

Forging Panoramic Pathways with Girls from Adolescence to Adulthood

ACT WITH

HER

Engaging Mentors in Very Young Adolescent Programming: 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.

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13,000 GIRLS and BOYS



PARTICIPATING IN OVER 500 MENTOR-LED GROUPS.

Designed to separately serve very young adolescents (VYAs) and older adolescents with a learning period built in between, Act With Her (AWH) engaged our first cohort of VYAs from March 2019 through January 2020, with over 13,000 girls and boys participating in over 500 mentor-led groups. Through perspectives gathered from our project staff and from the program's mentors during routine supervision and via an adapted Most Significant Change methodology, this brief



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

contributes to a growing body of experiential knowledge about deploying mentors in adolescent-centered programming. The information the mentors and our team collectively reported largely aligns with what the global community currently understands about challenges and best practices for mentor engagement. **Five themes in their responses stood out** as particularly useful for our team and potentially for others working with mentor-led adolescent programming:

1 Finding the best mentor profile is complicated

Global best practice and our implementation experience suggest that supporting local stakeholders to identify and recruit mentors from the same community as the adolescent participants is critical for maximizing trust, respect, and mutual understanding. Moreover, setting minimum standards for mentor skills, education or literacy, knowledge, values, and attitudes is important to ensure they can capably facilitate group discussions (particularly on sensitive or complex topics) and collect routine monitoring data. At the same time, in geographically remote, under-served, or migratory communities, finding enough local young people who meet these standards can be challenging. In some sites our team had to be flexible on certain requirements like grade level completion in order to find local mentors. In a small number of sites in a pastoralist region even that flexibility did not suffice,

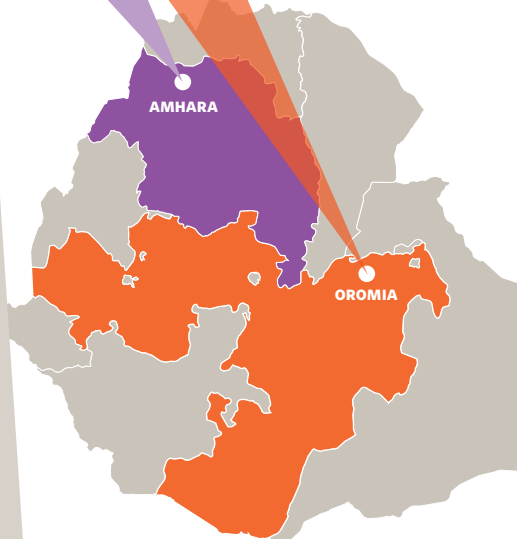
and mentors were selected from neighboring towns. Engaging mentors with fewer skills who live locally versus selecting higher-skilled, yet not-as-local mentors carries tradeoffs that programmers need to balance in their specific context. Additionally, our team observed that mentors who were married or who had children some- times had more difficulty with performance and commitment. Yet excluding mentor candidates for being married or having children would foster inequity and deny a key opportunity to young women or men who equally deserve it. Moreover, some staff recommended recruiting married mentors as they may be less likely to move away. Without a universally applicable mentor profile, individual programs will need to consider which mentor characteristics are the most pragmatic and appropriate in their setting.

2 Higher stipends do not necessarily guarantee mentor retention

Mentors serve a critical function and devote valuable time and effort by leading adolescent and youth groups. In Ethiopia the government considers mentors to be volunteers. At the same time, many programs offer small stipends to compensate mentors for their time and travel. We assigned such stipend amounts by considering: regional differences in cost of living; the amount paid within the pre-existing girls-only Her Spaces model (with mentors leading one group); and the higher levels

REGION*	GROUP ASSIGNMENT	MONTHLY STIPEND	COMPLETION BONUS	10-MONTH COMPENSATION TOTAL	ATTRITION RATE
South Gondar, Amhara Region	Her Spaces Girls' Group Mentors	\$5	NA	\$50	3.6% (1/28)
	AWH Girls' Group Mentors	\$15	\$50	\$200	10.7% (9/84)
	AWH Boys' Group Mentors	\$7.5	\$25	\$100	7.1% (6/84)
East Haraghe, Oromia Region	Her Spaces Girls' Group Mentors	\$5	NA	\$50	10.7% (3/28)
	AWH Girls' Group Mentors	\$30	NA	\$300	17.0% (15/88)
	AWH Boys' Group Mentors	\$30	NA	\$300	15.9% (14/88)

* The Afar Region is not represented as programming there is ongoing



of responsibility and time required of mentors in the expanded AWH model, where mentors worked in pairs to facilitate two groups and also helped facilitate parents' group sessions. In the Amhara region, the team also introduced a bonus for mentors who completed the full 10-month commitment. Given the well documented challenges for mentor attrition, AWH had overall high rates of retention, with around 90% of mentors staying through to the end. However, a surprising trend was that in both regions more attrition occurred for the mentors with higher compensation. The degree of increased responsibility these mentors had may not have been sufficiently offset by the difference in stipend amount, demonstrating that higher compensation does not necessarily deliver higher retention. In general, mentors reported finding full time employment, getting married, or moving out of the area as common reasons for leaving.

3 Mentors may become influential beyond the group space

Globally, mentors have a proven track record of serving as positive role models for the young people they engage with in groups or clubs, and our program mentors were no exception. Additionally, we heard

Since I was a facilitator of a boys' group and found the discussion very important for all, I decided to be a model for the boys in my group by fetching water for my wife, cleaning the house, and while she is baking Injera [bread], I prepare the sauce and coffee. By doing this, we are able to save time and minimize efforts by accomplishing lots of work in a short time which increases love and happiness in the family.

— AWH BOYS' GROUP MENTOR

many reports where they played an influential role for young people or members of the community who were not direct participants in the program, creating a diffusion of impact that may be useful to account for when planning new group-based projects. For example, several mentors were not only enlisted by AWH girl participants to help them cancel their marriages, but mentors also described instances where they proactively stopped a child marriage or female genital cutting (FGC) in the broader community (for adolescents outside the program). Mentors also may impact the behaviors of their own families and networks based on their changing skills and attitudes.

4 Supervision should be supportive, frequent, and transparent

Mentors in the AWH sites received individual and collective supportive supervision. Supervisors periodically observed them facilitating a session



to offer real-time guidance. On a quarterly basis, all the mentors from the same area were convened to share challenges and best practices and learn from their peers' experiences. Supervisors were responsible for rating mentor performance using a checklist that assessed different aspects of high-quality facilitation. Though we aimed for a 15% improvement between the start and close of the program, checklist scores were so high in the beginning that it left little room for improvement. However, this quantitative finding of near-perfect performance constructed a different picture than the qualitative feedback from supervisors. In the qualitative assessments, supervisors freely noted challenges and indicated a wide range of areas where they offered recommendations for improvement. Mentors themselves also reported that supervision was useful, highly valued, and important for their improvement and success. Supervisors may need more assurance that objectively rating mentor performance in data collection forms is not punitive

for them or for the mentor and will only be used to monitor changes over time and to identify areas when refresher trainings or additional facilitation skills-building are needed.

5 **Leveraging mentorship is an underutilized multi-sectoral approach**

In adolescent-centered programming, mentors are often considered a means to an end, or as inputs needed to reach the ultimate goal of improved adolescent well-being. Yet both the evidence base and our own experience tells us that typically these only slightly older youth reap meaningful personal benefits of their own. In our project they reported learning new knowledge from the trainings on curricula content, gaining more confidence and community respect, and using their improved skill sets to seek further opportunities.

Working as a mentor can do more than improve the lives of younger adolescents. It can also serve as a bridge to new educational or livelihood opportunities for young adults in low-resource areas. Usually funded to specifically drive progress in adolescent education or health, many donors and policymakers in the economic growth or workforce development sectors may be overlooking the potential that mentor-led programs also hold for improving early career readiness and forging bridges to youth employment.

Earlier my thought on my life was to marry and [care for] children only. So, I stopped my education. After I joined as a girl mentor the project awakened me and helped me to acquire confidence. Now I realized that I can do anything. I regretted discontinuing my education. I decided to return back to school for better future.

— GIRLS' GROUP MENTOR

"I bought a cow [with the mentorship stipend] I got from the project, now I have started an income generating activity."

— GIRLS' GROUP MENTOR



"I used to feel as I have no education but after I took the training and facilitated the [group] discussions I feel as I am an important person after all."

— GIRLS' GROUP MENTOR

"Earlier [the boys' group mentor] was not confident to share his ideas and ask questions in the classroom or at community meetings. Today, he is a good speaker and negotiator in the community. Due to this he is now employed as the functional adult literacy facilitator in the [town]."

— MENTOR SUPERVISOR

Key Takeaways

- No one-size-fits-all profile for mentor demographics will suit every program
- Mentors volunteering their time and energy deserve compensation, yet other factors such as high levels of effort or competing opportunities can still drive attrition
- Mentors may create impact by becoming

influential to adolescents or community members outside of the program

- Supervision of mentors is crucial, and supervisors themselves may need help with reporting and tracking performance objectively and transparently
- Mentorship models are a win-win across sectors, with the potential to improve not only adolescent well-being but also better educational, livelihood, or career opportunities for young adults



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