

Grandmothers - an invaluable resource for adolescent girls

Community leaders, including grandmothers (GM), grandfathers, religious leaders, village elders, women, men, older adolescent girls and boys, and teachers are all sitting in a circle discussing girls' development and education. For the first time, multiple generations and both sexes have come together to discuss what can be done to help girls stay in school, and to avoid getting pregnant or married. This describes one of the **intergenerational forums** taking place in villages in southern Senegal as part of Grandmother Project's (GMP) program *Engaging Grandmothers to Promote Girls' Development & Success in School*, which began in 2013.

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The goal of the *Engaging Grandmothers* project is to promote girls' holistic well-being, i.e. their physical, emotional, moral and intellectual development. The project promotes change in harmful community norms regarding early/forced marriage of girls, teen pregnancy, corporal punishment and girls' education. Project activities: strengthen communication between GMs, mothers, adolescents and other family members; reinforce the role of GMs as advisors and coaches to girls and their families on key issues regarding child/forced marriage, teen pregnancy, girl's education; and elicit discussion of "taboo" topics among community leaders of both sexes and all generations.

In addition to the forums, "**under the tree**" **non-formal education sessions** are organized to engage adolescent girls, boys, women and GMs in discussion of key issues related to girls' development. And **community radio programs** encourage discussion of these same topics within communities. All activities recognize and build on GMs' traditional role as family decision-makers and advisors to young people, especially girls.

Today we know how to avoid getting pregnant and this is because grandmothers have invested a lot of time and effort in us girls. If we have not already been married off it is because the grandmothers have helped a lot in discussions with our parents.
Khady Mballo, adolescent girl

Since the project started in 2013, **more than 600 community members have participated in 23 intergenerational forums, and 420 "under the tree" sessions have been conducted, involving 5,322 participants** (grandmothers, mothers and adolescent girls).

Through these activities community actors have identified key constraints girls face and are working together to keep girls in school. Positive changes in the behavior and attitudes of parents and adolescents have been observed in all communities and documented through informal interviews with community members.

Positive changes observed in communities include:

- **increased communication** within families and in the community between men and women, between elders and adolescents, on issues regarding girls' development and education;
- **more open communication** between girls, mothers and grandmothers on "girls issues";
- **increased appreciation and encouragement of the role of grandmothers** in girls' education on the part of other community members;
- **increased confidence of grandmothers** within families and communities to promote and defend the needs of adolescent girls;
- **increased support from boys** to encourage and protect girls from the threat of teen pregnancy;
- **increased confidence of girls** to communicate their feelings/priorities regarding formal schooling, marriage and child-bearing to other family members.



A grandmother confidant meets with adolescent girls 'under the tree' to discuss teen pregnancy, girls' education and other issues.

Conclusions: Project activities have catalyzed dialogue within communities on formerly taboo issues related to girls' holistic development that often were not openly discussed in the past. **Intergenerational forums, non-formal education sessions and local radio discussions** have all contributed to encouraging open dialogue on "girl issues" between men and women, older and younger. Communities have identified: problems faced by girls; the causes of those problems; and actions that communities and schools can take to address them. According to school district officials, teen pregnancies, child marriage and school drop-outs by girls have all decreased. Community leaders contend that the approach based on "dialogue between community actors" has had positive effects on girls, families and communities. **A major lesson from GMP's experience is that girls cannot change community attitudes and norms that affect them on their own. In order to promote positive and sustained change for girls the wider involvement of key community actors is required.**

And Grandmother Project has seen, once again, that wise, experienced grandmothers are an invaluable resource to promote girls' wellbeing.

Engaging grandmothers to promote girls' development and success at school was made possible by funding from the Nando Peretti Foundation. For more information about this project, or Grandmother Project, please contact us at: info@grandmotherproject.org or visit our website at www.grandmotherproject.org