to follow the right path with regards to the development of our girls.”

Grandmother Mballou

“In the past, I often mobilized the community when there was a meeting. I continue to do so today with the same determination. But I do so with more openness toward others.”

Grandmother Méta

Increased solidarity and understanding between GMs

The GM leaders clearly expressed an increased sense of solidarity between GM leaders and with other grandmothers, and a commitment to supporting girls' development by working together.

"Since the last training session we organized a meeting with all of the GMs in our village to tell them about what we discussed in the training. We emphasized the importance of working together whenever we are faced with a problem. We also discussed with them the importance of our role in bringing up children, especially young girls."

Grandmother Djidé

"Collaboration and understanding between grandmothers is a prerequisite for the girls to receive a good education. But, unfortunately, we weren't really close before. Through this training with grandmothers from different villages, we now have a common strategy for working with young girls."

Grandmother Korka Kandé

"These two days of training have taught me a lot, and with the other GM leaders we are going to continue these discussions as we go forward with a common goal: to educate young students, to teach them positive values and tell them about the risk of pregnancy."

Grandmother Maimouna Sabaly

"From now on, if we hear that a girl who is still at school is to be married off, the grandmothers will rally together and go to talk with her father. No father can resist the advice of a group of grandmothers who have come to speak with him, in purely objective terms, about the well-being of his daughter."

Grandmother Maimouna



Training session notes also reveal an increased sense of responsibility among the GM leaders in their role as community leaders to take action to solve problems they observe.

"Leaders need to work together in the interest of the village. If leaders don't work together, the village will never develop. All leaders need to cooperate to discuss and solve the problems of their village."

Grandmother Laalo

"This meeting is the most meaningful and the most important of any I've ever attended. Every subject we discussed will help us as we better play our leadership role in our respective communities. Each one of us will go back to our village with lots of ideas that will allow us first of all, to strengthen the cooperation between us, but also to reflect on the approaches we have been using, particularly concerning the way we communicate with young girls."

Grandmother Coumba

Increased knowledge of adolescents' physical and psychological development

GM leader participants showed increased understanding of the physical and psychological changes that adolescents go through and their need for patient support during this phase of their lives.

“Young girls of today very much need to be listened to as the challenges they face are many. They need to be able to discuss different matters and to express themselves with their parents. That’s why parents need to be patient with them and need to try to understand their opinions.”

Grandmother Sacou



Grandmothers and adolescent girls participate in dialogue about girls' health and development.

“We’ve always been told that adolescent girls need to be carefully supervised and disciplined. But since we have learned about the changes that all girls undergo during adolescence, as well as their causes, we have toned down our approach. Now, we encourage mothers to engage more in discussion with girls and to listen to them, as girls need to express their point of view and how they feel.”

Grandmother Mariama

“Adolescent girls are usually worried when these big changes happen in their lives. We, as grandmother leaders, must take advantage of this training so that we have all the information on the different changes that girls go through so that we can share this information with other mothers and grandmothers.”

Grandmother Fatoumata

Prior to their involvement in the GM leaders training, GMs had no knowledge of the role of hormones during puberty, and, typically, no one talked with girls about menstruation prior to its onset.

“Before coming to this training course, I’d never talked in detail with girls about menstruation. I used to just tell girls to be wary of boys in order to avoid becoming pregnant. That’s because we didn’t have the detailed knowledge to explain everything to them.”

Grandmother Ami

“I didn’t used to talk about menstruation with young girls because for me it was too sensitive to discuss with them. We thought we shouldn’t talk to about such things. Now when I see a girl coming into puberty, I try to discuss it with her and listen to her.”

Grandmother Oulimatou

Strengthened skills for communicating with teenage girls

There has been an improvement in the GM leaders’ understanding of how to more effectively communicate with adolescent girls through an approach based on “listening and dialogue”.

“You shouldn’t shout at girls. If you do, they will not hear anything. You have to discuss things with them.”

Grandmother Binta

“How we communicate with girls needs to change. Communication can no longer be based upon threats and harsh words, or on isolating them. We need to be close to them, listen to them, empower them, advise them and guide them as best we can. This will only be possible once we understand what they’re thinking and what they want to do with their lives.”

Grandmother Ansarou

“If the project had started earlier, we’d not be where we are today. It’s thanks to this training that we’re strengthening communication between grandmothers and girls. Even the way in which we communicate has improved because we now do so without raising our voices. It’s also thanks to the project that we’ve started to collaborate with teachers. We’d never thought about that before.”

Grandmother Amy

GM leaders are also taking the initiative to share their new communication skills with mothers so that they can improve communication with their daughters.

“We’ve organized meetings with the young girls of the village. We’ve also discussed with their mothers how to best bring up children. They have understood that the best way to educate girls is to discuss with them, listen to them and give them good arguments for what they should and shouldn’t do in life”.

Grandmother Tenegh

“We have fundamentally changed the way we communicate with girls – now, it’s no longer a matter of ignoring whatever they might be thinking or saying. We have become very attentive and now listen to them a lot. All conflicts that you see between girls and parents are based on a lack of communication. That’s why we are now doing a lot to help mothers communicate with their daughters.”

Grandmother Maimouna



Increased communication and collaboration between GM leaders and other community actors (traditional leaders, religious leaders, teachers, health workers, etc.) to take action in favor of girls, and children in general.

GM leaders have demonstrated increased collaboration with other community actors, to reduce teen pregnancy, to help girls to stay in school, and to not get married off before 18 years of age.

“I must say that the importance of solidarity between GM leaders, with all of the GMs and with other development actors both within and outside of our village, was totally new to me. Through this training I have realized that this is an element that is of utmost importance in our work to improve our communities.”

Grandmother Fatoumata

“If grandmothers do not communicate with other community actors, they will not be able to do much. They must be with the other actors, not against them. They need to reflect, discuss and take action together if they want to find solutions to problems in the community.”

Grandmother Coumba

“Starting from today, we’re going to commit ourselves to strengthening our collaboration with all those involved in development - the village headman, teachers, health workers and religious leaders - to see how we can work together to strengthen girls’ education - something that is well worth our time.”

Grandmother Danfa

As a result of the training, GM leaders have been actively engaging with others in their communities to discuss girls' well-being.

"I gathered the teenage boys of the village together in order to discuss the importance of protecting our girls from teen pregnancy. I did this by asking the teenage boy leaders to invite the teenage boys in the village to my house. During the meeting with them, I told them they should view all girls in the village as their sisters and that they should watch over them. I also often meet with the girls to tell them stories and to advise them of the importance of having appropriate attitudes and behavior throughout life."

Grandmother Fatou



Grandmother leaders discuss collaboration with other community actors.

"Since the last training session, I have been regularly inviting the head of the village, who is my brother, to work on building solidarity between the village inhabitants. I have often asked him to speak with the fathers to help them come to an agreement. I have also increased the number of discussions I have with teenage girls."

Grandmother Laalo

"We went to see the village chief after the training course to discuss girls' development with him. We exchanged ideas about the reasons why girls don't do well in school and why they can't do anything other than marry early and stay at home. Now we are all committed to work together to promote the development of our young girls."

Grandmother Diabou

"Like the grandmothers of Saré Yéro Méta (in the story presented to them), we have met with the village headman, other grandmothers, teachers, and mothers and fathers with adolescent daughters. We have discussed the situation regarding girls, particularly in regard to matters of their upbringing, schooling and child marriage. Everyone is in agreement that girls' development has become one of the biggest priorities."

Grandmother Khadidiatou

STORIES OF ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF GM LEADERS TO PROTECT GIRLS

The following anecdotes are good examples of individual and collective action for positive change taken by GM leaders who participated in the under-the-tree sessions.

This true story reveals how several grandmother leaders involved in the training have been empowered and were able to **save a 14-year old girl from child marriage**.

After a long discussion with his brothers and uncles, the father of 14-year old Fatou agreed to marry her off to an emigrant working in Spain, during his vacation in the village. When the grandmother leaders learned about this, 3 of them visited Fatou's mother. She was distraught but said she could do nothing to prevent the marriage. They then met with Fatou's father to try to dissuade him but he refused to change his mind. Determined, they went to see the village headman who agreed to talk to the father. However, before he did, 4 grandmother leaders joined by 3 other grandmothers returned to talk with the father. Pressured by the 7 grandmothers, the father gave into their argument that "it is dangerous for Fatou to be married at such a young age" and he renounced the marriage plans. One of the grandmother leaders who orchestrated this action said, "Before our training we didn't have the courage to do such a thing. But now we have greater confidence in ourselves and we are united to take action to protect our girls".

Here, a grandmother leader explains how she applied her strengthened communication skills and new knowledge and understanding of adolescent girls' health to **assist and advocate for a girl** in her village.

The other day, a girl in our village realized that she was having her first period. She was anxious and upset, and refused to eat. Her mother was furious and wouldn't stop insulting her for not telling her mother what the problem was. The mother insisted that her daughter merely lacked good discipline. When I arrived, I went to see this girl and sat down next to her, speaking to her gently. She told me that there was blood coming from her private parts, but she was upset because she didn't know why. I then explained why she was bleeding, and she felt reassured. I also spoke to her mother, who thanked me. This experience made me realize how important this training was. I would never have spoken to this girl and her mother if I hadn't participated in this training on girls' development.

Grandmother Diariétou

LESSONS LEARNED

The following lessons were learned from the GM leader training carried out during the project period.

1. Grandmothers are interested in learning and open to change.

The GM leader training has been very successful insofar as it provides additional evidence of grandmothers' interest in learning, and their willingness to re-examine their previous beliefs and practices, and to increase their commitment and involvement in their communities to promote the well-being specifically of girls, and of children in general.

We, as leaders, can now meet the expectations that our communities have had of us for a long time. We have always felt responsible but we didn't know how to go about doing what we should do. But today, with what we have learned we have everything we need to guide and better protect girls.

Grandmother Diabou

2. Promoting change in community norms requires ongoing dialogue.

To bring about sustained change in community norms related to FGM, girls' education, early marriage and teen pregnancy, there needs to be discussion of those norms within and between peer groups of men and women, older and younger. Respected GM leaders can play a key role in catalyzing such discussion between these different segments of the population.

3. Games and exercises can be used effectively in Senegalese culture to promote adult learning and change.

In Senegal it is often said that, "games are only for children". The experience with the GM leader training clearly showed that older adults also enjoy engaging in games and exercises that are both fun and educational. For example, the *Wisdom of Grandmothers* game was very much appreciated by the grandmothers, but also by men, other women and adolescents in communities.

4. The leadership capacity of GM leaders can be strengthened.

Prior to the under-the-tree training sessions, the GM leaders were playing a leadership role in their communities. However, it is through the participatory training activities, which challenged them to reflect on their role in communities, that their sense of empowerment and commitment to playing a more active role to promote and protect girls has increased.

5. Building on culturally-rooted communication channels between grandmothers and adolescent girls increases support for girls.

One of the culturally-dictated roles of grandmothers is to serve as advisors and confidants to young girls. Girls themselves insist that they are more comfortable talking with their grandmothers than with their own mothers. The under-the-tree training with grandmothers, and in some instances including girls, contributed to strengthening those culturally-rooted ties which are contributing to increased support for girls.

6. Under-the-tree modules and exercises promote active involvement/participation.

All of the exercises used in the under-the-tree training sessions proved to be effective in eliciting the active participation of the GM leaders. The fact that attendance at the training activities was over 95% suggests that the GMs were highly motivated to attend and interested in the different learning activities. Participants were not “paid to attend”. They did receive 1,000 CFA per day to cover their transport costs.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the project indicate that the three key objectives were achieved:

1. Grandmother’s knowledge of the risks and optimal practices related to teen pregnancy, EFM and FGM were increased.
2. Grandmother leaders now feel more empowered as leaders due to their strengthened leadership skills, increased confidence, and new knowledge and understanding of adolescent health and well-being. They are increasingly involved in community-wide efforts to protect and support girls to ensure their full physical, emotional and intellectual development.
3. Communication between grandmothers and adolescent girls has improved.

As a direct result of the training, grandmother leaders have reported that they are:

- organizing meetings with village chiefs, grandmothers, teachers and boys to discuss girls’ development and protection, including EFM, teen pregnancy and girls’ schooling;
- meeting with girls, individually and in groups, to talk about their health, development, and pregnancy prevention, and to share what they have learned about communication;
- teaching mothers how to communicate more effectively with their daughters, and educating them on girls’ health;
- in agreement that grandmothers should organize and take action, if needed, to stop EFM of girls.

The grandmother leaders are having a ripple effect in communities as they mobilize other community actors, including other grandmothers, mothers, fathers, traditional community leaders, teachers, and health workers, to work together to take action to support and protect girls.

Grandmother leaders exist in all communities but many programs neither recognize their importance nor encourage them to play an active role in promoting the well-being of families and children. The grandmother leaders training program both values and actively involves the **grandmother resource**, and empowers them to empower girls.