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Adolescence is a time of many transitions and a time to acquire the skills for adult life. Although skills can still be acquired in adulthood, adolescence is a time to lay a foundation of education, financial skills, positive health behaviors, and critical thinking. For many girls in the developing world, their opportunity to move freely in the community becomes limited at the onset of puberty. This may be a well-intentioned protective measure, but the effect can be to limit girls' opportunity to form strong social networks, gain the requisite skills, and learn how to be full members of their community.

The Council has developed a number of "safe spaces" programs that address the needs of vulnerable adolescents, particularly girls. The work begins with identifying girls who are especially vulnerable and then finding a safe physical space where they can meet in a group. A mentor delivers a curriculum and acts as a role model for the girls. These programs vary according to local input, but they all build on the key elements of a safe physical space, a mentor, and a friendship or social network for the girls.

What is a "safe space"?

A "safe space" generally means a girl-only space. This is an important component since public spaces are often inhabited largely by men. Examples of locations that can be used are community halls, dedicated program space, schools, youth centers, and even empty shipping containers. Finding such a space may involve the girls helping to map the locations where they feel safe and obtaining permission to use the space. For example, in Egypt a youth center in each village is available, by law, to all members of the community. However, since the centers were being used exclusively by boys and men, they were not deemed "safe" for girls. By working with the community and the youth centers, it was possible to get some time in the centers identified as "girls only" time, ideal for the Ishraq program.

Locations of safe spaces programs around the world

Why are social or friendship networks important?

In many settings the arrival of puberty decreases a girl's access to friends and her freedom to move around the community. The arrival of puberty may coincide with school-leaving, increased domestic chores, or preparation for marriage. Parents may fear for the girls' safety or the family honor if sexual maturity means that girls are more likely a target of men's advances. However, restricting mobility leads to reduced contact with friendship networks. Many studies point to the importance of social networks for good health (Berkman and Syme 1979; Marmot et al. 1991; Kawachi et al. 1996) and as practical assets. Adolescent girls are less likely than boys to have robust friendship networks, someplace they can go if they need a place to stay, a friend from whom they can borrow money if in need, or resources that can protect them if they are in danger at home (Erulkar et. al. 2004; Hallman 2009). The safe spaces programs involve social contact among girls to help foster such social networks.

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What is the role of mentors?

In general, mentors are young women from the community with whom the girls can identify. In addition to implementing the curriculum, mentors serve as role models for the girls. In contrast to peer programs, mentors are slightly older than the girls in the program. Even in distressed settings, there are frequently some girls who have gone further in school than others and have the skills needed to serve as mentors. In other settings girls may face specific needs that call for older women as mentors. For example, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, girls involved in a safe spaces program include those employed as domestic workers. These girls need help negotiating with their employers and invoking their legal rights, so mature women mentors are more effective in this setting.

We build a cascading leadership model throughout these programs to cultivate future leaders and help ensure sustainability. In most programs we are able to identify girls who are more interested in developing their skills, have more education, and show leadership potential. When they can be trained to lead and mentor new groups, it provides a paid activity for the girls and enables the program to spread within a community.

Who are the girls?

Girls vary in age, and the content of programs differs with the location and the needs of the girls. Although most programs initially targeted adolescents aged 15–17, sites having increasingly moved to younger ages, such as 10–14, because of the value in reaching them before the age of school dropout or early marriage.

The programs vary in terms of how often the groups meet and how long the program continues. Most programs meet one or two times a week, while others meet four times a week for three hours a day. The most intense is Ishraq, where many of the girls have no schooling and extra time is needed to meet the literacy and numeracy goals of the program. Most programs last between one year and two and a half years. The intensity of the intervention is tied to the needs of the girls and the ability to fit the program around their obligations, such as school, housework, or agricultural work.

Most programs include literacy training, though this aspect is more critical in some settings than in others. All programs include health behavior education, especially related to sexual and reproductive health, and are linked with health services in the community. In all areas, the issue of gender-based violence is included since it affects many girls and young women. In areas where child marriage is prevalent, delaying marriage may be a major focus of the program. Another goal is to help girls develop life skills and knowledge such as interpersonal negotiation, experience with thinking about life goals, and elements of citizenship. Financial capabilities, historically left out of most life-skills curricula, range from basic financial literacy to broader financial capabilities education and savings programs. The programs do not have rigid lesson plans, but rather a flexible curriculum that ensures topics are covered but also allows time for the girls to raise issues of concern to them.

Lessons learned

Existing data can be used to identify girls who are vulnerable and left out of other youth programming. For example, the Demographic and Health Surveys enable us to identify areas where girls are not in school, are not living with parents, or are at risk of early marriage. After identifying areas of need, it is possible to work with parents and community leaders to establish a program, which most communities welcome. Also, there is clearly an interest on the part of the girls: it is not unusual to have greater interest than initially anticipated, leading to waiting lists for the programs. However, the demands of other obligations can be a

problem for attendance. From the outset, programs seek to find times that correspond with the times girls are available, but a common reason for missing sessions is that girls were needed to do housework or care for siblings.

Assessing the impact of these programs is not simple because many effects may not be seen until years later. Some elements of the programs are straightforward to evaluate and the results are promising. For example, the girls enrolled in the Egyptian project had little or no schooling. Among the girls who stayed through the 30 months of the program and sat for their exam, 92 percent passed their literacy test. Other studies show clear improvements in knowledge of health issues and expanded life goals (Hallman 2008; Erulkar et al. 2011). Although it is easiest to measure program impact in one or two specific domains, these advances have an impact on the overall trajectory of a girl's life.

Delaying child marriage and supporting young mothers

- *First Time Parents*, India — A special group in need of safe spaces programs is first-time parents, especially in areas where age at marriage is very low. Working through community centers, the program has reached 1,700 girls in two regions, West Bengal and Gujarat.

- *Mères Éducatrices*, Burkina Faso — 4,000 girls aged 10 to 19 were enrolled into programs in school or health centers in their villages. The focus of this program was on delaying child marriage and training young mothers as educators to support other young mothers in their homes.

- *Berhane Hewan*, Ethiopia — "Light for Eve" has reached 12,000 married and unmarried girls aged 10 to 19 in a region of rural Ethiopia where half of girls are married by the age of 15. The *kebele* structures in villages provide the locations, and with government support the program will reach 72,000 girls.

Developing financial literacy

- *Siyakha Nentsha* ("Building with Young People"), South Africa — This program, which takes advantage of the high rates of school enrollment in KwaZulu Natal, works with 1,100 girls and boys in their schools. One component is financial literacy, and the curriculum has been certified by the government so that completing that part of the program provides a marketable credential for the youth.

- *Safe and Smart Savings*, Kenya — This savings program is an extension of one of the earliest safe spaces programs, Binti Pamoja. Located in the slum of Kibera, the program goes beyond financial education to a banking program in partnership with two banks in Nairobi. The program is now being extended to Uganda. Currently reaching 2,300 young people, the full roll out phase will reach around 20,000 participants.

- *Kishori Abhijan*, Bangladesh — Working through adolescent clubs in rural areas and non-formal technical schools in urban areas, the program reaches girls aged 15 to 19 to promote financial education through mentoring relationships. This is a structured test of the value of adding mentoring to traditional financial educational approaches.

Expanding life opportunities

- *Ishraq* ("Sunrise"), Egypt — In rural Upper Egypt, the Ishraq program has worked with 1,800 girls aged 12 to 15 to encourage re-entry into formal schooling and increase health education and literacy. Having gained strong community and government support, the program is expanding and is expected to become government-sponsored in the near future.

- *Abriendo Oportunidades* ("Opening Opportunities"), Guatemala — The program reaches 1,260 rural Mayan girls in two age groups, 8 to 12 and 13 to 18. The programs are based in community halls and schools and employ a "cascading mentorship" model so that girls may advance into positions of leadership in the program.

- *Biruh Tesfa* ("Bright Future"), Ethiopia — Starting in urban slum areas such as those in Addis Ababa, girls aged 10 to 19 in Ethiopia – including domestic workers – have been part of Biruh Tesfa. Working from community halls donated by the *kebele*, or local government, the program has reached 16,500 girls and will grow to 30,000 with the addition of 12 more cities.

- *Smart Girls*, Ghana — The newest program is the Smart Girls program in Tema, Ghana. Based on experiences from other urban programs, Smart Girls has enrolled 89 girls in a pilot program. Girls aged 12 to 15 helped renovate a vacant school building to be used as the program site.

Future directions

As "safe spaces" programs move beyond the pilot stage, there is an opportunity to learn more about the relative benefit of the primary program components. For example, Berhane Hewan is now testing the relative contribution of the community conversations, girls' asset building, and incentive components in delaying age at marriage. These assessments are important as we seek to streamline programs for scale up while ensuring that critical components are maintained. Also, as programs mature it is possible to examine the impact of programs on girls' lives, beyond the time they spend in the intervention. Do the girls delay marriage and/or childbearing? Are they more economically active? Does their new sense of a place in the community result in greater civic engagement? Since the girls in the programs will in most cases marry boys from their community, are there key interventions with boys such as alternatives to violence in solving disputes, assistance to budget and save, or basic sexual and reproductive health messages that should be delivered to boys? Some future directions may involve thinking about how to integrate the learning from the safe spaces programs into a changing landscape for the girls. For example, with increased commitment to schooling, are more of the girls we seek to reach now in school? If girls are in school already, should we alter any of the content of the program or seek to integrate some of the content (e.g., education about sexuality) into school programs? If mobile banking becomes more widespread, will it provide new opportunities for girls' savings programs? As we seek to improve opportunities for girls, we need to constantly evaluate the way in which their dynamic environment is changing and its effect on how we do our work.

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