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Enhancing Ubuntu: promoting community connectedness – the foundation for social change for girls

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Introduction

In all cultures one of the most basic human needs is *connectedness* between people. Scholars in various fields have researched and theorized this concept, primarily in the western world, consistently confirming its importance in the lives of individuals and communities. In the non-western world, connectedness is a primordial value embedded in cultural structures and systems. This social resource is often overlooked in the design of community development strategies that narrowly focus on issues related to health and development e.g. child health, preservation of the environment.

The purpose of this discussion is to catalyze reflection on the importance and dimensions of community connectedness as the foundation for efforts to promote social change in communities in non-western cultural contexts, specifically in Africa.

This chapter has two parts. First, we consider two distinct perspectives on community connectedness and the importance of this concept in community health and development programs in non-western contexts. On the one hand, we draw attention to the extensive conceptual literature from several fields, mainly community development, adult education and community psychology, on the importance of community connectedness as the foundation for community level social change efforts. On the other hand, we discuss the structure, values and traditions of cultures across the Majority, non-western world, especially in Africa, but also in Asia and Latin America, where interpersonal connectedness is a priority value. These two perspectives support the need for greater investment in strengthening Ubuntu values in community interventions.

The second part of the chapter presents a case study of a program in Senegal that aims to strengthen community connectedness, leadership and collaboration as the foundation for promoting Girls' Holistic Development (GHD), a program addressing girls' education, teen pregnancy, child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). We describe the conceptual and programmatic approach inspired both from insights from the community development, adult education and community psychology literatures and from the central value of Ubuntu in African cultures and informed by an iterative action-research and learning approach over ten years.

Lastly, a series of recommendations are formulated for the development of future community programs that build on both the theoretical and empirical knowledge from community development and from the relationship-based values of the indigenous Global South.

Roots of *connectedness* in community development

In the social sciences and community development field numerous scholars have conceptualized factors related to social connectedness including: social cohesion (Durkheim,1897; Wilkinson, 1999); solidarity (Bhattacharyya, 2004); social capital (Putman, 2001); collective empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995); relational empowerment (Christens, 2011); collective efficacy (Carroll et al., 2005); (social support (Heaney & Israel, 2008); and social networks (Valente & Pitts, 2017). The important construct *sense of community* implies "a degree of connectedness among members and a recognition of mutuality of circumstance, including a threshold level of collectively held values, norms and vision" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.14). Bhattacharyya (2004) asserts that fostering social interaction between different community members is a key to promoting community development.

The community development literature is replete with discussion of the importance of social connectedness to bolster community engagement in local development efforts, whether initiated within or from outside the community. However, there is limited discussion of the factors that undergird connectedness between community members. It is often erroneously assumed that community involvement indicates connectedness. Christens (2011) asserts that it is in fact the quality of the interpersonal relationships between those "involved" that is critical in supporting and sustaining connectedness and community mobilization.

There is extensive empirical and conceptual work supporting the rationale for building on community relational structures (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Kieffer, 2004; Trickett, 2009; Figueroa et al., 2002), however, few community health and development programs in the Global South seriously invest in strategies to strengthen community connectedness and capacity as a precursor to and foundation for interventions to promote change in community norms and practices. It is rare to find program plans that include outcomes related to *strengthening community connectedness, social cohesion and/or social capital.*

Roots of connectedness in indigenous cultures

A second perspective on community connectedness is rooted in the structure and engrained collectivist values of non-western cultures. In international development circles it is frequently stated that *it is important to take culture into account* but most often this discourse is not translated into culturally-grounded strategies. Airhihenbuwa (1995) and others have expressed their concern that many global health programs suffer from the lack of *cultural congruity*, i.e. congruity between cultural context and strategies promoting change. And in his seminal book, *Health and culture: Beyond the Western paradigm,* he points out the gap between community health strategies and cultural context across Africa asserting that "the degree to which new programs are adopted is dependent on the extent to which they are culturally appropriate" (Airhihenbuwa, p.122). Airhihenbuwa's thinking highlights the need for community programs to understand and build on communities' core cultural values and structures both to increase community engagement and contribute to greater program outcomes.

A major factor that contributes to *cultural incongruity* between global health and development programs and community contexts (suggested by the title of Airhihenbuwa's book) is the fact that

most scholars and practitioners overlook the profound differences between the structure and values of non-western and western cultures.

For many years, the two contrasting models of social organization and values in the non-western and western worlds have been discussed by social scientists, initially by anthropologists Triandis (1981) and Hofstede (1980), and more recently by cultural psychologists, including Markus and Kitayama (1998), Nsamenang (2008) and Kagistcibasi (2017). Different scholars have used different terms to describe these contrasting cultural systems. Many refer to a continuum between *individualist* and *collectivist* cultures (Triandis, ibid., & Hofstede, ibid.). Turkish social psychologist Kagitcibasi (2017) contrasts societies that prioritize *independence* and *autonomy* to those that value interdependency and *relatedness.* Similarly, Marcus & Kitayama (ibid) discuss the differences between western societies that promote independence and Asian, African and Latin American ones that value interdependency. In this chapter, we refer to the continuum between individualist, western cultures and collectivist, non-western cultures, recognizing that these classifications do not indicate all specificities of different cultures.[1] All of these scholars critique the hegemonic influence of the Minority World in the social sciences, i.e. grounded in western individualist values. According to Henrich et al. (2010), more collectivist cultures make up approximately 88% of the world's population, hence referred to as the *Majority World.*

For our discussion of community connectedness in non-western contexts, given the historical and continued global dominance of western framing of family and community life, it is of critical importance that the distinctive characteristics of non-western cultures be understood. Individualist and collectivist cultures differ in many regards, but the core contrasting feature concerns the relationship between individuals and others within the social environment. In western societies, the individual is viewed as an autonomous, self-contained entity. In non-western societies, the emphasis is on interdependency, or connectedness, with others. Table I below presents key characteristics of these contrasting cultural systems.

Characteristics of individualist and collectivist cultures	
Individualist western cultures	**Collectivist non-western cultures**
Independence and autonomy are valued.	Interdependency and connectedness are valued.
Ageist attitudes toward elders and limited interest in their experience and knowledge.	Elders' knowledge and experience is respected. Younger family members are expected to follow their advice.
Focused on youth, the future and innovation.	Strong interest in family history, tradition, wisdom of the elders and respect for ancestors.
Youth have weaker ties with older generations.	Intergenerational relationships are highly valued.
Individual decision-making, agency and action are encouraged.	Collective decision-making predominates and individual decision-making is frowned upon.
Nuclear families predominate and ties with extended family members are weaker.	Multigenerational families predominate and strong ties with extended family members.

Unfortunately, many scholars and development organizations alike, overlook these fundamental differences assuming the universality of Euro-American family and community structure and values.

[1] *Non-western collectivist cultures* refers to societies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, The Pacific and to indigenous groups in Australia, New Zealand and North America.

Core collectivist values are reflected in the South African concept of *Ubuntu* which addresses the intimate relationship between individuals and others in the social environment. The central concept of connectedness inherent in the notion of Ubuntu is expressed in the Southern African saying, "a person is only a person through others". The significance of Ubuntu is further explained by Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

> "The fundamental meaning of the proverb is that everything we learn and experience in the world is through our relationships with other people. We are, therefore, called to examine our actions and thoughts, not just for what they will achieve for us, but how they impact others" (Ngomane, 2020, p.8)

Numerous proverbs and sayings from different ethno-linguistic groups across Africa convey this same collectivist notion. In Yoruba, it is said that "It is when we eat together that the food is more delicious and that we are truly nourished". A Bambara proverb from Mali says "A person is nothing without others" and a Luhyia proverb from Kenya says "An individual exists because of others". Across the continent the collectivist value of Ubuntu communicates the importance of both connectedness and responsibility to others.

Mainstream social psychology from the Minority World hypothesizes that human behavior is universal (Smith et al.,2006). This assumption obfuscates the specificities of Majority World cultures. Anthropologists and cultural psychologists have described the contrasting characteristics of western and non-western cultures (highlighted in Table I). Cameroonian psychologist, Nsamenang (1992), contends that at the global level, predominant theories of human development, of family and community life, that frame research, policies and programs are consistently rooted in concepts from North American psychology. He asserts that "psychology is ethnocentric science, cultivated mainly in the developed world and then exported to sub-Saharan Africa" (Nsamenang, 1992)

Trained in the west, Nsamenang (1992) became acutely aware of the difference between western and African values regarding interpersonal relationships. He explains that the western individualist ethos conflicts with the West African worldview where "the individual exists in and for the community" (p.76). He cogently critiques the Euro-American foundations of psychology and insists on the importance of contextualizing psychological frameworks. He argues that while western psychology is often presented as a universal science, it is in fact a *monocultural science*, developed in the west, reflecting a western worldview, and exported to the whole world.

Collectivist values observed in Africa are very similar to those found in collectivist societies in other parts of the non-western world. East Asian psychologists, Kim et al. (2006), critique the Eurocentric orientation in psychology. They assert that since its birth as a discipline, "General psychology has attempted to develop objective, decontextualized and universal theories of human behavior" (p. 3). Kim (2001) describes the predominant collectivist perspective in his part of the world, "It is not what happens within an individual but between individuals the makes us human" (p. 52).

Kim et al. (2006) explain that in East Asian cultural contexts the appropriate unit of analysis is *relationships* rather than *individuals.* They explain that Confucianist philosophy supports the salient value of interpersonal relationships and responsibility to others. "In contrast to the Western emphasis on the individuated self, Confucianism focuses on emotions that bind individuals and family members together" (p.38). While the influence of religious values on human development is

very often ignored in global development discussions, these Eastern scholars emphasize this dimension which aligns with their collectivist values.

For Turkish psychologist, Kagitsibasi (2017), after studying in the US where she experienced *extreme individualism*, she too articulated the need for psychology to be adapted to non-western cultural settings. She conceptualized collectivist societies as *cultures of relatedness*, and how they differ from western *cultures of separateness.* She asserted that all human beings need both agency and connectedness and that they are not incompatible in relationship-based cultures.

Various South Africa scholars, including Marsella (2009) and Ebersohn et al. (2018) identified the limitations of Western psychological concepts for understanding African contexts. Ebersohn and colleagues expressed "The need to create a psychology relevant to non-western contexts". Influenced by the conceptual work of both African and Asian scholars, indigenous psychology (IP) emerged at the beginning of this century.

> Indigenous psychology questions knowledge hegemony and focuses on the cultural context in which psychological phenomena occur to help people promote well-being by dealing with problems in a culturally relevant and efficient manner through the use of alternative ways of knowing (Ebersohn et al., 2018, p335)

The recent development of IP exemplifies calls for decolonization of the social and behavioral sciences. A nascent field, IP supports the need for more culturally-grounded conceptual models, research and programs in the Majority World. Unfortunately, most community programs in the Global South are focused on instrumental outcomes and do not explicitly aim to strengthen indigenous cultural structures and values which, in many cases, are being lost.

Introduction: Supporting the rights and development of adolescent girls in Senegal

Across the non-western world the development and well-being of adolescent girls is compromised by various factors. Across Africa, salient constraints that girls face include: limited support for their education; child marriage; teen pregnancy; and in some contexts female genital mutilation (FGM). Huge investments have been made in all countries to address these issues, often with limited results.

Two major factors that contribute to the effectiveness of programs to promote change for adolescent girls relate first, to the extent to which they are culturally-grounded in the structure and values of non-western societies and second, to the theories of social change that underpin such programs. In the next section we discuss: the limited attention given to cultural context in most adolescent programs in the Global South and criticism by non-western scholars of monocultural adolescent interventions; and the conceptual grounding for social change in the Girls' Holistic Development Program in Senegal.

Orientation of adolescent programs in the Majority World

Historically, public health interventions globally have given limited attention to the cultural dimension of targeted communities (Kagawa-Singer et al., 2016). And public health research and programs addressing adolescent issues in the Majority World have consistently ignored the differences between the structure and values of collectivist societies and those of western

individualist cultures. The significant contrast in the values of these two types of societies are manifest in differing aspirations of families for youth development, and specifically for girls.

Referring to our earlier discussion of these differences, adolescent development in the western world prioritizes: autonomy; self-interest; individual decision-making; and peer relationships. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, priority is given to developing adolescents': sense of interdependency; responsibility toward others; collective decision-making and conformity to family values; intergenerational ties; and respect for and learning from elders.

There is widespread agreement that adolescents need an enabling social environment to support their development. To structure support to adolescents, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, developed in North America (Lerner, 2004), has been widely referred to globally as a basis for adolescent research and programs. In the context of this discussion of strategies to support adolescent development in non-western contexts, it is edifying to examine the parameters of PYD included and excluded in popular PYD models in light of the specific characteristics of non-western cultures. In a 2017 extensive USAID-supported review of PYD programs, the conceptual model proposed for PYD makes no reference to the family, nor does it mention youth's responsibilities to others (Alvaro et al., 2017). Other salient characteristics of non-western cultures give limited or no attention in PYD programs across the global south include: the central role of adults and elders in adolescents' lives; intergenerational communication; adolescent moral and spiritual development; development of cultural identity and values; and interconnectedness and interdependency with both family members and peers.

Many years ago, WHO adolescent health director, Friedman (1999), expressed concern that adolescent programs uncritically adopt a Western view of adolescence that does not reflect core values of non-western cultures in which young people are embedded. He specifically highlighted the importance of the family in adolescent development in the Majority World and the failure of programs to strengthen adolescent-family relationships. He asserted that this oversight not only decreases programs' effectiveness but can have a negative effect on those relationships.

More recently, various scholars from the Global South have critiqued the Eurocentric orientation in the adolescent field. Cameroonian Nsamenang (2002) contends that adolescent psychology, developed in North America, reflects the American view of adolescence and ignores the fact that "adolescence is a cultural process" (p.62) rooted in culturally diverse contexts. He critiques the assumption that adolescence is a universal phenomenon and explains that while African cultures promote development of adolescent autonomy, "African notions of individuality and autonomy are essentially relational and interdependent, not individualist and independent" (p. 69) as they are in western cultures.

Kagitcibasi also critiques adolescent psychology for its Eurocentricity. From her non-western collectivist perspective, she emphasizes the importance of connectedness between children and parents during adolescence and throughout life. She posits that adolescents' need both autonomy and connectedness and maintains that collectivist cultures foster both (Kagitcibasi, 2017).

East Asian scholars involved in PYD, including Korean, Park (2004), and Chinese, Siu et al. (2012) and Shek et al., (2019) all discuss the centrality of collectivist values in their cultures and emphasize the importance of adolescent character development, including spiritual and moral aspects, as well as

the importance both of adolescent-family relationships and of adolescents' responsibilities to families and peers. Shek et al. (ibid.) points out the western origins of the PYD framework that focuses on building adolescent assets, competencies, self-determination and self-efficacy while generally ignoring adolescents' spiritual and character development, both highly valued in Asian cultures. Similarly, scholars Koller and Verma (2017), of Brazilian and Indian origins, acknowledge the predominant influence of western concepts and models in PYD. They assert that adolescent interventions should be culturally adapted to reflect the structure and values of Majority World societies. They highlight the protective influence of adolescent relationships with families and schools.

In conclusion, available literature suggests that current adolescent research and practice in the Majority World gives insufficient attention to the structure and values of non-western cultures, thereby limiting its relevance and subsequent impact.

Predominant concepts and approaches to support change for adolescent girls

Several related traditions in public health in the North have had a decisive influence on strategies adopted to promote change supporting adolescent girls. First, both the field of epidemiology and the behavioral sciences prescribe a programmatic focus on risk groups, in this case adolescent girls (Glass & McAtee, 2006). In these fields, guidelines for program development prescribe individual level indicators and program effectiveness is evaluated at that level. Second, linear models of health communication and health promotion support a focus on individuals within risk groups (Trickett et al., 2011). The combined effect of these historical perspectives contributes to the prevalence of adolescent programs that are girl-centric (Richardson, 2018) and that focus on single issues e.g. child marriage.

Girl-centric interventions: Many programs to support adolescent girls, focus narrowly, and sometimes exclusively, on them (Svanemyr, 2015). A girl-centric focus aims to e*mpower girls to drive change in families and communities.* Limitations of girl-centric programs are increasingly discussed. Greene (2014) contends that programs supporting girls should involve not only girls, but also *community gatekeepers*, e.g. mothers, fathers and religious leaders, given their influence on girls' lives. She warns "it may not be viable or ethical to work with girls without engaging gatekeepers" (p.14). And similarly, Klugman et al. (2014) state that in order to change harmful social norms affecting girls, it is critical "to include community leaders and those with the power to endorse change" (p.41). The work of powerful organizations like the Gates Foundation, Population Council and USAID to support adolescent girls is largely focused on girls, aims to empower them and to provide them with various types of supports to optimize their rights and development. The girl-centric work of these organizations gives limited attention to the structure, roles and values of non-western cultures, exemplifying Nsamenang's (2002) critique of the Eurocentricity of adolescent program models.

In the non-western world, youth-led change, promoted by many international organizations, conflicts with both the hierarchical structures of those societies and the limitations of linear strategies to promote system-wide change. In this vein, Riddle et al. (2019) conclude that programs that do not involve family members can in fact, increase their resistance to change, a predictable reaction from a systems science perspective. Their conclusion is supported by the assertion of Trickett et al. (2011) that from a systems lens, any community intervention is an intrusion into

community life and can engender rejection of new ideas, e.g. abandonment of FGM. Girl-centric strategies, by definition, do not focus on promoting change in the wider community assuming that empowered girls can catalyze that change. In some instances, this assumption has been disproved (Temin & Heck, 2020;). In the ISRAQ project in Egypt (Sieverding & Elbadawy, 2016) with out-of-school girls, while their literacy skills improved their attitudes toward child marriage shifted to only a limited extent and there was no change in the attitudes of their mothers and brothers toward this prevalent practice in the intervention areas. These research findings reveal the limitations and critique of girl-centric programs.

Single-issue interventions: To support adolescents, many programs address *single issues* e.g. girls' education or teen pregnancy, while many challenges that girls face, like these, are interrelated. Reflecting priorities of institutions in the North, programs supporting girls primarily address, adolescent reproductive health (Svanemyr et al.,2015) and economic development. Clearly these are important issues related to girls' development, however, families' have additional concerns regarding their adolescents related to their moral, spiritual and cultural development. In most cases, PYD programs, copied from adolescent program models from the North, do not build on in-depth understanding of families' holistic concerns and priorities for girls such as these.

Alternative parameters to promote community-wide support for girls' development

An alternative perspective on change in collectivist family and community systems is supported by theories and concepts from anthropology, social work, community psychology, indigenous psychology, community development, adult education and systems science. The Girls Holistic Development Program in Senegal was informed by concepts from these different fields of scholarship.

In anthropology (Kagawa-Singer et al.,2016) and community psychology (Trickett et al., 2011.) the need for cultural parameters to be systematically considered in health research and interventions is increasingly discussed. This concern supports the need for initial formative research to provide in-depth understanding of targeted contexts to inform intervention design (O'Donnell & Tharp, 2011;). There is evidence that cultural adaptation of programs to promote social change contributes to greater community engagement (Trickett, 2009; Airhihenbuwa, 1995).

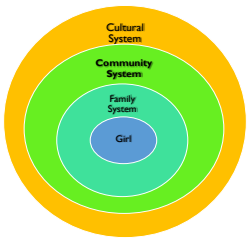
In efforts to bring about change in social norms in communities, the importance of involving power-holders (Pulerwitz, 2019) and community leaders, formal and informal, is increasingly recognized (Trickett, 2009). While formal leaders are more often men, natural women leaders exit in all communities though their role and knowledge is often underestimated (Wolfgramm et. al, 2016; Riaño, 1994). Riano discusses the importance of recognizing women's *social leadership role* as managers of *Networks of Survival and Mutual Help (p. 47).* Similiarly, Eng & Parker (2002) highlight the *natural helpers* who exist in all communities who provide information and tangible support to others.

Across Africa, elders are culturally-designated teachers, advisors and transmitters of social norms to younger generations (Fasokun et al., 2005; Aubel, 2010). Many social norms affecting girls, e.g. child marriage and FGM, are perpetuated by elders and anthropologist Shell-Duncan et al., (2018) asserts that elders are also those who have the cultural authority to change them. A crucial facet of elders' role in the transmission of values and knowledge to younger generations is

intergenerational communication (Airhihenbuwa, 1995). Elders teach and young people are expected to learn from them.

Diagram I.

Girls are embedded in family, community and cultural systems



Onion Model
Aubel & Rychtarik, 2015

Community psychology offers a systemic, or ecological, view of communities that supports research, interventions and evaluations that prioritize understanding of and support for change in family and community systems (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; Trickett et al., 2011). Girls are embedded in family, community and cultural systems and social norms affecting them, e.g. child marriage and FGM, are determined and perpetuated by those within those interrelated systems. The Onion Model (Diagram I.) clearly suggests that to promote change to support girls, empowering them can be beneficial, but not sufficient. Efforts to modify norms affecting girls require both involvement of key actors within family and community systems and strengthened relationships between those levels, or systems (Durlak et al., 2007).

Trickett et al. (2011) emphasize that bringing about change in culturally-determined social norms requires not only inclusive strategies but also *community capacity for collective action*. Key dimensions of *community capacity* necessary for effective community action include: skills and knowledge concerning targeted issues; leadership that builds social cohesion; efficacy and confidence on the part of community members; trusting relationships that promote collective problem-solving; and a culture of learning, i.e. ability to learn from experience (Easterling et al., 1998*).* In many community programs there is both a superficial notion of community capacity and the assumption that communities possess the competencies listed above. Consequently, the need to strengthen community capacity is often overlooked and/or equated merely with *workshops with community members*. Echoing this same idea, positive psychologists Snyder and Lopez (2002) point out that strengthening interpersonal ties within and between community groups is a preliminary step to building community-wide capacity to promote change.

In community development, social cohesion is an important construct associated with interdependency between community members, a sense of community, community identity and collective action (Kim, 2020). Kim identifies *trust* as a central element in development of social cohesion. “Trust is indeed regarded as an absolutely indispensable foundational element that must be in place before meaningful, healthy relationships can be developed between members of a community” (Kim, 2020, p.209).

Zimmerman’s (1995) early conceptualization of empowerment includes three components: emotional, cognitive and behavioral. Christens (2011) proposes an additional *relational dimension* of empowerment to highlight the importance of both relationships within and between social networks as a foundation for collective action. He asserts that social action is a product of “the dynamics of power within interpersonal relations that enable and catalyze effective social action” (p.116).

Christens reports that “Studies of community organizing have often highlighted the critical role that interpersonal relationships play in motivating and sustaining community mobilization” (2011, p.122). He contends that *relational connectedness* contributes to: broadening social networks; increasing understanding of social issues; and increasing commitment to community involvement.

And he argues that all community-level programs should aim to strengthen relational connectedness. The link between relational connectedness and collective change is discussed by Surrey (1987). She cogently argues that activities that develop relationships based on respect and trust provide a supportive context within which dialogue can take place, where individuals are both comfortable expressing their own ideas and are open to the ideas of others, thereby nurturing a sense of collective empowerment to address issues of common concern. Surrey also discusses the related notion of *connected learning* which involves "taking the view of the other (person) and connecting it to one's own knowledge" (p.6) that can lead to new understandings.

Community interventions invariably aim to change certain norms and practices. An assets, or strengths-based approach, recognizes problems but explicitly identifies and strengthens positive community resources and capacity, e.g. community experience and leadership capacity (Trickett et al., 2011). In addressing such problems, Trickett et al. report that community engagement is stronger in programs that draw on positive community resources (ibid., 2011). An assets-based approach echoes Rogers' concept of Unconditional Positive Regard to support change in individuals or groups (1980).

Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) in Senegal

In the Kolda region of Southern Senegal, far from the capital and economically disadvantaged, families face many challenges and adolescent girls' development is constrained by various factors. Girls are disfavored by: limited family support for girls' education; child marriage; teen pregnancy; and female genital mutilation (FGM). Other factors in the wider social environment that negatively affect girls include: the breakdown in intergenerational communication in families; the loss of cultural values and identity; and weak social cohesion and leadership in communities.

In 2008, the NGO *Grandmother Project – Change through Culture* initiated development of the Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) Program to address these four girl-specific issues by reinforcing girls' knowledge, attitudes and confidence, and simultaneously building support for change for girls in family and community systems around them. The goal of GHD is to catalyze community-driven change to promote GHD.

The GHD program is based on an aggregate of concepts from various disciplines, referred to above. They are operationalized in a methodology which embodies several interrelated approaches, discussed below.

Culturally-grounded approach: Collectivist, or Ubuntu values, are promoted in all GHD activities; culturally-designated authorities who transmit and reinforce social norms related to girls, namely elders, are respectfully and actively involved; grandmothers' culturally-assigned role in the socialization of young girls is recognized and they play a central role in GHD activities; all cultural protocols and traditions are followed during community activities, e.g. distributing cola nuts to elders, an age-old sign of respect. GMP actively promotes discussion of collectivist cultural values and of strategies to promote them, especially among younger generations.

Systems approach: Girls are embedded in family, community and cultural systems that determine the social norms related to GHD, e.g. child marriage. Promoting sustained change in such norms requires involvement and consensus-building between key actors in family, community and

education systems. To promote community-wide support for GHD, the program involves three generations of men and women (elders, adults and adolescents), traditional and religious leaders, teachers and community health workers, to varying degrees.

Strengthening communication relationships: Building consensus for change regarding GHD in communities requires the existence of strong social communication relationships. At the outset, in all communities a serious breakdown in communication between generations and between the sexes was observed, as reported by Demba Diallo, Village Headman.

Breakdown in communication

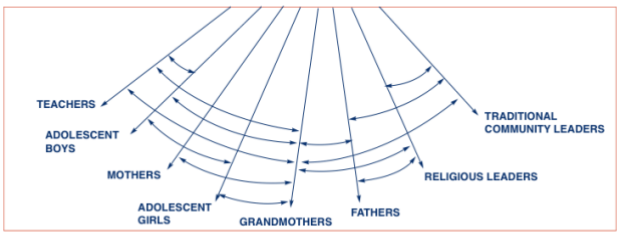
"Communication is the foundation of life for any group. Without communication and understanding there will never be any development. Many interventions failed in our communities because there was not enough dialogue and understanding between people. We never before have the opportunity to sit together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

Demba Diallo, Village Headman

In order to bring about community-wide change in social norms, there must be discussion between all segments of the community. For this reason, GHD activities both strengthen existing communication relationships between, e.g. girls and grandmothers, and create new relationships between, e.g. teachers and grandmothers. Diagram II visualizes how the community dialogue strategy catalyzes interaction to strengthen a sense of connectedness and build consensus for change.

Diagram II

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE FOR BUILDING CONSENSUS



Transformative adult learning approach:
Another critical facet of the GHD program is the transformative learning approach (Taylor & Cranton, 2021). In all community activities adult education learning methods are used that elicit collective reflection on past experience and on new ideas and that challenge participants to identify actions they can take to address priority issues discussed. Transformative learning is catalyzed through interactive activities and tools including stories-without-an-ending, problem-posing images, open-ended role plays and group discussions. In most cases, group dialogue and reflection is structured around Freire's sequence of questions that elicit critical analysis of situations and possible solutions. The importance of the collective learning process in African contexts is explicated by Botswanan educator, Ntseane, who contends that in collectivist Africa learning and change are not an individual affair and that "the change process itself has to be a collective one" (2011, p.318)

Assets-based approach: A key aspect of the GHD Program is that it not only aims to promote change in harmful girl-related norms, e.g. child marriage, but at the same time it actively recognizes and reinforces: positive roles, e.g. of elders; values e.g. intergenerational relationships; and traditions, e.g. story-telling, songs and dances, that transmit values that communities cherish.

Grandmother-inclusive approach:

The GHD Program is inclusive, involving all generations and both genders. However, as regards girls' growth and development, GMP realized that grandmothers, and other older women, play a special role as confidents and advisors to young girls and as advocates for them in families and communities. For this reason, GHD activities explicitly involve grandmothers and strengthen their knowledge and self-confidence to individually and collectively promote GHD. As the program evolved, we realized that in all communities, there are natural grandmother leaders. This realization led to development of Grandmother Leadership Training with small groups of these illiterate but intelligent and committed women (Aubel, 2020).

Community capacity building approach: GMP is committed to strengthening community capacity to address GHD as well as other issues of community concern. This is done mainly by recognizing the role, status and experience of *natural leaders* (among elders, adults and adolescents), and strengthening their knowledge and capacity to work collaboratively with all segments of the community to catalyze collective action for change. Trickett et al. (2011) contend in any community program, building community capacity is a prerequisite for achieving long-term sustainable impact. They identify leadership and critical thinking skills as key facets of community capacity.

Overview of GHD operational strategy to promote community-driven change:

Implementation of the GHD program in each community is organized around these steps:

Step 1: Identification of community actors, including power holders: who transmit and enforce social norms regarding GHD; and who have the authority to change them
Step 2: Establishment of strong relationships with: influential elder community actors; formal and informal community leaders, including adolescent leaders
Step 3: Strengthening relationships and communication between the three generations, between the sexes and between community groups
Step 4: Eliciting discussion among community members on various facets of GHD both: global issues (e.g. child marriage); and community-identified issues.
Step 5: Sharing information with community actors from trusted sources, e.g. health workers, teachers, local officials, religious leaders.
Step 6: Catalyze dialogue on key facets of GHD to lead to consensus on collective actions to address them.
Step 7: Ongoing support to formal and informal leaders to strengthen their capacity and commitment to community change

To address these various steps, a series of interactive community activities are organized to strengthen the social communication system and catalyze dialogue for consensus building for change. Most of these activities are carried out occasionally while others, the last two, are organized frequently.

- **Intergenerational forums:** Building community cohesion and consensus-building for change to support GHD requires activities that bring intergenerational leaders and groups together to engage in open dialogue on past experiences and new ideas. These two-day forums constitute the foundation for strengthening community connectedness and for initiating the

process of community consensus-building for change. Attended by elders, parents and adolescents of both sexes, community traditional and religious leaders, teachers and health workers, during these two-day activities GHD issues are debated and community-generated actions to support girls are proposed.

- **Days of Praise of Grandmothers:** Gatherings of natural grandmother leaders from several adjacent communities to celebrate the role of grandmothers, their experience and commitment to promoting the growth and development of girls and boys.
- **Grandmother Leadership Training:** Under-the-tree participatory learning sessions with natural grandmother leaders to: strengthen their understanding of adolescence; improve their communication approach with girls; and discuss collective action to promote GHD. Participatory learning activities with illiterate grandmothers strengthen ties between them and increase their collective commitment to take action to support and protect girls.
- **All Women Forums:** Girls, mothers and grandmothers, with female teacher facilitators, develop stronger relationships to support girls during adolescence. The forums build powerful cross-generational alliances of women to support girls.
- **Grandmother-Teacher Workshops**: to strengthen relationships between teachers and grandmothers to increase their joint efforts to keep girls in school, avoid child marriage and teen pregnancy.
- **Days of Dialogue and Solidarity:** Gatherings with community elders, religious leaders, other men and grandmothers to reinforce dialogue between generations and discuss their respective roles in promoting GHD. Local Imams share Muslim teachings on tolerance and solidarity.
- **Under-the-tree participatory learning sessions with girls, mothers & grandmothers:** Participatory learning activities: 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 that communities cherish.
- **Discussion groups with boys and men:** Participatory activities based on stories-without-an-ending on priority GHD issues to increase their support for change for girls.

Results of the Girls' Holistic Development Program:

Between 2015 and 2021 several studies and evaluations were conducted to assess the results of the GHD program. These studies provide evidence of positive effects of the program at several levels.

In 2020/21, the Institute of Reproductive Health (IRH) at Georgetown University, in collaboration with University of Dakar, conducted an extensive quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the GHD program, comparing attitudes and behavior in intervention and control communities. IRH researchers concluded that the GHD has contributed to shifting deep-rooted social norms related to girls' education, child marriage, teen pregnancy and FGM. The researchers aimed to identify the *pathway to change* and concluded that *"the main outcome of this intervention is that it has brought community members together, strengthening community ties; a vital accomplishment in a rural context where collectivist values are highly valued."*

The overarching conclusion of the IRH research supports the notion that the GHD strategy has strengthened communication, trust and connectedness between community members and that

this has provided a foundation for community-wide discussion of GHD issues that has ultimately led to community-wide consensus for change in key social norms affectin[illegible] the serious breakdown in communication observed in GHD communities at the outset, according to IRH researchers and to community leaders alike these changes are very significant.

Diagram III

> Before there was a breakdown in communication between members of the same village and between generations in the same family and community. The social fabric was being torn apart. Amazingly, GHD facilitated the reconciliation between generations who now accept, understand, tolerate and spend time together. In order to change anything in society we must communicate with each other through respectful dialogue.
>
> Abdoulaye Balde, Imam and Arabic Teacher

Findings from several smaller studies conducted by Soukouna & Newman (2015), Diallo (2019, 2020), Quiroz-Saavedra (2020) and Lulli (2018, 2020) complement IRH conclusions and help to understand the pathway between the GHD intervention and the multi-faceted changes in attitudes and behavior at several levels within communities. Two studies by Lulli (2018, 2020) support the conclusion that GHD has contributed to strengthening connectedness between the generations and between the sexes across communities. And Quiroz-Saavedra (2020) concluded that the cultural and religious grounding of GHD elicits strong motivation on the part of communities to participate, to consider new ideas and to collectively come to a consensus for change.

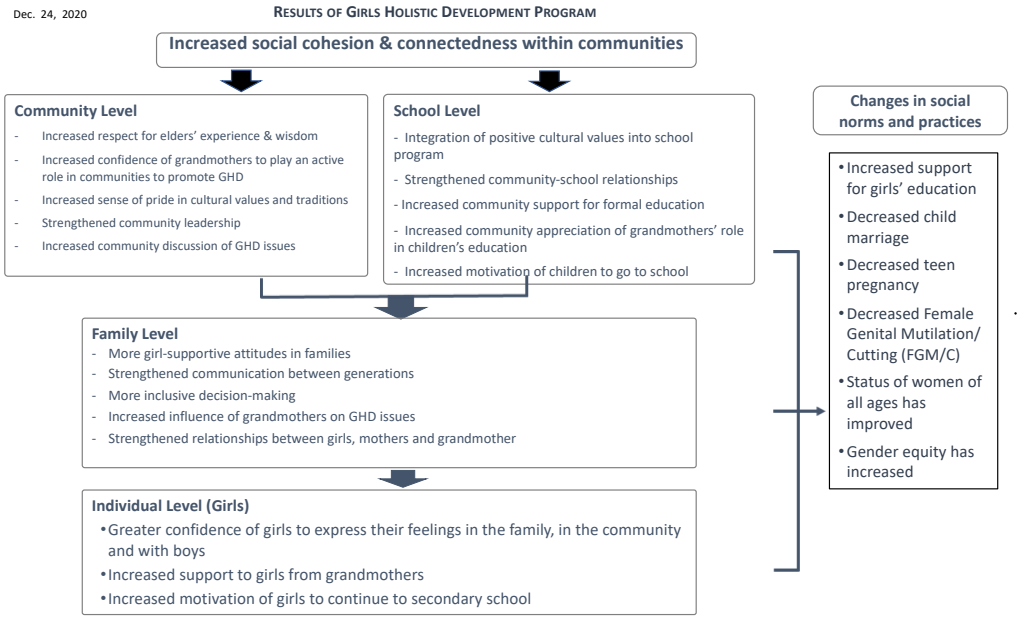
Changes in communities, families and adolescent girls

Diagram III below, summarizes key results of the GHD Program based on the several studies conducted between 2015 and 2021. GHD has contributed to strengthening social cohesion and connectedness within communities and this has constituted the foundation that has supported change in communities and in schools related to GHD. Those changes have contributed to positive change in families' attitudes and behavior. And lastly, the multi-faceted strategy has had a positive effect on girls' own knowledge, confidence and collective efficacy**.** The different facets of change included in the diagram are reviewed below.

Changes at the community level

The various studies on the effects of the GHD program reveal strengthened relationships and communication between community members between generations, between the sexes and with leaders. More specifically, research findings point to the following changes:

- *Increased respect for the experience and wisdom of elders,* especially of older women.
- *Increased community confidence in grandmothers' role promoting GHD*
- *Strengthened community leadership promoting GHD*
- *Increased community discussion of sensitive GHD issues, e.g. child marriage and FGM.*
- *Increased pride in cultural values and traditions*



Changes at the school level

The results of several studies support the overarching conclusion that the combination of GHD activities with community and school actors has had a positive effect on community perceptions of formal education. The following positive changes have been observed:

- Integration of positive cultural values into school teaching
- Strengthened relationships between schools and communities
- Increased community support for formal education, i.e. enrollment of children and support for their schooling
- Increased appreciation by communities of grandmothers' role in children's education
- Increased motivation of children to stay in school

Changes at the family level

The GHD program has encouraged families to adopt more intergenerational and open communication and to reconsider traditional attitudes and practices, such as child marriage and FGM. Conclusions of the several studies identify the following changes:

- *Families are more supportive of girls' education and delaying marriage.*
- *There is stronger communication between generations.*
- *Decision-making within families has become more inclusive.*
- *Grandmothers have increased influence on family decisions related to girls' wellbeing.*
- *Relationships between girls, mothers and grandmothers have been strengthened.*

Norms change toward GHD within communities and schools, and changes in family attitudes have helped create an *enabling environment* that protects girls and promotes their wellbeing.

Changes in adolescent girls

The various studies identify the following changes directly affecting girls:

- *Girls have more confidence to express their feelings in the family*
- *Grandmothers offer more support to girls.*
- *Girls are more motivated to continue to secondary school.*

Discussion:

The experience of the innovative and ongoing Girls' Holistic Development (GHD) Program in Senegal illustrates a culturally-grounded approach to promoting change in family and community systems to support the rights and development of adolescent girls. Both an extensive external evaluation and a series of smaller studies carried out over the past few years converge on the conclusion that the program has contributed to very positive change in community attitudes and practices related to increased support for girls' education, decreased child marriage, teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation. Insights gained through the various studies help to understand the pathway between the GHD program strategy, and the very positive results observed.

We identify two foundational characteristics of the GHD program that have contributed to both very strong community involvement in the program and to the very positive results. First, the community capacity building orientation rooted in principles and methods from community development and second, it's culturally grounded approach that builds on extant cultural and religious values..

At the outset, in all communities in the GHD program area expressed serious concerns regarding the loss of cultural values and identity, the break-down in communication between generations and the absence of a sense of community to undertake collective action to promote community well-being. The overarching conclusion of the various studies, as well as the analysis of extensive process documentation collected over many years, is that community-supported change in favor or GHD was made possible by the significantly increased sense of trust and connectedness between community members. These analyses that provide evidence of the positive outcomes for adolescent girls across communities, demonstrate four critical parameters of community connectedness and integration identified by Sorensen and colleagues (2013), namely: frequent contact and communication between community members; strong and respected leadership; evidence of cooperation between community members to collectively respond to community needs; and an increased sense of community identity and shared values. These scholars assert that these 4 aspects of sociocultural integration contribute to community connectedness and ability to collectively address community issues.

A unique aspect of the GHD strategy is its rootedness in African cultural roles and values, exhibited in various aspects of the program. The strategy involves culturally recognized authorities, namely elders, traditional and religious leaders. Grandmothers are accorded a central role reflecting their responsibility to coach and protect girls as they mature. The program promotes cherished values related to intergenerational communication and to the transmission of knowledge and traditions to younger generations. Religious values and traditions are respected through: the inclusion of

religious leaders; the use of prayer at the beginning and end of all community activities; and frequent reference to key values promoted by Islam, the religion of all community members. Cultural forms of communication, including singing, dancing and story-telling, are used to increase connectedness and interaction between community members.

The culturally grounded program yielded dual benefits. First, as reported in a study by Quiroz-Saavedra (2020), the cultural framework for the program was highly appreciated by communities and this engendered very strong community engagement in all aspects of the program. Second, the recognition and reinforcement of culturally-designated roles and values has heightened communities' awareness of the importance of their cultural heritage and increased their resolve to revive and concertedly promote it for the benefit of the younger generations.

The GHD program discussed here addresses various issues related to the education, development and protection of adolescent girls in Senegal. Based on our experience implementing this innovative and quite successful program, we believe that there are many facets of the approach that are relevant to addressing other issues concerning community health and development. And, we believe that many aspects of this approach, developed in Senegal, could be used not only in other African contexts, but also elsewhere in the non-western world given many similarities between cultures in the Global South related to their collectivist values and social structure.

We attribute the positive outcomes of this program to two interrelated elements. First, in each community where the program has been implemented, the initial and foundational strategy was to strengthen the sense of community, of connectedness between generations, between men and women, between teachers and community members, between formal and informal leaders of all generations Various interactive gatherings were designed to bring together people who, in many cases, did not have a deep sense of trust in each other and who, therefore, were not used to having in-depth conversations on critical life issues. The forums and other types of interactive activities organized by GMP promoted respectful listening and dialogue and built trust between people. In other wards, the first step was to renew the weakened sense of Ubuntu, of togetherness, of reciprocity. In this way, a foundation was created upon which issues of concern both to communities and to development organizations could be addressed. GMP staff invested an inordinate amount of time to renew and nurture the spirit and practice of Ubuntu. Second, and related to the former, is the cultural grounding of all program content and activities. Decisions on who should be involved reflects both a systemic and cultural view of communities and in all cases with inputs from community authorities. Both cultural and religious values and traditions were woven into all program activities from the exclusive use of the local language, to the distribution of cola nuts, during each gathering in which the elders participated, a traditional sign of respect, to songs of praise of grandmothers, cultural pillars of families and communities.

Based on both the results of the various studies carried out on the program and the ongoing reflection among GMP team members regarding the interface between the GHD program and partner communities, many lessons have been learned regarding how best to approach, engage and learn from and with communities. And the learning process continues.

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