

PASSAGES PROJECT

“The Grandmother Project” - Change through Culture: Girls Holistic Development

Executive Summary of Qualitative Research Report



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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND KEY PHRASES

GHD	Girls Holistic Development (Développement Holistique des Filles)
FGM/C	Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting
GMP	The Grandmothers Project
IRH	Institute for Reproductive Health
USAID	US Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Grandmothers Project – Change through Culture (GMP) is a non-governmental American and Senegalese organization that develops innovative community change strategies that build on the specific structure and values of non-Western, collectivist cultures. In 2008, GMP developed and continues to implement the Girls’ Holistic Development (GHD) Program in rural and urban areas in the Vélingara Department in Southern Senegal. GHD promotes change in culturally embedded social norms and practices related to girls’ education, child marriage, extra marital teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) by both empowering girls and creating an enabling environment where family and community actors support change for girls. GMP uses a *Change Through Culture* approach, which builds on culturally-defined values, roles, and resources to preserve positive cultural elements that are beneficial to girls while discouraging harmful ones.

In Vélingara, family and community systems are characterized by age, generational and gender hierarchies. Decision-making related to girls’ development and wellbeing is collective in intergenerational families and girls have limited voice. Often decisions related to girls’ education and marriage are made by adults and elders, and girls’ opinions are not seriously considered. Elders in this setting include respected community members, men and women, who are considered sources of wisdom. In this setting, parents of adolescents have a high degree of authority over adolescents’ mobility, social interactions and choices including whether to stay in school and when and whom to marry. Both parents and elders often use directive, top-down communication with adolescents. Compounding these generational divides, educational programs that ignore cultural values, new technologies, and social media all contribute to a growing rift between adolescents, adults, and elders. Traditionally, grandmothers and aunts had primary responsibility for the socialization of adolescent girls, but today their role and influence has diminished in spite of their strong commitment to girls’ development and wellbeing. This breakdown in communication between generations and the limited communication between sexes creates a barrier to communication and decision making in general and for adolescent girls specifically.

To reduce child marriage, teen pregnancy, and FGM/C, and increase girls’ school attendance, GMP’s Change Through Culture methodology uses an inclusive and participatory approach. The approach requires strong respectful relationships between GMP staff and community actors to increase community confidence and engagement in the program. It involves adolescents, parents, elders, traditional community and religious leaders, local health workers and teachers in various dialogue-based activities to strengthen relationships and communication both between generations and between men and women. It increases social cohesion between community leaders and members, a prerequisite for collective action for girls. It restores the role of elders in communities and empowers grandmothers to be active allies of young girls. It strengthens relationships between girls, mothers, and grandmothers.

As part of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Passages Project, the Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH) at Georgetown University provided technical assistance through a Realist Evaluation approach to guide understanding and scale-up of GHD. GMP was beginning an expansion of GHD into seven villages in 2017, when the Passages/GMP collaboration began. This presented an opportunity to assess GHD impact using a mixed method, quasi-experimental design to explore how norms change processes work. Included in the program evaluation was an endline qualitative study that sought to understand the contextual characteristics and mechanisms of change that influence whether and how GHD achieves its objectives related to

child marriage, early pregnancy, FGM/C, and girls' education. This English Executive Summary and accompanying French report focus on the qualitative inquiry in four of the intervention villages.

The qualitative study sought to answer four research questions:

- (1) How did GHD influence behavior and intentions, individual and collective efficacy, and social norms related to project outcomes?
- (2) How did GHD influence inter and intra-generational communication, and the role and respect community members give to grandmothers?
- (3) How did GHD influence girls' efficacy, the collective agency of grandmothers and communities, social cohesion, and collective action for GHD?
- (4) How did the program mechanisms of change vary by village, participant type and exposure to the intervention?

METHODS

As part of the Passages/GMP collaboration in Vélingara, an endline qualitative study was conducted in four of the seven intervention villages. The four villages were selected to capture variation in population size. The study consisted of in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD) in each site, with very young adolescent girls (VYA) (total: 16 IDI; 4 FGD), grandmothers that represented leaders in the community (total: 16 IDI; 4 FGD), mothers and fathers of VYA (total: 16 IDI; 4 FGD) and community leaders and influential community members (total: 4 FGD). Participants were purposively selected to include those with a range of engagement with the program. The number of interviews and FGD per site were selected to capture a range of experiences, perceptions and behaviors. Given the size of the villages and their proximity, one FGD per village was considered sufficient to reach saturation. IDI and FGD included discussion on GHD activities and explored the role, relationships and communication within and across generations and the changes in social norms and practices related to adolescent girls early marriage, extra marital teen pregnancy, FGM/C and girls education.

Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers managed by the Université Cheikh Ante Diop in Dakar, Senegal. All interviewers participated in a 5-day training that included research ethics, consent, confidentiality, study protocol, and IDI and FGD guides. The study was reviewed and approved by Georgetown University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Senegal Ministry of Health IRB. Interviews were conducted in Pulaar, the local language. All IDI and FGD were audio recorded, and simultaneously transcribed and translated into French. A different interviewer and the supervisor performed quality checks comparing the audio recording to the transcription.

Thematic analysis was used to understand the contextual characteristics and mechanisms of change related to the GHD theory of change. Analysis started with a full review of a subset of transcripts and documentation of key themes identified during this reading. Key themes were those discussed in interviews or FGDs that were considered important (e.g., by being raised across transcripts, emphasized in the interview/FGD), where there was consensus or disagreement. Following this, key themes were reviewed and further developed to reflect the research questions and mechanisms of change described in the theory of change. Coding and analysis took place in NVivo.

RESULTS

Community view/perception of Girls' Holistic Development approach

In the Vélingara area where the GHD program is implemented, in Halpular culture, collectivist values orient family and community life. Interviewees expressed their profound concern with the rise of individualism and their enthusiasm for GHD which has acknowledged the experience and influence of traditional leaders, revived positive cultural values, created stronger bonds, and

increased social capital in their communities. Communities expressed strong appreciation of the participatory and dialogue-based approach, which involves all segments of the community and is respectful of everyone's opinions. All ages and leadership expressed support for the culturally-grounded approach of GHD, in particular women who appreciated the approach and how it created space for discussion and to have their opinions heard. They noted the value GHD placed on local cultural roles and traditions and described this as an entry point for establishing community trust in and engagement with the GHD team. They compared the GHD approach to other interventions that impose foreign values and do not consult communities on their project approach.

The goal of the dialogue-based approach was to promote change in social norms. Many participants described the approach as a platform for the community to discuss problems, including norms and practices that are harmful for VYA and to identify their own solutions through consensus building, for example, on how to prevent child marriage. According to interviewees, decision-making in both families and communities has become more inclusive, more participatory, and more gender-equitable.

Changes in relationships in families and communities

Adolescents, parents, and grandmothers frequently stated that the GHD dialogue approach has improved various facets of relationships and communication within families and communities. They particularly pointed out increased understanding in families between parents and adolescents, guided by mutual respect and the use of more open, non-violent communication even when there is disagreement. Fathers have changed their approach to decision-making and listen to the opinions of other family members, including VYA— for example, those related to marriage of their daughters and their schooling. Girls stated that they now have more confidence to express themselves, and to advocate for their desires, and that their fathers consider their opinions before making decisions on their behalf.

Prior to GHD, community members and grandmothers themselves considered grandmothers as outdated elders who promoted conservative values and did not understand present day life. Through the GHD approach that considered grandmothers as agents of change, community members, including VYA, gained newfound respect for grandmothers. The value of grandmothers in the community and within families was uplifted with many interviewees referring to them as counselors, advisors, and guardians of history and culture. Grandmothers also reported feeling more confident in their relationships with parents and adolescents, feeling more valued and able to contribute to adolescent education, both in communities and in schools. 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.

The training received by grandmothers improved their knowledge of adolescent development, including reproductive health, and increased their confidence to discuss these topics with young girls and with mothers. Girls are often more comfortable talking with grandmothers than with their mothers and reported seeking advice from grandmothers who then advocate in families on their behalf on issues like child marriage. Grandmothers have used this newfound role to advocate for girls having fewer domestic chores so they can spend more time on homework, staying in school for longer, and not getting married before finishing school. Relationships between young girls, mothers, and grandmothers have been strengthened through the intergenerational dialogue creating alliances between three generations of women.

Changes in Social Norms and Behaviors

Child Marriage

When asked to describe the decisions to support early marriage for girls, parents and community members explained that it was linked to a desire to prevent girls from being sexually active before marriage and, particularly, to prevent pre-marital pregnancy. Family honor and respect in the community is directly tied to their daughters being seen as honorable, defined in part as a respectable girl who protected her virginity and had limited interactions with boys and men. Social norms to protect family honor and respect include expectations that parents will restrict girls' time in public spaces where they may encounter boys including school settings and social sanctions for the girl and her family when she deviates from expected practice. Early marriage and taking post-puberty girls out of school are parental efforts to avoid pre-marital pregnancy, even when girls are doing well in school and are not pursuing intimate relationships. In addition, social norms typically, limit the voice of women and girls in deciding when and whom girls should marry. Fathers are the ultimate decision makers for this, often in consultation with older male family members. As communication increased across age and gender groups due to GHD, mothers, fathers, grandmothers and girls described having conversations about girls' marriage, including being able to state when they disagreed with the timing of the marriage. Grandmothers and girls were able to voice and advocate for their opinion with the girls' father on when and with whom girls should marry and to seek support from others family members in favor of delaying marriage of young girls. Fathers maintained their role as final decision makers, but are now more willing to listen to the opinions of other family actors, particularly women, and in many cases to shift their decision accordingly.

Through participation in GHD, grandmothers stated that the community perception and practice of child marriage is changing for the better (towards delayed marriage), with many people raising concern of reproductive health risks associated with girls' pregnancy at a young age. Other participants agreed that parents have become concerned about the health risks of pregnancy at young ages for girls but thought that child marriages had not yet decreased. Instead, some describe a shifting practice whereby parents agree to the marital engagement of their young daughters and only finalize the marriage and send them to their marital home once they complete their schooling. Cross-checking this with other data sources such as marriage registers could help determine whether child marriage practices have changed in these communities.

Extra marital teen pregnancy

According to Peuhl traditions, girls who become pregnant out of marriage are considered disrespectful, as are their families. Due in part to GHD activities and a national government campaign to keep girls in school, many parents, grandmothers, and girls described support for the idea that girls should complete their schooling and wait to marry when they are older. Yet they also described a tension between shifting norms on girls' education and child marriage and existing traditions that value girls' virginity. School was seen by families as a place for girls to meet and spend time with boys, risking their sexual purity. In order to reconcile their increased support for girls' education and delayed marriage with concerns of preserving girls' sexual purity, parents and grandmothers now exert greater control over girls' mobility to prevent interaction between boys and girls. From girls' and grandmothers' descriptions, this control on girls' mobility is not experienced negatively, as girls are motivated to stay in school and they enjoy spending more time with their grandmothers sharing stories and doing homework. Parents expressed relief in a perceived decline in early pregnancy with girls increasingly continuing their schooling and postponing marriage.

Girls Education

Participants of all ages described increased belief in the value of education for children and specifically for girls. Previously, it was normal for children to miss school when parents needed help harvesting crops. Parents described their own transition from dismissing school as unimportant and not necessary for girls to seeing the value of girls' education as a road for them to have access to

better jobs and income. As a result, though girls were traditionally expected to be heavily involved in housework, mothers have decreased domestic tasks assigned to their daughters to allow them to have more time for studying. Parents most often perceived the value of school when their children were doing well in school.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

In Vélingara, after a 1999 law was passed outlawing FGM/C, many communities that practice FGM/C continued the practice using strategies that kept it hidden from public view. For example, before the law, most girls underwent FGM/C during adolescence; now the ceremony is performed during infancy as it is easier to keep it secret. Therefore, though GHD works to shift community norms on FGM/C, it would not be possible to see this change in this study because girls are cut as infants. When asked about FGM/C in the community, some participants noted that FGM/C had started to decline as people were concerned about the negative consequences of FGM/C, including health consequences for babies who undergo the practice, and the longer-term complications for women who have been cut during childbirth. By working across generations with men and women, GHD engaged both those who influence decision-making on FGM/C – men, religious and community leaders – and those that participate in or conduct FGM/C ceremonies – grandmothers. Though participants described some shift in attitudes and norms on FGM/C, the qualitative interview did not focus on this outcome as extensively as on other issues and cannot validate whether a decline in FGM/C or norms shift has in fact taken place.

CONCLUSION

The GHD approach is grounded in local cultural roles and values. The cultural dimension of GHD was very significant to communities in a time when these communities are acutely concerned about the loss of cultural values and identity. Throughout the qualitative research, community members expressed deep appreciation for the GHD approach, describing it as reflecting the values and traditions that are important to communities.

The GHD approach is working to build social cohesion a prerequisite for collective decision-making for change in favor of girl's development and wellbeing. GHD aims to create an enabling environment around girls where positive traditions are preserved and harmful ones are changed. The GHD strategy creates spaces for dialogue and consensus building between elders, adults, and adolescents, as well as between men and women to promote community-wide change in social norms related to girls' education, child marriage, extra marital teen pregnancy, and FGM/C. This inclusive strategy has contributed to increased communication, understanding, and respect between gender and between age groups. Participants expressed that their opinion and values were considered by adult men and women individually and in community forum. Their opinions were considered important to discussing and making decisions including girls' education and marriage. Girls expressed increased confidence to express their ideas in family and community contexts and noted the importance of the increased support they are now receiving from grandmothers. The study suggests that grandmothers can leave behind old norms and adopt new ones that promote the wellbeing of girls.

The effects of GHD, according to respondents, are that attitudes and actions towards girls are shifting. This study demonstrated progress in shifting norms, especially norms related to girls schooling and child marriage. This results in girls staying in school and marrying later, though they still may be engaged to their future husband during adolescence. The value given to girls schooling has increased, though parents and elders expressed concern about girls becoming pregnant at young ages due to increased exposure to and time with boys at school. Qualitatively, parents perceive that rates of pregnancy outside of marriage as stable or decreasing even as girls remained in school for longer. Spending time at home with grandmothers and in the family was considered protective for

girls. Finally, parents and grandmothers perceived a decline in FGM/C. Overall, the qualitative data provided strong support for the GMP mechanisms of change described in the program theory of change. There was evidence of attitudes, norms, and behavior change. Exploring these findings in conjunction with the quantitative study findings will enhance understanding of whether and how GMP achieves change on social norms and behaviors. The study has important learnings for programming to advance girls' development and wellbeing globally. Analysis of the GHD intervention supports the idea that programs seeking to advance the well-being of VYA girls should consider how to strengthen intergenerational and gender relations. Development programs seeking to advance the well-being of VYA girls may benefit from considering how to strengthen intergenerational and gender relationships.