



ACT  
WITH **HER**

## Gender-Synchronized Programming: Perspectives from the Frontline



**WHERE**

Amhara, Oromia, Afar, and SNNP 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**

2017-2023

Pathfinder International, in collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia, in partnership with CARE International, and with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, implements the Act With Her (AWH) program to partner with girls in forging the health, education, economic, and social pathways they need to thrive during the transition to adulthood. Between 2019 and 2022, we have reached more than 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 Aid-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 AWH engage very young adolescent (VYA) girls (10-14) 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.

AWH further expands this foundational model to also include mentor-led group programming for VYA boys (10-14) and for older adolescent (OA) girls and boys (15-19), and a series of 5-6 group sessions with parents or caregivers of both girl and boy adolescents.

In select sites, AWH 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 AWH sites the younger adolescent girls also receive a moderate material asset transfer aimed to support their menstrual health and continued education.

The program was implemented in two consecutive phases, with a learning and reflection period between them. We engaged the first cohort of VYAs across the Amhara, Oromia, and Afar regions from March 2019 through January 2020, with over 13,000 girls and boys participating in over 500 mentor-led groups. The advent of the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 largely coincided with our planned learning period, but it did additionally postpone the initiation of the second phase by several months. From



mid-2021 through the end of 2022, we reached a large second cohort of VYAs, while also completing programming for the first cohort of OAs (ages 15–19). The older group meets over the course of 6 months as compared to 10 months for the younger group, although the community level social norms and systems strengthening components for both age groups takes place for approximately 12–18 months. Working across the Amhara, Oromia, and SNNP regions in this phase, more than 29,000 adolescents participated in over 1,164 groups.<sup>1</sup>

This brief contributes to a growing body of experiential knowledge about working together with boys in girl-centered programs (or, being ‘gender-synchronized’), and specifically focuses on AWH’s experience with this approach in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia. The AWH team has delivered the gender-synchronized model to more than 4,000 very young adolescent boys and girls (and their parents and caregivers) across 42 kebeles (villages) in Amhara.

### What is Gender-Synchronization?

Gender is a social construct that refers to the characteristics, norms, behaviors, and roles associated with women, men, girls, and boys, and their relationships with each other. Because it is socially constructed, concepts of gender vary by context and evolve with time.<sup>2</sup> Inequitable gender norms and power dynamics are driven and reinforced by adolescents’ peers, families, communities, and the broader institutional structures that surround them. As children enter and progress through adolescence, gender norms play a heightened role in shaping the trajectories of their lives. Without change in gender attitudes and norms at each of these levels, improved outcomes within the transition from childhood to adulthood are unlikely to be sustained.

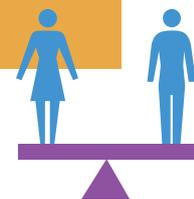
## Key Definitions:

**Gender-transformative programs** aim to deliberately and directly transform gender relations and norms to promote equality. Common attributes of effective gender-transformative programs include engagement of various sectors and stakeholders at different levels of the social ecological model; diversified programming whose activities and perspectives reinforce each other; and fostering of critical awareness and participation among affected community members.<sup>3</sup> Many of these efforts exclusively work with women and girls.

**Gender-synchronized programs** are gender-transformative and work with young people and adults of all genders simultaneously in an intentional and mutually reinforcing way that challenges gender norms, catalyzes the achievement of gender equality, and improves health.<sup>4</sup>

### Gender-Synchronization in AWH

AWH’s gender-synchronized programming helps adolescent girls and boys question and critically reflect on norms, behaviors, and expectations related to masculinity and femininity. Most of the weekly group discussions the adolescents attend are segregated by gender and led by trained near-peer mentors of the same gender. Additionally, four joint sessions bring the boys and girls together to discuss issues related to gender roles and negotiation skills. These joint sessions build mutual understanding and enhance participants’ ability to address gender- and age-based challenges



<sup>1</sup> For both phases combined: all AWH intervention sites (kebeles) in Afar and approximately 58% of intervention sites in Amhara and Oromia were part of GAGE’s impact evaluation. The SNNP region is not part of GAGE’s research areas.

<sup>2</sup> “Gender and Health.” Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization. Accessed January 3, 2022. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1).

<sup>3</sup> Levy, Jessica K, Gary L Darmstadt, Caitlin Ashby, Mary Quandt, Erika Halsey, Aishwarya Nagar, and Margaret E Greene. “Characteristics of Successful Programmes Targeting Gender Inequality and Restrictive Gender Norms for the Health and Wellbeing of Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults: A Systematic Review.” *The Lancet Global Health* 8, no. 2 (February 2020): e225–36. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(19\)30495-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(19)30495-4).

<sup>4</sup> Greene, Margaret E, and Andrew Leveck. “Synchronizing Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations.” Interagency Gender Working Group, 2010. <https://www.igwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/synchronizing-gender-strategies.pdf>.

in their communities. The AWH curriculum has been tailored to the specific program context for cultural sensitivity and specificity to the adolescent needs and gender norms in the project area.

AWH recognizes that working with adolescents alone is not sufficient to change longstanding gender norms. AWH separately engages parents and caregivers in six sessions designed to encourage and facilitate adult-adolescent dialogues. These sessions engage diverse community members who are fathers, mothers, and guardians to improve their relationships with their adolescent children. In addition, the project engages local communities to catalyze positive shifts in gender and social norms via CARE International's longstanding Social Analysis and Action (SAA) approach. SAA encourages regular participation of key norm holders, influential persons, elders, and religious leaders in creating their own solutions to challenge rigid, harmful social and gender norms within their communities. Through reflection, problem-solving, and dialogue, community members work together to address inequitable community norms that prevent youth from realizing their rights.

### What Participants Had to Say

In 2020, at the end of the first 10-month duration of adolescent group meetings, the AWH team adapted the Most Significant Change methodology to collect 48 stories of change from a subset of participants in Amhara. Rather than pre-specified questions tied to program goals or indicators, the participants were asked an open-ended question about any change in their life. While the information reported is not generalizable, it aligns with current global knowledge and understanding about this life stage. The stories highlight positive shifts in gender-related attitudes among adolescent girls and boys and their mothers, fathers, and caregivers.

Adolescent girls reported greater communication skills and confidence to set goals, express themselves at home and in school, advocate for their safety and wellbeing, and engage in healthy friendships. Girls also reported better awareness of menstrual hygiene management, other good hygiene and nutrition practices, and financial savings and management, leading to better health and greater ability to engage in school and other activities. In addition to their personal growth, girls described notable shifts in attitudes and practices of the boys and adults around them; these are apparent in the Most Significant Change stories of boys, parents, and caregivers.

Boys described heightened awareness of the importance of good nutrition, of saving money, and of sharing the burden of household chores. For example, Meseret, a 12-year-old grade 6 student who lives with his parents, two sisters, and two brothers, lives in a culture that discourages men from sharing domestic work. Meseret never did any work around the home or considered the fairness of the distribution of work within his family or its negative impact on his sisters' school performance.



**As I am participating in home chores, my sisters are getting more time to read, and they are getting competitive in school.**

After participating in AWH sessions with other boys, Meseret's views on gender began to shift. During a "Whose role is it?" session, mentors brought boys together with girls to discuss gender norms and encourage equal participation in chores at home. Meseret realized that his and his brothers' participation in household activities would reduce the burden on his mother and sisters, allowing his sisters more time to study and perform well in school.

Meseret now helps his mother and sisters around the house. "As I am participating in home chores, my sisters are getting more time to read, and they are getting competitive in school. Now there is no work division in our house. I began cooking wot, fetching water, and cleaning animal dung together with my sisters. I am happy to share the burden with my mother and sisters."

Mothers, fathers, and other caregivers who participated in AWH underwent similar transformations. Parents like Aleign Kibret, 35, who attended the parental sessions while his son attended an AWH boys' group, report positive shifts in their relationships with their spouses and children. After attending the sessions, Kibret became more engaged in his



four children's educational and social lives and began helping his wife with household chores—something he previously saw as shameful. Before, his wife was often tired and unwell. But after he began to share the burden of cooking, baking injera, cleaning the house, and doing the laundry—for example, he might chop onions for dinner while his wife washes the dishes—his wife was much happier, and he was, too.

Dessie Asmamaw, a 35-year-old father of five, reported that prior to participating in AWH, his children did not attend school. His participation in the sessions led to his realization of the important foundation that school provides; consequently, he enrolled them in school. His actions caught the attention of his community since it was well-known that he had previously refused to send his children to school. This attention provided him the opportunity to speak about the benefits of both AWH and of sending children to school. Tsehaynesh Alemu, 38-year-old mother, also participated in the AWH parent sessions while her daughter took part in the girls' sessions. As a result of her experience with AWH, Alemu spoke with her husband, and together they canceled the proposed early marriage of her daughter. She has gone from being a proponent of early marriage to working to raise awareness of the dangers of early marriage in her community.

### Insights and Recommendations

Engaging parents, caregivers, and adolescent boys along with adolescent girls can have a considerable impact on gender norms and cultural practices that negatively impact women and girls. By encouraging boys and men to support the girls and women in their lives, AWH is reducing the gender gap and creating an equitable environment for all. Implementation of the AWH approach has yielded several valuable lessons for successful gender-synchronized programs.

#### Gender-synchronized programs for adolescents should not:

- **Assume gender norms are uniform or similar across implementation contexts.** Even within the same country, norms are often specific to a certain community or location. The AWH curriculum allows for discussion led by adolescents, allowing space for exploration and re-examination of contextualized, relevant norms and related practices.
- **Assume that all men and boys inherently perpetuate negative gender norms and behaviors or that all women and girls are opposed to harmful gender norms.** Recognize that all people have the potential to, and in fact do, reinforce healthy or unhealthy notions of masculinity and femininity. Failing to acknowledge that many boys and men are already allies in gender equality falsely reinforces stereotypes and can also curtail their valuable support and engagement with the project.

#### Gender-synchronized programs for adolescents should:

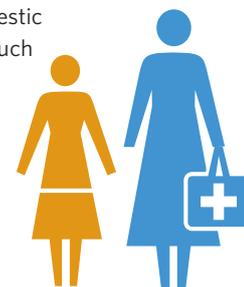
- **Acknowledge that directly including boys in girl-centered programming carries both benefits and caveats.** As a girl-centered program, initially the girls received 40 weekly sessions and the boys met every other week for 20 sessions. At first, many communities expressed an appreciation for the attention to boys' vulnerabilities, given how many

programs solely enroll girls. Over time, however, as it became evident that girls met more often, the AWH team consistently heard concerns and frustrations from community leaders, families, and boys about the unfairness of that approach. AWH 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. The team subsequently adapted the approach for its next phases, and now delivers an equal number of sessions for girls and boys. The objective is to better meet boys' needs, bolster community acceptance, and mitigate potential community backlash for girls.



- **Engage caregivers and community members as agents of change and allies to promote adolescent project participation and gender-equitable relationships for the whole community.**

Gendered roles—domestic responsibilities for girls and economic activities such as animal herding for boys—initially hindered regular group attendance for many adolescents. Implementers must consider the support adolescents may need in navigating gendered constraints to fully participate and experience all the benefits of the program. Gender norms are discussed early in the series of AWH group sessions for parents and caregivers. As a result, some adolescents said their parents started compromising with them on chores, and some caregivers reported encouraging their daughters to regularly attend.



- **Consider holding joint sessions with all genders.** A project can be gender-synchronized if it directly involves and serves all genders, even if they are engaged separately. If culturally acceptable, however, also holding a small number of joint sessions between genders carries many potential benefits. The AWH team reported that the four joint sessions helped build empathy between girls and boys for the gendered pressures and expectations each face.



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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 Aid-funded Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research consortium.

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