



## Intentional Design Practitioner Report

# IMAGEN: Shifting Native American Youth Programming to a Gender Focus through Intentional Design Methods

**By Kelly Hallman, Stephanie Martinez, Janet Routzen, LeToy Lunderman, and Lisa Polen**

Contributions from Angel del Valle, Eva Roca, Victoria Star Boy, Cheryl Whirlwind Soldier, Sunrise Black Bull, Malorie Arrow, Tasheanna Running, Tristan Two Eagle, Jenny Greaves, Norman Running, Amanda Roblez, Mariah LaPointe, Ashley Sarracino, Shayla Yellowhair, and Kassel Franco-Garibay

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The Adolescent Girls Community of Practice is a project of the Population Council.

<https://buildcommunity4girls.org/>

## About

**The Intentional Design approach has been foundational to the Population Council’s work since 2000, when on-the-ground programs to reach the most excluded girls in the poorest communities greatly expanded. This practitioner report is part of a series of 20 reports reflecting work in sites around the world from 2000 to 2020. The Intentional Design approach was implemented in these sites with nongovernmental and governmental partners who explored the question: Why invest in girls? Once that was understood, the Council offered learning tools to navigate the questions: Where do we work? With whom do we work? When, chronologically, in the girls’ life cycles are the most crucial moments? Which content is meaningful and realistic and builds girls’ protective assets? What does success look like for different segments of girls?**

In 2013, the Girl Roster tool was added when it was clear that many partners lacked the technical and scientific resources to establish the “universe” of girls in the places they had selected to work. Intentional Design tools—with the Roster being the most known and catalytic learning aid—have been utilized in South and East Asia; the Middle East; Central, East, and West Africa; North America; Latin America; and the Caribbean.

The Roster has been adapted for use in an array of sociodemographic contexts including dispersed rural villages, poor urban neighborhoods, conflict zones, refugee camps, densely packed informal/migrant-receiving settlements, high-risk HIV zones, before and after epidemics, as a rebuilding tool, and in Native American reservation communities. In every context, the Roster provided a transformative opportunity to see girls’ lives more systematically, drawing both quantitative and qualitative information. The efforts to estimate and segment the universe of girls has challenged initial assumptions about girls, families, safe and unsafe zones in communities, and the accessibility and relevance of services, even among those who felt they knew their community, including longstanding program staff. Across the board, practitioners report that on-the-ground application of the learning tools generates surprising and useful knowledge vital to shaping their work, assessing its reach, and articulating plans for expansion.

In the 20 reports that comprise this series, our partners share their experiences applying Intentional Design tools and principles. The reports represent just a few on-the-ground projects, but most of our partners report that the Intentional Design approach has taken root. We honor our partners for their honesty and dedication. They inspire us.

Judith Bruce and Sophie Soares

Authors, *Intentional Design: Reaching the Most Excluded Girls in the Poorest Communities—A Guide for Practitioners and Advocates*, from which these reports were excerpted.

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Findings and Decisions	Implementation Observations and Adaptations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A high proportion of 10-14-year-olds (males and females) live apart from parents and grandparents.</li> <li>• Gender-pooled mentoring structures exist in some larger communities to support positive cultural continuity; nothing exists in smaller communities. People still believe a dedicated physical building is needed to conduct any program.</li> <li>• To increase access to a place for girls to de-stress and discuss sensitive topics, mentorship platforms must be: 1) denser geographically and repurpose existing physical structures, 2) gender-specific (now programs are for “Native Youth,” not Native Girls or Boys), and 3) co-led by younger and elder women to strengthen social access and encourage transfer of cultural knowledge between generations.</li> <li>• Economic literacy is vital given the extraordinarily high economic burden carried by females—women heading 40% of Native households in Great Plains communities, often large and multigenerational; great need for gender- and age-specific financial-literacy materials.</li> <li>• Tools developed in other settings need careful review to be adapted, keeping in mind local risk factors while honoring equally vital local possibilities and assets, which increase local valuation of maintaining cultural identity and practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In light of over-regulation, often to a punitive degree, of American Indian families residing in tribal housing, questions in the Girl Roster asking number of people living in the household were removed.</li> <li>• The Girl Roster was renamed the Youth Roster; while asking questions about male or female adolescents, it expresses the high value placed on community cohesion even as it reveals important distinctions by gender and age.</li> <li>• It is vital to alert communities about Roster activity beforehand because they are so often invaded by punitive government activity (forced removal of children during boarding-school era; current Child Protective Services removal of children at disproportionately high rates; law enforcement sweeps of tribal neighborhoods for suspected drug activity).</li> <li>• Each team collaboratively scripted an introduction on how to clarify the Roster’s intent at the beginning of each interview.</li> <li>• Better to contact household members in the afternoon than in the morning, as unemployment is high and daily schedules are shifted later.</li> <li>• Safety needs were addressed by creating triples of Roster teams, rather than pairs, comprising two females and one male; being mindful of complex kinship structures within communities (not being assigned a house where a strained family relationship may exist), and using vehicle transportation between houses (because of distance and danger in some places of roaming feral dogs).</li> <li>• Most of those involved in rostering were already trained mandated reporters, meaning that when faced with issues such as domestic violence, they were equipped and readied to report to the proper authorities, as well as provide resources for services.<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> In the communities in the Council’s Guatemala work it was not mandated to report cases of abuse, but the team came across situations that required immediate case management and reported them to authorities.

## Introduction

### The Issue

Adolescent Native American girls are distinct from every other segment of young people in the United States, from the assets their ancestors have passed down to them, to the unique challenges they currently face. Native women and girls carry immense responsibilities within the family, and school alone cannot prepare them for the challenges many will face as they transition to womanhood. IMAGEN provides Intentional Design, strategic planning tools, and training to Native families, communities, and schools to create, operate, and maintain a geographically dense network of social platforms where collectives of girls (“Girl Societies”) can gather every week.

Native young people in the United States are at high risk for school dropout (Musu-Gillette et al. 2016). Nearly one in five Native high school students were threatened by a weapon at school in the past year (versus 7% nationally) (Musu-Gillette et al. 2016); 28% of American Indian/Alaska Native women report being raped and 55% have experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (Breiding et al. 2014). Although lifetime fertility rates are no higher for Native females than the national average, and are declining like all other race groups, Native girls still have the highest rate of teen births in the US (Martin et al. 2018). Suicide rates among girls in the US are highest among those in the American Indian/Alaska Native race group (CDC WISQARS 2018). There is also growing evidence that suggests that Native girls face high risks of trafficking (NCAI 2016).

Many current programmatic initiatives and donors serving Native young people often regard Native youths as a monolithic, homogeneous group and do not account in their program designs for the many life transitions that take place between the ages of 10 and 24 years. They also rarely distinguish the needs of girls versus boys. A gap remains in understanding and addressing the gender and age-segment-specific needs and experiences of adolescent Native American girls.

Identifying and working with segments of adolescent girls is a touchstone of the Intentional Design approach, making it a fitting approach for examining the lives of Native adolescent girls and designing programs to better serve their needs.

### The Indigenous Adolescent Girls’ Empowerment Network (IMAGEN)

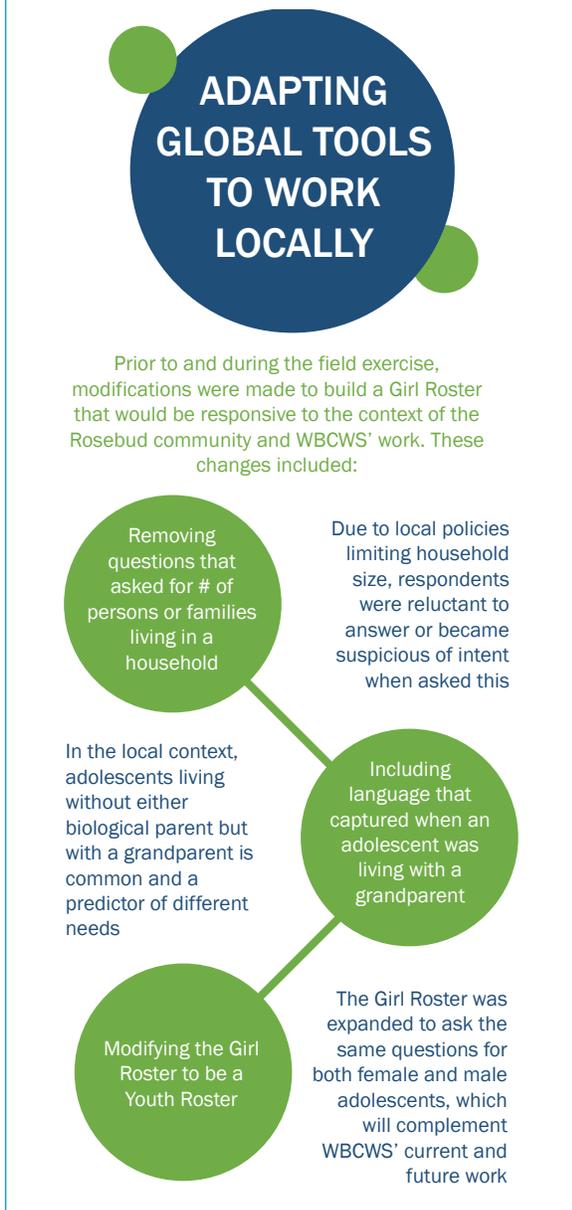
IMAGEN—with its initial brainstorming meeting in March 2017—was conceived as a means of bringing together Native American serving organizations that have the willingness and ability to design, document, and share evidence from programs that build on Native girls’ innate talents, while addressing the factors that put them at risk. The Network provides strategic planning tools and training, based on Intentional Design principles, that enable Native families, communities, and schools to create, control, and maintain a geographically dense set of social platforms where collectives of girls (“Girl Societies”) can gather every week.

The Network’s inaugural workshop was attended by six participating organizations, covering a cross-section of Indian Country’s challenges and geographies, including:

- White Buffalo Calf Women’s Society (WBCWS)
- Union Pacific Railroad’s Council of Native American Heritage (CONAH)
- An̄po Wicañpi/Pine Ridge Girls’ School
- Indigenous Peoples Task Force
- National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center (NIWRC)
- American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES)

Since then, IMAGEN—in addition to its affiliation with the Population Council’s Community of Practice—has been designated as a key innovation experiment within the Council’s Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center where it seeks to provide Native families,

**FIGURE 1. ADAPTING THE GIRL ROSTER TO WORK LOCALLY**



communities, and schools with tools to establish social platforms that increase the protection, safety, and resilience of girls. It does so by using Intentional Design's evidence-based tools to reclaim/repurpose neighborhood spaces where Native matrilineal traditions can be preserved and rekindled by Native girls with mentorship from Native adult women and elders. As of 2020, the Network and its member organizations are active in Minnesota, Montana,

Oklahoma, and South Dakota. IMAGEN's efforts have resulted in girl-centered programming being piloted in eight distinct geographic areas, serving both rural tribal communities and urban Indian neighborhoods.

1. Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC) serves the Oglala Sioux Tribe (OST) on the Pine Ridge Reservation in southwest South Dakota. TVCDC, which has a wide and influential reach within and beyond its communities, is starting Girl Society groups in each of OST's nine administrative districts.
2. 100 Horses Society is based in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, on the Cheyenne River Reservation. It has been a leader in preserving one of the seven rites of womanhood within Lakota culture, the coming of age ceremony for girls. With IMAGEN they are planning more consistent and frequent outreach to local girls instead of just the yearly ceremonial four-day camp held each June in the Black Hills.
3. WBCWS serves Rosebud Sioux Tribal communities in south central South Dakota and hosts weekly community-based girl groups—known as Girl Societies—in three of their most underserved communities, as well as two innovative adaptations to the juvenile justice center and to schoolgirls serving school suspensions.
4. The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota are working with local schools in their communities to enable Girl Society mentors to earn high school credit for their leadership activities. High school mentors are being paired with local elder mentors to begin Girl Society groups in three communities.
5. The American Indian Family Center (AIFC), serving the St. Paul, Minnesota, metro area, is establishing a Girls' Talking Circle as part of the outreach efforts to the urban Indian population there.
6. Oklahoma City Indian Clinic serves a large Native metro population and is now

implementing a weekly program for girls aged 10–16 years; participants hail from eight distinct tribal nations.

7. The Fort Belknap Indian Community's Commercial Tobacco Prevention Initiative has organized a weekly girl group on Sunday afternoons at their local community center in northern Montana.
8. The Little Shell Chippewa Tribe's Commercial Tobacco Prevention Initiative is launching a monthly girl group meeting at their tribal culture building in Great Falls, Montana.

## The Adaptation and Application of the Girl Roster

### The Use of the Roster

An early step in the process was to examine whether the Girl Roster, a benchmarking tool created by the Population Council's Community of Practice, would be useful to support programs that aim to engage girls in their programming but may have reached fewer than they could. The following report details the application of the Roster with the White Buffalo Calf Women's Society (WBCWS) in the northern plains. See Figure 1 for the process of adaptations made to the Roster to contextualize it to a rural tribal setting.

### Community Challenges and Adaptations for Roster Application

Challenge: Immediately after the pilot rostering took place in summer 2017, WBCWS shared negative reactions they received both during and after the exercise. Despite the community knowing WBCWS's 40 years of service locally, WBCWS had never before gone house-to-house in the community, so people did not know what was happening. Staff implementing the tool expressed that they were met at times with suspicion or rejection from potential respondents. The reasons varied from general suspicion to a belief that the survey was tied to federal government activity.

Adaptation: To resolve this moving forward, WBCWS informed the tribal police, who accompanied them during subsequent Roster activities. WBCWS also created a series of public service announcements (PSAs) that were read over the widely accessed tribal radio stations. These PSAs clarified the purpose of the rostering as a step toward creating programs for young people in the community, and explicitly stated the dates on which the team would be in certain communities. Additionally, the team collaboratively created a script to be read at the beginning of each survey that clarified the intent of the rostering and explained how the information would or would not be used.

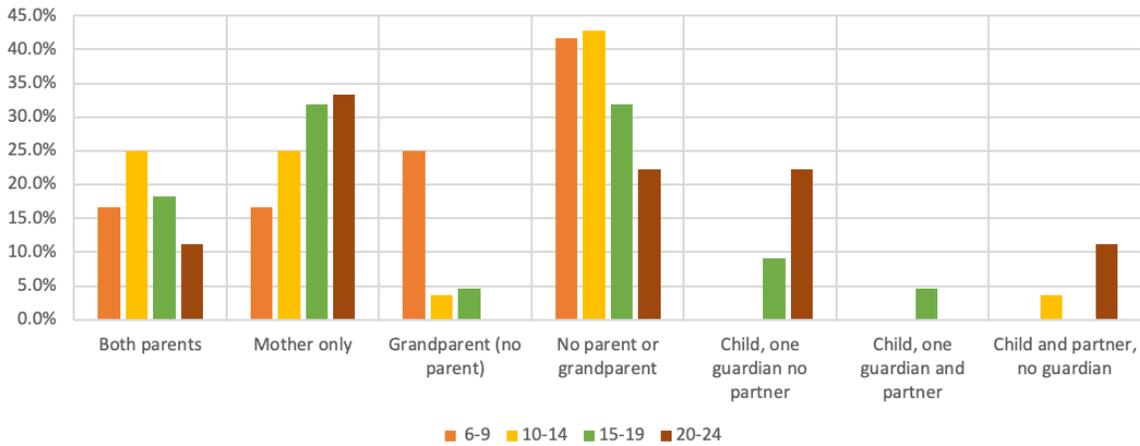
Challenge: Another initial challenge faced during the field exercise was the time at which the rostering took place. The WBCWS team went out to roster at approximately 10:45 a.m. in one of the communities hardest hit by unemployment. Many households did not answer their door. Additionally, the staff expressed concern in approaching some residences that were likely to have household members who use alcohol or drugs.

Adaptation: To resolve this moving forward, the team planned to carry out roster activities later in the day and to have the tribal police informed of their location and ready to respond if necessary.

Challenge: The rostering team from WBCWS was comprised of the organization's full-time staff who had varying experiences with out-of-office outreach and training. As a result, there were some members who felt less prepared to go door-to-door. Some staff members had previous encounters through their work on violence mitigation at WBCWS that necessitated avoiding contact with specific members of the community. Additionally, there was significant concern about the dangers presented by feral dogs known to roam around the area.

Adaptation: To mitigate these concerns, the pairs were reconfigured to match newer employees with those who had more experience dealing with potentially inflammatory situations.

**BOX 1. WHO GIRLS LIVE WITH, BY AGE GROUP, IN RESULTS OF ROSTERING EXERCISE WITH WBCWS**



Additionally, WBCWS opted to adopt trios, consisting of two females and one male, rather than pairs of females for extra protection. Prior to rostering, the team also confirmed the assigned households to ensure that certain households would not be assigned to certain staff members. The concern about the dogs was addressed by using vehicles for transport between households (vehicular support is necessary anyway in this context as homes can be quite remote, and communities often cover large, isolated areas.)

**Challenge:** A later development for rostering in a tribal community, which has not been faced as often in the tool's previous global applications, is the understanding that the door-to-door process may reveal scenarios in which rosterers might have to fulfill their duties as mandated reporters. That is, WBCWS is, at its core, a provider to victims of domestic and sexual violence, so all staff serve this role and might be confronted by these scenarios when rostering.

**Resolution:** Leadership in WBCWS, during the briefing after the initial field exercise, reiterated the team's responsibility to serve dual roles—not only as rosterers but as mandated reporters—and to alert authorities to problematic situations they witness. They were also reminded to bring violence services support materials from WBCWS to distribute as needed.

**Illustrative Findings and Their Unique Revelations about Indigenous Girls' Experience**

Results from the rostering exercise reveal a wide variety of household demographic situations for girls.

- A large percentage of girls did not reside with either a parent or grandparent: 40% among girls aged 6–9 and 10–14 years old; 30% among girls aged 15–19 (see Box 1).
- Girls experienced early childbearing: 3% of 10–14-year-olds and 12% of 15–19-year-olds had a child.
- While Native American communities embrace a broader definition of “relatives” than do Western ones, the absence of key guardians in households of young adolescent girls raises questions about their safety and whether they are residing with protective relatives or in potentially exploitative situations, in jeopardy, and out of reach of resources like social-emotional and educational support.

## BOX 2. LOCAL VULNERABILITIES

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|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bullying and fighting</li><li>• Racism and discrimination</li><li>• Drug and alcohol use</li><li>• Self-harm and suicide</li><li>• Early childbearing</li><li>• Dropping out of school</li><li>• Domestic violence</li><li>• Poverty</li><li>• No opportunities after school</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Transient, seasonal community visitors</li><li>• General community distrust to outside help</li><li>• Lack of life preparation</li><li>• Programs only during school hours</li><li>• Programs more accessible for boys</li><li>• Lack of any programs for young people</li><li>• Sexual pressure during powwows (cultural community dance festivals)</li><li>• Lack of community participation</li><li>• Rural transportation obstacles</li></ul> |
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## BOX 3. LOCAL POSSIBILITIES AND ASSETS

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Local valuation in maintaining cultural identity</li><li>• Existing enthusiasm among young people to participate in cultural activities</li><li>• Social media to better understand local “universe” of girls</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Traditional games as a vehicle for culturally relevant programming in partnership with asset-focused curricula</li><li>• Powwows</li><li>• Mentorship from Native women at local universities</li></ul> |
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## Shaping Program Premises, Learning Methods, and Content to Excluded Native Girls and Communities

### Finding Protective Assets Responsive to Local Vulnerabilities

In another setting for this work—Montana—IMAGEN staff facilitated a two-day discussion on the girl-centered, Intentional Design approach to program design, which covered, among other subjects, initial reactions to Girl Roster results. We explored, as a group, what a culturally appropriate local rollout could look like. Through activities centered around topics such as asset building, programmatic segmentation, and community mapping, participants identified several regionally specific vulnerabilities (see Box 2) and opportunities (see Box 3) that existed for adolescent girls throughout tribal areas in the state.

### Highlights from Adapting Intentional Design in Native American Contexts

- Because many people in small tribal communities are distantly related, we do not speak of participants, subjects, or clients, but instead as serving “relatives.”
- Local girl groups are referred to as “girl societies” (referencing long-established cultural traditions of women’s societies and warrior societies) and weekly meetings as “talking circles.” Use of these labels reflects the consistency of IMAGEN’s approach with those of historical tribal cultures and lifeways.
- The process of recruiting mentors from among females aged 18–29 is common in many parts of the world; IMAGEN has found, however, that this is not fully appropriate for the Native context, because of the strong tie between the generations

**FIGURE 2. EXAMPLES OF NATIVE AND GIRL-FOCUSED RESILIENCE SKILLS CARDS BASED ON THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE'S ASSET EXERCISE**



and the need to involve tribal elders in order to preserve tribal knowledge and lifeways before they are forever lost. Research with Native teens in the US consistently shows that due to lack of resources, services, and opportunities, young people are eager to gain knowledge of their cultural traditions as a source of healing and wellness. Some struggle, however, to gain access to elders who can impart such information. Community-based mentored girl societies that utilize a combination of young women and elder women as mentors can begin to strengthen social ties and encourage transfer of knowledge between generations.

- The tremendous pressures and burdens of historical and contemporary trauma and grief in tribal communities, daily occurrences of illness, death, and violence, combined with a lack of even basic services and the immense caregiving responsibilities of Native females all result in regular absences of meeting participants and project team members. This must be planned and budgeted for and requires using trauma-informed practices. Duplicate and back-up team members are required

so that plans can go forward, and program knowledge is preserved and built upon over time.

- Inspired by the Community of Practice's Asset Exercise, an original set of Native and girl-focused resilience skills cards were created that featured Native American-focused capabilities and skills that girls should have by particular ages (see examples in Figure 2). Realities of modern Native American life and matrilineal cultural traditions feature heavily in the card set. These were created based on a series of workshops and key informant interviews that IMAGEN led with Native women and girls.
- Native adolescent and girl-focused economic literacy curriculum has been drafted to fill a glaring gap we found in this sector. Despite women heading 40% of Native households in the Great Plains (often large and multigenerational), they have lower financial literacy and financial-service access than males. Existing Native asset-building programs (such as the First Nations Development Institute) do not currently have age- and gender-specific materials for Native American girls.
- Working in a trauma-informed manner with this population also means knowing about Native history. This, in turn, informs whether and how global tools could and should be adapted for use. For example, in Native American communities, anyone going house-to-house knocking on doors was traditionally there to take one's children away (to boarding school), to evict you from your house and land (forced removals by the US government), or to arrest someone. One must be extremely careful in considering whether tools that seem innocuous to outsiders can, in fact, be deeply trauma-inducing and inappropriate.

## Conclusion

With our Native American partners, IMAGEN is utilizing Intentional Design tools, gathering

resources, and drafting girl-centered program-planning tools and a curriculum for use in Native American communities. We are also developing, as of 2020, a Native community-focused “how-to” guide for implementing girl-centered programming in rural tribal communities and urban Indian neighborhoods.

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For more information on IMAGEN Network, please visit:

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