

ACT
WITH

HER

Working with Very Young Adolescent Girls and Boys: Perspectives from the Frontline

Pathfinder International, in collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia, in partnership with CARE International, and with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is implementing a five-year umbrella program that partners with girls to forge the health, education, economic, and social pathways they need to thrive during the transition to adulthood. By 2022, we aim to reach 50,000 adolescent Ethiopian girls and boys by scaling up an existing girls' empowerment program (called Her Spaces) while simultaneously assessing the potential value-add of an expanded version (called Act With Her). A randomized impact evaluation conducted by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research consortium will determine to what extent Her Spaces and the variations of Act With Her:

- strengthen individual and collective capabilities among adolescent girls across six domains: physical health, education, bodily integrity, psychosocial well-being, voice and agency, and economic empowerment;
- increase gender equitable attitudes, behaviors, and norms throughout social networks, families, and communities; and
- increase responsiveness and access to high-quality services for adolescents.

Both Her Spaces and Act With Her engage very young adolescent girls (10 up to 14) in weekly curriculum-based groups facilitated by "near peer" mentors ages 18-24 over

the course of 10 months. Topics covered include a wide range of puberty and menstruation, health, nutrition, education, safety, gender, communication, and economic empowerment themes.



Act With Her expands this foundational model to also include mentor-led group programming for older adolescent girls (ages 15+) and younger and older adolescent boy peers, and a series of group sessions with parents or caregivers of both girl and boy adolescents.

In select sites, Act With Her also partners with local communities to catalyze positive shifts in gender and social norms, and to make key health, education, child protection, and other social services more adolescent-responsive.

In a small number of Act With Her sites girls also receive a moderate material asset transfer aimed to support their menstrual health and continued education.



WHERE

Amhara, Oromia, and Afar regions of Ethiopia

WHY

While Ethiopia has made remarkable socio-economic progress over the last decade, too many adolescent girls are still vulnerable to child, early, or forced marriage; female genital cutting; and sexual or gender-based violence. Their voice, agency, education, and livelihood options are often more limited compared to boys due to restrictive gender and social norms.

WHAT

Act With Her is a multi-sectoral program partnering with adolescent girls to forge healthy and happy futures while also connecting with boys, parents/caregivers, and local leaders to ensure that girls have allies and support now and in the future from peers, partners, and social services and systems.

WHO

Pathfinder International, CARE International, Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE), Government of Ethiopia, funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

WHEN

2017-2022

What Very Young Adolescents Had to Say

Designed to separately serve very young adolescents (VYAs) and older adolescents, with a learning period built in between, Act With Her (AWH) engaged the first cohort of VYAs from March 2019 through January 2020, with over 13,000 girls and boys participating in over 500 groups. We collected routine monitoring data which included an adolescent feedback form completed monthly by every group. At the end of the 10-month duration of adolescent group meetings, we also adapted the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology to collect stories of change from a sub-set of participants, including adolescents. Rather than pre-specified questions tied to program goals or indicators, the participants were simply asked an open-ended question about any change in their life. While the information reported by adolescents is not generalizable, it largely aligns with the global community's current knowledge and understanding about this life stage. **Four themes from the responses stood out as particularly useful for our team and may be useful for others working with very young adolescents:**

1 *Individual-level beliefs about gender may shift in a short period of time*

Virtually all the VYAs reported major changes created in their lives from participating in the project. Common examples include improved educational performance, experiences of reduced stigma around menstruation, improved communication skills, and increased self-confidence. Additionally, the changes in gender-related behaviors that they consistently described align with the growing understanding that early adolescence is a critical time to meaningfully inform both girls' and boys' attitudes about gender and gender norms.²

"My father is very aggressive, like a dictator. He influences my mother and community too. The majority of husbands in my community act like my father. I also needed to be like my father. I complained to my mother and sisters, even fighting with them if they couldn't serve my breakfast on time. Because of the project, I completely changed my behavior positively, I stopped fighting with my sisters when they are late to serve breakfast. I started to support them while they are cooking breakfast. I stopped seeing my father as a role model."

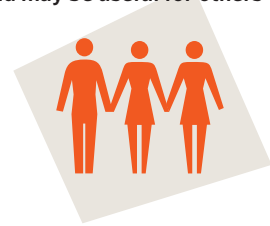
— BOY

"I was considering myself as less than men... but it's wrong. I can do what boys do."

— GIRL



2



Like all people, adolescents do not live in siloes

The VYAs often told stories that reflected a ripple effect, with changes happening across several domains of well-being at once. For example, stories described how better menstrual hygiene practices led to an increase in school attendance, boys who began to share family chores led to girls having more time for school and homework, and in several cases, new communication skills were used to speak up against child, early, and forced marriage.

[After attending a session where she learned tips to access diversified foods] ... "I discussed with my parents and they prepared a plot of land at the back yard for planting vegetables. A few months later, those vegetables were matured for consumption and we started including green vegetables as one part of our meal. There are extra vegetables from the garden which I take to the nearby market to sell, and I started to earn additional money. When our mentor encouraged us to wisely manage every penny that we get, I started to save my money."

— GIRL

¹ Rick Davies and Jess Dart, "The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique A Guide to Its Use," Version 1.00 April—2005 <https://www.mande.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/MSCGuide.pdf>

² Global Early Adolescent Study, <https://www.geastudy.org/>

3 **Heavy burdens of work at home**

Old enough to handle some responsibility but typically still too young for paid or formal work, many VYAs are assigned heavy workloads at home. When asked via the group feedback form if there were factors that made it difficult for them to attend AWH sessions, both boys and girls overwhelmingly reported household and family duties. Some described using their newfound knowledge of gender roles or communication skills to negotiate greater chore-sharing between boy and girl siblings, or to get parents to agree to a schedule that allowed for both chores and school or group attendance.



4 **Parents and caregivers are still in control**

Though parents and caregivers are influential gatekeepers for older adolescents' choices and behaviors, by comparison they are in even more control of the lives and choices of VYAs, who often have very limited autonomy. Some adolescents observed that the parents' group sessions powerfully spurred one or more parents to demonstrate new opinions or behaviors at home.



"I had workload from my family which caused me to be absent from school... my family ordered me to keep stocks, fetch water from the river, participate in farming work, prepare foods, etc. My parents, especially my mother, wanted me to remain at home during school time... After I started attending girls' group sessions about negotiation, I started communicating with my parents and explained to them if I follow my education and attend it without being absent, I will reach a better place and achieve my goals. I also told them I can help by working during free time after study. Then my family gave me a promise that they will never let me remain at home due to work. Parent sessions is one reason my parents understand my feelings because it made them aware of the importance of education. I started to attend school regularly and my educational performance shows progress."

— GIRL

Insights from the Local Implementation Team

When asked for their perspectives and insights gleaned from engaging very young adolescents, the following were common themes in our frontline team's responses:

Including boys in girl-centered programming carries both benefits and caveats

In the research sites assigned to the girl-only Her Spaces model, communities did not express concern about the sole focus on girls. In the sites assigned to Act With Her which includes group programming for both genders, boys received a lighter touch model by meeting bi-weekly instead of weekly. They also did not receive the asset transfer in the groups assigned to that variation. At first, many of these communities enthusiastically welcomed the inclusion of boys, reporting that too many youth efforts focus only on girls and expressing an appreciation for also

attending to boys' vulnerabilities. Over time, however, as it became evident that girls met more often or some were provided with an asset transfer, our team consistently heard concerns and frustrations from community leaders, families, and boys about the unfairness of that approach. Our staff and community allies were largely successful in explaining that girls suffer from inequity and thus may require additional support, but this took considerable time and effort. The concepts of equity and equality are complex, and it is understandably confusing for participants to learn about gender equality while observing us apply an uneven intervention. We now plan to deliver an equal number of sessions for our forthcoming cohort of older adolescent girls and boys, as we feel that boys need and deserve it, community acceptance is bolstered, and potential community backlash for girls is mitigated. >>>



VYAs are eager to learn and apply new ideas

Children in early adolescence are developing opinions and behaviors that will impact the rest of their lives. Staff consistently reported how open and eager the VYA participants were to learn and grow, and how important it is to reach young people early on while the opportunity still exists to foster positive thinking and attitudes.

“Adolescents are like blank papers, just they capture what you told them.”

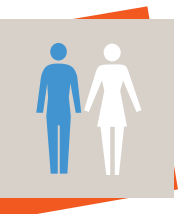
“They easily express feelings openly, understand what you teach them, and they also changed into practice. I learned from them that they change their attitudes in a short period of time.”

Connecting with VYAs requires sensitivity, friendliness, and fun

Staff described a common shyness found in younger adolescents compared to their older peers, and therefore highlighted the importance of using accessible, friendly, and respectful facilitation styles. They also observed that VYAs were most engaged during participatory and play-based learning activities. The adolescents often spontaneously created and performed original poems, songs, and dances about what they had learned, unprompted by the curricula guide. They also appreciated breaks that included cultural dance or sports, which gave them the opportunity to further bond and burn off energy.

“Since VYA are very sensitive, anyone who implements with this age group should be wise, be an active listener, and properly understand what they are saying... I have learnt many things from them: they are fast to talk, transparent, and need care and support. Therefore, we should be careful while we approach them.”

“They were attracted by observable things like drama, role play, learning from model people in the community, and telling true stories.”



VYAs can be meaningfully engaged in monitoring, evaluation, and learning

Collectively, the adolescent development field has made impressive improvements in meaningful youth engagement, particularly related to the program design and implementation phases. We found that young people can also be effectively included in monitoring, evaluation, and learning workstreams. Asking VYAs for their opinion can elevate their sense of voice and agency, and give them a channel to share their opinions and input on a program they are taking part in. In the AWH model, each mentor randomly selected one adolescent per month to respond to a feedback form. They were asked simple questions about their experience, how the groups could be improved, and about any challenges that they faced. There are flaws with this approach as the mentors may not accurately capture the adolescents’ responses or the VYAs may not feel comfortable divulging their true feelings to their own mentor. Our team decided that without other options it was best to try to capture the participants’ experiences this way, and the VYAs did share interesting and thoughtful points that helped us strengthen our programming and better understand their lives. Recognizing that program monitoring is by nature an extractive process where data is collected from communities but rarely communicated back to them, we also aggregated the adolescent feedback into a simple data flyer for the VYAs themselves that included pictures, quotes, and opinions from their peers in the same region.

Key Takeaways

- Individual young people reported large differences in a short time, which were often multi-faceted in nature (versus sector-specific)
- Young people are very eager to learn and grow, but they appreciate being approached sensitively and with play and fun in mind
- Given their authority over younger adolescents, hosting group sessions with parents and care-givers is a “must-do” for this particular age group
- Including boys in girl-centered programming has compelling benefits but requires careful balancing
- Very young adolescents are socially and intellectually mature enough to be engaged in monitoring, evaluation, and learning



Act With Her is led by Pathfinder International, in collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia, in partnership with CARE International, and with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Evidence of impact is being assessed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research consortium.

TO LEARN MORE VISIT www.pathfinder.org/projects/act-with-her/

#ActWithHer on social media