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GRANDMOTHER
PROJECT CHANGE THROUGH CULTURE

Study n° 1

Changes in gender relations and in the status of women

Velingara Dept., Kolda Region, Senegal

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INTRODUCTION

The Grandmother Project – *Change through Culture* (GMP) is an American and Senegalese NGO that has been working in the Department of Velingara since 2008. Its goal is to promote Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) using an approach that seeks solutions to the problems which the youth are facing. GHD fosters change to the norms related to girls' limited education, teenage pregnancy, female genital mutilation (FGM) and intergenerational and cross-gender communication.

With the GMP, the foundation for changing social practices and norms in the community relies on collective consensus. It is based on open communication between the generations and the sexes. According to the GMP, the role and culture of grandmothers needs to be valued when working towards agreement and understanding among community stakeholders (, particularly) with regard to the importance of existing or new attitudes and norms. This approach is based on the development of activities and communication tools.

Context

In the areas where the GHD program is employed, according to the information gathered at the beginning of the GHD program through studies and the testimonies of community members, the relationship between men and women (as well as between generations) was particularly tense. Traditional customs that demand the obedience and subordination of women are being confronted with new behavioral patterns. This has increased conflict between the sexes with women being unable to overcome the challenges associated with publicly expressing their needs and actively participating in family and collective decision-making.

Through GHD methodology, the GMP combines intergenerational relations with the use of open-ended communication techniques. Earlier studies (IRH, 2019) clearly demonstrate the positive changes which have occurred in the community between generations with regard to gender relations. We are going to examine these latter changes.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Conceptual framework

This study's conceptualization is based on the OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) framework (2014). Following this approach, we aim to deal with three of its priority parameters in depth, these being:

- Discrimination against women within the home. Restrictions on women's decision-making power in the household and the family.
- Violence against women. Restrictions on women's control over their own bodies.
- Women's access to public spaces – access to, having voice and participation in the public and social sphere.

Study objectives

The objectives of the study are the following:

1. Identify changes in men's and women's attitudes with regard to women's self-confidence and their right to be heard.

2. Identify changes in the relationship between men and women at three generational levels: elders, adults, youth.

Study sample

After selecting a judicious sample, interviews were conducted in 13 villages in the area of Vélingara (where the GHD program was implemented), this included eight in the municipality of Nemataba, four in the municipality of Kandia and one control village in an additional municipality. The people interviewed fell into the following categories: grandmothers (78), mothers of children and teenagers (53), girls (70), community elders and men (35) and youth (27). A total of 253 people were interviewed.

Data was collected through interviews with homogenous groups using gender- and generation-specific interview guides plus series of vignettes. The guides and vignettes were produced by anthropologist Francesca Lulli in collaboration with community worker Mariama Kande. The interviews were conducted in Pulaar by Mariama Kande with Francesca Lulli attending. The subsequent translation into French was later recorded and transcribed.

The data was analyzed using a content analysis approach. Certain themes were identified at the start, while other themes and subthemes emerged from the collected data during the analysis process.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Here we are referring to the results of the interviews held with the various groups within the municipalities of Nemataba and Kandia where the project took place¹. They demonstrate important changes that have resulted in the ability of three generations of women to express themselves with greater confidence in the home and in the community.

1. Women's confidence and voice

According to those interviewed, before the GHD program, the majority of women did not speak in public and had difficulty expressing their ideas in front of men and elders. Now, women of all generations are more confident and can share their opinions and ideas with men and elders more freely at home and in the community.

“Before, none of the women dared to speak in public. You wouldn't even see one woman who could speak in public, and that's no longer the case now. You see women speaking in public, giving their opinion, saying everything that they think.” **Young men of Diamweli**

¹ Since 2016, the GMP is no longer working much in the municipality of Kandia, whereas implementation of the GHD program in the municipality of Nemataba began near the end of 2016. That said, the responses recorded in both zones demonstrate very similar trends with regard to the issues on a whole, and as a result they have been dealt with together.

1.1 WRA express themselves freely at home and in the community

In general, according to everyone interviewed, before the GHD program, WRA were reluctant to speak up and express their point of view, especially if it differed from their husband's or an elder's². Now they speak publicly in community settings and speak freely in front of men, husbands and elders:

“Now we, the WRA, can express ourselves in public and in front of men. Before we didn't dare to do this since it was only men who had this power, but now we can express ourselves in public, we are more confident compared to in past years.” **WRA from Koumera**

“Before, even if you saw something wrong, you couldn't say anything because a grandmother or an elder was there, and if they didn't say anything about it, you didn't have the confidence to say anything about it. But now we can get our ideas out there, we can publicly say what's on our mind.” **WRA from Nemataba**

1.2 Girls express their ideas confidently in public, at home and around boys.

According to everyone interviewed, before the arrival of the GMP, girls were not confident about expressing their ideas in public. Often, they did not even dare to tell their parents about their educational needs. Furthermore, it was not culturally acceptable for them to speak in front of adults. Now, according to those interviewed, girls are confident about expressing themselves and know how to talk about their needs, to share their thoughts publicly and to give their opinion at home and in the community.

“Before, even if a girl didn't have a pencil, she wouldn't say anything, she would ask somebody to lend her one instead of coming and asking her family for help. But now, she comes and simply says: ‘Papa, mama, grandmother, I don't have any pencils and we need to find one for me.’”

“If there's a problem, a young girl now talks freely about it.” **Grandmothers of Bakayoko**

“The girls now express themselves in public confidently and with determination. Before, this wasn't the case. Even if you questioned a girl and told her to speak up, she wouldn't dare say a word. But now that girl is able to express herself in public.” **Community Elders in Saré Sankoulé**

Girls also have more confidence and are less intimidated. They express their thoughts and opinions assertively with boys.

² WRA: this acronym refers to Women of Reproductive Age who are married and, according to the patrilocal custom, reside in the husband's domain with their children.

1.3 Grandmothers participate and express their ideas publicly in front of men and women

Everyone interviewed, including the grandmothers themselves, stated that before the project they were isolated and marginalized, and that they did not dare share their ideas. Now, they are confident, they express their opinions and share them with everyone, both men and women.

“Before, we were very limited in all domains because we didn’t dare to give our opinion at home, we didn’t dare to talk with WRA, men, or to get close with our granddaughters, because people considered us to be witches. But now we’re determined; we’re not isolated; we can express ourselves in front of an audience; we give our opinions when it’s called for; we talk with people of all generations.” **Grandmothers from Koumera**

“Before, we didn’t dare to express ourselves. Now we speak in public. If there’s a community meeting and a man talks first, the second person to talk is a grandmother.” **Grandmothers from Saré Niari**

2. Men accept that women have a voice and recognize the value of their ideas

Before the GMP, men of all generations were not used to asking or valuing the opinions of women. It was not culturally acceptable for a woman to express her ideas in public, especially in front of men or elders. Now, according to everyone interviewed, the attitudes and behaviors of men of all ages have greatly changed. They seek out, listen to and value women’s opinions and ideas. Now, it is culturally acceptable for a woman to publicly express her own ideas.

2.1 Men listen to their wives’ opinions

Before the implementation of the GHD program, men usually considered a woman who spoke up as being disrespectful to them. Now this has changed. According to those interviewed, men listen and take women’s ideas into consideration more, even if they differ from their own.

“In most households, the man thought that it was disrespectful if his wife spoke to him. Now the fact that a woman speaks to her husband is culturally acceptable.” **Girls from Kouméra**

“Now the WRA have the confidence to say anything they want around their family and we all take turns speaking. A husband speaks and says his point of view, the wife also speaks in turn and says her point of view – in turn, and that’s something new!” **Community Elders from Némataba**

2.2 Fathers listen to their daughters’ ideas

According to everyone interviewed, before the GMP, fathers did not allow their daughters to speak in front of them and reacted in an authoritarian fashion when they had problems with them. Now, fathers encourage a lot more dialogue with girls and listen to them when it comes to several issues.

“It’s beneficial to listen to girls because communicating with them and listening to their opinions has removed many of the barriers between us and them. Before, you didn’t communicate with a girl; if she went out at night, you, her father, would chase her from the home. You chased your daughter out without knowing what she’d do out there. It was very

dangerous for the girl. But, when you talk with her, you know what's going on in her mind, you can give her advice and you can make her understand the risks that she's running." **Community Elder from Sare Samba Nety**

"Before, it was not culturally acceptable for a girl to express herself in front of an elder. We didn't understand the benefits of people expressing themselves, of sharing opinions. For us, it was only the elders who had good ideas, when really everyone has a good idea." **Community Elders from Saré Sankoulé**

2.2.1 Families listen to girls more in the home

According to all the testimonies, parents and grandparents generally listen to girls more in the home:

"Now we are heard and we share our opinions. If something happens at home or in the community, we are asked 'What do you think about that?' For example, if a friend gets pregnant, they ask what we think about it." **Girls from Bakayoko**

"Now our parents ask our opinions, especially when it comes to marriage... What's more, when it comes to school as well, our parents talk with us about it, asking how things are going at school, if we are working hard, if we have good grades." **Girls from Diamweli**

2.3 Men listen to and value grandmothers' opinions

If they were not taken into consideration at all in the past, according to everyone interviewed, now grandmothers are consulted with and listened to much more by men at home and in the community.

Men:

"Now grandmothers are consulted with in all situations: if we're talking about solidarity, if we're talking about marriage, about how a WRA can maintain a good relationship with her husband. Grandmothers are consulted with in all situations". **Community Elders from Bakayoko**

"Grandmothers are consulted with regard to all matters. You could say that they're the ones who take the lead in everything. If they weren't involved, things would go wrong!" **Men from Badiara**

Boys:

"There has been a big change because now we boys can sit down with the grandmothers. They give us advice and show us the correct cultural path, what used to be done. The grandmothers also talk to us about the bad things that are happening now, and we listen." **Boys from Koumera**

2.4 Boys listen to and respect girls' ideas

For the majority of those interviewed, the behavior of boys towards girls has truly changed. Now they respect their opinions and positions.

“There is a big change with regard to night-time escapades because of the discussions we have had with our elders and grandmothers; we’re aware that they’re not good. Now we talk with girls, we tell them that it’s good to be confident, to look a boy in his face and give him a piece of your mind. Because if you get pregnant before you’re 18, it can spoil a lot of things.” **Boys from Saré Sankoulé**

“There’s a lot of confidence now in girls, who can stay and talk to boys. What’s more, boys don’t dare accost them because now they’re more determined and can push boys away.” **WRA from Badiara**

3. Changes in gender relations. Women’s practices and status

According to everyone interviewed, the relations between men and women of all generations have improved in terms of communication and collaboration. These changes have contributed to an increase in mutual respect between the sexes and the active participation of women on several levels.

3.1 Changes in husband-wife relations

Before the project, according to the majority of those interviewed, there was not a lot of dialogue between husbands and wives and conflicts were common. Following the GMP activities, respect and communication for one another increased significantly as well as collaboration between them.

3.1.1 Increased communication and mutual respect within the couple

According to everyone interviewed, better communication and renewed respect between husband and wife have had a positive impact on their relations:

“Before, there was a lack of respect, but now a husband knows how important it is to respect his wife, and vice versa. What’s more, they listen to each other! Before, they didn’t listen to each other. If a wife spoke, her husband didn’t listen; likewise, if a husband spoke, his wife didn’t listen. That’s why they didn’t get along very well.” **Grandmothers from Badiara**

“Before, men thought that it was only women who needed to respect men, but in a couple, a man must respect his wife and she must also respect her husband. That’s what has changed in their relationship.” **WRA from Koumera**

3.1.2 Reduction in marital conflict

According to the majority of those interviewed, before the GMP, misunderstandings between spouses were frequent and often resulted in conflict. Now arguments have become less common, and when there is a disagreement, husbands try to talk with their wives instead of reacting in an authoritarian fashion towards them.

“Men’s attitude towards women has changed now, because before if a man was angry with his wife, he didn’t ask for explanations, he immediately went and lectured his wife or argued with her. Now we talk.” **WRA from Némataba**

“I fought with my husband every time, but that has completely changed because now I can sit and discuss with him the whole day long.” **WRA from Kouméra**

“Arguments between husbands and wives have decreased. It’s true that we’re children, but before we used to hear every time they fought, and now we don’t hear that anymore.” **Girls from Bakayoko**

3.1.3 Dialogue and decision-making within the couple

Better dialogue between spouses has contributed to the adoption of a more democratic approach to family decision-making which involves both the man and the woman. According to everyone interviewed, in the end, spouses are discussing a lot more together about all the issues and activities which concern the family.

“Before, men made decisions alone, they did whatever they wanted. Then they would come and tell you ‘I’ve don’t this, I’ve done that.’ But that’s no longer the case. We are involved in family consultations about everything that concerns keeping the family running smoothly; when it comes to food and other issues, our husbands involve and consult with us. Now a husband will ask you, ‘I want to do this and that, that’s my idea, what do you think?’ And you, you say what you think about it. Then you look for a good solution together.” **WRA from Saré Yira**

Spouses also collaborate a lot more with regard to managing their farm work and their income:

“Before, a wife would manage her field and her husband would manage his field. Husbands didn’t help their wives at all. But now husbands help their wives because they know it’s beneficial for both of them. You can sell a peanut, get money and solve some of your needs. Beyond that, you can use this money for sauce ingredients. That’s why a man’s now conscious that his wife’s field is beneficial for both of them, husband and wife.” **Community Elders from Bagayoko**

3.1.4 Sharing and empathy between spouses

Almost half of the WRA interviewed spoke of a new sense of devotion of *iuroumondigol* (in Pulaar) which has increased between them and their husbands since the arrival of the GMP. This consists of a feeling of empathy and mutual empowerment.

“If now we speak of a sense of pity, it means that if a wife has a problem, it’s also her husband’s problem. Likewise, if something is hurting a husband, it’s also his wife’s problem. They need to look for solutions to resolve their problems together.” **WRA from Saré Sankoulé**

3.2 Changes in the relations between girls and boys

Before the project, according to the majority of testimonies, girls and boys met mostly at night – at TV screenings, at the “tar pits” or at dance parties in neighboring houses – in situations where there was no control and promiscuity resulted in teenage pregnancy. Relationships were described as rather erotic and were not based much on dialogue. In this context, girls, according to almost everyone interviewed, showed a sort of subordination with respect to boys which did not allow them to express their positions and opinions confidently or with determination.

3.2.1 More egalitarian relations between girls and boys

After the GMP, according to everyone interviewed, girls expressed themselves with more self-confidence, which made their relationship with boys more equal and peaceful:

“Now, we have the courage to tell boys our opinions, or even refuse them, because now we have complete confidence in ourselves, which wasn’t the case previously. Before, we wouldn’t dare. Now, it’s our confidence that drives us to say our opinions. Before, we were afraid to speak out in public. Getting closer with the grandmothers has even helped us to express ourselves around boys...” **Girls from Koumera**

3.2.2 Boys have more respect for girls

According to those interviewed, girls’ having self-confidence and speaking out has greatly increased the esteem and respect that the boys have for them.

“Now they hold each other in esteem. You can hear the boys talking together saying, ‘We need to let the girls continue their studies. They’re our sisters, we’re their family, we’re in the same village, we mustn’t get the girls pregnant.’” **Grandmothers from Saré Sankoulé**

“Boys no longer dare accost girls because now they’re confident and can refuse when they’re with boys.” **WRA from Badiara**

3.2.3 Relations between girls and boys have become more united

Now, according to everyone interviewed, girls and boys have stopped meeting up at night and they see each other during the day to talk and participate in activities together.

“There is a change in the relationship between girls and boys, because they have strengthened the solidarity between them. For example, now they do lucrative activities together; they go out in the fields, they work together, and with the money sometimes they can organize a party or participate in football (soccer) clubs.” **WRA from Koumera**

3.2.4 Reduction in teenage pregnancy, and the role of grandmothers in the relations between girls and boys

For the majority of those interviewed, the relations between girls and boys have changed a lot as a result of numerous discussions with grandmothers, which seems to have contributed to a decrease in teenage pregnancy. Through these meetings, boys as well as girls have become aware of problems associated with teenage pregnancy.

“Before, there were more teenage pregnancies and grandmothers didn’t give us advice. When we were with boys, suddenly someone would get pregnant. But from the discussions that the grandmothers have had with us, we understand that we don’t have to agree to everything that boys suggest.” **Girls from Diamweli**

3.3 Changes in the relations between grandmothers, men and boys

The relationship between grandmothers and men (Community Elders, adults, youth) has changed a lot according to everyone interviewed. In the past, grandmothers were feared and often accused of being witches. They have become real points of reference for all the generations, and men consult with them about many issues.

“Before, men didn’t involve us in anything at all and didn’t tell us anything at all. Now, we are respected, listened to, and men follow our advice. Now, if there’s a problem, the first thing men think to do is to bring in the grandmothers so that they can solve the problem.” **Grandmother from Nemataba**

Boys have also changed their attitude with regard to grandmothers, and their relationship has become stronger, as the following quote highlights:

“Before, boys distrusted us and told us that we were witches. But now, we can get together, hold a meeting with them. It’s a big change.” **Grandmothers from Diamweli**

4. Family consultation includes all genders and generations effectively

According to all the testimonies, before the project the family decision-making process only concerned adult men, while the women and youth were excluded. Now, this process has changed and, according to everyone interviewed, the three generations and two sexes are involved:

“Before, a father thought that he was the only one with a right to speak. He didn’t know that everyone needs to give their opinion.” **Girl from Kael Bessel**

Participation of girls and boys:

“Now it’s culturally acceptable for a girl to speak. Before, people didn’t understand, and children never took part in family meetings. Children would be chased away every time. People weren’t aware that it’s good for a child to participate too! Because children grow up, and it’s good to prepare them to be intelligent and have experience.” **Community Elders from Sare Samba Nety**

Participation of WRA:

“Now we are involved in discussions about all issues: if there’s a marriage, if there’s a baptism, if there’s a conflict at home, we are involved to consider how to resolve the problem. Even at school, when it’s starting, previously a father would never say anything about it, but now our husbands call us to tell us that ‘Soon classes will be starting, what do we need to do for our kids?’” **WRA from Sare Sankoulé**

Participation of grandmothers:

“Before we weren’t involved at all, because people did whatever they wanted and only afterwards they would call us to let us know. But now it is us grandmothers who are involving the community elders in family discussions!” **Grandmothers from Sare Yira**

4.1 The wedding decision-making process takes into consideration the girl’s wishes

The interviews, including those conducted in the control village, tell us that, before the project, in the communities of Kandia and Nemataba according to tradition, it was the father who made the decision about his daughter’s marriage. He could do this without consulting the women in his household and, above all, without asking the girl’s opinion. Now this has changed: a father will consult with the girl’s mother and grandmother and, above all, ask and take into consideration the wishes of the girl.

“Before, no one asked our opinion. If someone came and wanted your hand in marriage, it was your father who decided. He did whatever he wanted without the girl’s consent, without her mother’s consent. Now, if someone comes, the mother, or even the father himself, will call us to ask us: So-and-so has come, he wants to marry you, do you love him? Do you want to marry him?” **Girls from Diamweli**

“We have allowed girls to express themselves and say what’s on their mind about marriage, but also about all topics of conversation. It wasn’t like that before.” **Community Elders from Nemataba**

5. Community consultation involves both sexes and all three generations

According to everyone interviewed, before the project community decisions were made only by adult men and Community Elders. Women and girls were not involved in organizing ceremonies, community activities, conflict resolution, or any other collective matter. Now, according to everyone interviewed, the community consultation process has changed and includes the involvement of all generations and both sexes. Men are aware of the benefits of participation and sharing.

“Now, it’s no longer like it was before. Before, it was only the men who participated in community consultations. Now men no longer look to see if someone’s a child, or if someone’s a girl or a WRA. They call everyone together so that they can each give their opinion.” **WRA from Sare Sankoulé**

“Compared to before, consultations have changed, and for the better, because the best thing to do is make decisions together, to make a collective decision, because one person is only one idea, while many people equal many ideas. I am very happy to make decisions together with the others.” **(The eldest) Imam from Sare Samba Nety**

“Now there is a committee for community consultations. Alongside us there are girls, there are boys, there are WRA, there are grandmothers.” **Community Elders from Koulandiala**

5.1 Community consultations about conflict management: the increased role of grandmothers

All ages (through their leaders) are now involved in community conflict resolution, but grandmothers play a central role. According to everyone interviewed, grandmothers have resumed and strengthened their role as mediators of conflict in the home and have also taken on a new position (as a peer group) in the resolution of community conflicts, this was previously entrusted to the Village Chief alone.

“Grandmothers are listened to by their families, because when there is a misunderstanding, they are called upon to solve it. Grandmothers communicate very well with different age groups, which increases the harmony and understanding between us. It’s the grandmothers who solve most of the conflicts that exist in this village. It’s become a habit. It’s become something that happens all the time.” **Community Elders from Saré Sankoulé**

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that the GHD program has had a significantly positive impact on gender relations and the status of women, even though this was not an explicit priority of the program. Taking into consideration the three OECD SIGI parameters: (i) discrimination against women within the home; (ii) violence against women; (iii) women's access to public spaces, we can recognize the program's contribution through these important results:

- Women of all generations confirm that they are more self-confident and are now capable of expressing themselves publicly, both at home and in the community.
- Men appreciate that women express themselves and recognize the benefits and advantages of listening to the ideas of women of all generations, both at home and in the community. Girls' opinions are taken into consideration.
- The cultural norm of women being silent and subordinate has changed. Now women freely express their opinions in front of men. Girls defend their opinions in front of boys.
- Gender relations for all generations have become more peaceful and are now based on respect, listening to one another, and collaboration.
- The decision-making process within the home and the community now involves women being heard and actively participating.
- Grandmothers play an important role with regard to solving social problems, and family or community conflicts, this has also had a positive impact on other women.

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