Empowering Grandmother Leaders to Support and Protect Girls:
an experience from Senegal

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In the Global South, many programs promoting girls' rights and development narrowly focus on girls, assuming that if empowered they can instigate changes in harmful social norms affecting them, e.g. child marriage and boy-preference for education. In Senegal, many NGO and government programs to support girls illustrate this pattern. This linear approach, supported by concepts from behavioral psychology and epidemiology, fails to take into account the role and influence of other influential actors within family and community systems in which girls are embedded. Insights from the fields of community development and community psychology support the need for a systemic, or socio-ecological

(Trickett, 2009), approach to Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) particularly in collectivist cultures in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In these non-western, hierarchically structured cultures, elders have great authority regarding the socialization of adolescent girls, it is senior women, or grandmothers, who are key actors.

Most programs to promote GHD in non-western societies do not explicitly involve grandmothers, often viewing them as an obstacle and totally ignoring the existence of *natural grandmother leaders* (Riano, 1994), thereby overlooking an abundant community asset and source of social and cultural capital for promoting and protecting girls.

> *"Confidence builds power. Thanks to these training sessions I no longer feel any sense of hesitation with something needs to be said or done. I no longer bow my head when speaking before a group of men because I feel more confident".*
>
> *Grandmother Leader*

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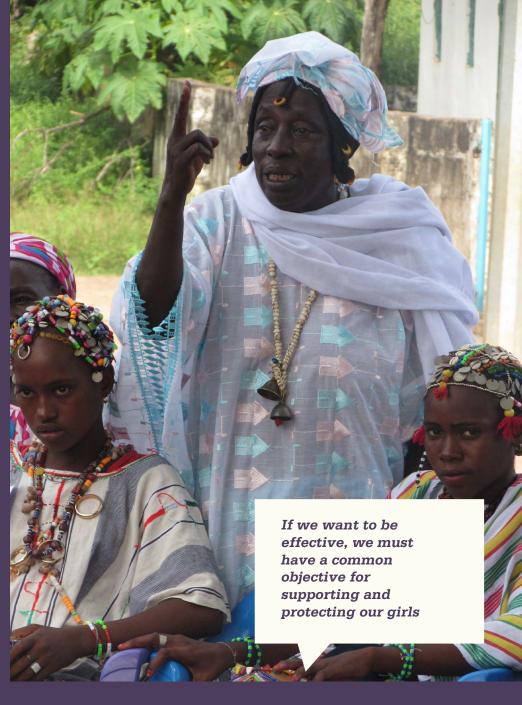
In Senegal, the NGO *Grandmother Project – Change through Culture* (GMP) identified natural grandmother leaders as an important yet underutilized resource for promoting GHD. GMP developed an innovative under-the-tree non-formal education training strategy to strengthen grandmother leaders' confidence, knowledge and collective capacity to promote positive change for girls. This strategy is part of a larger community program promoting GHD which: embodies an assets-based approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) building on existing culturally-designated roles and values; promotes inclusive intergenerational dialogue between elders, adults and adolescents of both sexes to strengthen community cohesion; and catalyzes community-wide reflection on priority issues for action to promote GHD. A key component of the program is community leadership development.

The under-the-tree *grandmother leadership training strategy* was conducted in 20 rural and urban communities with 230 illiterate grandmother leaders, identified by other grandmothers. The GMP training curriculum is rooted in core values of collectivist, or communal, cultures, reflecting the cardinal African concept of *Ubuntu* which refers to solidarity and interdependency between people (Nussbaum, 2003). The conceptual basis for the curriculum differs markedly from the conventional *western leader-follower notion of authoritative leadership and draws on notions of collective leadership* (Hughes, 2005); *connective leadership*, proposed by South Africans, Kirk and Shutte (2004) and *indigenous leadership,* elucidated by researchers working with indigenous people in New Zealand and North America (Cajete, 2016).

The innovative leadership training strategy addressed five interrelated objectives: to strengthen grandmothers' self-confidence in their role as community leaders; to increase solidarity between grandmother leaders and with other grandmothers in the community to support girls; to strengthen grandmothers' knowledge of the changes girls experience during adolescence; to strengthen grandmothers' ability to communicate with girls using an approach based on listening and dialogue; and to increase their collaboration with other community leaders (men and women) to promote GHD.

The training program consists of four two-day-long modules conducted over the course of 6 months with small groups of ten grandmother leaders. The training curriculum, based on adult education principles, specifically designed for illiterate participants, involves a variety of participatory learning activities using drawings, photos, stories, role plays and games to catalyze discussion related

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to the five objectives. The training took place in 20 sites with a total of 320 grandmother leaders. 6 months after the training, individual interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 103 grandmother participants, to assess the effects of the training. Focus groups were also conducted with adolescent girls specifically to understand their perception of grandmother-adolescent communication and relationships.

Interview data was analyzed manually based on grounded theory and thematic analysis to identify key themes related to the training objectives. From the individual responses, certain parameters of those themes were quantified. Assessment data revealed positive changes related to all five training objectives.

Grandmother leaders' increased self-confidence

In the evaluation interviews, the majority of grandmothers (89%) stated that through the training their confidence in themselves as leaders and the importance of their role in the community increased. For example, one grandmother leader who now exudes with self-confidence said, "Now, I can stand on the roof and say what I think with a loud voice, without crying and without trembling. And I no longer hesitate to say what I think in community meetings".

Solidarity between grandmothers

In the individual interviews, grandmothers were asked if the relationships between grandmother leaders had changed since the training. Most grandmothers (92%) stated that there is more solidarity between them than in the past. For example, "The training helped us realize that if we want to be effective, we must have a common objective for supporting and protecting our girls". It appears that grandmothers' enthusiastic participation

in the training is explained in part by the fact that it contributed to bolstering this cherished, but weakening cultural value.

Grandmothers' knowledge of adolescent changes

All grandmothers stated that they had acquired useful new knowledge regarding adolescent girls' development. The learning activities provided grandmothers with accurate information on adolescence and all expressed their openness to and appreciation of the new information which has helped them to understand adolescents' bad behavior and to be more tolerant toward it.

Grandmothers' improved communication with girls

In Senegal, as in many African cultures, the traditional way of communicating with children is very directive. All grandmothers (100%) stated that they had changed how they communicate with girls now favoring listening and dialogue. Confirming these changes in grandmothers' communication style, 90% of girls interviewed confirmed that "grandmothers have changed the way they talk to us, no longer giving us orders. Now, they listen to us and talk to us in a calm way."

Increased grandmother collaboration with other community leaders

The majority of grandmothers stated that their collaboration with other community leaders, including male traditional and religious leaders, has increased. They attribute this to their greater individual and collective confidence acquired through the training. 73% gave examples of activities carried out with male leaders to address community problems, including many related to GHD. Significant examples

of these grandmother-initiated collective actions include: blocking child marriages planned by fathers; increasing family support for girls' education; and mobilizing their communities to abandon female genital mutilation.

Discussion:

The results of the Grandmother Leadership Training reported here are very positive and clearly support the idea that grandmothers constitute an abundant and underutilized resource for efforts to promote girls' rights and well-being. It is important to state that these results cannot be attributed solely to the leadership training, as this strategy is part of the larger GHD program in which grandmother leaders were also involved.

Many community programs to support girls give little attention to grandmothers' culturally-designated role to protect and promote girls' development and totally ignore the existence and potential of natural grandmother leaders. Women-focused development programs invariably involve adolescent girls and women, reflecting a bias against grandmothers that they cannot learn and won't change. Results of GMP's experience with grandmother leadership training which increased both their knowledge and collective sense of empowerment to support girls, clearly defies conventional wisdom and demonstrates that *old dogs can learn new tricks.*

Leadership training of natural grandmother leaders increased their sense of empowerment to reclaim their culturally-designated role in communities and it simultaneously increased communities' realization that grandmothers constitute an invaluable but neglected source of *cultural capital* (Matarasso, 2001) for families and communities. As an inherent part of all community contexts, natural

grandmother leaders exist, in both rural and urban areas. Given similarities in the hierarchical and collectivist structure of non-western societies across Africa, Asia and Latin America, it is hypothesized that this training strategy would be well-received by grandmother leaders in communities across the three continents and would strengthen their role to benefit girls and their families.

The collective leadership development model underpinning the grandmother leader training strategy appears to be particularly relevant in collectivist cultures in the Global South where interconnectedness and solidarity are primordial values and where inclusive and collective decision-making are valued.

This experience illustrates how natural grandmother leaders can be empowered to be effective protagonists in their communities to support girls' rights and development. It challenges those who design programs for non-western collectivist settings that narrowly-focus on girls to deepen their understanding of the characteristics of those cultural contexts in which girls are embedded, to examine the ageist biases that have blinded many organizations to the invaluable grandmother resource and to recognize the power of transformative adult education approaches to strengthen the leadership and well-being of communities.

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