

# GRANDMOTHER PROJECT

CHANGE THROUGH CULTURE

## ***Grandmother Leaders: A valuable resource to improve the lives of adolescent girls***

*A project funded by Dining for Women and the UK Embassy in Senegal*

*“A grandmother leader is someone who sees a problem and who does not just sit there. She is someone who is always ready to help solve problems and contribute to the development of the community.”*

*Grandmother Leader,  
Gnima*



*“Wisdom of Grandmothers” game elicits dialogue on girls’ development.*

A priority goal of ***Grandmother Project – Change through Culture*** (GMP) is to promote girls’ education and well-being. One of GMP’s new initiatives to improve the lives of adolescent girls is the **Grandmother Leaders Project**. The project aims to strengthen the leadership role of grandmothers in communities to prevent child marriage, teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation, and to keep girls in school.

Girls are threatened by these and other challenging issues which they cannot overcome on their own. The project aims to increase community support for girls namely, by building on the influential role of grandmothers within families and communities to promote changes in attitudes and expectations related to girls’ growth and development.

The objectives of the project are: to increase grandmothers’ knowledge of the risks of child/forced marriage, teen pregnancy and FGM; to increase solidarity and collaboration between grandmother leaders and with all grandmothers; to increase grandmother leaders’ confidence to play an active role in promoting community-wide change in favor of girls’ health and well-being; and to strengthen communication between grandmothers and adolescent girls.

# GRANDMOTHER PROJECT

CHANGE THROUGH CULTURE

To accomplish the three objectives of the **Grandmother Leaders Project**, four training modules were developed for this innovative “**Under-the-tree Leadership Training for Grandmothers to Promote the Well-being of Adolescent Girls**”. Grandmother leaders from adjacent villages participate in a series of four two-day participatory non-formal education/training sessions. The training aims to increase grandmother leaders’ self-confidence, both individually and collectively, to take action within their own communities to protect and promote girls’ well-being and education. The training sessions for grandmothers consist of a series of participatory learning activities using role plays, discussion of case studies which describe typical situations and problems, and discussion of drawings, photos and testimonials from grandmothers in other communities. Virtually all of the grandmother leaders are illiterate and the training activities do not require any reading or writing.

Adolescent girls participate in some of the participatory learning activities with the grandmother leaders during after-school hours.

*Grandmothers participating in the “broken circles” exercise which teaches the importance of collaboration. 230 grandmother leaders from 43 communities are involved in the under-the-tree training sessions.*



A total of 230 grandmother leaders from 43 communities are participating in this program. The majority of the grandmothers are from rural villages, but participants also include some urban grandmothers from the town of Velingara.

The content of the training activities is further explained below.

→ **Increasing grandmothers’ knowledge of the risks of early/forced marriage, teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation**

The aim of the various participatory learning activities in the training sessions is to encourage discussion of these critical issues concerning girls. GMP believes that

# GRANDMOTHER PROJECT

CHANGE THROUGH CULTURE

changes in grandmothers' attitudes and strategies for addressing these issues can best come about through discussion within peer groups of grandmothers in which "traditional" and "modern" ideas are debated and a consensus is reached on the best practices to adopt. An interactive game was created, called "The Wisdom of Grandmothers", to stimulate discussion related to these and other issues affecting the growth and development of young girls.

## → Empowering grandmother leaders to play a greater role in promoting the health and well-being of girls at the family and community levels

Under-the-tree trainees are all grandmothers who were identified as leaders by their communities. However, it is through the participatory training activities on their roles and on the importance of strengthening both individual self-confidence and group solidarity that grandmothers have increased their sense of empowerment and commitment to play a proactive role at the community level to promote girls' development and empowerment, and to protect them from harmful practices and situations.

*"When you have confidence in yourself you feel powerful. In order to accomplish our objectives we grandmother leaders must feel strong and confident."*

*Grandmother Leader Sadio*

## → Strengthening communication between grandmothers and adolescent girls

The traditional African approach to teaching children priority values and attitudes is based on "educating through fear". Project training activities with grandmothers promote "educating through listening and dialogue". In the course of the four training sessions, numerous exercises, role plays, etc. deal with how to communicate with girls using listening and dialogue. Significant changes in the attitudes of grandmothers regarding how they communicate with girls are documented in their comments such as this one from Grandmother Fatou, "We have realized that we need to listen to girls much more in order to know how to support them".

*Discussion with grandmothers on how to improve communication with adolescent girls using an approach based on "listening and dialogue" rather than the traditional approach based on "threats and lectures".*



# GRANDMOTHER PROJECT

CHANGE THROUGH CULTURE

Due to the **Grandmother Leaders Project** grandmother leaders now feel more confident, they have increased their understanding of the challenges faced by young girls and are increasingly involved in community-wide efforts to protect and support girls to ensure their full physical, emotional and intellectual development. The grandmother leaders are having a ripple effect on other grandmothers, mothers, fathers, traditional community leaders and teachers by mobilizing other community actors to take action to encourage and protect girls.

The following true story reveals how several grandmother leaders involved in the training have been empowered and were able to save a 14-year old girl from child marriage to a well-off immigrant.

*After a long discussion with his brothers and uncles, the father of 14-year old Fatou agreed to marry her off to an immigrant, who lives in Spain, during his vacation in the village. When the grandmother leaders learned about this, 3 of them first visited Fatou's mother. She was distraught but said she could do nothing to prevent the marriage. They then met with Fatou's father to try to dissuade him but he refused to change his mind. Determined, they went to see the village headman who agreed to talk to the father. However, before he did, 4 grandmother leaders joined by 3 other grandmothers returned to talk with the father. Pressured by the 7 grandmothers, the father gave into their argument that "it is dangerous for Fatou to be married at such a young age" and he renounced the marriage plans. One of the grandmother leaders who orchestrated this action said, "Before our training we didn't have the courage to do such a thing. But now we have greater confidence in ourselves and we are united to take action to protect our girls".*

*An under-the-tree discussion with girls and grandmothers of a story-without-an-ending on early marriage.*



**Conclusion:** Grandmother leaders exist in all communities but many programs neither recognize their importance nor encourage them to play an active role in promoting the well-being of families and children. The **Grandmother Leaders Project** is capitalizing on the grandmother resource by empowering them to empower girls.