

Research Article

**AN ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURALLY GROUNDED APPROACH
TO PROMOTE ADOLESCENT GIRLS' RIGHTS AND DEVELOPMENT:
A CASE STUDY FROM SENEGAL**

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Across the Global South, adolescent girls are victims of intersecting gender-based discrimination that limits their educational opportunities and exposes them to child marriage, teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation (FGM). This paper presents a case study of an innovative program to support adolescent girls' rights and development in southern Senegal. Implemented in 90 rural and urban sites, Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) is a community intervention developed through a multi-year action-research approach, that is: culturally-grounded; intergenerational; builds on existing community assets; elicits dialogue for consensus-building for change; and strengthens community leaders' capacity to catalyze change in social norms affecting girls. Extensive research on GHD, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, supports the conclusion that GHD has contributed: to changing community norms and practices regarding girls' education, child marriage, teen pregnancy and FGM; and to modifying gender-biased attitudes negatively affecting girls. Other significant outcomes of GHD include: creation of local alliances of girls, mothers and grandmothers; and empowerment of grandmother leaders, both promoting GHD. The GHD intervention responds to calls from the Global South to decolonize development programs through adoption of social change strategies that respect and build on extant cultural values, roles and traditions.

Keywords: *adolescent girls, gender-based violence, Global South, enabling environment, socio-ecological approach, social norms change*

1. Introduction

Across the Global South, adolescent girls are faced with multiple challenges in families and communities due to gender-based attitudes and practices that limit their rights and prospects for full development. Many girls suffer from discriminatory social norms and practices related to: girls' education; child marriage; teen pregnancy; and FGM. Numerous programs to protect and support girls focus narrowly, and sometimes exclusively, on girls, ignoring the structure and core cultural values of non-Western societies and reflecting behaviorist and linear reasoning. This reductionist orientation is reflected in the dominant approach promoted by many organizations. For example, Population Council (2010), the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) (Warner et al., 2014) and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA, 2014) refer to *girl-centered programming*, while the Overseas Development Institute (Harper et al., 2018) and Plan International (Plan International, 2014) refer to *girl-focused programs*. In all cases, a girl-centric orientation presumes that empowered girls can use their power to promote change in family and community attitudes

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and norms (Plan International, 2014). Moreover, a reductionist orientation is manifest in numerous programs that: adopt single-issue strategies, e.g., child marriage or FGM; involve parents to a limited extent; and almost never explicitly involve elders. It is widely acknowledged that in spite of vast resources invested in programs to address the complex issues affecting adolescent girls, the results have been limited (Van Eerdewijk, 2017; UNICEF, 2022; United Nations, 2023).

2. Decolonization of social change strategies in the Global South

The unsatisfactory results of development programs in the Global South are increasingly attributed to the culturally incongruous concepts and values that underpin social change strategies (Malunga, 2014). Southern scholars increasingly critique the predominant development models that reflect Euro-American values and call for the decolonization of development policies and programs that ignore core values of their societies (Abebe et al., 2022). Airhihenbuwa argues that “There is a need to develop programs in ways that are consistent with a people’s and community’s cultural framework rather than based on the Western paradigm” (1995, pg.7). Malunga (2014) contends that most development initiatives in Africa have failed because they are not aligned with local cultural values.

In this same vein, Abebe and colleagues (2022) critique the “dominance of Euro-Western and North-centric worldviews” (p.256), assumed to be universal and exported to the Majority World. These scholars discuss the process of decolonization that involves escaping from “the tyranny of universals” (p.266) and developing programs that reflect core socio-cultural values and knowledge in Global South contexts.

There is increasing agreement that the design of community social change programs should be grounded in the cultural contexts where they will be implemented (Schensul & Trickett, 2009; Airhihenbuwa & Iwelunmor, 2022). However, in the case of programs to support youth in the Global South, many organizations adopt strategies based on Western theories of adolescent development that are erroneously believed to be universal (Nsamenang, 2002). Often the information used, and the assumptions made in designing such programs are incongruent with non-Western values, community and family structures. (Abebe et al., 2022; Airhihenbuwa, 1995).

Researchers and organizations dealing with adolescents in non-Western societies often overlook the significant differences between the structure and values of Western individualist, Euro-American societies, and those of more collectivist, relation-based non-Western cultures in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East (Kagitcibasi, 2017). Anthropologists (Hofstede, 1980) and cultural psychologists (Marcus & Kitayama, 1998) have categorized cultures on a continuum from individualist to collectivist and those differences are summarized in Table 1. These and other social scientists concur that core values of collectivist cultures are similar across the non-Western Majority World (Henrich et al, 2010). Recognizing the distinctive structure and values of non-Western cultures is a first step in efforts to decolonize social change efforts in Global South contexts.

The distinct core values of collectivist, or relation-based, cultures are laid out in Table 1 and include: interdependency, connectedness, reciprocity, respect for elders, intergenerational communication and learning, strong relationships with extended family members and relational agency. Abebe (2019) discusses the importance for African youth,

and specifically for girls, to develop *relational agency* which he describes as their creation of relationships with siblings, elders, extended family members and peers based on mutuality and collective life. This concept is clearly disparate with the notion of individual agency, central to most girl-focused strategies in Global South contexts (Warner et al., 2014).

Table 1. Characteristics and values of individualist and collectivist cultures (Aubel & Rychtarik, 2015)

Individualist Western “Me Cultures”	Collectivist non-Western “We Cultures”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence and autonomy are valued. • Ageist attitudes and limited interest in elders’ experience and knowledge. • Relationships with older generations are weakened and are strengthened with peers. • Individual decision-making is encouraged. • Agency and individual assertiveness are valued. • Individual accomplishments and competitiveness are highly valued. • Nuclear families predominate and weaker ties with the extended family. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdependency and connectedness are valued. • Elders and their knowledge are respected and sought. • Intergenerational relationships are highly valued. • Collective decision-making predominates. • Relational agency and reciprocity are encouraged. • Collective accomplishments and collaboration with others are highly valued. • Extended families are predominant and strong multigenerational relationships.

Particularly in collectivist cultures, the family is a central pillar in young people’s lives before, during and far beyond adolescence. Much research and many programs assume the prevalence of the nuclear family. There is growing awareness that the “use of the nuclear family model limits our understanding of the constellation of roles and influence within family systems in the Global South” (Aubel et al., 2021, p.6) and that extended family members have a huge influence on family decision-making related to the lives of women and children (Oyewumi, 2003). Inadequate understanding of the influence of the family on its members reflects a linear approach that ignores the *family systems* construct (Aubel et al., 2021).

Research in the Global North provides clear evidence of the importance of family-adolescent relationships for adolescent development (Fulgini, 2019; Blum et al., 2022). In the Global South, where extended families are prevalent, there is a growing body of research from Asia (Kagitcibasi, 2013; Verma & Saraswathi, 2002; Yang, 2006) and Africa (Nsamenang, 2002; Kassa, 2016) that supports the importance of interdependency between family members, and specifically of family support to adolescents in the process of enculturation. Despite the evidence regarding the critical role of the family in non-western societies, many girl-focused programs prioritize girls’ autonomy, agency and peer relationships, while giving limited attention to strengthening family-adolescent relationships and intergenerational learning (UNICEF, 2023). In some cases, programs view the family as a constraint to girls’ development (Mohanty, 1988; Fennell & Arnot, 2009; Plan International, 2014).

Also related to family structure, in many non-Western societies, where patriarchal values are strong, it is often assumed that fathers make all decisions related to girls’ lives. This assumption is questioned by African and Latin American scholars who contend that, especially at the family level, the matriarchs, i.e. older women, have formidable influence on all issues related to women and children (Amadiume, 1997; Iyam, 2013; Mazzucchelli et al., 2022).

Many gender frameworks focus only on reproductive age groups, ignoring the roles and authority of older generations, male and female. Identification of both gender-specific and generation-specific roles within family systems is vital in designing programs to support girls that are culturally-rooted.

2.1 Community capacity building for collective action

Given the disappointing results of individual-focused social change interventions many development organizations express their commitment to the socio-ecological model. However, while their discourse has shifted, the reductionist focus persists both in research and practice in strategies to support adolescent girls. The need to reorient community interventions to promote wider, systemic change in communities is endorsed by community psychologists, Trickett et al. (2011), who assert that social change requires empowering community leaders and groups. This assertion is supported by recent research in community psychology that identifies three prerequisites for inclusive and meaningful community engagement: strong relationships between community actors; committed leaders; and a sense of mutual trust between community members (Di Napoli et al., 2019; Procentese & Gatti, 2019). The importance of these factors to support community-led change in relation-based societies in the South is confirmed by scholars from Africa (Ntseane, 2011; Esuruku, 2010) and Asia (Kim, 2020).

In efforts to promote social change, social networks are an important resource that provides information and emotional support to their members (Heaney & Israel, 2008). Increasing solidarity between network members and strengthening the capacity of network leaders can be a powerful source of support for social change. Feminist researchers point out the importance of women's groups and friendship networks that can strengthen women's self-confidence and become powerful collective forces for social change (Fennell & Arnot, 2009; Mumtaz & Salway, 2009). Especially in non-Western hierarchical societies, older women play an influential role as informal communicators on topics regarding their roles and experience, and strategies that increase their access to information and communication methods can formalize their role as communicators and influencers in communities (Riano, 1994; Mazzucchelli et al., 2022).

Recognized formal leaders are usually older men, however, in all communities there are also informal women leaders whose role and knowledge are often overlooked (Wolfgramm et al., 2016; Esuruku, 2010). Riano discusses women's social leadership role as managers of networks of information and support to others (Riaño, 1994). Particularly in hierarchically structured cultures, where age and experience are revered, development communication experts Nair and White (1994) emphasize the importance of utilizing endogenous sources of knowledge and influence, specifically that of the elders, to promote change in communities.

In the Kolda region of Southern Senegal, adolescent girls face various gender-based norms and practices, similar to other places in the Global South, that limit their rights and full development. The past 20 years, NGOs working in this region have addressed priority global concerns, e.g. girls' education, child marriage, teen pregnancy and FGM, with limited results, except in in terms of girls' school attendance (Ndione et al., 2011). In this socio-cultural context where elders are influential family and community actors, virtually all past programs adopted a linear and girl-centric approach, with limited parent involvement, and only rare elder participation. While all programs in the area address global concerns for girls, they rarely also address specific community priorities related to girls' development. In the

Velingara area of Kolda region, where GMP is working, local concerns related to girls' development include: the serious breakdown in communication between generations; limited social cohesion within communities; weak community leadership; and the loss of cultural identity and values among the younger generations' (GMP, 2006; Lulli, 2021).

3. The case study

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of the innovative GHD strategy which aims to bring about change in gender-based norms and practices that limit adolescent girls' development. First, the Theory of Change developed for GHD, is presented, followed by a description of the multi-step *Change through Culture* methodology. Last, the conclusions of several external evaluations and studies provide evidence of the effectiveness of GHD's strategy.

In 2008, the American and Senegalese NGO, *Grandmother Project – Change through Culture* (GMP), initiated the GHD program in the Kolda Region of southern Senegal to address both global and local concerns affecting girls' rights and development. Initiated in 6 villages, GHD was gradually expanded to involve more than 90 rural communities and urban neighborhoods. It is an ongoing program that continues to expand geographically. GHD activities are conducted by GMP staff, almost exclusively women, who are all from the local area. They collaborate with a team of facilitators, all teachers who have received extensive training on adult education and group facilitation methods.

3.1 The theory of change

At the outset of GHD, the Theory of Change was developed (Figure 1) based on many of the concepts discussed above.

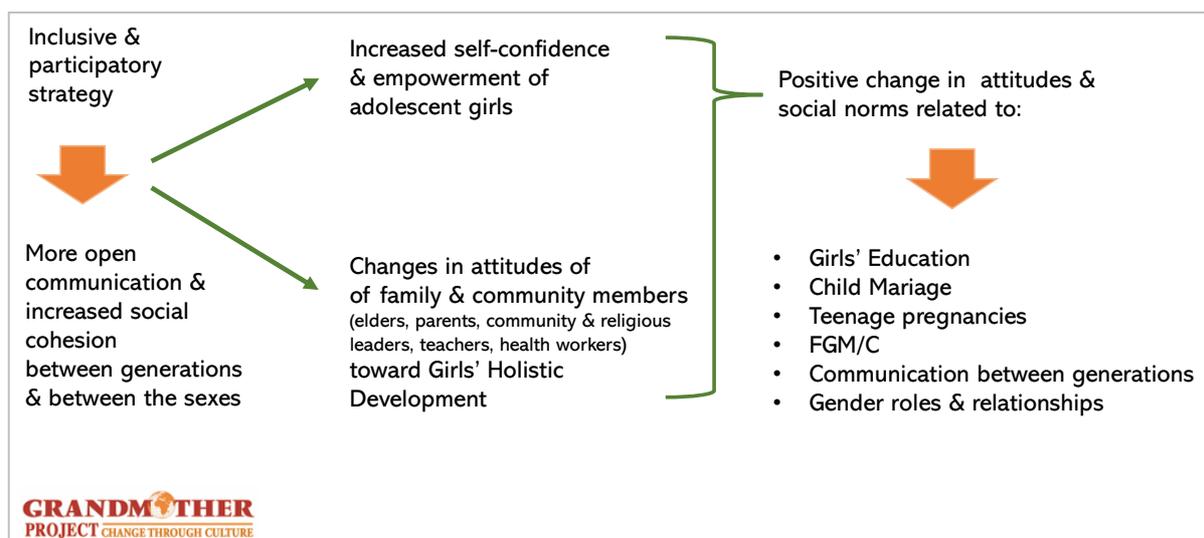


Figure 1. Theory of Change: Girls' Holistic Development Strategy

It lays out key elements of the strategy that can lead to positive change for girls (GMP, 2012). GHD aims to reinforce girls' knowledge and confidence to promote their own well-

being, while simultaneously promoting change in social norms, and family and community members' attitudes toward GHD.

3.2 Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) program in Senegal: aims, context and participants

The GHD strategy involves an inclusive, culturally grounded, intergenerational and assets-based approach that uses transformative adult learning methods to strengthen communication and build trust and cohesion between community members and to catalyze dialogue and consensus-building for change related to GHD.

Promoting sustained change in social norms related to GHD requires involvement and consensus-building among key actors in family, community, and education systems. To create an enabling environment to support change for girls, GHD involves men and women of three generations (elders, adults, and adolescents), traditional and religious leaders, teachers and community health workers. Inspired by the concept of *cultural renewal proposed by Nair & White (1994)*, GHD activities challenge community actors to revitalize core aspects of their cultural values and identity and to incorporate new norms and attitudes in favor of GHD.

In African societies, communication between generations is highly valued (Twum-Danso, 2022). However, in all communities where GHD has been introduced, community actors have reported a serious breakdown in communication between children, adults, and elders, and between the sexes. In light of this situation, GHD activities both strengthen existing communication relationships, e.g. between girls and grandmothers, and create new relationships, e.g. between teachers and grandmothers. Figure 2 visualizes the community dialogue strategy that catalyzes interaction to strengthen connectedness, a prerequisite for community-wide consensus-building for change.

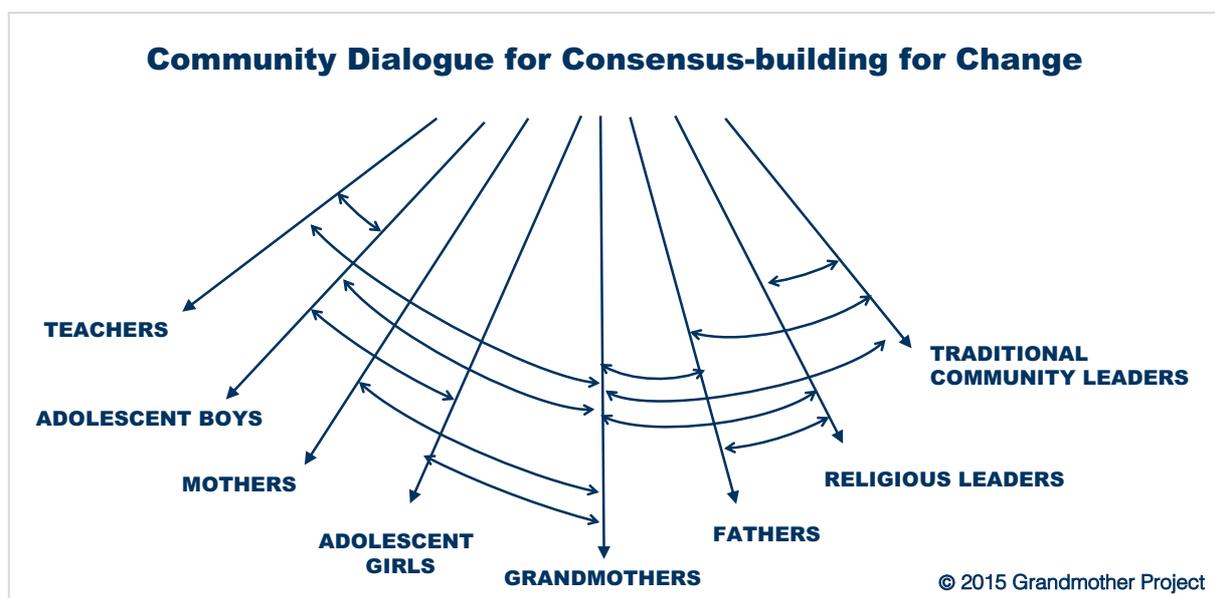


Figure 2. Community dialogue strategy

In GHD's inclusive and assets-based approach, natural leaders of three generations, male and female, are targeted in activities that elicit dialogue and critical reflection. Leaders' knowledge and capacity is strengthened to work collaboratively across the community to

catalyze consensus-building for change. GMP recognized that grandmothers, and other older women, play a special role as confidants and advisors to young girls and as advocates for them in families and communities (Newman, 2023). Furthermore, GMP discovered *natural grandmother leaders* in all communities. To optimize this social resource, grandmother peer groups identified those respected, natural leaders, and all GHD activities explicitly involve them to strengthen their knowledge and confidence to collectively promote GHD.

GHD builds alliances between girls, mothers and grandmothers to increase communication between them and create a source of collective power to counteract the sometimes-harmful influence of men and boys on girls' lives. This support for girls contributes to increasing their self-confidence and sense of empowerment in the family, at school and in the community (Abebe et al., 2022).

Throughout the GHD program, participatory transformative learning methods (Cranton, 1994) are used including stories-without-an-ending, open-ended role plays and facilitated group discussions. In collectivist African societies, group learning methods are well-suited. Botswanan educator, Ntseane (2011), contends that in Africa learning and change are not an individual affair and that "the change process itself has to be a collective one" (p. 318).

3.3. Change through Culture: A methodology for promoting change in communities

Based on the Theory of Change, an operational methodology was developed which exemplifies GMP's Change through Culture approach. The methodology consists of 7 generic steps implemented more, or less sequentially. In addition to the seven steps, a cross-cutting element is the strengthening of communication relationships between all segments of the community. Each of the steps in the culturally-grounded approach is briefly described below.

Step 1: Establishing trusting relationships with community leaders & groups. In this initial step, information on the proposed program is shared with formal community leaders and groups. Usually, development organizations decide which communities to involve in their programs. In contrast, GMP facilitates a process of self-selection that involves a wide range of community members in discussions and that leads to a community decision on whether or not to participate in the program.

Step 2: Analysis of family and community systems. To understand the local setting a participatory assessment is conducted using a guide developed by GMP, *Focus on Family and Culture* (Aubel, & Rychtarik, 2015), which was inspired by the work of Tseng and Seidman (2007). Through focus group interviews, information is collected from community members on cultural and religious values, roles, attitudes, practices, and power relations regarding GHD issues. The guide helps organizational teams to involve community groups in collecting three types of information on: 1) the foundational structure, roles and values of family and community systems; 2) the roles and relationships of family and community members related to the specific health/social issues of concerns; and 3) the norms and practices related to the specific issue/s addressed.

Step 3: Affirming local cultural roles and values. GHD's assets-based approach strengthens communities' appreciation of their cultural values, including intergenerational communication: program activities involve all generations; grandmothers teach positive cultural values in schools; and children sing songs of praise to grandmothers on the radio.

A key activity that contributes to promoting community recognition of the important role that grandmothers play in families and communities are the occasional *Days of Praise of Grandmothers*. During these special community gatherings, involving grandmother leaders, community elders, religious leaders and teachers, grandmothers share their experiences promoting the education and development of children, especially of girls.

A powerful facet of these special events is the Songs of Praise of Grandmothers. The use of culturally traditional song and drumming, and the words of the songs build trust and reciprocity between community members. McConnell's (2016) research documents the positive impact of such interludes that catalyze *musically facilitated bonding*.

Step 4: Strengthening the knowledge and confidence of community leaders. Leadership development is ongoing to reinforce both formal and informal leaders of three generations and both sexes. This includes structured leadership training and periodic follow-up.

Grandmother Leadership Training involves under-the-tree participatory learning sessions with natural grandmother leaders to strengthen solidarity between them and their knowledge on adolescence. All grandmothers in the area are illiterate and, therefore, learning activities involve the use of visual materials, e.g. drawings and photos, and a variety of interactive activities that encourage discussion and problem-solving. This training increases grandmothers' individual and collective sense of empowerment to take action to support girls. GMP also organizes *Girls' Leadership Training* Based on African cultural values. Participants in 4-day long workshops are primarily girl leaders, but several grandmothers and mothers also participate to strengthen girls' relationships with older women, whose role it is to support them. Participatory exercises engage participants in discussion of priority cultural and religious values and, in the spirit of *Ubuntu*, how girl leaders can contribute to the well-being of others, in their families and communities.

Step 5: Community dialogue for consensus-building. Building consensus for change requires community-wide dialogue over time. GMP organizes a series of activities that involve different combinations of community actors of all generations. These activities specifically target formal and informal community leaders, chosen by their respective peer groups, to catalyze critical reflection during and after these events. These activities include *Intergenerational Community Forums*, *All Women Forums*, *Days of Dialogue and Solidarity* and *Grandmother-Teacher Workshops*. In all activities adult education transformative learning methods are used, and community actors are challenged to analyze issues related to GHD and to decide collectively what actions can be taken (Mezirow, 1991).

The foundational activity is the *Intergenerational Community Forum*. These two-day events are attended by elders, parents and adolescents of both sexes, community elders, religious leaders, teachers and health workers to discuss GHD issues and to decide on collective action. These forums build trust and social cohesion within communities. *All Women Forums*, attended by women leaders of three generations, build powerful intergenerational alliances of women to support girls. For focused discussion on FGM and child marriage, two-day *Days of Dialogue and Solidarity* involve those who have strong influence on these social norms, namely, community elders, religious leaders, grandmothers, women and men. Carefully chosen local Imams, who are opposed to both of these harmful practices, share Muslim teachings on these issues in support of GHD objectives. GMP's innovative strategy strengthens relationships between teachers and grandmothers. *Grandmother-Teacher Workshops* aim to increase their joint efforts to support girls at school and prevent child

marriage and teen pregnancy. While the activities described above take place occasionally, on an ongoing basis *Under-the-tree Participatory Learning Sessions* with girls, mothers & grandmothers are organized. The objectives of these sessions are: to strengthen participants' knowledge of key facets of GHD; to strengthen girls' relationships with peers and older women; to increase girls' confidence to discuss their priorities and challenges; and to strengthen transmission of positive cultural, spiritual and moral values identified by communities.

One of the transformative learning methods used in many community activities are Stories-without-an-ending (Aubel, 2017). The content of each of these stories juxtaposes 2 opposing opinions related, for example, to FGM. Questions for story analysis are based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). These stories are used with all generations of men and women to catalyze dialogue on a variety of topics and to build consensus for collective action. Depending on their availability, participatory group learning activities are also organized with boys and men on GHD topics and on communication between the generations and the sexes.

Step 6: Ongoing support to formal and informal leaders to reinforce their capacity & commitment to support community well-being. Leadership development is a long-term process that requires continuous reinforcement of community leaders. Ongoing contact with and encouragement of leaders of all ages is ensured by GMP community development staff who have extensive experience working with communities.

Step 7: Ongoing monitoring, documentation and learning. Programs should identify key parameters to assess initially and to monitor periodically. Monitoring of strengths and weaknesses in program activities is the basis for continuous learning to enhance future activities. In GHD both mini-interviews and small studies are often conducted with community actors to determine their perception of GHD activities and of possible changes in their attitudes and practices.

3.4 Evaluation of the Girls' Holistic Development Program

Between 2011 and 2022 a number of studies and evaluations were conducted by external researchers to assess the effects and outcomes of the GHD program. The results of these various studies provide considerable evidence of the positive effects of GHD at several levels.

The most extensive research was conducted in 2019/2020 by the Institute of Reproductive Health (IRH, 2019; IRH, 2020) at Georgetown University. In collaboration with the University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, the IRH researchers conducted an extensive two-part quantitative and qualitative evaluation of GHD. An overview of the two-part evaluation is provided here. The full reports on the two-part study are accessible on-line and provide in-depth information on the methodologies, ethical approvals, population samples and findings (IRH, 2019; IRH, 2020).

IRH conducted a Realist Evaluation using a mixed method, quasi-experimental design to explore how norms change processes may have come about. The quantitative study involved a post-test intervention/control group design with a survey conducted in 7 intervention communities and in 7 control villages. A survey was administered to adolescent girls, grandmothers, mothers, and fathers after 18 months of intervention activities. The quantitative study results indicate "considerable positive effects on social norms related to

FGM/C, girls' schooling, child marriage and early pregnancy" (IRH, 2020, p.6). IRH researchers identified two facets of the GHD intervention that significantly contributed to those changes, first, the strengthening of intergenerational communication between girls, parents and elders, and second, the recognition and involvement of "grandmothers as a valuable community resource" (IRH, 2019, p. 6). They concluded that "grandmothers are cultural levers for change" (IRH, 2019, p. 8).

As part of the larger evaluation, an endline qualitative study was conducted (IRH, 2019) in four of the seven intervention villages to investigate the mechanisms by which the GHD strategy has contributed to promoting change related to girls' education, child marriage, teen pregnancy, and FGM/C. Interviewees included adolescent girls, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and community leaders through individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The study concluded that according to community members, preoccupied with the breakdown in the social fabric, the main benefit of the GHD program is that it has strengthened solidarity and social cohesion, both prerequisites for communities to be able to take collective action to support girls. Various other positive changes in favor of girls are reported in the IRH study. Considerable attention is given to the benefits of the grandmother-inclusive approach in GHD. "Grandmothers regained their privileged role and trust in their relationships with young girls by spending more time with them, using their cultural knowledge, storytelling, riddles and songs, to increase communication with them on topics including reproductive health" (IRH, 2019, p.9).

In addition to the comprehensive IRH evaluation, 9 other evaluations and studies were conducted by external researchers, mostly commissioned by GMP, to examine different facets of GHD.

At the end of the first phase of GHD (2008-2011) an external evaluation identified positive changes in communities related to: strengthened cultural values and identity among all ages; increased community recognition of grandmothers' role in children's education; increased intergenerational communication; increased solidarity between community actors in addressing community problems; and positive changes in community attitudes and practices related to girls' education; child marriage, teen pregnancy and FGM. (Ndione et al., 2011)

In 2015 Soukouna and Newman (2015) conducted a study of the school Values Education Program. They documented: improved relationships between teachers and communities, where in the past there was often conflict; increased involvement of teachers in community life; increased recognition of grandmothers' indigenous knowledge; increased respect for elders by children; children's increased interest in and knowledge of cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge.

To understand family decision-making regarding child marriage, Diallo (2019) conducted a qualitative study. Her study identified these changes: more inclusive family decision-making processes with men's greater openness to women' and girls' opinions; empowered grandmothers increased their influence in families to prevent child marriage; and increased community level support for delaying marriage of young girls.

In 2018 an evaluation of the Grandmother Leadership Training strategy by Lulli (2018) revealed: increased grandmothers' knowledge of adolescence; empowered grandmothers were promoting girls' well-being in the wider community; solidarity between grandmother leaders increased supported their collective action to keep girls in school, to prevent child marriage and FGM.

Diallo (2020) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the process of FGM abandonment. Study results revealed key factors that have contributed to abandonment:

creation of spaces for open discussion on FGM between both sexes and three generations; grandmother leaders' increased self-confidence to promote GHD in communities; increased community recognition of grandmothers' experience and role in girls' development; and increased support for abandonment among all categories of community actors.

Two interrelated studies by Lulli examined shifts in gender attitudes and practices related to GHD. The first study, (Lulli, 2019), based on the Social Institutions and Gender Index of the OECD revealed positive changes including: increased confidence on the part of all three generations of women to express their opinions in family and public spaces; men's increased openness to the opinions of girls, women, and grandmothers; more inclusive family level decision-making; and involvement of all generations of women in community decision-making processes. The second study looked at the relationships between women of the same generation and of different generations (Lulli, 2020). Study findings include: strengthened relationships between adolescent girls, mothers, and grandmothers; strengthened relationships between women of the same generation; improved relationships between grandmothers and young mothers; and grandmothers' supportive role with adolescent girls had greatly expanded.

In 2020, community psychologist Quiroz-Saavedra (2020) undertook a study to analyze the relationship between the culturally-grounded GHD strategy and the strong community engagement, documented earlier by IRH researchers (IRH, 2019, 2020). Through his qualitative study, he identified various factors that contribute to strong community engagement namely: various facets of the approach include and acknowledge the importance of cultural and religious values and traditions; recognition of grandmothers' importance, ignored in past programs; and the reinforcement of community solidarity through the GHD program.

In 2021 Lulli (2021) led a study to identify possible changes in intergenerational communication in GHD communities. She found significantly increased communication and mutual respect between all generations, and increased community-wide involvement in transmitting positive cultural values and traditions to younger generations.

Triangulation of the conclusions of these various evaluations and studies on the GHD strategy provides substantive evidence of changes at several levels, of the community; the school; the family; and of adolescent girls themselves (Kohli et al., 2021). Those changes are presented in Figure 3 (next page).

4. Discussion

Across the Global South, numerous programs address gender-based discrimination against adolescent girls related to their education, child marriage, teen pregnancy, and female genital mutilation with limited results. Organizations committed to addressing these issues at the community level are challenged to identify strategies that actively engage community actors to promote sustained change in norms and traditions that limit girls' development. GHD, an ongoing and progressively expanding program, addresses these issues based on an ecological and culturally grounded framework. Results of the GHD program, based on several evaluations and studies, provide evidence of its effectiveness in catalyzing change at the community, family and individual levels in engrained socio-cultural norms that limit girls' development.

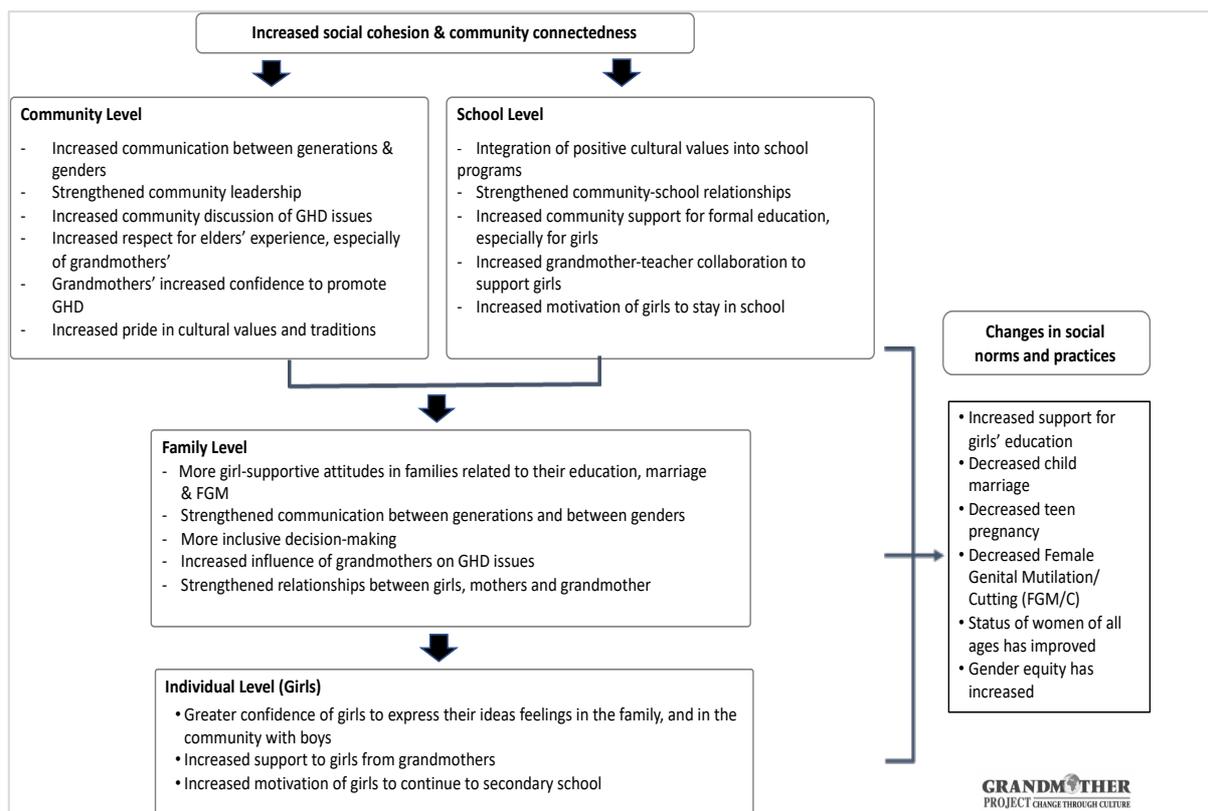


Figure 3. Results of the Girls' Holistic Development Program

We identify three salient characteristics of GHD, that have contributed to strong community engagement and to community-driven support for change, that we believe are applicable to future social change programs elsewhere in the Global South. These key characteristics are: the grounding of the intervention in the local socio-cultural context; the ecological, systemic framework that underpins the inclusive approach to promoting change; and the participatory and empowering methods used to promote consensus-building for collective change.

The conceptual underpinnings of GHD, reflected in these three critical characteristics, draw on insights primarily from community psychology, but also from community development, adult education and communication for development. These three facets of the GHD strategy contrast markedly with predominant approaches used to promote social change in the Global South, and specifically to support change in favor of adolescent girls.

First, GHD illustrates a social change strategy based on an in-depth and systemic understanding of the cultural context, informed both by an initial participatory community assessment and by the cultural grounding of GHD managers and implementors. At the global level, many programs to support girls are based on a superficial and Euro-American perspective on socio-cultural contexts, and fail to identify endogenous structures, values, roles and power dynamics that are culturally determined. This limitation of mainstream programs contributes to the fact that the central values conveyed through most programs, e.g. girls' autonomy, voice and agency, conflict with core values of non-western relationship-based societies (Banati et al., 2021; Everatt, 2015).

Through a multi-year action-research and iterative learning process, GHD developed a *Change through Culture* framework for a multi-faceted, culturally grounded approach that explicitly builds on culturally defined roles, values, authority and tradition (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). GHD is based on a careful analysis of the roles and influence of elders, adults and adolescents of both sexes on different issues affecting girls. Recognizing the divergence between the values of Western and non-western worlds regarding adolescent development (Nsamenang, 2002; Katgicibasi, 2013), GHD's unconventional approach explicitly builds on positive roles and values that are prevalent in societies in the Global South. Those essential non-western values include: reciprocity; interdependence; solidarity; relational agency (Atebe, 2019); the importance of adolescent-family relationships (Kagiticibasi, 2013); and respect for and responsibility toward elders (Markus & Kitayama, 1998).

International NGOs rarely question the hegemony of Western values promoted through adolescent-focused programs in the Global South. However, this is a growing concern of some scholars from Africa, (Nsamenang, 2002, Twum-Danso, 2022; Abebe et al., 2022), Latin America (Koller & Verma, 2017; Bessa, 2019) and Asia (Maithreyi et al. 2020; Lee & Lok, 2012). Nsamenang (2002) was the earliest scholar from the Global South to question the concept of the *universality of adolescence* and he expressed deep concern with the effects of Western values on African youth. Similarly, Koller & Verma (2017) contend that extant adolescent frameworks, all of Northern origin, do not reflect fundamental cultural values of the non-western world. Likewise, Abebe (2022) and Maithreyi and colleagues (2020) critique Western liberal notions of girlhood that encourage individualism, autonomy, and independent choice-making.

Based on Quiroz-Saavedra's (2020) research, he concluded that communities' strong engagement in the GHD program and their openness to reconsider traditional norms and practices, e.g. child marriage, and to adopt new ones can be attributed, to a great extent, to the fact that the strategy builds on deeply rooted cultural roles and values.

The second salient characteristic of GHD is the ecological, or systemic, framework for promoting change in communities. GHD promotes change in gender-based norms and practices affecting individual girls, however, reflecting an ecological perspective on change, both the units of analysis and of intervention are family and community systems, rather than girls alone. GHD's ultimate goal is to foster sustained change within those systems (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). The current discourse regarding the needs of adolescent girls in the Global South calls for an *ecological approach*, and also the creation of an *enabling environment* around them to support change on their behalf (Svanemyr, 2015). However, at odds with this rhetoric, is the continued predominance of linear, girl-centric, and single-issue programs. Most interventions do not explicitly involve all key family members who influence GHD issues. For example, to accelerate abandonment of FGM and child marriage, UNICEF and other organizations, are currently promoting the "involvement of men and boys", while making no mention of the need to involve older women, or grandmothers (Balanti et al., 2021). In all non-western contexts, grandmothers have significant influence on family decision-making related to those traditions (Newman, 2022). The predominant girl-centric orientation is influenced by multiple factors including the epidemiological and behavioral science focus on risks groups (Glass & McAtee, 2006), linear models of health communication and health promotion (Trickett et al., 2011) and dominance of individual behavior change models and tools, emanating from North America (Barnes, 2015).

The GHD program exemplifies the use of various key ecological concepts, mainly from community psychology, that contribute to systemic change in families and communities

(Kelly, 2007; Behrens & Foster-Fishman, 2007). GHD's ecological approach involves: 1) initiating community change processes by developing relational connectedness (Christens, 2011) and by strengthening interpersonal ties (Synder & Lopez, 2002); 2) using an assets-based approach that strengthens social resources and capacity (Chaskin et al., 2001); 3) involving and strengthening the capacity of community leaders, both formal and informal, of all generations and genders (Trickett (2009), and of religious leaders (Sorensen et al., 2013); 4) involving community power holders (Pulerwitz et al., 2019), which includes elders in African societies (Fasokun et al., 2005), and specifically grandmothers, given their role in the socialization of adolescent girls and their authority in family decision-making related to GHD (Aubel, 2023; Lipman, 2013); 5) creating communication networks across genders as a foundation for social change (Singhal et al., 2006); 6) strengthening communication networks between women (Riaño, 1994; Mazzucchelli et al., 2022); and 7) addressing community priorities along with global ones (Tufte, 2017).

Third, the communication and education methods used in GHD catalyze community-wide reflection and empowerment for consensus-building for change (Zimmerman, 1995; Figueroa et al., 2002). The goal of GHD is to build community capacity to promote girls' health and wellbeing. In Senegal, most community programs that aim to promote change, and specifically regarding girls' rights and well-being, are strongly influenced by the *diffusion of innovations* (Rogers, 1995) and other linear communication models. Such models assume that social problems are due to a lack of information, implying that message-driven strategies can trigger change, e.g. abandonment of FGM. While one-way and top-down communication methods have been increasingly critiqued (Figueroa et al., 2002; Newman et al., 2023), they continue to be widely used in community programs in Senegal, and elsewhere. The contrasting approach used in GHD, involves participatory learning activities based on values and methods from adult education, rooted in the work of Paolo Freire (1970) "who conceived of communication as dialogue and participation for the purpose of creating cultural identity, trust, commitment, ownership and empowerment" (Figueroa et al., p. 2). In GHD, the adult education methods used in all community activities reflect key characteristics of *collaborative transformative learning* (Taylor, 2007). The GHD carefully-designed participatory learning activities embody those characteristics: reflection on *individual experience* as the starting point for all learning; *collective critical reflection* on both past experience and new ideas; *dialogue for consensus-building* within both existing and new communication relationships; *holistic learning experiences* that involve different ways of knowing including cognitive, affective and spiritual; *learning experiences reflect the local context*, especially the cultural context, which is collective and hierarchical in African societies; and the creation of *authentic relationships* between facilitators and learners, and also between learners.

We surmise that these three characteristics of the GHD strategy are equally important in other Global South contexts and should be considered in future interventions to protect and promote girls' rights and development. The GHD program contributes to current efforts to decolonize social change interventions and to reflect African epistemology.

5. Conclusion

At the global level, a major focus is on promoting the rights and opportunities of women in the Global South, especially of adolescent girls, given the gender-based norms and practices that can seriously limit their development. Dominant approaches to promote girls' rights and

development give only superficial attention to key conceptual and methodological insights from several fields outside of public health and gender studies that provide the foundation for the innovative GHD program.

GHD offers an example of an ecological approach to promote social change within family and community systems, that builds on key culturally grounded values and actors, and that uses inclusive and participatory methods. Conceptually, GHD is deeply rooted in community psychology, especially the socio-ecological model, which supports: identification and involvement of all influential family and community actors, especially formal and informal leaders; building on community social resources, or assets; contextualizing all strategies in cultural roles and values; and strengthening relationships within and between family and community systems. In many interventions designed to support adolescent girls, the socio-ecological model is referred to but is not comprehensively reflected in program design. Insights from systems theory show that social norms change strategies can only succeed if they engage those who wield authority over those norms, e.g., child marriage. For this reason, it is critical that development of community interventions requires first, identification of the social norms' influencers, i.e., the context-specific decision-makers, and their respective degrees of authority within extended family and community settings and second, involvement of those influencers in social change strategies. In non-western contexts, it is erroneous to assume that adolescent girls are key social norms' influencers. While interventions to support girls should involve them, strengthening intergenerational relationships is an imperative for building wide consensus for change within families and communities.

In addition to the importance of an inclusive approach, another key facet of GHD, that has wide relevance to other community programs, is the use of a participatory approach that engenders community consensus-building for change. GHD demonstrates the need for those who both design and implement community change strategies to have competencies in participatory methods drawing on the vast field of research and practice in adult education.

Development sector scholars and program designers in the Global North often overlook the contrasting structure, values, and other contextual features of non-western cultures in the Global South. This limits their ability to develop interventions that are culturally grounded and, therefore, more relevant to communities and more likely to lead to positive outcomes. The decolonization of development practice requires increased dialogue between Global North and Global South scholars and practitioners that considers cultural specificities, including gender dynamics, within family and community systems in African societies, and across the non-western world. This paper contributes to the growing imperative to decolonize strategies to change deeply rooted social norms and end gender-based violence against women and girls by respecting and building on the cultural specificities of Majority World contexts.

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