ACT WITH HER

PHOTO: Anouk Delafortrie

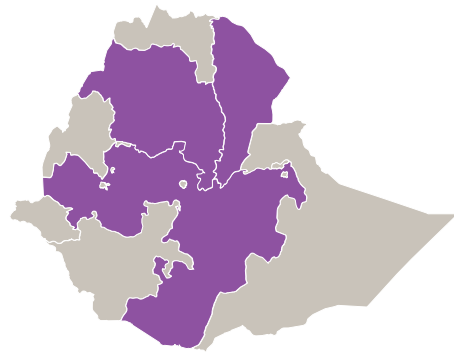# Delivering Adolescent Programming in a Migratory Pastoralist Setting: Perspectives from the Frontline

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

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.

WITH OVER 2,600 GIRLS and BOYS PARTICIPATING IN MENTOR-LED GROUPS

We introduced the AWH program to a cohort of very young adolescents (VYAs) in the Afar region of Ethiopia in July 2019, with over 2,600 girls and boys participating in mentor-led groups (these groups will conclude when program implementation resumes after the current pause due to COVID-19, instated in March 2020). Through perspectives gathered from our project staff, this brief contributes to a growing body of experiential knowledge about delivering social development programming in pastoralist or migratory contexts. Our experiences, involving several challenges unique to this setting, and our team's attempts at creative problem solving may offer helpful lessons or ideas to others working in similar environments.

The setting

While Ethiopia has made remarkable progress in poverty reduction, health, and education over the past decade, the pace of change varies by region. The Afar Region of Ethiopia is one of nine regional states, located in the north-east. Over 90% of the population are agro-pastoralists who depend on both raising livestock and agricultural production, with high levels of mobility and migration that vary by season and year. The area's arid, harsh, and drought-prone environment has given the Afar people a reputation for their pride, strength, and resilience. This context, however, has also left them largely marginalized, with significant food insecurity and an increased overall vulnerability to climate change, conflict, or economic shocks. Unlike other parts of Ethiopia, Afar receives very limited international aid or investments in socio-economic development. In turn, when compared to other regional states, Afar has underdeveloped infrastructure, a lack of basic social services such as schools, poorer households, the lowest gender parity index, the second highest proportion of women with no education (and the highest for men), the second highest total fertility rate, and the highest rate of teen pregnancy.

Women and girls in Afar also suffer from some of the most rigid and patriarchal social and gender norms. For example, longstanding and still widespread local tradition of Absuma (which ensures that girls marry their first and eldest cousin) contributes to early, child, or forced marriage, and limits the voice and agency of adolescent girls. As a result, key gender and education indicators in Afar are distinctly different from AWH's other two target regions:

Indicators	Afar	Amhara	Oromia
Teenage motherhood	23.4%	8.3%	17%
Female genital cutting	91.2%	61.7%	75.6%
Women's literacy	13.8%	31.3%	21.1%

Challenges and creative problem-solving

Designed in close collaboration with AWH's funder and research consortia, from the start the entire team not only understood the enormous potential to make a positive difference in Afar, but also the specifically unique barriers we would face to doing so. Relatively few adolescent- or gender-focused interventions have effectively reached these communities, leaving a large gap in proven or best practices to use as a guide. At the same time, the dearth of evidence for what works has inspired us to prioritize learning and critical reflection, and to embrace the chance to help expand our collective knowledge base on how to support the 'hardest to reach' adolescent girls and boys.

It was not surprising when challenges began to arise, though some were more unanticipated than others. For example, despite having been spoken for a long time,

linguists only developed a distinct Afar alphabet in the 1970s, making its written form fairly young in comparison to the other long-established languages in Ethiopia. This made finding efficient and high-quality translation services for our group materials far more difficult than we originally expected. The more anticipated hurdles that came to pass included general literacy barriers and major program disruptions due to migration, security concerns, and weather events.

ULTRA-REMOTE LOCALES

At times, a solution to one challenge unintentionally created new ones. After having difficulty identifying young women and men in some of the Afar program sites who met the predetermined literacy levels and qualifications used in other regions, the team reduced some of the requirements. Even using this new criteria, however, in certain areas literate mentors could only be found in neighboring kebeles (villages). This approach solved the recruitment challenge but posed new ones for travel and accessibility. Even within Afar, our specific implementation area (Zone 5, also known as Harirasu) is considered one of the most isolated and difficult to access. On average the sites are a five hour drive from the region's capital, far from a main road, up to 70 kilometers from any town center, and even located several hours away from one another (the latter is partially due to randomized assignments versus the geographic clustering that would happen in real-world implementation). There is also not a widespread network of public transportation or affordable vehicles for hire. Not only did this make supervision and oversight complicated, but it took extraordinary effort for the mentors from neighboring sites to reach the communities where the adolescents served by the program resided. The mentors became quite resourceful in response, introducing additional adaptations such as remaining flexible in their schedules, and bundling some sessions together during a single group meeting.

FLUID MIGRATORY PATTERNS

By far the most complicated challenge to date has been finding ways to consistently convene adolescents in the same physical locations, given the mobile lifestyle of their families and communities. In some Afar sites,
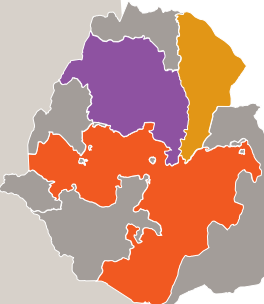
> **On average the sites are a five hour drive from the region's capital, far from a main road, up to 70 kilometers from any town center,...**

Notable obstacles and considerations for future programming

OBSTACLE	CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING	
Without good road networks or viable public transportation options, travel is extremely difficult, time consuming, and costly. **Highly qualified project staff and mentors are less available in the most distant and isolated communities.**	Prioritizing strong staff qualifications over local residence carries clear advantages and helps ensure high quality implementation. Yet when project staff and/or mentors live outside of the local intervention sites in pastoralist settings, the frequency and overly long distances of travel required for supervision, project oversight, and group facilitation can be overwhelming from both an operations and sustainability perspective. All efforts should be made to recruit locally, which may mean significantly altering qualification criteria and offering more robust pre-service training than usual to fill any capacity gaps. Some activities	could also be potentially re-formulated so that they can be delivered through low-tech digital innovations or by partially leveraging existing public sector structures and staff (such as health extension workers). Importantly, young women in particular have severely limited opportunities in geographically isolated communities. Despite the additional investments in training or skills-building support they may need to capably lead adolescent programming, it gives marginalized young women a rare and valuable chance to expand their own voice, agency, and future opportunities.
Fluid seasonal migration patterns, unpredictable severe weather, and conflict and insecurity all prohibit the feasibility of frequently and consistently convening groups of adolescents and their parents together in the same places at the same time.	AWH calls for girls to meet every week, boys to gather every other week, and for adolescents' parents to join six group sessions over the course of 10 months. Neither this frequency nor the overall duration is realistic for a highly migratory population. Group-based interventions should consider strategies for bundling content into fewer and more	modular batches, designed flexibly to be delivered during windows of opportunity that more closely align with the population's movements and preferences. It may not be possible to predict when these periods of physical access will occur, so rigid, pre-determined schedules and calendar-based timelines are not advised.
Routine data collection for basic monitoring, evaluation, and learning was difficult for low-literate staff. Despite being paper-based at the lowest levels, the project's larger data system is digital (DHIS2) and therefore required extensive training for team members still unaccustomed to using technology. Significant internet and electricity outages exacerbated these issues.	Teams should use creative strategies for data collection and implementation learning that do not overly burden frontline workers. Despite the temptation to collect as much information as possible to help fill the knowledge gaps, MEL systems and processes that will be used by staff without extensive training should be aggressively streamlined, pared down to only report on the most critical indicators and data points. Though ultra-remote	sites and travel challenges makes the timely collection of paper-based forms difficult and therefore inhibits the detection of real-time problems or progress, their use may mitigate more complex challenges posed by technological platforms requiring high levels of literacy and digital fluency. Phone calls or messaging apps should be encouraged for reporting serious problems or incidents that would warrant rapid actions or responses be taken.

#ActWithHer

> **Serious, realistic, and practical planning is needed to find the right balance of adaptations, and to build in far more space than usual for ongoing and rapid micro-adaptations and course corrections.**

migratory patterns continue to vary and evolve. For example, in several areas, sub-clusters of clans and families were moving simultaneously in several different directions rather than in one direction as a generally larger group. This meant that at any given week in these particular sites, even when the mentors were readily available to facilitate group sessions, only a small portion of the adolescents from that group were physically present in the same place. Demonstrating a high level of creativity, the CARE staff who lead implementation in this region developed an innovation to deliver the program in the few sites where this scattered migration pattern was most problematic. They recorded the entire girls' and boys' curricula, creating an audio-only version (on an Amplio Talking Book, designed for low- or non-literate users). Without access to mentors, a 'resource person' from each traveling family or clan (such as a trusted mother or a community mobilizer used in public vaccine campaigns) can play the audio and lead group discussions. They can then verbally record basic key data points on the device (such as how many adolescents listened in), to be uploaded at a later date into our project's data system. The team was poised to roll out this innovation just as the COVID-19 pandemic began and will be re-initiated when the temporary program pause has ended.

SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING REQUIRES SUFFICIENT BASIC SERVICES

The program sites in Afar are assigned to the variation of AWH that includes community-level social norms change and local systems strengthening. In other project regions, the latter was designed to focus on school-based education and health for very young adolescents (for example, by partnering with schools to better support girls when menstruating). In Afar, however, many locations lack even minimally functioning schools. In a project where systems strengthening is designed to be complementary rather than the primary objective, the aim is not to establish or supplement such services but to enhance the ways that they serve and support young people. Therefore, in Afar this workstream is narrower than in other regions, with the team focusing on activities that can take place even where the existing education system is weak.

Reflections

Operational and cultural complexities abound when delivering adolescent-focused development programming with a geographically remote and migratory population. Yet because adolescents in these communities are so marginalized and underserved, even flawed programming can potentially have an outsized beneficial impact. Funders, policymakers, and implementing agencies should think hard about what they can do to deliver support to these populations despite the complications, possibly higher operating costs, lack of evidence-based practices, and the elevated potential for failures. At the same time, standard operating procedures need more than a handful of tweaks to be compatible, feasible, or even appropriate in these settings. Serious, realistic, and practical planning is needed to find the right balance of adaptations, and to build in far more space than usual for ongoing and rapid micro-adaptations and course corrections. In hindsight, our model likely required quite a bit more differentiation from the plan in other regions. We remain excited and optimistic about continuing to learn useful lessons, and overall, deeply inspired by the adolescent girls and boys in Afar who continue to show us the way.

Key Takeaways

- Even minimal levels of programming can benefit the most underserved and hardest to reach adolescents

- With few proven practices in these contexts, learning through trial, error, and even failure makes an important contribution to eventually learning what works

- Planning centered around fluctuating windows of opportunity to reach and convene migratory adolescents may work better than using prescribed timelines, calendars, and schedules

- Consistently convening groups of adolescents or parents over prolonged periods of time is unrealistic, so content should be condensed into fewer and more efficient formats

- Extremely low levels of literacy require thoughtful, creative, and flexible approaches for staff recruitment, training, and skills-building

- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning plans should incorporate strategies for reflective learning and adaptation, but require minimal data collection from the very frontline