

CATALYZING CHANGE FOR GIRLS:

GRANDMOTHERS SUPPORT GIRLS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY OF APPROACH
AND ACHIEVEMENTS



GRANDMOTHER
PROJECT CHANGE THROUGH CULTURE

**Catalyzing Change for Girls: Grandmothers Support Girls' Holistic Development.
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“Thanks to the Grandmother Leadership Training we now have the knowledge, confidence, and power to take action to protect girls and promote their development. Together, we can approach any parent or community leader to discuss issues related to girls to prevent families from taking them out of school or giving them away in marriage when they are still very young. When a baby girl is born, we visit the family with the other grandmother leaders to convince them not to cut the newborn.”

-- Hawa, grandmother leader

“Whenever I have a problem, my grandmother is the one who I go to, she is the most supportive. In the evening, she tells us to do our homework and not to go to dancing parties in dark places. If a father decides to marry off his daughter who is very young, the grandmothers will oppose the idea and visit the father to convince him to abandon that idea. She gives us advice but also listens to us.”

-- Fatoumata, adolescent girl

“From the day that a baby is born, it is the grandmothers who know what to do. They have vast experience and they teach children the values that are important in our culture. They are the ones who know how to bring up a child. That is why they are at the center of all activities to promote the development of our children, especially our girls.”

-- Salifou, community leader and elder



PREFACE

The mission of Grandmother Project – Change through Culture (GMP) is to improve the health and well-being of women and children in countries in the Global South. GMP believes that all communities have resources, or assets, that should be recognized and utilized by communities to promote their own well-being. In Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, the experience and wisdom of elders is recognized as a resource for younger generations and for society as a whole. Community development programs in those parts of the world often fail to appreciate and optimize this abundant but underutilized cultural resource for young people and their families.

In my work I have observed the central role played by grandmothers in families and communities across the non-western world, specifically in relation to the development and welfare of women and children. The work of GMP uses an intergenerational approach to bring together younger and older generations so that they can support and learn from each other. GMP helps young people draw on positive values and knowledge from the past, while preparing themselves for the future.

In southern Senegal, GMP works closely with the Ministry of Education in two programs. First, Integrating Positive Cultural Values into Schools, with grandmothers serving as a special resource for teachers to help promote an education that reflects local values and culture inside and outside the classroom. Second, the Girls' Holistic Development Program, the focus of this report, aims to protect girls and promote their rights and well-being, especially as they go through adolescence. GMP also partners with the Institute of Rural Development at the University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar to introduce the Change through Culture methodology into the institute's curriculum.

Since GMP was created in 2005, our work has been supported through private contributions, organizations, and foundations. Major supporters include: the embassies of The Netherlands, Canada and the United Kingdom in Senegal; the following foundations: Gianturco; Nando Peretti; Tavola Valdese; Dining for Women; Action Without Borders; Trust Africa; Symphasis; and Rockdale; and development organizations: World Vision; UNICEF; and UNFPA. We are most grateful for past and ongoing support from these organizations.

Catalyzing Change for Girls showcases our work on Girls' Holistic Development, which is strongly supported by communities, and has contributed to positive change for girls. We hope that this document will be useful to others as they develop programs that build on the positive resources that exist within communities, while helping them to forge their own development path.

Judi Aubel
GMP Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

Grandmothers are a powerful and under-utilized resource in African communities. This principle has guided the Grandmother Project (GMP) since its creation in 2005, and the results it has generated have amply borne this out.

The Grandmother Project is an American and Senegalese non-profit organization. A priority goal is to promote the health and well-being of young girls through the Girls' Holistic Development Program (GHD).

The organization works in West Africa, principally in southern Senegal. In the Kolda region of Senegal, as in many parts of rural Africa, communities are poor and disadvantaged and life is challenging for all children, but especially for girls. In these areas families still prioritize the education of boys. Deeply embedded cultural norms and practices limit girls' rights and development and their access to education. Early marriage is prevalent and sometimes girls as young as 12 enter into arranged marriages. Those who stay in school beyond puberty run the risk of teen pregnancy. Girls lack positive role models who can demonstrate the benefits of education and professional activities. And despite being an illegal practice, female genital mutilation (FGM) is still common and can lead to health risks, including complications during childbirth.

To address all of these issues faced by girls, the Grandmother Project has created an original and highly effective model to catalyze dialogue for change within a cross-section of community members. And it has done so by reinstating grandmothers in their traditional roles as wise leaders and caretakers of the community.

Over the last ten years GMP has succeeded, where many development programs have failed, in bringing families and communities together to make positive shifts in cultural thinking and practices for the benefit of girls.

CHANGE THROUGH CULTURE

African cultures are collectivist. Within them elders have special status. Traditionally, senior women have significant influence over decisions in the family and the community, particularly when it comes to the well-being of mothers, children, and young girls entering womanhood.

Those roles have become eroded of late. There is concern that modernity and the increasing influence of western cultures are

The Change through Culture approach:

- ***Build on cultural roles and values***
- ***Involve elders, especially grandmothers***
- ***Strengthen intergenerational communication***
- ***Increase confidence and capacity of local leaders***
- ***Catalyze dialogue for consensus-building***

leading to a breakdown in communication between the generations, and a loss of identity, traditional values, and knowledge.

Many international development projects have only aggravated this situation. Too often they ignore the way that African societies function. Instead, they impose a western, individualist concept of culture, focused on the nuclear family and ideas of youth empowerment. They assume that elders are simply an obstacle to change.

Our Change through Culture approach is driven by the belief that to promote change we must build on the roles and values that underpin communities. Elders are key pillars of African societies and they should be involved as key partners in all programs.

“In Africa when an elder dies it is as though a whole library had burned down.”
-- Amadou Hampâté Ba, Malian philosopher (1900-1991)

Within African cultures, grandmothers can help bring about change for girls and are uniquely placed to do so. They traditionally play a central and influential role throughout the life cycle of women and children and have the power to influence men’s decision-making. They guide and watch over all matters concerning the sexual health and well-being of women and children. They also play a key role in the socialization of adolescent girls and hold a collective responsibility for girls in the community, not just in their own families.

While girls and their mothers are often powerless to prevent arranged marriages from taking place, or to prevent the harmful practice of FGM, grandmothers can influence fathers and other men in the community and dissuade them from perpetuating these traditions. We have found that once encouraged to unite, learn, and open themselves to new perspectives, grandmothers can become advocates for the abandonment of these practices. They can educate girls on sexuality and protection from teen pregnancy. They can offer much-needed advice, listening and support, filling roles that busy mothers are unable to.

THE GIRLS’ HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

In 2008, the Grandmother Project initiated the Girls Holistic Development Program



A Senegalese grandmother and her family

(GHD) to promote the development and well-being of girls. The GHD addresses priority global issues including girls' education, child marriage, teen pregnancy, and FGM, as well as aspects of girls' development prioritized by communities – the moral, cultural, and social development of girls.

Having begun modestly in 6 communities, the GMP has now implemented the GHD in 77 villages and 2 urban neighborhoods. Working closely with community leaders, groups, and teachers, the program has evolved through a process of testing, evaluation, and revision to create a new model for positive change. To date it has mobilized nearly 2,000 grandmothers and over 10,000 primary and secondary school pupils have participated in its activities.

The GMP approach differs in several important ways from other programs and projects supporting girls.

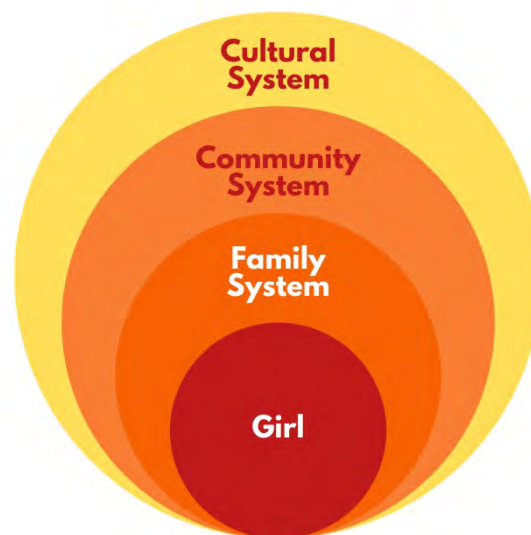
Many international and national resources have been channeled towards creating better futures for girls, with only limited results. Development programs often set out to empower girls, without acknowledging the more complex reality: that girls are embedded within family, community, and cultural systems. They focus narrowly on girls, seeking to empower them to challenge the hierarchy of power and decision-making in which elders and men play a major role. They assume that girls can be the primary agents of change.

The GMP takes a different approach; we recognize that the rights and development of girls are constrained by the norms and practices of their social environment. By setting out to create an *enabling environment* within which girls can flourish, we help shift those norms and practices, and encourage family and community to provide girls with the support they need as they grow up.

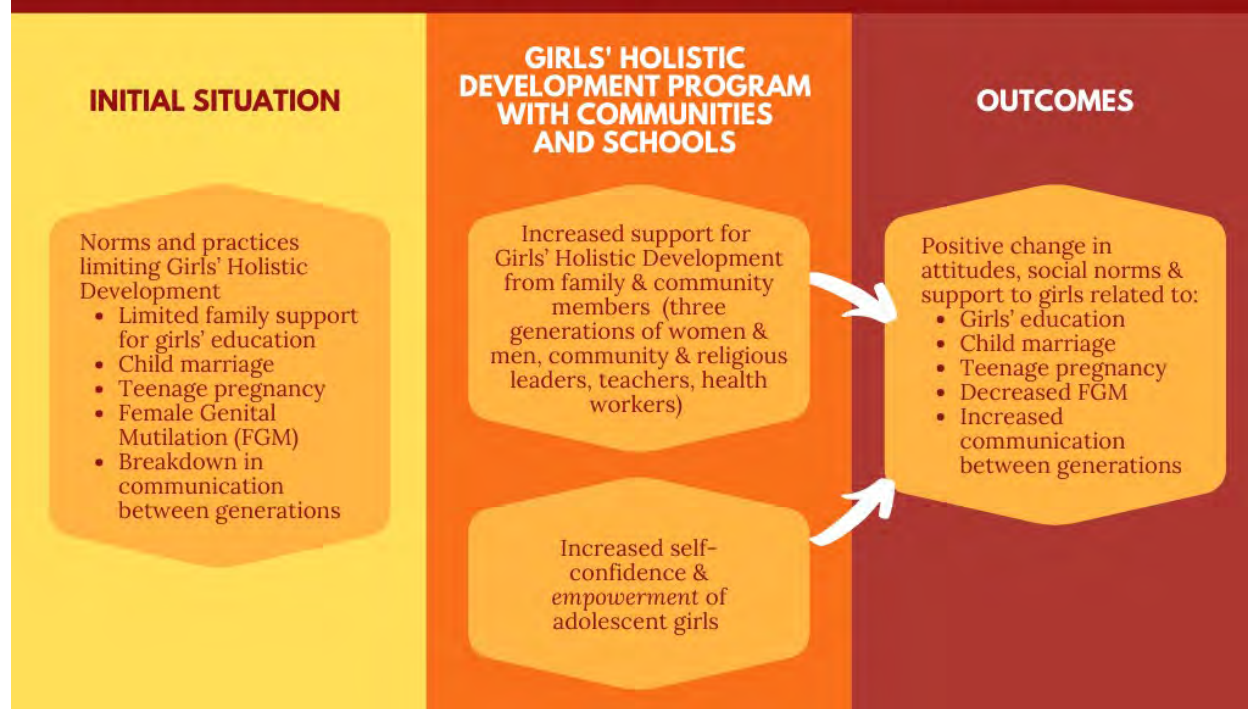
To support GHD, the GMP's two-pronged Theory of Change provides direct support to adolescent girls but also encourages changes in attitudes and behavior within families and communities.

Many organizations support girls by opting for single issue programs, focusing uniquely on child marriage or FGM, for example. These programs do not reflect the multiple concerns that families have for their daughters. The GMP addresses a spectrum of issues related to girls' well-being, from education to child marriage, teen pregnancy and FGM. It therefore provides an integrated, holistic approach to supporting girls.

**Onion Model
(Aubel & Rychtarik, 2015)**



THEORY OF CHANGE - GIRLS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT



Most programs promoting girls' rights and well-being address critical global and national priorities, such as child marriage, but ignore community concerns about their girls. The GHD circle, which is the framework for the program, addresses both global and local priorities for girls.

This includes key facets of girls' development related to their health, physical and intellectual well-being, which are of global and national concern, and also addresses other aspects of girls' development identified as important by communities – their spiritual, cultural, emotional and moral development, and their evolution as responsible citizens.

While GHD focuses primarily on girls, it is important to note that it also includes and supports young boys as they grow up alongside girls.

Aspects of Girls' Holistic Development



STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

In the GHD program, a series of innovative activities brings together community members to engage in dialogue on key issues relating to the development of girls and to build community consensus for change to support them. GHD activities include:

- Intergenerational forums
- Days of Praise of Grandmothers
- All women forums
- Grandmother-teacher workshops
- Under-the-tree participatory learning sessions on GHD topics with girls, mothers, and grandmothers
- Grandmother Leadership Training
- Discussion groups with boys and men
- Days of Dialogue and Solidarity



In most programs, activities target specific groups in the community but do not explicitly catalyze dialogue and reflection between different categories of community members. The different dialogue-based activities involving various community members – from teachers and traditional and religious leaders to parents, grandparents and adolescents, boys and girls – help create a synergy in the discussion of key GHD issues across the community.

While many programs use persuasive communication methods to convince people to adopt new ideas or practices and abandon existing ones, all of our community activities promote active reflection and decision-making through the use of participatory adult education methods. We encourage discussion of 'old' and 'new' ideas, without dictating any preferred outcomes. Our objective is to share information and invite critical thinking and problem solving, rather than pushing community members towards specific choices and activities. In this way they come to their own conclusions about how to keep girls in school, prevent child marriage and strengthen

their children's appreciation for positive cultural values. The GMP believes in the ability of community actors to make good decisions for themselves and their girls, when encouraged to consider their options critically.



Intergenerational Community Forum

All activities encourage open discussion, gender equality, respect for children, and a voice for everyone. In all group activities debate is encouraged on the positive aspects of tradition – that bind and reinforce local culture and identity – as well as those that can be harmful to girls (such as FGM, child marriage or teen pregnancy).

In all these activities, grandmothers play a central role. They participate in dialogue and debate along with other community members, and their involvement strengthens their capacity and commitment to lead positive change.

Grandmother Wisdom and Power

The Grandmother Project aims to understand and build on social realities, and its approach is underpinned by substantial insights from anthropology and community psychology. Most African extended families encompass several generations and different family branches, including co-wives and their children. Within this system, and in the wider community, there are distinct hierarchies and systems of influence involved in decision-making and the caretaking of younger members.

Within family systems, grandmothers have natural status and wisdom, and are motivated by a desire to bring people together and see family and community members thrive. They are storytellers, healers, and keepers of tradition, and they are advisors to men on all family issues.

The Grandmother Project recognizes the status of grandmothers and their potential to unite and lead. They are uniquely placed to bring about change for girls. They traditionally play a central and influential role throughout the life cycle of women and children and have the power to influence men's decision-making. They guide and watch over all matters concerning the sexual health and well-being of women and children. They also play a key role in the socialization of adolescent girls and have collective responsibility for girls in the community, not just in their own families.

Many programs ignore the traditional role of senior African women in the socialization of young girls. This is an affront to grandmothers and can alienate them from activities designed to support girls.

The GMP has discovered a special human resource that exists in all communities. Within all social networks of grandmothers there are natural leaders who have a deep commitment to promoting the well-being of others, and especially of girls and mothers.

The GHD strategy includes training activities for natural grandmother leaders, who are identified by their peers, to improve their knowledge of adolescence and their collective support for girls. That training has promoted the collective empowerment of grandmother leaders and together they have catalyzed discussion for change among other grandmothers, women, men, and community elders.

Numerous programs across the non-western world ignore the influence and capabilities of natural grandmother leaders. GMP appears to be the only organization that has identified and reinforced their role in promoting girls' rights and well-being within communities.



Grandmother Leadership Training

The gatherings and discussion groups that we facilitate create community-wide support for young girls. In particular, they build strong alliances between grandmothers, mothers and girls. Girls are encouraged to express themselves, to voice their needs and concerns with other women, and in the family. Grandmothers are encouraged to improve the way they communicate with girls – especially when tackling delicate subjects such as sexuality and reproductive health – using humor, games, stories, and traditional riddles.

This ongoing collective conversation, spearheaded by the grandmothers, has made it possible to address sensitive issues relating to the well-being of girls, often for the first time – such as FGM, teen pregnancy and child marriage – and to begin to change the conversation around these topics.

Once they are themselves convinced that certain practices are harmful to girls and their development, the grandmothers can influence the thinking of fathers, male elders, and religious leaders.



Three generations of women during an All-Women Forum

Teacher-Grandmother Support for Girls

Schools are an important part of the community system, and teachers have considerable influence on the lives of girls and boys. A companion component of the GHD targets schools to strengthen relationships between schools and communities. When communities have confidence in their schools, they are more likely to send their children to school and encourage them to stay in school. This is particularly true for girls. Families are more comfortable keeping their girls in school when there are close teacher-family relationships.

GHD is implemented in close collaboration with local education officials. Given the important influence of both teachers and grandmothers on girls, the GMP has strengthened relationships between teachers and grandmothers to encourage collaboration in protecting girls and promoting their healthy development. Grandmothers visit classes to teach children positive values that are in danger of being lost, using traditional proverbs, songs, and stories. This also strengthens relationships between children and grandmothers. Teachers report that they have learned a lot from observing how grandmothers discuss sensitive topics such as teen pregnancy with children. Strong teacher-grandmother relationships mean that families are more confident in sending their kids to school, especially girls.

“If I want to stay in school and wait to get married my dad won’t listen. If my mom opposes his plan to marry me before I am 18 there is little chance that he will change his mind. But if my grandmother tells my dad that I am too young and that I need to stay in school, he can’t go against her advice.”

-- Fatou, 14 year-old girl



GIRLS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS

A series of studies were carried out between 2015 and 2020 to determine the results of GMP's GHD program and to ensure ongoing learning. These studies provide insights into how the program responds to global priorities, while also responding to community concerns related to girls' education and development. The positive outcomes extend in many directions.

Changing Social Norms

In 2020, the Institute of Reproductive Health (IRH) at Georgetown University completed an extensive evaluation of the GHD program, comparing attitudes and behavior in communities within the GHD program and outside of it. The two-part report is based on extensive quantitative and qualitative research (IRH 2020a & 2020b).

The very significant conclusion of the IRH evaluation is that the GHD has contributed to shifting deep-rooted social norms related to girls' education, child marriage, teen pregnancy and FGM. The IRH research, and other complementary studies by Newman (2017), Newman & Soukouna (2017), Diallo (2018, 2019), Lulli (2018, 2020), and Saavedra (2020), have helped to understand the *pathway to change*: the factors contributing to the creation of a supportive environment for shifting social norms. They have focused particularly on what has been achieved through the meetings, forums, and consensus-building exercises.

"Increased social cohesion." The IRH reports that "the main outcome of this intervention is that it has brought community members together, strengthening community ties; a vital accomplishment in a rural context where collectivist values are highly valued." This is particularly significant given the serious breakdown in communication observed in all communities at the outset.

"Communication is the foundation of life for any group. Without communication and understanding there will never be any development. Many interventions failed in our communities because there was not enough dialogue and understanding between people. We never before had the opportunity to sit together and discuss like this, although it is the best way to promote the development of our communities."

-- Demba Diallo, village chief

The IRH research and other studies all agree that the GHD strategy, building as it does on existing cultural and religious roles and values, as well as the central role of grandmothers, has strengthened relationships and communication between generations at the community level. It also has brought teachers and communities closer together.

By strengthening social cohesion and building communication and trust between community members, the program has created a solid foundation for a community-wide discussion of GHD issues.

Changes at the Community Level

The program has strengthened relationships and communication between community members across the generations, between the sexes and with leaders.

There is increased respect for the experience and wisdom of elders, especially for older women. Communities now have a much greater appreciation of the role played by grandmothers in families and in the community, and specifically in the lives of girls.

"Before, each one of us was in her own corner. Today, there is much more solidarity between us. Now we organize regular meetings to discuss how we can work together to solve problems in our communities."

-- A Grandmother

Community members have greater confidence in the active role grandmothers play in promoting girls' development. Within the program area 100% percent of grandmothers feel appreciated by their communities, compared to only 53% in communities outside of the GHD.

The GHD strategy has increased grandmothers' knowledge of the issues faced by girls and encouraged them to take collective action to protect and promote their well-being.

Community leadership has been strengthened.

Community leaders are now better informed about issues concerning girls and have more skills for mobilizing communities to address them.

There is greater pride in cultural values and identity.

Pride has been restored in cultural values and traditions and communities are committed to transmitting them to younger generations.

Communities have been able to tackle sensitive GHD issues openly.

For most communities, the program provided a first opportunity to discuss issues relating to girls – many of which were previously considered taboo – in a public space.

Relations between schools and communities have been strengthened.

"The program has made schools



Amy Sessay, Grandmother Leader

Ending FGM In Lambatara Village

Amy is a dynamic grandmother leader who received leadership training from GMP. Her community is very attached to tradition and to FGM in particular, but she became determined to promote abandonment of the practice. After the leadership training, she and four other grandmother leaders from Lambatara met with the other grandmothers and mothers to explain that FGM is not recommended by Islam and that it is a cultural practice, not a religious one. They also discussed the unnecessary harm it does to girls and women throughout their lives. Once they had gained the support of other women and grandmothers, the five grandmother leaders met several times with the community elders. They met several times with the village headman and local Imam to share their own experience with FGM and their arguments for abandoning the practice. After several meetings, the headman and Imam told the grandmothers; "This is a women's affair. You, our respected grandmothers, are responsible for perpetuating this tradition. If you are telling us that we should stop, we cannot refuse your advice." The village headman then organized a community meeting to explain the decision taken by him and the other community elders to prohibit the practice in the future. Now, whenever a baby girl is born, the grandmother leaders visit the family in the first days after birth to remind them of the elders' decision. Amy reports that FGM is no longer practiced in Lambatara. The grandmother leaders are all very proud of the collective action they have taken for the well-being of girls and women.

more culturally relevant to families and has strengthened community-school relationships". Teachers and community members are working together and there is mutual respect and affection between them.

As a result, there is more community support for formal education. Families are now more motivated to let their children continue attending school and feel safe allowing their girls to continue at school, even during puberty. Local education officials report that school enrolment has increased, particularly for girls, while drop-out rates for girls have decreased.

Communities are more appreciative of the role grandmothers can play in children's education.

There is a general recognition that grandmothers can transmit important cultural values through storytelling in classrooms and in the community.



Grandmothers visit classes to teach children positive cultural values

Changes Within Families

By inviting more discussion of issues concerning GHD at the community level, the program has in turn encouraged families to adopt more intergenerational and open communication and to reconsider traditional attitudes and practices, such as child marriage and FGM. Girls feel

empowered to express their opinions and feel more supported as they face the challenges of adolescence.

Families are more supportive of girls. Attitudes within families related to the rights and development of adolescent girls have shifted. Families are now much less supportive of FGM, child marriage and teen pregnancy and more supportive of girls' education. As regards FGM specifically, only 18% of parents intend to cut future daughters, as opposed to 44% in areas outside of the program. Relationships between family members have become more gender equitable.

There is stronger communication between the generations. "GHD has contributed to improvements in family relationships, particularly between parents and adolescents."

Decision-making within families has become more inclusive. Fathers are now more open to the opinions of other family members, and especially those of women of all ages. "Fathers have changed their approach to decision-making and listen to the opinions of other family members, including adolescent girls, including those related to the schooling and marriage of their daughters."

In communities within the program area the majority of parents (80%) respect their daughters' wishes related to their schooling, compared to only 63% in communities outside of the program.



Grandmothers have more influence over girls and their development. The program has restored grandmothers to their traditional role as family advisors and advocates for young girls. Most grandmothers (93%) say that parents now ask their advice on many issues related to GHD, compared to only half of the parents (53%) in communities outside the program.

As a result of the GHD strategy based on respect and dialogue, grandmothers have become receptive to new information, and are willing to embrace new ideas and to seek a healthy balance between tradition and modernity.

More communication and collaboration between grandmothers at the community level have increased their confidence in their ability to oppose tradition and support change within families and neighborhoods.

Relationships between girls, mothers, and grandmothers are stronger. Girls now benefit from a strong female support system within the family.

Changes that Benefit Girls

By shifting norms within communities and changing attitudes in families, the program has helped create an *enabling environment* that protects girls and promotes their well-being.

Girls are more confident in expressing their feelings. Girls themselves and other family members confirm that they are much more confident in articulating their feelings and needs clearly. As a result of the program activities, parents have adopted a more receptive communication style, favoring more listening and less scolding. This has helped girls become more confident to speak their minds.

Grandmothers offer more support to girls. A notable shift has been observed in the relationship between adolescent girls and grandmothers. In the past, girls spent less time with grandmothers and were influenced by ageist attitudes towards them. Now girls actively seek their advice on many issues, including school, sexuality, pregnancy, and relationships with boys. Almost all girls (93%) seek support from grandmothers on a regular basis, compared to only 49% of girls in communities outside the program.



“When I have my period for the first time, I won’t be afraid. I will go to my grandmother so that she can advise me on menstrual hygiene. She is the one I share my problems with, and she always puts me at ease and listens carefully to whatever I say.”

-- Mariama, adolescent girl

Girls are more motivated to continue to secondary school. In the Velingara area, few girls go on to secondary school and fewer still succeed there. Support for girls’ education has increased in communities under the GHD, both among family members and teachers. Interviews with girls show that they are now more motivated to continue to secondary school (32%), while in communities without GHD only a few girls (14%) have this aspiration.

LOOKING AHEAD

The innovative approach of the GMP and the Change through Culture approach has contributed to widespread positive change. It has shown that rooting back into cultural traditions and values strengthens communities, and can allow for adaptability to change.

Deeply entrenched social norms are changing. Communities can come together in dialogue, affirm their traditions, and embrace change where needed. Girls can anticipate a future of greater possibility and reach.

The potential for expansion and replication of these methodologies is huge. The intergenerational and grandmother-inclusive approach used by the Grandmother Project in the Girls' Holistic Development Program is relevant and could be beneficial in many non-western cultures across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where intergenerational relations and hierarchies still characterize family and community life.

“In all regions of the world, older women represent an important human resource...but their contributions to society often remain unseen or unrecognized.”

-- Dr Valerie Lipman



LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE GIRLS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

- In African communities, elders have status and power over younger generations and determine the social norms that structure family and community life. When approached respectfully and through dialogue, elders are not automatically opposed to change.
- When programs respect and seek to build on cultural and religious roles and values that communities cherish, community members are more receptive and more engaged. The opposite is also true.
- Communities are more open and engaged with programs that adopt an assets-based approach, in which positive roles, values and practices are encouraged and reinforced, while harmful ones are discouraged.
- Given that families themselves are concerned with all aspects of girls' upbringing and development, communities are more receptive to programs that address a range of concerns related to girls' development, rather than those that propose single issue strategies.
- In non-western cultural contexts in which extended family networks are strong, grandmothers play a key role in all aspects of the upbringing and development of children, especially girls. Programs are more effective and supportive when they acknowledge and build on this cultural resource.
- When interventions listen and seek to address issues of concern to communities, they are more likely to gain their support and involvement.
- Harmonious shifts in attitudes and practices within family and community systems are best achieved by catalyzing communication and dialogue between generations (elders, adults, and adolescents). Focusing attention on only one group (such as girls) can unintentionally create conflict between generations.
- Both formal and informal leaders, representing different generations and both sexes should be involved in all efforts to promote change in communities. Given their influence with their respective peer groups they are powerful gatekeepers who can either support or block new ideas and behaviors.
- When school programs reflect local cultural values, pupil motivation increases, relationships between schools and communities are strengthened and family support for children's education is greater.

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