

Translated May 2021  
[Editing by Noelle -June 2021](#)



## Gender Study 2

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Changes in the relationships between  
three generations of women  
which are contributing to improving  
their power and well-being.

*A study on the impact of the  
Grandmother Project's  
Girls' Holistic Development Program<sup>1</sup>*

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Study led by: Francesca Lulli, anthropologist  
Interviews conducted by Mariama Kandé and Francesca Lulli

July 17, 2020

[www.grandmotherproject.org](http://www.grandmotherproject.org)

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## Grandmother Project - Change through Culture

*1-This study analyzes data on changes in women’s relationships with one another. The data was collected in a larger study on changes in relationships between generations and between sexes, as a result of the GMP activities related to gender change section entitled: Changes in Gender Relationships and Improving the Status of Women. Study on the impact of the GMP Girls’ Holistic Development Program – Department of Vélingara – Senegal – GMP – 2020.*

### Summary

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The objective of the Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) program implemented by the NGO the Grandmother Project – Change through Culture (GMP), is to promote respect for the rights and well-being of young girls. It aims to abolish Female Genital Mutilation by improving the quality of girls' education and by reducing child marriages and teenage pregnancies. The GHD program helps strengthen intergenerational dialogue and involves older women, or grandmothers, as a resource for girls. According to the results of previous studies (FIG 2019 & IRH 2019), the GHD program has had a positive impact on relations between women of the same or different generations, as well as between men and women. This study analyzes the changes observed in the relationships between women of the same or different generations.

Improving relations between women is necessary because it allows for the emergence of collective autonomies within age groups, thus bringing together coalitions of women. This enables them to acquire important and effective decision-making powers that are capable of changing norms (IRH 2019).

To identify changes, group interviews were conducted in 13 villages with 253 people. These took place in the communes of Nemataba and Kandia where the GHD program was implemented. The collected data was analyzed by hand using the content analysis technique. The interviewees' responses to almost all the questions they were asked were similar, which makes the answers reliable. Data was taken from all categories within the communities and from within both communes.

The key findings of the study are presented below. They show that there have been significant changes in the relationships and in the quality of communication between women of the same and different generations, as well as within the family and the community, following the intervention of the GMP:

First and foremost, we note that relationships between women of the same generation have strengthened.

- While in the past, women seldom visited with each other, shared few activities, and rarely chatted with each other, today they have built better relationships and communicate much more frequently:
  - Grandmothers visit each other more often, meet to discuss with one another, and rally to organize activities of community interest and to care for young girls.
  - Women of reproductive age (WRA) meet up more often and their relationships are less contentious. Now they collaborate and discuss common issues with each other.
  - Girls spend more time together, share more activities, converse with one other, offer each other advice, and talk about their studies and their future.
  - Relations between women of different generations have been strengthened: in the past, these relations were difficult and communication was weak.
  - Within families, relations between grandmothers and WRA (the girls' mothers)

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have calmed. The WRA trust grandmothers, listen to their advice, and collaborate with them, as well as supporting them in several areas.

- Relations between grandmothers and girls have improved. Grandmothers give a lot of advice to the girls and are involved in their education. Young girls appreciate the presence of their grandmothers, whose support has made them more confident.
- Young girls communicate better with their mothers through dialogue and mutual listening.

## I. INTRODUCTION

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The Grandmother Project – Change through Culture (GMP) is an American and Senegalese NGO that has been working in the department of Vélingara since 2008. Through its Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) program, its objective is to respond to the many problems that young girls confront. The GHD program promotes change with regard to the norms regulating girls' education, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, female circumcision, and communication between generations and between sexes.

According to the GMP, collective consensus is the lever upon which any change in practices and social norms within communities relies. Since collective consensus is the result of open communication between generations and genders, the GMP organizes activities which promote communication. It arranges communication tools which will enhance culture, support grandmothers, and facilitate agreement between the community actors who decide which actions to take and which practices to continue to observe and perhaps modify.

### Context

Based on information gathered at the start of the GHD program, and based on our studies and the testimonies of community members, relationships were particularly contentious between generations, and between men and women – even within the same age groups. Traditional customs, which demand obedience and subordination of younger siblings to their elders, and of women to men, have mixed with new patterns of behavior, increasing conflict between the sexes and the generations. Older women were considered obsolete and mystically dangerous, and their authority and skills were devalued by youth.

The breakdown in dialogue between generations of women slows the flow of knowledge and compromises the sharing of interests, protection, and reciprocal support between older and younger women. Individualism has thus had a significant impact on relations between people of the same generation and it has changed the balance of societies in this region. In the past, the importance of such

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associations of women was recognized, but today they have nearly disappeared<sup>1</sup>. In this situation of relational breakdown, the strategy of the GMP's GHD program has made it possible to strengthen relations between generations using non-directive methods of communication.

Below we will study the changes observed in the relationships between women of the same and different generations as a result of the GHD activities<sup>2</sup>.

## II. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

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The objectives of this part of the study are as follows:

- To identify changes in relationships between women of the same generation; and
- To identify changes in the relationships between women of the three generations (grandmothers, mothers/[WRA] and girls).

### Study Sample

The interviews were conducted using a reasoned sample, in 13 villages of the Department of Vélingara where the GHD program was implemented. This included eight in the commune of Némataba, four in the commune of Kandia, and one in a control village of another commune. The categories of people interviewed were: grandmothers (78); mothers of children and adolescents (53); girls (70); community elders and men (35); and adolescent boys (27). A total of 253 people were interviewed.

Data was collected from interviews conducted with homogeneous groups, using interview guides specially designed for each gender and generation as a series of vignettes. The guides and vignettes were produced by anthropologist Francesca Lulli with support from community worker Mariama Kandé. The interviews were conducted in Pulaar by Mariama Kandé and in the presence of Francesca Lulli. The French translation was recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The data was analyzed using the content analysis approach. Some themes were defined from the start while other themes and sub-themes are the result of the data extracted from the analysis process.

## III. THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

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We illustrate here the results of the interviews conducted in the communes of Némataba and Kandia, where the project was implemented. We observe significant positive changes in the general

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<sup>1</sup>Reveyrand, O. (1987). "Women's Associations in Black Africa: The Casamance Example" Part 3, *The Month in Africa*, 253-254: 100-118.

<sup>2</sup>Reveyrand, O. (1987). "Women's Associations in Black Africa: The Casamance Example", Part 3, *The Month in Africa*, 253-254: 100-118.

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relationships among community members, but especially among women of all generations.

### Positive changes in relationships between community members

According to the testimonies, the GMP program has had a positive impact on family and community relationships. Baseline studies and previous work-reports show that prior to the GMP's arrival in the study area, family and community relations were particularly contentious between generations and between sexes. Thanks to the GHD program, communication has improved and relations are much calmer among all members of the community.

*"The relationships between peer groups, that is to say between grandmothers, between men, between young girls and between WRA, are better, because now we are visiting with each other. Relations between generations have also evolved: grandmothers, WRA, and girls now do a lot of things together. They help each other, and that is very good. "*

*Koulandiala Community Elders*

## 1. Changes in relations between women of the same generation

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Relationships have also improved between women of the same generation: between grandmothers, between WRA, and between girls. Traditionally, good relationships between women of the same age group were the norm; yet, in recent decades, the adoption of western values and emerging individualism have caused this custom to almost disappear. According to interviewees, prior to the GMP's arrival, relationships were compromised and very confrontational between women, but now that seems to have changed.

### 1. Grandmothers now visit and get together with one another

All the interviewees confirmed that before the implementation of the project, the grandmothers no longer visited with one another. They lived isolated lives and only met during ceremonies. Therefore, they did not discuss matters of common interest and did not concern themselves with community issues. Marginalized by the other generations, they were considered archaic, dangerous, and/or mystical. Now all that has changed.

All the grandmothers interviewed say that now they are meeting up and visiting with each other as never before:

*"Before, we did not dare get together to discuss and chat with each other. We were not mobilizing, but now we are. It was not culturally accepted that we could get together in each other's homes, and we did not know the importance of solidarity."*

*Grandmothers of Nemataba*

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All the grandmothers therefore consider their relationships to have improved:

*"Now we are united. There is understanding and social cohesion between us – we hang out with each other, which did not happen before. We share and we exchange ideas. We built relationships of trust that had not existed before. Now we can discuss with each other, know what is going on in each other's our inner lives, and collaborate perfectly with one another. "*

*Grandmothers of Bakayoko*

All other generations interviewed on this subject say that this change is new:

*"There has been a big change because now grandmothers can call meetings to see each other, discuss, tell stories, meet up... all this did not exist before. It is a big change."*

*Koulandiala Community Elders*

### **2. Grandmothers take care of collective problems together**

According to all the interviewees, since relations have improved, grandmothers collectively involve themselves in issues of community and collective interest, such as the promotion of culture, the organization of solidarity initiatives, and the education of children and girls.

*"We have strengthened communication and solidarity between us, and we are now talking about the constraints that young girls have, such as child marriages, teenage pregnancies, and dropping out of school."*

*Grandmothers of Koumera*

*"The relationship between the grandmothers is now very good because we have only one goal. When one of us attends a meeting, the topics covered during the meeting are then shared with the other grandmothers and discussed. Even when the others were not present, they agree with those who participated, and we discuss and share everything. "*

*Grandmothers of Sare Yira*

Grandmothers discuss and share their knowledge while supporting each other. They rally and act at the community level in almost all the villages by, for example, organizing weeding or seeking to resolve family and community conflicts. They are listened to when they get involved in important issues, and their advice is followed at the family and community levels, on topics such as that of child marriage or conflict management.

*"In the case of weddings: for example, if our parents wanted to give us away in marriage, the GMs did nothing at all and said nothing; now on the contrary, they get involved and protect us. "*

*Girls of Nemataba*

*"The relationship between the grandmothers is good and now they are seeing each other. They are the ones who settle conflicts together in the village."*

*Girls of Sare Niari*

*"It's very important to visit with one another in order to fight individualism. We do everything as a group, and it is very beneficial. Now we settle all conflicts together."*

*Grandmothers of Diamweli.*

### **3. Together the grandmothers are more confident**

According to many grandmothers, good relationships have a positive impact on individuals and on the group trust of grandmothers.

*"Now we do everything together, collectively. If we act as a group, then even if one of us does not know how to contribute, when the others are confident, then she also will find the courage to participate. "*

*Grandmothers of Koulandiala*

The status of grandmothers has improved since they act together and collaborate with each other. They now know how to speak individually or as a group with other family and community members, and they are listened to.

*"The first thing is that I saw our status change thanks to the forums that the GMP organizes in the village, because before there was no solidarity or understanding between us – we did not see each other. But now with the activities that the GMP organizes in this village, we have forged good relations and, in addition, we are speaking publicly: before we could not do that. Not so much because we could not express ourselves, but because we didn't see each other. We were each on our own side, in our own house, and there was no coming together, there were no meetings, there was nothing at all. But now we can speak out publicly, thanks to the GMP. "*

*Grandmothers of Saré Sankoulé*

### **4. Better communication and more exchanges between the WRA**

According to all interviewees, before the GMP's intervention, relations between the WRA were contentious. The WRA often argued, seldom spoke or collaborated much with each other, and did not trust one another.

*"Before, we did not visit one another, nobody trusted their neighbor. Now trust reigns; we have good discussions and share a lot. Before, we each had a mystical fear of the other, but all that disappeared when we visited with each other. Now we understand each other, and we can spend time together. All of this is thanks to the GMP sessions."*

*WRA in Sare Niari*

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All the interviewees affirm that relations are now better: the WRA see each other regularly and communicate and advise each other on matters of personal and collective interest, such as the education of children. They sometimes set up community savings banks and help one another with field work which, according to the testimonies, was not done before.

*"Before, the WRA did not visit each other, but now they get together every afternoon to discuss, share, drink. Also, during the rainy season, they take turns cultivating the fields. This didn't happen before."*

*Grandmothers of Sare Sankoulé*

*"Now we visit each other, get together, and we help one another. We discuss solidarity between us, about the well-being of our children, and we share a lot of things."*

*WRA in Kael Bessel*

*"The relations between the WRA are good today... They discuss, rally without arguing; whereas, in the past, as soon as two or three WRA sat down together, after a few minutes they argued, or they fought. Now, on the contrary, there is solidarity between them. They do a lot of things, get together every week to make a membership fee and help each other."*

*Grandmothers of Badiara*

### 5. Good relations among WRA are the foundations for their action

Good relationships and mutual listening allow for the exchange of ideas and the flow of information. Talking about common problems strengthens women. It promotes mutual trust and understanding, as well as action.

*"There are changes in the relationships between us because before we didn't mobilize, we couldn't have meetings without fights. Now we can get together, meet people, and everyone gives their opinion without arguing."*

*WRA in Saré Yira.*

*"Better relations have enabled us to build a beautiful and strong understanding amongst ourselves which did not exist before. Now we have also built relationships of trust. Improving relationships is good for the group above all because we each know one another better, each knows what the other thinks, and each understands things through mutual counseling. We can benefit from that as well. "*

*WRA of Badiara*

*"By visiting with each other, we found a lot of solutions to our problems, because it was by talking that we got the idea to start a savings bank."*

*WRA of Saré Sankoulé*

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*"Being together allows us to know a lot of things through the advice we give each other."*

*WRA of Badiara*

Together women gain confidence in their abilities, understand common difficulties, and seek to share solutions.

### **6. Relations between girls have been strengthened**

The GHD project has also had a positive impact on the relationships between the younger girls. According to all interviewees, before the GMP arrived, girls were not used to spending a lot of time together. They stayed most of the time with their mothers during the day, and at night they went with the boys to dances, to the "Tarmac" or to sit in front of the TV, without forging any real group dynamics. Now all the interviewees say that girls have better relationships. They hang out and share activities. They spend their free time together, regularly discussing their goals, counseling each other on their relationships with boys, talking about issues of child marriage and teenage pregnancy, and about the importance of their education.

*"Before, we did not visit one another, each of us stayed at our mother's side, but now, we discuss, we converse. We give each other advice on our studies and on anything that interests us. Now all the girls see each other twice a week."*

*Girls of Bakayoko*

*"There is a huge change, because before girls were fighting and arguing all the time! Now you see them together, they get along well, they laugh. So if there is a problem, they agree, they discuss the matter. If there is work in the fields to do, they agree to organize themselves to do it together. "*

*Grandmothers of Koumera*

*"Among the girls, there is also a big change because they form associations to help each other. They have an association to cultivate a field together; we pay them, and with this money they buy clothes. They can meet their own needs in a way, without weighing too much on their mothers to purchase their clothes. "*

*Grandmothers of Sare Sankoulé*

The girls are thus coming to understand the importance of being together. They feel stronger through discussions, common reasoning and the exchange of ideas. They support each other in many situations and give each other advice on relationships with boys or child marriage issues.

*"We discuss together and if we see one of us hanging out too much with boys, we call her to tell her that she is playing with her future and that she needs to focus on studying instead."*

*Girls of Kael Bessel.*

*"For example, if one of us is to be given in marriage then we discuss this. The girl who is to be married asks the other girls: Can you help me talk to my parents so that they let me continue my studies? We discuss this among ourselves and we agree that we must continue our studies. "*

*Girls of Koumera*

## 2. Changes in relations between women of different generations

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If before the project, the relations amongst women of the same age group were somewhat contentious, those between women of different age groups were extremely difficult. According to testimonies and several preliminary studies, the older women and the younger women were suspicious of one another (the same situation as is experienced in relationships between elders and boys). Dialogue was almost non-existent and there were zero visits with one another. By all accounts, this has changed thanks to the contribution of the GHD activities.

### 1. Strengthening relations between grandmothers and WRA<sup>3</sup>

Interviewees also say that in the past (before the GHD program), there was no communication or collaboration between grandmothers and WRA. Grandmothers were not close with the WRA, who distrusted them and treated them like witches, whilst ignoring their advice and keeping them from visiting with their grandchildren.

*"Before, we did not even look at the grandmothers, we did not talk to them, we did not do anything for them. Before, I was the one whispering in children's ears: "Your grandmother ... she's a witch, you must not go near her". Now all that no longer exists. I am the one who pushes the children to go to the grandmothers, so that the latter can tell them tales and riddles. "*

*WRA of Saré Yira*

Project activities reestablished the relationship between grandmothers and WRA. Communication has been restored: WRA listen to grandmothers, trust them, and appreciate their advice and commitment to the education of children. For their part, the grandmothers advise the WRA on family life and education, pass down cultural values and traditional knowledge, and take care of children and pregnant women. Communication facilitated reciprocal support at the home economy level which, according to the majority of interviewees, was not common before.

*"Now we communicate with grandmothers: we are together and we follow the advice*

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<sup>3</sup> In Fouladou, among the linguistic groups present, the residence is patrilocal: the relationship between grandmothers and women of reproductive age (WRA) at the family level is a relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (the latter are often brought to the marital home by a decision-making process that does not consider their opinion).

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*of grandmothers in many regards, such as child-rearing. So, we listen to the grandmothers who help us to heal ourselves according to traditional medicine."*

*WRA of Koumera*

*"We have a good relationship with our daughters-in-law. Before, we did not dare to argue with them. Now there is trust, there is peace and solidarity between us. In addition to this, the WRA ask for our advice. "*

*Grandmothers of Badiara*

*"Now there is a very good relationship between us and mothers, because the WRA understand that it is important for them, because they alone cannot educate their children. It takes the involvement of grandmothers for education to run smoothly. Before we were isolated, mothers refused to let their children join their grandmothers, but now this is no longer the case. Now they leave us with our grandchildren, now we are in charge of everything. In addition to that, if we advise mothers of families, they follow our advice. "*

*Grandmothers of Sare Sankoulé*

According to many WRA, openness to dialogue with grandmothers has also improved their position within the family. They speak more easily in an environment that is more supportive and more responsive to listening. They can now express their opinions without fear of being misjudged by elders, as explained in the following quote:

*"The coming-together between us and the grandmothers has enabled us to improve our status in the family, because now we can express ourselves, share our ideas, and publicly say what we are thinking."*

*WRA from Nemataba.*

Better relationships between grandmothers and WRA bring many benefits: WRA can count on the help and support of grandmothers at many levels, such as in the resolution of marital conflicts. Grandmothers see their value recognized and their role in the home and community is restored .

### ***2. Strengthening relationships and trust between grandmothers and girls***

According to all interviewees, the young girls did not speak with their grandmothers before the GMP arrived; they avoided them, viewing them as outdated, mystical, and dangerous. Grandmothers, on the other hand, were harsh and bossy with younger girls, did not listen to them, and often scolded them, seeking to raise them through fear.

Now the grandmothers listen to the young girls and talk with them. They enjoy their company and their advice. Almost all grandmothers report spending time with the young daughters in their families every day and meeting collectively each week with other grandmothers and girls from the village to discuss sexual health or other topics. Communication between daughters and grandmothers now is based on

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respect and active and reciprocal listening.<sup>4</sup>

*"Before, we used to scold and scare girls, but now we prefer active listening. We are listening to the girl so she can tell us what she is thinking. "*

*Grandmothers of Saré Sankoulé*

*"Now we spend time with young girls, give them advice, and follow them. All this thanks to a better quality of communication. We visit each other every day, because every grandmother has granddaughters in her house and makes sure to chat with them at home. Every week we organize a collective discussion between girls and grandmothers."*

*Grandmothers of Koumera.*

*"We no longer think of grandmothers as witches. Grandmothers give us good advice, and also talk to us about sexuality and tell us how to protect ourselves. "*

*Girls of Sare Niari*

### 3. Strengthening the relationships and education of girls

Now the grandmothers spend a lot of time with the young girls. At night they tell them stories and riddles and they discuss various topics, such as school or sexual health. This last subject, which was previously taboo, is now approached openly and very clearly.<sup>5</sup>

*"Grandmothers tell us cultural stories about the past, fairy tales, riddles, plus they tell us about all the risks we run. They tell us to beware of boys, to stop all-nighters and advise not to have sex with boys, because if the liquid enters the woman's vagina, she can get pregnant."*

*Girls of Diamweli*

The WRA are happy with the better relations between grandmothers and girls.

*"We are happy that the grandmothers and our daughters are coming together, because in this way the girls no longer go out at night and, in addition, the grandmothers take care of their well-being. It wasn't like that before. "*

*WRA of Kael Bessel.*

#### a. Girls express themselves more confidently because girls and grandmothers have stronger relationships

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<sup>4</sup>The data on the change in communication and the educational approach of grandmothers towards young girls had already been confirmed by the 2018 study on the evaluation of the "Training Under the Tree of Grandmothers' Leaders".

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed young girls said that the dialogue on sexuality is new.

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According to the majority of interviewees, before the GHD program, girls, who before did not dare to publicly express their opinions, now express themselves with more confidence in their family, with their parents, with boys, and also within the community during public meetings. According to the majority of interviewees, they credit this new self-assurance to time spent with grandmothers (and sometimes with mothers), which has inspired them to speak out courageously.

*"Confidence comes from the grandmothers' sessions with the WRA and the girls. Now during the sessions, we say bluntly to the girl, 'You have to respond because it helps you to express yourself publicly. You have to express your opinion too!'"*

*WRA of Saré Faramba*

*"It is thanks to the intervention of the GMP that we have gained confidence, but also thanks to the discussion we have with grandmothers and our mothers."*

*Girls of Kael Bessel*

*"We are listened to by our parents because we have more confidence. We have gained confidence in ourselves thanks to the grandmothers. "*

*Girls of Koumera*

### b. Girl/Grandmother relationships and changing attitudes between young girls and boys

According to the majority of interviewees, the coming-together of grandmothers and girls has led to better relationships between girls and boys.<sup>67</sup> Girls have more courage and know how to refuse the advances of boys.

*"Now we have the courage to tell boys what we think; we know how to refuse their advances because now we have confidence in ourselves, unlike in the past. Before, we were afraid to speak out in front of an audience. Being close to our grandmothers has helped us with our relationships with boys."*

*Girls of Koumera*

According to the interviewees, if the relationships between girls and boys have changed, it is due to the many encounters they have had with their grandmothers.

*"Before, there were more teenage pregnancies and the grandmothers did not advise us. When we were with young boys, immediately there would be a pregnancy. But through discussions with our grandmothers, we understood that young boys are not important, that we should not get pregnant, and that we need to be confident in*

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<sup>67</sup>For the results on these changes see the study: Changes in gender relations and improving the status of women. Study on the impact of the Girls Holistic Development Program of GMP- Department of Vélingara (Senegal), GMP 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

*ourselves. "*

*Girls of Diamweli*

*"There is a big change between boys and girls. This was done through the sessions that we, the grandmothers, organize. In addition to this, the girls listen to us attentively, and the boys too. So even boys help us protect young girls."*

*Grandmothers of Badiara*

### c. Relations between WRA and their daughters are based on listening and mutual respect

Before the project, according to all the interviewees, the relations between mothers and their daughters were rather confrontational and communication was very rare. The WRA did not listen to girls and educated them through fear or scolding. In turn, the daughters sought to escape their mothers' control and had little respect for them. Now, according to all interviewees, communication, mutual respect and listening have all been reestablished.

*"Between us and our mothers, now there are good relations. Before, mothers did not listen to us and constantly lectured us. In addition, when we wanted to talk, our mothers would tell us directly: 'Shut up! This is unruliness, you must not speak in front of me and all you say is a lie'. Now that has changed."*

*Girls of Bakayoko*

*"Now there is a perfect relationship between us and our daughters. Before they did not listen to our advice, but now they listen to it. On top of that, the young girls respect us."*

*WRA of Badiara*

## **CONCLUSIONS**

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According to the testimonies collected, the relations amongst women have changed and strengthened thanks to the activities of the GMP.

The individualism and reciprocal mistrust that had broken ties and the practice of women of the same generation visiting one another have been replaced by the desire to be together, to share problems, and to support each other.

At the same time, better relationships between women of different generations have helped to build a climate of mutual trust and support.

Women have learned to communicate, to collaborate, to support each other and to share useful information. They have discovered how to act to protect common interests such as their health, their

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status, and their presence within their families.

Younger people benefit from the support and information that older people provide them, and grandmothers have regained their central role as educators and counselors. This role is now recognized by other women and by men as well. They are today an essential and revalued reference for the resolution of conflicts at the family and community level.

The regard and actions of grandmothers are those of women who are now recognized and honored, and who can take care of the community and other women in an atmosphere of mutual respect and listening.

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