

Grandmother Project Technical Note: 8

Overview of Grandmother Project's strategy to promote abandonment of FGM/C in Southern Senegal

The Role of Grandmother Leaders in promoting abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Senegalese Communities

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Velingara is situated in the Kolda Region of Southern Senegal, one of the areas of the country with the highest prevalence of FGM, estimated at 64% (DHS, 2017). It is a deeply-rooted tradition in the predominant ethnic groups in that area, namely the Halpular and Mandinka. In addition to FGM, other issues that threaten girls' rights and development at the family level are: limited family support for girls' education; child marriage; and teen pregnancy.

Since 2008, *Grandmother Project-Change through Culture*, an American and Senegalese NGO, has implemented the Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) Program in two communes in the Kolda Region, in the Dept of Velingara. This ongoing program promotes positive family and community roles and values to support multiple facets of girls' development. GMP believes communities are more supportive of programs and they are more effective when they address various issues that concern both communities and development organizations. In the GHD program, FGM is a priority issue but various aspects of girls' development are simultaneously addressed. Especially for dealing with sensitive issues like FGM, GMP believes that communities are much more receptive to an approach that addresses several facets of girls' development, rather than one that focuses on only this issue.

In addition to challenges facing girls listed above, other critical features of the Velingara context prior to development of GHD were: limited social cohesion and communication between generations; grandmothers' culturally-designated role to socialize and support adolescent girls; grandmothers (GM) were culturally responsible for perpetuating FGM; and they did not question the practice even though they understood the risks.

Development of the innovative GHD program, to address FGM, girls' education, child marriage and teen pregnancy was based on several key concepts intended to promote community-wider change in the FGM social norm: recognition and inclusion of elders, given their role as norm setters and advisers to younger generations; active involvement specifically of grandmothers, building on their role regarding all aspects of GHD; strengthening communication between generations and between the sexes; close collaboration with community leaders, both formal and informal, and strengthening their confidence and capacity to promote change;

communication methods based on dialogue and consensus-building; a systems approach to community-wide change through involvement of three generations (elders, adults and adolescents) of community actors, including traditional and religious leaders, and teachers. The overall goal of GHD is to empower communities to critically reflect on FGM, and other cultural norms, and to catalyze collective action to abandon these harmful practices. GMP's efforts to promote community-driven abandonment involves a wide range of community actors but targets community leaders, both formal and informal, given their influence with the community.

The program has expanded over time to more than 70 rural communities in Kandia and Nemataba communes, and in the urban context of Velingara Town. Key activities in the GHD program are:

- **Days of Praise of Grandmothers:** to recognize and encourage grandmothers to play an active role in families and communities; and to increase respect for them among other community members;
- **Intergenerational forums:** to strengthen communication between community and religious leaders, parents, grandparents, teachers and adolescents on issues of concern to communities and/or to GMP;
- **Under-the-tree participatory non-formal education sessions:** to involve grandmothers, mothers and adolescents in dialogue on priority GHD topics;
- **Grandmother leadership training:** to increase natural GM leaders' knowledge and collective action to support and protect adolescent girls regarding FGM, child marriage and teen pregnancy.

All of the GHD activities use adult education methods based on dialogue and collective critical reflection. Communities are never told *to abandon the practice*. Using adult education methods like stories-without-an-ending, they are challenged to critically reflect on both their past ideas and experiences, and new information shared with them, in most cases, by respected community actors like imams and midwives, and to come to their own conclusions about whether to maintain or abandon this social norm.

In early 2019 a study was conducted to investigate the process of abandonment of FGM in communities where the GHD program has been implemented for the past several years. The study aimed to understand which community actors played key roles in the abandonment process. The study sample consisted of 15 communities where GMP community development staff had worked for several years, who were very familiar with the GMs, women and elders and who were quite sure that FGM had been abandoned there.

Based on triangulation of the information collected the main conclusion of the study is that the abandonment of FGM has come about primarily due to the efforts of the GM leaders. These are the natural community leaders who had participated in the GMP leadership training in 2015. The study identified three main factors that contributed to GM Leaders' strong commitment to promote abandonment of FGM in their own communities.

- 1) *The information they received* concerning: a) the harmful effects of FGM on girls and women that they had ignored in the past; and b) the realization that Islam does not require the practice.
- 2) *Grandmother leaders' increased confidence*, due to the grandmother leadership training in which they participated, that empowered them to participate in public events and to be able to express their ideas in public.
- 3) *The creation of safe spaces for open and intergenerational discussion* on previously taboo issues dealing with girls' development, including FGM.

Once convinced of the need to abandon the practice, the GM leaders proceeded to convince other GM, women-of-reproductive age and male community leaders, including religious leaders, to support their idea. Totally of their own initiative, the GM leaders organized individual and group discussions to share their ideas on why FGM should be abandoned.

All interviewees said that it was the intergenerational activities organized by GMP, that elicited open-ended discussion of a previously taboo topic and that contributed to developing a consensus among community actors that the practice should be abandoned. But it was the assertive role played by the GM leaders to catalyze ongoing debate on the issue, that one community after another arrived at a consensus on the need for abandonment.

A significant factor that reveals the influential role of senior women, or GM, within families and communities is that many of the male community elders interviewed expressed the idea that they felt obliged to follow the advice of the GMs. Many elders articulated this idea: « We could not refuse the advice of the GM leaders to stop the practice given their authority and our respect for them ». Other elders made comments like this: « They are the ones who are responsible for FGM just as it is the men who are responsible for circumcision of boys. It is their affair and if they decide to stop the practice, we will not stop them. »

The study results suggest that the process of community-wide consensus-building regarding the process of FGM abandonment, led by the grandmother leaders, was similar in all communities

The Girls' Holistic Development program is an example of a *Change through Culture* approach which recognizes the culturally-designated roles related to FGM of elders, and specifically of grandmothers, which explicitly involves them, along with all other key categories of community actors in a process of dialogue and critical reflection to come to their own conclusions on whether to perpetuate or abandon this deep-seated tradition.

The results of GMP's experience using an unconventional intergenerational and grandmother-inclusive approach demonstrate: the importance of fostering communication between a wide range of community actors in order to promote collective support for social

An elder, who is also an Imam, said « I am very satisfied with the work of the Grandmother Leaders. What they have done to promote FGM abandonment, no one else could have done. Before, they were the ones who defended the practice. They have an authoritative voice when they talk about FGM because they are at the heart of the practice. They know what they are talking about. » Imam Sow

norms change related to FGM; and grandmothers’ intelligence and openness to reconsider an age-old tradition, and their ability to assume an active leadership role in their communities to promote the well-being of girls and women. GMP believes that many elements of the GHD program approach can be used in other African communities where FGM is a prevalent practice.

The Diagram below « The Role of Grandmothers in Promoting the Abandonment of FGM/C” presents this same information visually.

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Role of grandmother leaders in promoting abandonment of FGM/C in southern Senegal

Summary of results of interviews with grandmother leaders, women of childbearing age, and elders in Kandia Commune, Dept of Velingara, Senegal

