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MENTORING IN GROUP-BASED ADOLESCENT GIRL PROGRAMS IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES: EVIDENCE-INFORMED APPROACHES

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AT A GLANCE

Adolescent girls face distinct challenges that require tailored and girl-centered responses. This brief draws on the knowledge of program implementers and researchers who work on community-based girl group (CBGG) programs (often called “safe spaces”) in various low- and middle-income settings and the US. It summarizes emerging lessons and insights on CBGGs, emphasizing the vital role that mentors play in this group-based model. The evidence emphasizes the importance of providing mentors with training, supervision, compensation, solidarity, and opportunities to build their own networks.

INTRODUCTION

Governments, donors, and practitioners recognize the importance of adolescence (age 10-19) as both a window of opportunity and a period of rapid and challenging physical, social, and emotional transitions. After puberty, girls experience distinct challenges as they face fewer freedoms and new responsibilities, which require tailored and girl-centered approaches that respond to girls’ lived realities. Practitioners, advocates, and donors need evidence and practical lessons to inform decisions and investments for girls in all their diversity.

This brief draws on [evidence](#) from program implementers and researchers who have worked on community-based girls’ group (CBGG) programs (often called “safe spaces”) in various low- and middle-income settings as well as in the US to share emerging lessons and insights on mentors within the CBGG model.

COMMUNITY-BASED GIRL GROUPS (CBGGS)

A CBGG, also called a “safe space,” is a platform for delivering programming that **engages girls across diverse low-resource contexts**. Safe spaces are private, secure venues – in formal or informal locations – where group members meet on a regular basis over a set period to learn, play, communicate, and gain support regarding various issues that affect their lives. CBGG programs aim **to promote participants’ opportunities and wellbeing by building their assets and collective power**. Girls leverage assets such as skills, knowledge, and relationships to build social capital, access services, assert their rights, and protect their health.

Evaluations of CBGG programs have demonstrated effects on a spectrum of empowerment and wellbeing outcomes for girls, including outcomes related to violence, school

dropout, child marriage, HIV, and adolescent pregnancy. CBGG programs may also help build solidarity, broaden opportunities for economic and civic participation, and reshape gender norms and expectations for girls' and women's roles and rights. The evaluation evidence on this program model remains mixed in relation to context, combination of interventions, and types of outcomes.

MENTORING IN CBGGS

In CBGG programs, **a group of adolescent girls typically meets regularly with a young woman mentor who has been recruited from the community.** Typically, mentors do not start a program with the required skills. They receive training in participatory learning methods and group management to deliver a set curricula. Mentors are made, not found.

In addition to managing and leading the CBGGs, **mentors also often serve as confidants** for girls to talk about subjects or experiences they may not be comfortable raising with friends or relatives. As they are often young women with similar backgrounds to the girls in their groups, mentors are relatable resource people. Their roles can be flexible based on different contexts and needs. Mentors may facilitate community activities, such as caregiver meetings or intergenerational dialogues, or work with professionals like teachers and counselors.

CBGGs revolve around **group mentorship, making the mentor role distinct from one-on-one mentoring models.** By reaching and engaging many girls at once, group sessions create space to build connections and solidarity. The group structure is especially important during adolescence, when social norms and concerns about girls' safety may restrict girls' movement, isolating them socially. Group activities are intended to provide opportunities to practice social support and life skills while girls engage critically with gender norms and roles. Furthermore, programs use CBGGs to reach girls who tend to be overlooked or

excluded from other programs, such as out-of-school or married girls.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM GROUP-BASED MENTORING PROGRAMS

These are lessons drawn from literature and program experiences on what strategic investments of resources, time, and energy are vital to make group-based mentoring most impactful.

1. **Empower mentors with training and supportive supervision.** Mentors may start with limited knowledge and low self-confidence, particularly where women's mobility or educational opportunities are constrained. Trainings should include participatory learning methodologies and accurate, non-stigmatizing content on topics such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, mental health, and social and emotional learning. Regular supervisor visits to group sessions, mentor meetings, and refresher trainings are just as important to help mentors hone skills and build confidence.
2. **Structure opportunities for mentors to build their own networks.** By encouraging mentors to work together to build skills, share experiences, and collaborate to develop strategies, programs can enhance their quality. These networks are a crucial resource for mentors to manage group dynamics, counsel girls, and navigate relationships with community leaders. Over time this also may encourage mentors to realize their leadership and movement-building potential.
3. **Pay mentors.** Group-based mentoring is skilled work for which they should be paid. Mentor stipends provide young women with reliable income, recognize their work as worthy of compensation, and may also reduce turnover. Fair pay can be set using pay ranges for local jobs that require similar skills. Other forms of recognition such as uniforms, certificates, and mentor ID cards can also contribute to their motivation.

4. **Support long-term investments in mentors to sustain impact.** Long-term commitments to CBGGs in specific areas can foster responsive programming and promote sustainable change. Over multiple program cycles, mentors may contribute to review and revision of materials, which helps ensure responsive content that fits mentors' and girls' realities. Through a cascading leadership model, where older or more experienced mentors help younger mentors establish working relationships with community leaders, mentors can take on authority and responsibility for program design and management over time.

REMAINING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

More research is needed to fully understand the value of CBGGs, and particularly to learn about the collective, intergenerational, lasting changes that mentors and CBGGs can achieve. Some priority research questions include:

- **Sustainability and scalability:** In what settings is it feasible to integrate public-sector-supported, mentor-led CBGGs into existing social protection, health, or educational institutions?

- **Optimal mentor management package:** What are mentor training and supervision requirements and appropriate compensation, and how do they vary by context?
- **Complementary activities:** What parallel programs may help optimize the potential of mentor-led CBGGs?
- **Impact of mentorship:** What is the impact of mentorship on mentors themselves?

Learn more from the [full publication](#), including program examples from AGI-K, IMAGEN, and *Abriendo Oportunidades* that illustrate the potential of strategic, long-term investments in mentors, girls, and their communities.

The Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center is a global research hub that envisions a gender-equitable world where girls and boys make a healthy and safe transition into adulthood and reach their full potential.

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