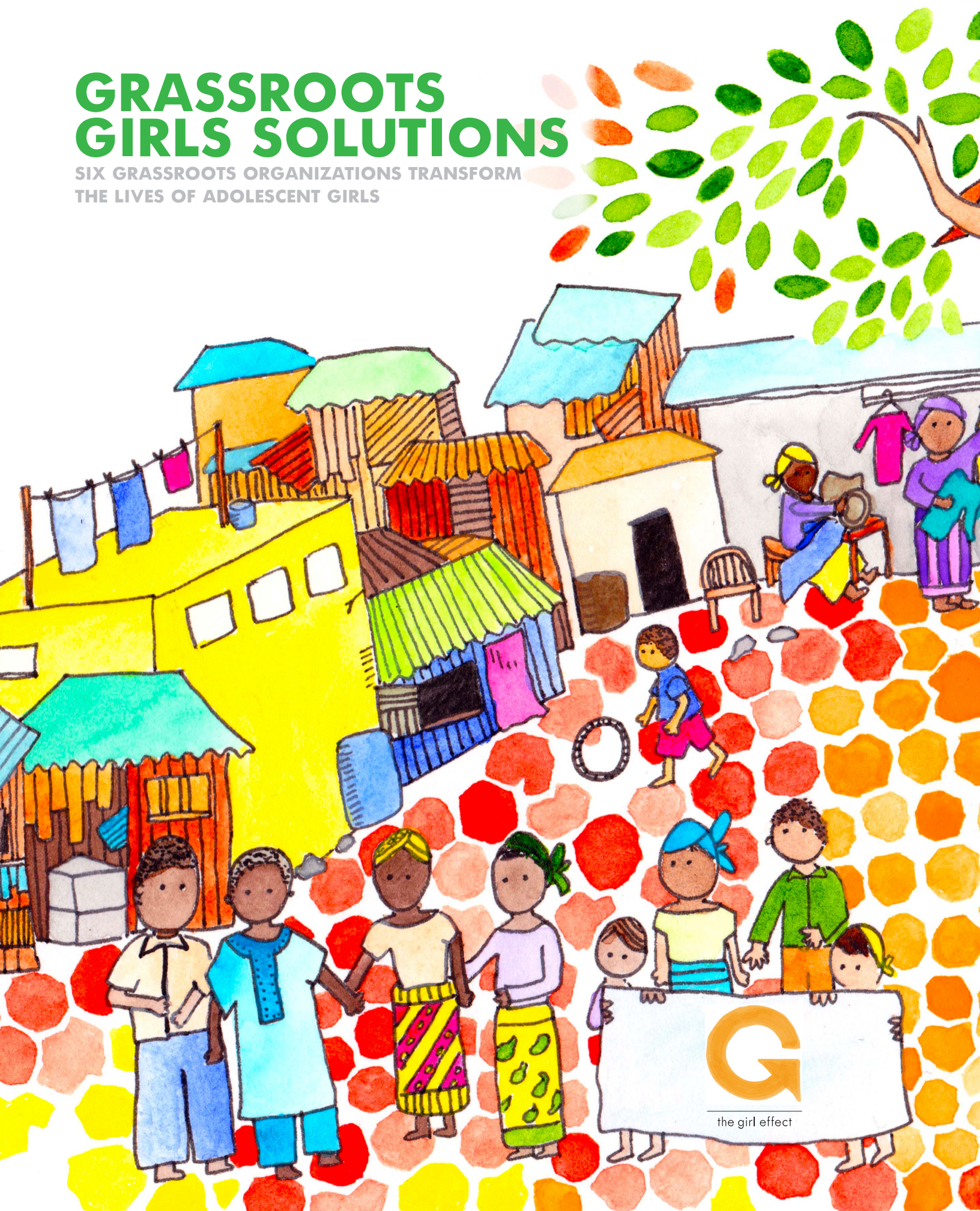


# GRASSROOTS GIRLS SOLUTIONS

SIX GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS TRANSFORM  
THE LIVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS







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THE LIVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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The Grassroots Girls Initiative is a partnership of six funders that believe grassroots organizations are uniquely qualified to design and implement effective, organic solutions for the most underserved girls in the communities where they work. Grassroots Girls Initiative members are:



The Grassroots Girls Initiative was launched by the Nike Foundation in 2006 as the first donor consortium devoted exclusively to grassroots solutions for adolescent girls. The Nike Foundation believes in the power of local solutions to unleash the girl effect.

***Nike Foundation***

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# INTRODUCTION

**AMONG THE TOWERING** Sal trees and fertile mangrove forests of West Bengal, teenage Tanuja has emerged as a leader to educate, persuade and inspire her community to act against child marriage and see the inherent worth of girls. Not letting verbal abuse, aggression, torrential floods nor a persistent lack of electricity stop her, Josefa continues to make long treks with her high school-aged cohorts through the lush hills and valleys of Guatemala to give workshops on reproductive rights to isolated populations of girls. Passing rusted shacks, dirt roads deeply rutted with foul water and roving gangs of boys, 14-year-old Susan doesn't let her surroundings in a Kenyan slum get her down—instead she channels her energy into being a positive, motivated role model for her adolescent girl group.

Though the paths these girls traveled to become empowered agents of change were littered with different obstacles, they all encountered grassroots organizations that facilitated their positive transformations and offered new opportunities. Grassroots organizations, that are born from and work within their communities, are uniquely positioned to unleash the potential of the 250 million adolescent girls living in poverty in the developing world. Adolescent girls have a multiplier effect in the fight against global poverty. When the life of one girl is changed, her family, community and our world benefit. This is the girl effect.

Despite their proven potential to change the world, girls in poverty, navigating the already tenuous years of adolescence, face additional quicksand such as child marriage, early pregnancy and violence. Perhaps no other segment of society globally faces as much exploitation and injustice.

“Women represent 50 percent of humanity and countries are holding themselves back in terms of their economic development by discriminating against girls and women,” Desmond Tutu said in a 2012 press conference for The Elders, an international non-government organization of noted and noble public figures. “[The Elders] are saying

‘imagine what would happen when women and girls are set free and can participate in decision-making.’”

Investing in adolescent girls is one of the most effective ways to break the pattern of poverty that is handed down from generation to generation. As reported in detail in the *Girls Count* series, if a girl stays in school, has access to health services and is given an opportunity to earn a dignified wage, she will marry later, have fewer and healthier children and earn an income that she'll invest back into her family and community. Recognizing this potential, and that of grassroots organizations to deliver innovative and inspiring solutions that reach some of the most

marginalized girls in the world, the Grassroots Girls Initiative (GGI) was formed in 2006. This donor consortium is committed to improving the lives and opportunities of adolescent girls by supporting and strengthening grassroots organizations.

Profiling six organizations out of the 300 groups supported by the GGI, this report makes clear that quality grassroots organizations not only transform the lives of girls, but also shift the thinking of entire communities to see the

value of girls. Unreached adolescent girls, mobilized by grassroots organizations, create visible, measurable change in their own lives and in their families, communities and nations. In this community-wide approach, grassroots organizations found the key to unlocking the dual shackles of poverty and lost opportunity. The girls, their families, the community and the grassroots organization are inextricably intertwined with the success of one depending on the successes of the others. By supporting grassroots organizations with robust, dedicated programming for adolescent girls, entire communities are given a new way to create their own path away from endemic poverty.

Focusing on transforming the lives of adolescent girls and the people and institutions that surround them, the grassroots organizations profiled here, along with many others, share four characteristics that make them successful:

In this community-wide approach, grassroots organizations found the key to unlocking the dual shackles of poverty and lost opportunity.



## **SUSTAINED PRESENCE**

Rooted in the community, the staff of grassroots organizations know well the complex dynamics that make up the society in which the girls live and grow. Having themselves experienced the reality and roadblocks that the girls experience—from becoming teenage heads-of-households in communities ravaged by HIV to accessing reproductive health care in remote villages—staff are able to address the specific and compelling needs of girls that change over time, while remaining steadfast in their presence. These grassroots groups purposefully build bridges between generations so that “graduates” from their programs can return to mentor and guide the next generation through similar challenges.

## **REACHING THE UNREACHED**

Marginalized by cultural practices, poverty and discrimination, girls are often outside the reach of larger development projects led by governments and international aid agencies. By utilizing local networks and leveraging relationships within communities, grassroots organizations are able to identify the hardest-to-reach girls, while staff are positioned to know how to find those girls who are hidden and socially isolated from public places. That grassroots organizations are of the community creates a sense of trust and credibility that allows them to reach seemingly invisible girls, like the adolescent girls who leave school in shame due to harassment by their male teachers or the teen mothers who find themselves trapped at home, cut off from the chance at an education and participation in their community. Only grassroots organizations have the trust needed to access, mobilize and strengthen the social capital of girls.

## **INNOVATIVE, LOCAL SOLUTIONS**

Grassroots organizations—that know the local landscape, language, culture and challenges that influence and shape the lives of girls—offer the most salient solutions for adolescent girls in their communities. Staff cultivate unexpected interpretations of local problems by listening to girls and the larger community and then use those insights to design appropriate solutions. As programs are implemented, staff are then able to work closely with girls and the community, monitoring the

effectiveness of their programs, and are able to make changes to their strategy and focus based on the needs at hand. This local knowledge best places grassroots organizations to address the urgent needs of girls, giving authenticity to their home-grown, ingenious solutions. From training Muslim girls in photography as an exercise in self-empowerment by capturing the reality of the world around them to teaching rural girls sustainable farming methods to combat soil depletion, which in turn helps girls gain credibility and influence in their villages, change is happening in surprising ways. Communities are buoyed by the contributions of adolescent girls and the unique, form-fitting solutions grassroots organizations design for girls and the world around them.

## **COMMUNITY-WIDE APPROACH**

Grassroots organizations are able to understand and deal with the spectrum of actors and complexities that shape the environment in which girls operate. Rather than compartmentalizing their approaches, grassroots organizations instead employ comprehensive programming in response to girls’ multifaceted needs. An effective grassroots organization goes beyond working with local police officers to rescue child domestic workers from abusive situations, to also provide a safe house, educational opportunities and medical care to rehabilitate the girls, facilitate vocational opportunities with local businesses for reintegration back into the community and offer informational sessions for village chiefs to stop child trafficking before it starts. A range of actors—from the government, police, hospitals and schools—are enlisted to create safety nets for the most marginalized population of their community, thus, strengthening the social fiber that enables the entire community to thrive.

Exceptional grassroots organizations have the insight and staying power to see even the most marginalized girls as part of an environment that is integrated and implement innovative strategies to transform their whole environment, to the benefit of the girl and the community. The following examples, from very different corners of the world, show that this approach is not a theory, as profound change is happening now and is revolutionizing the world of girls.



# AWAAZ-E-NISWANN

## CREATING OPPORTUNITY FOR MUSLIM GIRLS

**NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX** political and religious arenas that come with being a Muslim girl in India is no easy task. Forced marriages based on deceit and shame can dissolve a girl's spirit; promising female students find themselves home-bound due to strained finances; venturing out to pursue a vocation is sometimes seen as socially taboo—something a traditionally “good” Muslim girl would not do. Fighting against these ingrained practices and for the rights of girls is Awaaz-e-Niswann (AEN), translated as “voice of women.” This community-based organization works toward the empowerment of some of the most marginalized adolescent girls in India, providing grassroots level solutions to prevent domestic violence, encourage higher education and self-sufficiency and to create a safe space for Muslim girls. Formed by the Muslim women's community based in Mumbai, AEN is able to access Muslim girls living in ghettos and belonging to lower economic groups in and around Mumbai. There are few other organizations in India reaching this mostly isolated group of adolescent girls with a feminist and rights-based approach.

Within the Muslim community in India, women and girls are particularly marginalized. In 1973, the Indian government established the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, thereby allowing the Muslims of India to exercise justice within their own communities through the application of *Shari'a* (Muslim Personal Law). The leadership of the Board consists of religiously and socially conservative men charged with interpreting *Shari'a*. This patriarchal system of justice denies women of all ages rights that are enshrined in international human rights law, the Constitution of India and, in some cases, *Shari'a* itself. Topics legislated by *Shari'a* include marriage, divorce, dowry payments and inheritance. However, the powers of the Board have expanded over the past several decades to include customs and behavior, dress and rituals. In

addition, Muslim women must also contend with structural challenges that all Muslims face in India, including lack of access to education and the systematic ways Muslims are being left out of the country's economic success. These factors have compounded each other to have a significantly negative impact on the ability of Muslim adolescent girls and young women to exercise their rights, such as freedom of movement outside the home, obtaining an education, accessing quality health care, living a life free from gender-based and domestic violence and choosing their own livelihoods.

Shahnaz Shaikh, who in the early 1980s unsuccessfully challenged the right of Muslim men to unilaterally divorce women, formed AEN in 1987. The founding members—Muslim women, many of whom have survived violence in their personal lives—believed that demands for the reform of *Shari'a* must come from within the Muslim community, and not from the Indian government. The original mission of the organization

Today, I am a changed person. Now I can speak [publicly], travel alone all over Mumbai and fight for my own rights.

was to provide a safe space for Muslim women and girls where they could gather and talk about their concerns without fear of alienation from their communities. For more than two decades, AEN has successfully provided a safe space for adolescent girls to meet, share problems and express themselves in a non-judgmental environment.

After being forced to relocate offices 12 times over the past 10 years because of its controversial work and threats to their safety, the organization secured a permanent office in Kurla, a centrally located urban neighborhood with a significant Muslim population in Mumbai. AEN also opened a field office, the Rehnuma Library Center, in Mumbra, a suburb 40km outside of Mumbai that is home to over 800,000 Muslims displaced from central Mumbai by the 1993 communal riots, started as a result of Muslim-Hindu tension prevailing in the city after the Babri Mosque demolition. By opening an office in this area, AEN brought their programs

to where they are most needed in order to serve girls who are not reached by government services or large-scale international aid interventions.

“In the initial years, most of the women who approached AEN were older, married and with a history of domestic violence. Many of them wanted their daughters to be educated and have more life options,” said Yasmin Aga, an AEN coordinator. “In the late 90s we started arranging scholarships for these girls. Then we thought: ‘Why wait for the girls to be married and face violence? Why not work with them from an early age so that such situations can be prevented?’ It was then that we decided to design programs exclusively for girls.”

A significant number of the women approaching AEN with cases of marital dispute and domestic violence are between the ages of 16 and 25. Early marriages are common in the Muslim community due to religious sanction and concern over girls’ safety. AEN offers assistance to adolescent girls and young women seeking to get out of bad marriages through their casework program, which includes the provision of advice and information; mediation with family members and negotiations on behalf of women at religious forums; facilitation of access to legal, social and other support services; and assistance navigating the justice system. AEN’s consistent and continuing work with a variety of community members—from fathers, to religious leaders to government officials—is going beyond transforming the lives of girls to tapping into the AEN constituency for awareness building, campaigning for law reform and advocating against broader human rights violations faced by Muslims and other marginalized communities.

AEN also offers a sanctuary for girls, something Reshma is grateful to have found. Married young, Reshma was sent to live with her husband and his family in a village some distance from her home in Mumbai. Soon the honeymoon was over and her husband’s cruelty became increasingly unbearable. Alone with only his family, there was no one to intervene on her behalf when he beat her. Reaching her breaking point, Reshma fled to her mother for help. Speaking about the abuse was very difficult and shameful for Reshma. Her mother became infuriated, vowing not to let her daughter be treated with such cruelty.

Having heard that there was a local organization

that helps women challenge the discrimination they face within their families, Reshma’s mother reached out to AEN. After hearing Reshma’s story, AEN staff led her through the process of obtaining a divorce from her abuser. As her case progressed, Reshma began to spend more time at AEN’s office and became interested in their photography workshops. Over three years ago, Reshma became a member of AEN’s photography team and now plans to use her skills to become financially independent.

“In my initial days I was shy, apprehensive and naïve,” said Reshma. “Today, I am a changed person. Now I can speak [publicly], travel alone all over Mumbai and fight for my own rights. AEN has always encouraged me ... I have left behind my past and I am striving to pursue my dreams.”

Many girls who were forced to move from Mumbai to Mumbra, with their families, after the 1993 riots had to drop out of school due to the unavailability of public schools and high costs associated with private schools. Furthermore, girls in Mumbra could no longer attend or had to travel 25 miles to AEN’s offices in central Mumbai to access their programs. These were the main factors that led to the establishment of the Rehnuma Library Center in Mumbra. Currently, there are about 200 members between the ages of 16 and 25. This center houses a library of Urdu literature, which is difficult to access in India, in addition to books in Hindi and English. The Center also organizes book readings, excursions to parts of Mumbai, workshops on personal development and drama, as well as interactions with other NGOs.

One of the core activities at the Rehnuma Library Center is the literacy program, which aims to increase girls’ access to post-primary education and livelihood opportunities. Due to poverty, Muslim families tend to prioritize education of males over females in the family, leaving few girls able to obtain a secondary education. By providing 35-40 scholarships yearly to cover tuition costs for girls to pursue secondary and college education, as well as professional and vocational training courses, AEN fulfills a considerable unmet need. Furthermore, AEN’s initiatives include literacy classes, which provide basic education to illiterate girls, and homework assistance for girls attending school.

Tabassum and Hina, both 20-years-old, took different roads to the Rehnuma Library Center, but

soon found their lives and futures intertwined.

Hina had come with her mother who needed assistance to get out of a domestic violence situation. Seeing that Hina had completed her schooling, AEN staff asked her to teach one of the literacy classes and Hina agreed. Tabassum, on the other hand, was unable to attend secondary school due to financial constraints. An avid reader, Tabassum sought out the Center to find books in Urdu. As she became more familiar with the Center, Tabassum started to participate in the reading club and subsequently joined Hina's literacy class.

Tabassum recalls how freeing it was to speak her mind at AEN and how she would look forward to attending Hina's literacy classes. Hina created an atmosphere of sisterhood and brought the girls' talents to the forefront by making them sing when they made mistakes on their lessons, rather than punishing the girls. Tabassum soon realized that she had a talent for writing plays. The girls in that literacy class produced and performed one of her plays at a public auditorium in Mumbra where family members and the general public were in attendance. Before this day, the girls could not imagine that the wider community would be interested in listening to and learning from girls. It was a rare opportunity that they cherished: "After the play, we held each other and wept," said Tanassum. "We couldn't believe that we had actually performed in public!" Both girls, now best friends, were awarded AEN scholarships and are studying at college.

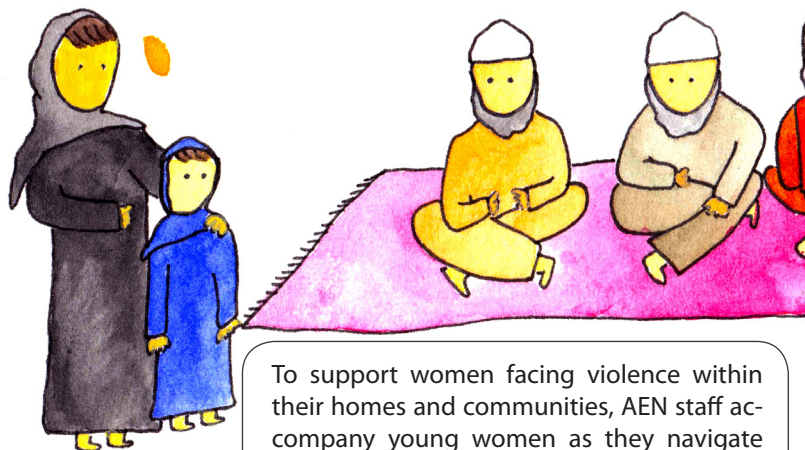
The uniqueness of AEN's approach lies in its ability to reach a population that is marginalized and often hard to find—Muslim girls and women in ghetto communities—and to encourage them to become confident and full citizens. AEN represents one of the few civil society organizations that works with Muslim women and adolescent girls in India with an approach that addresses both tangible (safe space, support, education and skill building) and intangible (self-esteem, rights awareness and empowerment) needs. By bolstering the community's support for adolescent girls, AEN is enabling empowered individuals to serve as role models and change agents for their peers.

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*This article was derived from a case study report researched and written by Asmita Basu, Sandhya Gupta and Elizabeth DeLois on behalf of American Jewish World Service. Please go to [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org) to access the full report.*



By opening the Rehnuma Library Center in Mumbra, home to over 800,000 Muslims, AEN has brought their programs to where they are most needed to serve the girls who are not reached by government services.



To support women facing violence within their homes and communities, AEN staff accompany young women as they navigate the formal and informal justice systems.





## AWAAZ-E-NISWANN IN THEIR COMMUNITY



In collaboration with Point of View, a women's media advocacy group, AEN conducted a year-long photography workshop with 16 women and girls, most of whom are domestic violence survivors, to help the participants understand themselves by capturing images of their world.

Through AEN's advocacy initiatives, members participate in campaigns initiated by AEN and other civil rights groups to campaign for law and policy reform.

American Jewish World Service, based in New York, has funded AEN since 2001. By funding community-based organizations like AEN, which operate in remote areas and urban slums, AJWS reaches out to people whose needs are not always met by traditional development efforts. Because these groups are often marginalized by their local governments and societies, working with them combines service provision and community development with efforts to demand public services, ensure respect for human rights and reduce discrimination. To learn more about AEN and American Jewish World Service, please go to [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org).

# WEM INTEGRATED HEALTH SERVICES

## EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRL PEER EDUCATORS

**A RISING STAR** in her school, Susan knows that a good peer educator understands and respects others and encourages girls to make positive choices. From a peri-urban slum in Thika, an industrial town in Central Province, Kenya, Susan leads an adolescent girls club where during weekly meetings girls discuss the challenges in their lives and how to make informed choices. Through engaged discussion and exposure to new ways of thinking, the girls work on increasing their self-awareness and developing the confidence to stand up to negative influences.

Susan also knows that insidious influences are abundant and ingrained in her community where poverty and HIV/AIDS are rampant. The lives of girls and women in Thika's slum are framed by a dearth of opportunities, marginalization and vulnerability. Over 60 percent of hospital beds are occupied with HIV/AIDS patients and approximately half of the population lives in absolute poverty. Thuggery, theft and violence were Susan's reality growing up, and shaped how she interacted with others. Before becoming a peer educator, 12-year-old Susan bullied other students and copied their work. Teachers, Susan believed, were not to be trusted. At home, her grandmother—overwhelmed with the responsibilities of caring for her grandchildren without an income—often beat Susan. A confluence of negative factors, magnified by poverty, engulfed her.

In 2009, though, a grassroots organization changed the trajectory of Susan's life. WEM Integrated Health Services (WEMIHS), which works to provide comprehensive care and support for those impacted by HIV, initially focused the majority of their efforts on caring for adults living with HIV. They quickly realized the impact of HIV on children, especially girls, and expanded their services to address a wider spectrum of young people's critical needs. Girls made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS have high levels of stress and fear about

their future; they seldom feel they have someone who will listen or help them to work through their grief and trauma: "You give us food and clothes, but no one listens to us," said Wanjiru, a WEMIHS beneficiary.

WEMIHS heard those cries. They redesigned their child-focused programming to respond to the psychosocial needs of girls at home, at school and in their peer groups. Adolescent mapping conducted by WEMIHS in 2009 confirmed that three key actors—parents and guardians, teachers and girls—are critical to transforming the lives of girls. Adolescent girls do not exist in isolation, but rather are part of and affected by the broader environment in which they live.

Accordingly, a multi-pronged approach is now used by WEMIHS to equip adolescent girls and the key actors in their "ecology of care" to support the needs and rights of girls by engaging parents and guardians, training teachers and increasing the self-confidence and self-efficacy of girls.

Addressing parents and guardians as key actors strengthens the well-being of the family and their ability to meet the basic needs of their children. Before WEMIHS' programs, many parents and guardians blocked their girls' ability to focus on school by heaping on chores and other responsibilities. Some guardians were not aware that secondary school even existed, while others neglected to provide the support that would help girls succeed in school. Recognizing that parents and guardians face challenges due to poverty and HIV/AIDS, WEMIHS provides additional services like the sustainable livelihood initiative. Through the initiative, parents and guardians receive agricultural training as well as access to local micro-credit and savings support. By helping to improve income and food security at home, WEMIHS relieves pressures that often strain the family and result in girls being pulled out of school. In addition, WEMIHS also facilitates psychosocial support among caregivers, which helps them to

Girls now have the material and psychosocial support to actively pursue opportunities to enroll in secondary school.

support each other as they face life challenges.

Even though all children between the ages of 5 and 15 must attend school in Kenya, WEMIHS saw that typically schools do not adequately respond to the specific needs of girls. As a result, girls were not reaching their full potential academically and often dropped out. WEMIHS enhances the school environment by training teachers to offer psychosocial support and counseling to students. Training in child counseling equips teachers with the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of girls not just as learners, but as vulnerable children. Through the psychosocial support training, 23 teachers are now able to identify vulnerability, and possess the skills and confidence to counsel and refer girls to other service providers, such as hospitals and the police. The head teacher at Susan's school participated in the WEMIHS training and began to set up a peer education club for adolescent girls, looking for students who demonstrated leadership qualities to launch the program. While originally the teacher saw Susan as a poor student and troublemaker, after the WEMIHS training he realized she was a lonely, angry and vulnerable girl struggling to survive. He also saw Susan's potential. Taking a chance, Susan was asked to become a peer educator.

Adolescent girls themselves form the third, and most important, prong of WEMIHS' programming. WEMIHS found that girls were not prepared for the challenges of adolescence. They did not have confidence or self-awareness, nor did they have a source for sound information regarding their reproductive health. Furthermore, girls did not have support to enroll in, complete and succeed in secondary school. Many girls were lost in transition. In order to help girls gain confidence and to create a safe space where they can discuss their problems and access reliable information, WEMIHS identifies girls with potential and trains them in peer education and life skills. At one such course, 58 adolescent girls, including Susan, and boys between the ages of 10 and 15 received life skills education, communication skills and information on drugs, sex and sexuality, behavior and behavior change. During the three-day training Susan gained knowledge that helps her negotiate the dynamic years of adolescence. She learned about children's rights and the particular needs of

young people affected by HIV/AIDS. Follow-up support to reinforce the foundation laid during the workshop includes the formation of adolescent clubs, parent forums and assemblies, where girls are recognized and heard.

Susan realized by the end of the training that she had to lead by example. She stopped cheating and bullying her classmates; she studied and did her own homework. Once weary of teachers, Susan began to see them as positive role models. "They help me. If I don't understand something I ask them to explain," commented Susan. Soon her grades began to rise and she met her goal of qualifying for a strong secondary school. Susan was even able to speak with her grandmother about children's rights and that beating is wrong. Now, a more peaceful atmosphere prevails in Susan's home. By tapping into her own power through the continuous, encouraging support from her teachers and WEMIHS, Susan grew from an insecure and feared tormenter into a positive force and agent of change in her family and school.

As a result of WEMIHS' programs, Thika has seen a drop in early pregnancies and an increase in the number of girls going on to high school. Before implementing the WEMIHS program, teachers would see an average of 12-15 pregnancies per year; teachers have since reported zero pregnancies for three years, and only one pregnancy in 2010. Girls now have the material and psychosocial support to actively pursue opportunities to enroll in secondary school.

As an institution of and from the community, WEMIHS has the local knowledge, relationships and trust to access and influence families and teachers as key stakeholders who affect the lives of girls. Their roots in the community give them the staying power to facilitate ongoing transformation. WEMIHS makes use of their knowledge and social capital to mobilize positive cultural values, systems and structures so adolescent girls are empowered to make informed decisions about their lives. The life trajectory of adolescent girls in Thika is indeed changing.

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*This article was derived from a case study report researched by Susan Wilkinson-Maposa and written by Zanele Sibanda on behalf of Firelight Foundation. Please go to [www.firelightfoundation.org](http://www.firelightfoundation.org) to access the full report.*



## WEM INTEGRATED HEALTH SERVICES IN THEIR COMMUNITY



WEMIHS' peer education program goes beyond the boundaries of schools to train girls in peer mobilization and community outreach, helping them transform their communities with needed services, like the mobile voluntary HIV testing center that reaches marginalized women and girls in remote areas.

Recognizing that guardians face challenges due to poverty and HIV/AIDS, WEMIHS provides immediate assistance, like food parcels, and also long-term solutions, such as linking guardians to the sustainable livelihood initiative, which provides economic empowerment so that parents can meet their children's basic needs for food, shelter and clothing.





School assemblies are now a forum where adolescent girl peer educators are encouraged to speak out on issues affecting the students. Peer leaders help girls access information on sexuality, HIV/AIDS and drug abuse and support each other to stand up for their rights.

Through the sustained support from Firelight Foundation, based in Santa Cruz, California, since 2001, WEM Integrated Health Systems has been able to strengthen their innovative and empowering community programs in Kenya. With enhanced programming, WEMIHS is working to improve the capacity of local structures to better cope with the impact of disease and poverty. For more information on WEMIHS and Firelight Foundation, please visit [www.firelightfoundation.org](http://www.firelightfoundation.org).

# NISHTHA

## WORKING INTERGENERATIONALLY FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

**FOLLOWING A SPATE** of female suicides and murders, Pritilata Das was determined to establish a community group in 1974 aimed at addressing women's most urgent problems in West Bengal. She wanted to lessen local women's suffering by giving them a measure of control over their lives. Working with a handful of volunteers, Pritilata set up a modest health clinic to ensure that women had access to basic reproductive health care, established a literacy program for women who had never been to school and developed a small-scale training program where women could learn marketable skills in embroidery and decorative painting. Her organization, Nishtha ("dedication" in Bengali), was driven by her vision of a discrimination-free society where women could live with full dignity and equal rights.

When her daughter, Mina Das, assumed responsibility for Nishtha in 1978, she realized that although her mother's organizational model might ease some women's suffering, it would never change their circumstances on a larger scale. She needed to create a platform that would enable women to solve their problems and demand their rights collectively, backed by their families and communities. Mina saw this as part of a wider development process that would benefit everyone involved.

"If we try to make a woman empowered, she might become empowered, but where?" asked Mina. "We have to do something to sensitize, prepare and involve the whole community so they accept women's leadership and realize women's problems, and we have to make them eager to change the situation. We have to convince them that we are not only working for women: If a woman is educated, then the whole community will be educated."

In the past three decades, Mina and her colleagues at Nishtha have built an institution that enlists girls and women as central actors to improve their own lives, strengthen their families and

improve economic prospects and living conditions for the larger community. Approximately 16,500 women and girls participate in the organization's age-specific community development groups: *bali-ki bahinis* (children ages 6-11), *kishore bahinis* (adolescent girls ages 12-18), *mohila mondals* (women ages 19-54) and senior women's groups (ages 55 and older). Nishtha empowers these groups by employing interlocking strategies that nurture individual girls while building community support for female leadership. Their model is based on an intimate knowledge of the obstacles that adolescent

girls and young women confront, blending support for education with information about health and rights; reaching out to parents, teachers and community leaders; and investing in building girls' confidence, self-esteem and organizing skills.

From the beginning, Mina recognized that education was central to realizing her mother's vision: Without it, women had few

life prospects, little earning power and almost no hope of breaking the cycle of poverty and dependence in which they had been trapped for generations. To spark systemic change, Nishtha needed to reach females much earlier—ideally at the age of 6—to ensure they started school with their peers. In order to do this, the organization came up with a strategy for addressing the multiple economic, cultural and social factors that keep girls out of the classroom. They needed to convince parents of the value of investing in their children's education.

Tanuja was born into a typical, poor village in rural West Bengal, where many families survive on less than US\$2 a day, making illiteracy, child marriage and poverty a fact of everyday life. In her traditional family, Tanuja knew obeying the family dictum reigned supreme and that her circle of interaction would always be severely limited as a girl. At 8 years old her life took a drastic turn. Waking to the sound of her mother crying, Tanuja learned that her father had left them—forever—for his other family. Despondent, her mother wept over

We are building  
a new world ... where  
girls know that they're  
human beings and  
that they can do  
anything.



their tenuous future while Tanuja remembered the words of her grandmother: “It is a curse to be a woman and so you will be made to suffer.”

Tanuja’s family was forced to move into their uncle’s home. As an occasional farm laborer, Tanuja’s mother was not able to provide for all of her family’s needs and they became dependent on their relatives. While many expressed sympathy, Tanuja knew her relatives disapproved of her mother’s status as a “deserted” female head of household and that they also felt resentment over the family’s needs. Every time Tanuja visited her relatives they acted as if it were only to ask for food, money or a favor.

Relatives advised Tanuja’s mother to quickly arrange for her daughters’ marriages so that she could focus her efforts on her son and reduce the economic burden on the family. Her mother resisted, but as an abandoned wife she had lost confidence and could not continue to go against familial pressure and societal expectations. Thus, Tanuja was pulled out of school to work with her mother and sister in *jari*, the fine stitching of colored thread on garments.

When Tanuja turned 12, she was invited to join the Nishtha-supported adolescent girls group *kishori banhini*. In the group, the girls discussed the customs and practices in society that affected them adversely. This opportunity for contact with other girls was intensely special for Tanuja as she missed the social interaction that school once provided. As Nishtha staff became aware of Tanuja’s family’s struggles, a *didis*, or social worker, began to visit them at home. The *didis* talked to Tanuja’s mother about the importance of sending her daughters back to school and creating long-term solutions to ameliorate their current situation. Tanuja’s mother resisted, feeling bound to her traditional relatives who were financially supporting them. Nishtha’s *didis* nonetheless continued her regular visits to Tanuja’s family and Tanuja found herself secretly regaining some hope that she may be able to return to school.

Just as Tanuja’s family was emerging from the shadows of shame that her father’s disappearance cast, her older sister found herself the recipient of unwanted attention. After cajoling and intimidation did not work to bend Tanuja’s sister to their will, a group of young men resorted to outright

lies to defame her character. Rumors spread from kitchen to kitchen. Scandal erupted and Tanuja’s family was called to appear before the *Salishi*, a council of male village elders. The council struck down Tanuja’s sister’s pleas of innocence, condemning her to the sneers and outrage of the villagers. Tanuja’s family faced possible banishment from their village—they feared their darkest days were yet to come.

Nishtha had not abandoned the family, though, and they organized a strong gathering of women to resist the decision of the *Salishi*. Nishtha’s members came forward to expose the false accusations of the young men. Using the power of the group, Nishtha members were able to convince the *Salishi* and the community of Tanuja’s sister’s innocence. Tanuja’s family no longer had to flee. When Tanuja’s mother saw the power of the women, she stopped hesitating and joined Nishtha, becoming an active supporter and eventually a *mohila mondals* group leader. Tanuja was also allowed to return to school.

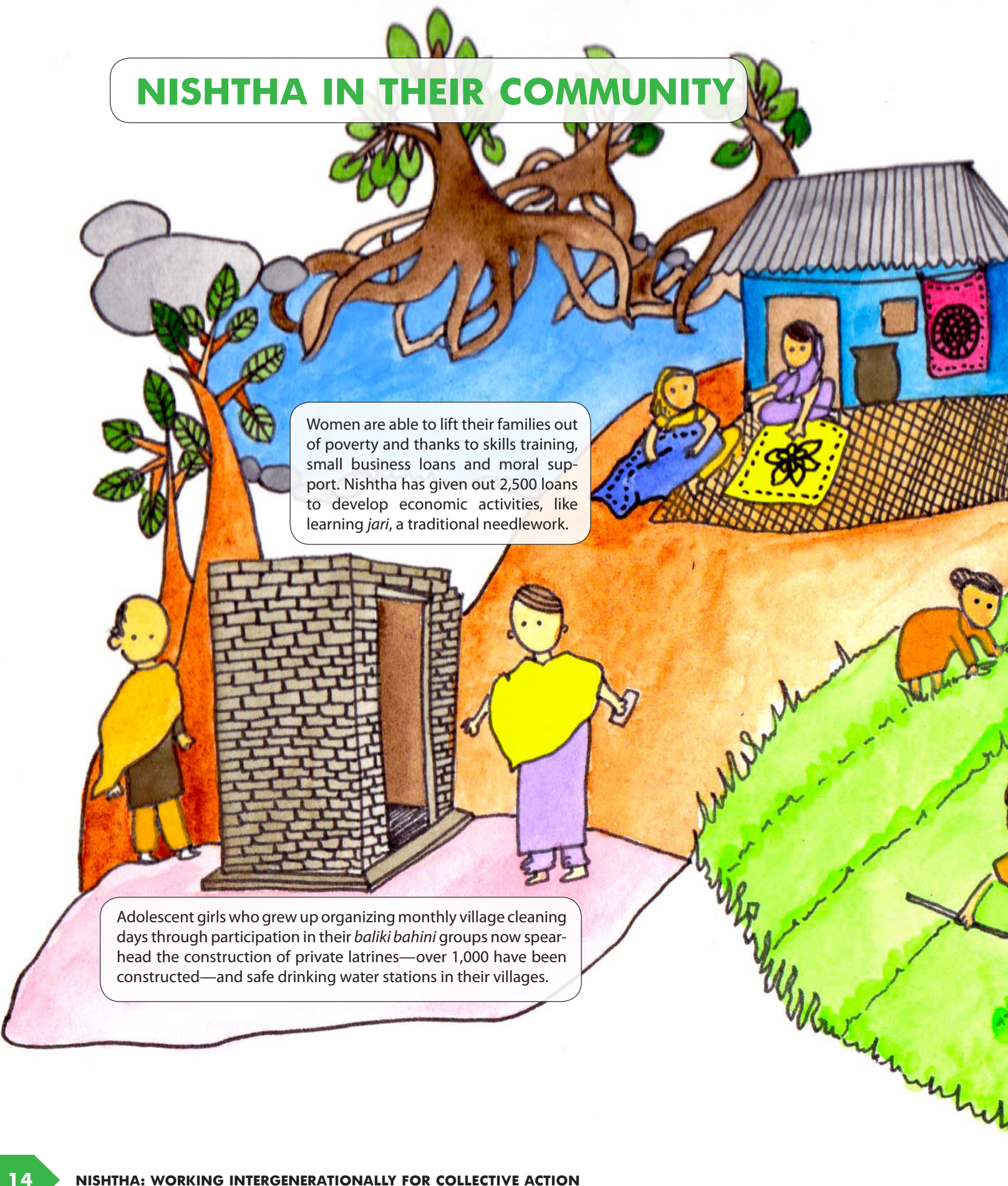
“That was the most memorable moment of my life,” gushed Tanuja. “I will study, I will study more and I will study more and more!”

Through the caring support network of peers and mentors, Tanuja found her voice and is now more self-assured and confident. After some time, Tanuja became the leader of her *kishori bahini* group, transforming her experience to help others. Tanuja and her friends often visit houses in the village to advocate for girls to be in school. In one case, Tanuja acted swiftly when she heard a fellow classmate was being forced into marriage and persuaded her teacher to intervene.

“I have a dream that my group will be strengthened to reach each and every girl of the community, where no women will be humiliated and have to lead a life like my mother, where no girl will get married early and be tortured by her in-laws, where no girl will drop out from school. All girls will be adored like our brothers,” affirmed Tanuja.

Tanuja often works with her mother’s group to visit parents, explain the negative consequences of child marriage and even to threaten contacting the police if the marriage goes forward. Nishtha’s intergenerational approach helps build a community-wide support network wherein women and girls of all ages can teach and learn from each other,

## NISHTHA IN THEIR COMMUNITY



Women are able to lift their families out of poverty and thanks to skills training, small business loans and moral support. Nishtha has given out 2,500 loans to develop economic activities, like learning *jari*, a traditional needlework.

Adolescent girls who grew up organizing monthly village cleaning days through participation in their *baliki bahini* groups now spearhead the construction of private latrines—over 1,000 have been constructed—and safe drinking water stations in their villages.





"I have a dream that my group will be strengthened to reach each and every girl of the community ... All girls will be adored like our brothers."

The *kishori banhini* adolescent girls group mounts campaigns against child marriage, child trafficking and child labor, develop advocacy materials and organize rallies. Over 4,500 people actively take part in Nishtha's rallies and raise awareness throughout the community.

To combat soil depletion caused by costly chemical pesticides, Nishtha has trained over 80 adolescent girls in sustainable farming methods: testing soil, developing herbal pesticides and encouraging the use of compost. Once trained, they are dispatched in pairs to various communities to share their knowledge with local farmers.

solve problems collectively, build alliances and recruit others. Girls who join *kishore bahinis* encourage their mothers to join *mohila mondals* (and vice versa), and are eager to share their newfound knowledge—from writing their name to farming techniques—with other family members. Nishtha *didis* also meet frequently with parents of *kishore bahini* members, ensuring that they have the resources to pay their daughters' school fees and purchase the necessary textbooks and school supplies and to offer financial and material support to families who cannot afford to educate their daughters. Girls who are struggling academically are provided with Nishtha-trained tutors to supplement their lessons and monitor their progress.

Although the organization reaches out to people of all ages, adolescent girls are the heart of Nishtha's work, enabling them to accomplish multiple goals simultaneously: Nishtha provides direct support to the most needy and neglected members of society, creates positive role models for girls and changes the image of young women in everybody's eyes. Girls now lead classes on nutrition and other subjects for their peers, while the rest of the village looks on intently. Before Nishtha began working in these villages, such scenes would have been unimaginable, as residents would never have accepted the idea that girls can be sources of information who are valuable to the entire community.

"Our plan is to reach young women, and seed in their minds that they are human beings and that they have equal rights with their brothers, so that slowly they can gain confidence," commented Mina. "They have to think, 'I will be responsible for my family also, this is my family also. This is my village.' If you don't take any responsibility, you cannot demand any rights. So we should prepare ourselves to be responsible, to make decisions."

Nishtha works to build concentric circles of

support around girls—starting with individual self-esteem, but growing to encompass peer solidarity, family and community receptivity, and institutional support from Nishtha—allowing girls to draw on both individual and collective strength in their efforts to change their circumstances. The organization repeatedly reinforces the message that girls are human beings with the same rights as boys, that they are full members of their families and full citizens of their villages. Nishtha *didis* sensitize families and community leaders on an individual basis, while Nishtha volunteers engage in public awareness-raising through rallies, campaigns, information fairs and public advocacy.

The results are evident: Girls who participate in Nishtha's programs are educated longer and married later. A Nishtha assessment showed that only 3 percent of girls in its programs dropped out of school compared with 39 percent of girls not in its programs. Nutrition, health and sanitation have improved in the villages where Nishtha works and women are able to provide for their families through the skills training, small business loans and moral support Nishtha provides.

"We don't have a magic wand, we cannot change everything, but a little bit of change we can make," Mina reflected. "We are building a new world where women can enjoy their rights, where girls know that they're human beings and that they can do anything. They will be educated. They can raise their voices. They can question society. They will create change, not us. We have to prepare them. This is our mission."

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*This article was derived from a case study report written by Andrea Lynch on behalf of EMpower—the Emerging Markets Foundation. Please go to [www.empowerweb.org](http://www.empowerweb.org) to access the full report.*

EMpower—the Emerging Markets Foundation, based in New York, London and Hong Kong, shares Nishtha's commitment to youth development, believing that investments in young people's health, education, leadership and livelihoods can bring about sustainable, positive change. EMpower's grants to Nishtha since 2005 included the support of 1,080 girls to continue their education, bolstered by academic coaching from tutors, and a pilot vocational training/job placement program for graduating girls. To learn more about Nishtha and the support needed to continue transforming communities in West Bengal, please visit [www.empowerweb.org](http://www.empowerweb.org).



# FONDO CENTROAMERICANO DE MUJERES

## NURTURING ADOLESCENT GIRL-LED GROUPS

**“WE HAVE SUCCEEDED** in empowering each one of the participants in our group,” proclaimed a Gaviotas Jovenes por Nuestro Derechos participant from Nicaragua. “At the beginning the girls were timid, too shy to participate in our activities, but on our path we have gotten rid of our fear of speaking in public and now say what we feel without fear that they will criticize us ... We are dialoguing with other women in movements, promoting our rights and integrating more young women in our activities. In other words, we have succeeded in transforming our fear so that we can continue to promote our rights.”

The personal empowerment and metamorphosis of these adolescent girls was facilitated by grants from the Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM), translated as Central American Women’s Fund, and its Ola Joven (Young Wave) grantmaking program. FCAM stands at the forefront of providing integrated support to marginalized adolescent girls and young women under 30, who are indigenous, of African descent, rural, living with HIV and/or encountering violence in Central America. Established in 2003, FCAM is dedicated to guaranteeing the right of adolescent girls and women to physical and emotional integrity in Central America and enabling women and men to participate equally as leaders in all areas of society. FCAM launched its Ola Joven program to support girl-led and driven organizations working to improve their own lives and transform their communities. Ola Joven grantees are organized into three broad programs that reflect salient issues for adolescent girls in Central America today: promotion of sexual and reproductive rights, young women’s participation and leadership and physical and emotional integrity.

FCAM is the only foundation in the region that is dedicated to supporting the initiatives of adolescent girls. Currently, Ola Joven grants support nascent girl-led groups in Guatemala, Honduras,

El Salvador, Nicaragua, Belize and Costa Rica. In these countries, the legacy of organized conflict, civil wars, vast disparities of wealth and power, marginalization of indigenous people, human rights abuses and a culture of impunity continue to have repercussions. In addition to grinding poverty and ingrained violence, adolescent girls and young women in Central America face a lack of safe employment opportunities, bodily autonomy and access to higher education. While there are some advances in gender equality in formal institutions and legislation, particularly at the local government level, much ground still has to be won, such as having police and courts take domestic violence seriously. Domestic violence is so normalized cultur-

ally that many girls and women cannot conceive of a life free of violence.

FCAM believes that long-term social transformation for adolescent girls and their communities can only be achieved when the protagonists and change agents are the adolescent girls themselves. FCAM does not seek to create its own initiatives, but rather to identify, mentor and network local adolescent girl-led groups. These groups are at a stage of organizational development where extra resources and support can produce a multiplier effect that will transform individual lives and indeed whole communities. From 2003-2009, FCAM, through its Ola Joven program, directly reached 7,342 individual adolescent girls and young women and helped 91 adolescent girl and young women-led groups evolve and mature.

Josefa, a leader for the Programme for Young Women in Esquipulas, Guatemala, knows that outside support is vital to the continuation of her group. Working on the challenging issues of sexuality and reproductive rights, Josefa and her peers have often been targets of verbal abuse and aggression, “even from the young women who do not understand our work,” she commented. The group started with 10 adolescent girls and has now grown to 22 girls and

Those [girls] who participate in our activities ... have the courage to say: ‘No, enough is enough!’

young women committed to educating their peers. Together they visit various rural communities, regardless of difficult conditions, bad roads or the flooding that occurs every rainy season.

“Supported by FCAM, we organize video forums, meetings and workshops, even in places where there is no electricity,” explained Josefa. “In spite of everything, the view that a part of the community takes of us has been quite good, because the women pick up the topics very well. One can easily see the different attitude in those who participate in our activities, because they have been able to defend themselves in aggressive situations. They have the courage to say: ‘No, enough is enough!’”

Beyond influencing peer groups, Ola Joven grantees extend their reach into their communities, working to change the perceptions of parents, teachers and community leaders regarding the capabilities of adolescent girls. Adolescent girls who have participated in the Ola Joven program typically are recognized as “authorities” in their communities. People come to them for advice and information on issues that are often considered taboo topics, such as sexuality and reproductive rights. The girls and young women provide resources to the community by hosting workshops and activities, integrating what they have learned from FCAM workshops. Parents changed previously accepted definitions of what girls “can” do or “should” do and are encouraging their daughters to pursue new opportunities. Local governments are also taking notice of the capabilities of adolescent girls by inviting organized groups to be a formal part of policy planning exercises. Other Ola Joven grantees report that girls in their communities increased their use of contraceptives, reduced the rate of unwanted/unplanned pregnancies and are now more inclined to report violence to the authorities.

“We have knocked on all the doors in our community, even the mayor’s and the priest’s, for we want more young women to have the opportunity to see changes in their lives,” commented Carmen, who has participated in the La Esperanza Young Women’s Network in Nicaragua for four years. “We are making an effort to provide these girls with information, to raise funds and to achieve that young women are present in a range of bodies, from leadership of student organizations to municipal

decision-making institutions. We have many plans and many ideas and we hope we can always count on the support from FCAM.”

FCAM is committed to building the financial sustainability of their grantees, by including a multi-annual support component in their grants, to help overcome challenges posed by other funders’ manner of giving: restricted funding, short-term support or expecting that girls and women will work on a voluntary basis rather than meriting/ needing paid salaries. FCAM’s unique and hands-on strategy includes integrated support to adolescent girl-led initiatives throughout the grant period and is particularly respected for providing an extensive agenda of workshops and events, close mentoring and participatory monitoring and evaluation. This accompaniment is started by inviting each new grantee to a two-day workshop with FCAM staff focused both on planning the grant and establishing relationships of trust between the adolescent girls and their FCAM mentors. After this initial contact, FCAM staff maintains an “open line” policy, by which all grantees with access to the Internet and/or telephone are promised same day responses by FCAM staff. This continuous availability for support and guidance, as opposed to the more structured and limited communications of traditional grantmaking organizations, has proved to be extremely important for the Ola Joven groups.

In 2009, 63 out of a total of 75 Ola Joven groups received an in-person visit from a dedicated FCAM mentor. These visits permit FCAM and the groups to evaluate their monitoring reports, giving valuable feedback to a group on its activities, challenges faced, advances made, lessons learned and advice around future plans and budgets. Equally important from FCAM’s perspective, these site visits are crucial to understanding the lives and contexts of the adolescent girls. While on-site monitoring requires greater resources than e-mail or telephone contact, FCAM sees these in-person visits as an essential part of its mentoring process.

A second important characteristic of monitoring visits is that FCAM invites an adolescent girl or young woman from another Ola Joven group to accompany FCAM staff on the visit. This is done so that the adolescent girls and young women can exchange knowledge and establish alliances. FCAM’s final evaluation process involves bringing all of



the Ola Joven groups together for collective self-assessment of their work during the grant period. This has proven to be a powerful way of stimulating reflection and learning among the girl leaders: “[Evaluation tools] are important to remind us of the commitment we have as leaders, and they give us the tools with which we can measure achievements, challenges and identify opportunities,” said one Ola Joven grantee member from El Salvador.

FCAM spent an impressive 21 percent of its budget on mentoring, learning and networking activities in 2009. Yearly, FCAM hosts an average of 10 workshops and events for their grantees, with an emphasis on strengthening organizational development and demystifying financial management. As the number of Ola Joven grantees increases each year, the number of workshops also increases to continue meeting the demand for this type of support. A clear and important benefit of FCAM’s Ola Joven network is an increase in the diverse and innovative strategies used by the adolescent girls’ groups and the sharing of these strategies among different girls’ organizations. Regional exchanges are also facilitated by FCAM on reproductive rights, feminism and sexual rights. These events stand apart in particular because of their cross-country focus, where adolescent girls from the various countries Ola Joven operates in have the opportunity to meet and learn from their peers and other rights-based organizations, thus, contributing to FCAM’s wider objective of stimulating a movement of adolescent girl leaders in the Central American region.

“Each workshop, each activity in which we participate as young women is an opportunity for personal growth and for helping to make people

recognize the leadership of young women,” commented one Ola Joven grantee partner girl leader.

FCAM also offers an inventive 12-day Central American “feminist camp” every year. The overarching objective of these camps is to help construct and strengthen inclusive and democratic leadership, through new ways to promote solidarity between adolescent girls and young women. On a daily basis, the participants in the camps are encouraged to put themselves in the shoes of others (sex workers, indigenous people, HIV-positive individuals, lesbians, etc.) and reflect on the discriminatory actions and attitudes these people encounter. This “lived” method has two objectives: to promote individual change by challenging inherent discriminatory beliefs and practices and to promote relationships of solidarity and alliances between the adolescent girls and young women.

Support from FCAM provides the means for these girl-led grassroots organizations to scale-up their existing activities, incorporate more community members and to explore new avenues for change through peer learning and FCAM’s mentorship. The spirit of determination, resilience, passion, vision and commitment of FCAM and its Ola Joven grantees is radically changing the landscape of gender rights in Central America by giving adolescent girls a platform from which to speak and be heard. “We are girls—screaming, creating, crying, smiling, learning,” declared one Ola Joven participant. “We should not let ourselves be trampled on, we must always move forward as one community.”

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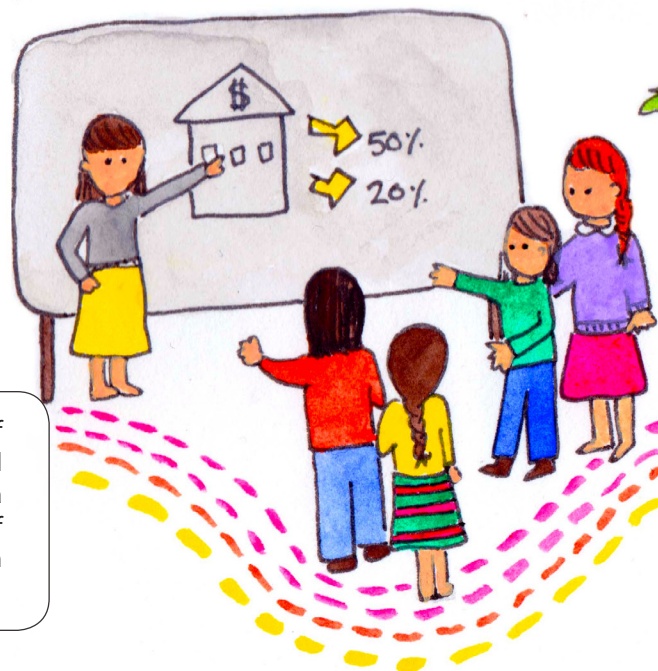
*This article was derived from a case study report researched by Jean Casey and written by Gita Beker Busjeet on behalf of Mama Cash. Please go to [www.mamacash.org](http://www.mamacash.org) to access the full report.*

The Fondo Centroamericano de Mejores’ focus on strengthening young women’s groups—to ensure women’s human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, economic justice for women and young women’s participation as leaders in making decisions that affect their lives and their communities—fits well with Mama Cash’s vision. Mama Cash is the oldest international women’s fund, established in the Netherlands in 1983, working to support pioneering and innovative women’s initiatives around the world because they believe that social change starts with women and girls. Mama Cash has funded FCAM since 2004, with 17 grants totaling \$1.8 million. To learn more about FCAM and Mama Cash please visit [www.mamacash.org](http://www.mamacash.org).



FCAM identifies and funds promising girl-led movements and supports their efforts to amplify girls' voices. One grantee, The Mayan Youth Movement in Guatemala, has grown from engaging more than 1,500 adolescent girls in workshops on reproductive health and HIV to collaborating, in 2009, with the National Coalition for Widows in Guatemala to present three cases of violence against individual and collective human rights to the United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This involved participation in forums in New York and Geneva.

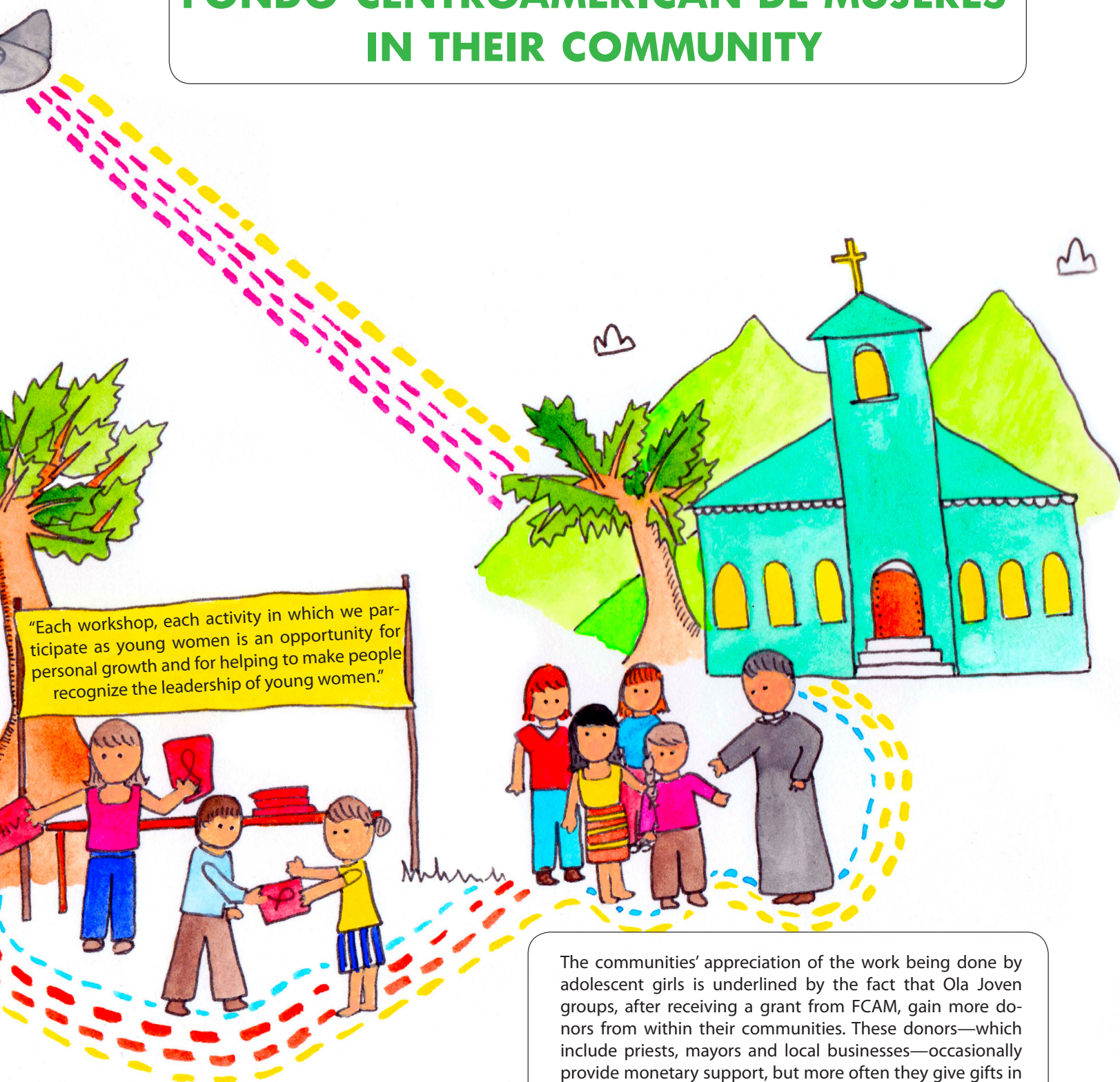
Organizational development is an important part of FCAM's mentoring programs. A main focus is financial management, with a general objective to combat a common sense of fear that surrounds the handling of money for many Ola Joven grantees who have often not had any money of their own to spend before.



FCAM supports the "end of silence" and the birth of civic vibrancy in places where social, political and economic debates are often limited to elites, and where girls particularly are silent. Ola Joven groups, schooled by FCAM in an ethos of agency, motivate and support civic action for human rights in their communities across Central America.



# FONDO CENTROAMERICAN DE MUJERES IN THEIR COMMUNITY



The communities' appreciation of the work being done by adolescent girls is underlined by the fact that Ola Joven groups, after receiving a grant from FCAM, gain more donors from within their communities. These donors—which include priests, mayors and local businesses—occasionally provide monetary support, but more often they give gifts in kind, such as free meeting space or office materials.

## CENTRE FOR DOMESTIC TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

### RESCUING AND REHABILITATING INVISIBLE GIRLS

**IN KENYA, THERE** is an invisible population. Approximately 350,000 children and adolescents live in the shadows as domestic servants, the majority of them girls under 18 years of age. Child domestic workers are predominately very poor girls from rural areas who have little or no formal education: They are among the most vulnerable and exploited populations in Kenya. Most of the girls are taken to Nairobi by people who have gained the confidence of the girls' parents by promising wages and schooling. Once they arrive in Nairobi, many of these girls are abused and exploited—working up to 18 hours a day, beaten and humiliated by their employers, sleeping on the floor and sometimes sexually abused. They never see the inside of a classroom, and they earn no more than US\$10 a month, if they are paid at all. Despite their overwhelming numbers, these girls are hidden.

The Centre for Domestic Training and Development (CDTD) was founded in 2001 to help domestic workers negotiate fair labor conditions, protect themselves from abuse and to encourage economic alternatives. Expanding their services, CDTD is now the only organization in greater Nairobi rescuing and rehabilitating child domestic workers under the age of 18. CDTD is reaching girls that most Kenyans have already “resigned ... to their inescapable fate”—those who fall outside the reach of mainstream services. One hundred percent of the child domestic workers that CDTD has rescued are girls, typically between the ages of 10 and 18, from very poor, rural households. An overwhelming 90 percent of the girls are victims of human trafficking.

Every year, CDTD works with an average of 500 women and girls, ranging in age from 10 to 35. For young women over 18, CDTD offers professional household management training and job assistance. For girls under 18, CDTD's focus is on the four Rs: reaching, rescuing, rehabilitating and reintegrating. In doing so, they provide medical care and psychosocial support, emergency shelter,

family reunification, basic education and in some instances vocational training. As a result of CDTD's outreach and advocacy initiatives, numerous organizations and individuals know and trust the organization to rescue and rehabilitate girls who are being exploited and abused as child domestic workers: It is the only organization that receives emergency cases from local government authorities and police.

Every three months, CDTD's community outreach and advocacy program staff conduct a series of grassroots-level information sessions and campaigns related to child domestic labor in slums and other communities across greater Nairobi. Informational and educational materials and pamphlets are distributed during and after the information sessions. Critical to the success of these initiatives is outreach to and subsequent attendance by local chiefs, district child protection officers and

police officers. The sessions are always followed by one-on-one visits and trust-building time with these key officials and gatekeepers. By addressing the issue of child trafficking and child domestic labor through linked strategies and in several sectors, CDTD is demonstrating the power and potential of grassroots organizations to not

only reach and help isolated girls who can easily fall through societal chasms, but to also create safety nets made by the community. Reaching, rescuing, rehabilitating and reintegrating girls is done with the help of the entire village.

Mary thought that the stranger in the tinted car would be her ticket to a better life. Growing up in a poor, rural village in Kenya, Mary and her six siblings teetered dangerously close to the grave. Their elderly mother used her monthly income of less than US\$1—from selling tea leaves she cultivated on a tiny plot of land—and handouts from their neighbors to keep the family alive, but just barely. When the unknown woman offered Mary US\$23 a month to be her domestic worker, she saw a way out of crushing poverty. Following the woman's instructions to put on an extra set of clothes, Mary

Adolescent girls  
describe CDTD as ‘a  
home where you can  
speak and you will be  
listened to.’



arrived in Nairobi the same day to work for the woman, her husband and their baby.

Within a month, the matriarch began a daily routine of emotional and physical abuse. Rising at 4 a.m., Mary washed clothes, prepared the family's meal and cared for the baby. She was allowed to sleep for only four hours a night, if at all, on a chair in the sitting room. Eventually the husband joined his wife in abusing Mary, inflicting severe physical beatings. On the day the woman of the house threatened to throw Mary on electrical wires, she knew she could take no more. Stealing away in the early morning, Mary ran to a friend's house who convinced her to go to the police station. Through the International Organization for Migration, the police alerted CDTD and the director soon arrived to take Mary to the girls-only shelter, which is unmarked to protect the safety of the girls.

On a weekly and sometimes daily basis, CDTD's outreach coordinator rescues girls in emergency situations. Within 24 hours of receiving a call or a referral, CDTD staff collects and relocates the girl to the organization's shelter. Approximately 90 percent of referrals now come from beneficiaries and graduates who refer their friends, peers and other girls in need of assistance. Girls talk to their friends, and their friends listen.

CDTD's staff is highly trained in assessing the best interests of the child, as well as in working with victims of trafficking, and provides not only shelter, but also medical care and counseling. Psychological services are imperative for girls like Mary, who was unable to talk about her harrowing experience for a number of days.

With no modern means of contacting Mary's mother, CDTD staff had to rely on the few details of her village that Mary could remember, making it an arduous task. CDTD staff began discussing educational plans and possibilities for Mary, and she enrolled in a girls-only vocational training school where she learned knitting, sewing and embroidery. The school was the first real step toward realizing her girlhood dream of owning a sewing and knitting business.

The average time a girl spends in CDTD's emergency shelter is four months. While at CDTD, the girls are given a safe space in which to build relationships with other girls and young women from different ethnic groups and socioeconomic

backgrounds. The girls are encouraged and expected to participate in shelter activities such as life skills training and literacy classes. In addition, labor rights are taught to empower shelter residents to negotiate decent terms and conditions of employment.

"Rehabilitation does not start outside the shelter or after they leave the shelter; it starts the first day they come into the shelter and eventually overlaps with the last phases of reintegration," explains CDTD's Director Edith Murogo. Perhaps most importantly, CDTD provides all of these supportive services with tremendous warmth, compassion and unwavering commitment. The beneficiaries describe CDTD as "a home where you can speak and you will be listened to." CDTD accomplishes an enormous amount by creatively deploying its resources and partnering with other organizations.

Approximately 40 percent of the girls who were rescued by CDTD from emergency situations over a six-month period in 2010 were successfully reunified with their families and are now either in school or receiving vocational training. The families of these girls are extremely poor, and therefore welcoming the girls back into the home can create a financial burden. Thus, families of reintegrated girls receive small-scale monetary support that is intended to ensure the ability of the girls to engage in educational opportunities, rather than be pressured to contribute to their families financially and forgoing the growth opportunities offered by CDTD.

It took CDTD nearly six months to reunite Mary with her mother, who had been tirelessly and anxiously searching for her since the day she disappeared. In the end, Mary only received US\$11 for three months of exhausting labor punctuated by severe abuse. With those days behind her, Mary is now enjoying being a student. She spends most of her free time practicing and improving her knitting and sewing skills and hopes that the vocational training will help her support herself so that she can in turn help her mother. Because of CDTD, she is equipped with positive social support and the business skills to be self-sufficient. "I'd like to encourage other girls to help others the way the Centre has helped me," said Mary. "Us girls, we can make it."

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*This article was derived from a case study report written by Kristen Woolf on behalf of the Global Fund for Children. Please go to [www.globalfundforchildren.org](http://www.globalfundforchildren.org) to access the full report.*



# CENTRE FOR DOMESTIC TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT IN THEIR COMMUNITY

For girls who are being reintegrated, CDTD works to facilitate vocational skills sponsorships at nearby institutions or apprenticeships in the community and offers business start-up training and kits for girls and their families.

Every three months, CDTD's community outreach and advocacy program conducts a series of grassroots-level information sessions related to child domestic labor in slums and other poor residential areas in Nairobi. Critical to the success of these initiatives is outreach to and subsequent attendance by local chiefs, district child protection officers and police officers.

"I'd like to encourage other girls to help others the way the Centre has helped me. Us girls, we can make it."





CTDD receives referrals for girls in harmful and abusive domestic work situations from district-level police officers, district-level child protection officers, local chiefs and other child welfare organizations that are not set up to work with child domestic workers. CDTD is the only organization that receives emergency cases from local government authorities or police.

"CTDD is unique in the services that it provides to the invisible population of domestic workers in Kenya. It has earned the trust of the domestic workers, the community and police. It gives girls and young women the protection and skills they need to claim their rights. CDTD continues to expand and diversify its programs to respond to the needs it sees on the ground," commented Solome Lemma, Global Fund for Children's grantmaking program advisor. Global Fund for Children has been an avid supporter and funder of CDTD since 2008. To learn more about CDTD and the support they need to continue offering their valuable services to Kenya's adolescent girls, please visit [www.globalfundforchildren.org](http://www.globalfundforchildren.org).



# SIN-DO

## BUILDING A SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR GIRLS

**SIGNALING 12-YEAR-OLD NEHIVENA** to stay behind as her classmates headed for home following the five o'clock bell, her teacher said that he had some great news about her schoolwork. Once alone in the classroom, the teacher proposed that they have sex and in return Sabina would receive excellent grades for the remainder of the year. Young, female, naïve and desperate for an education were factors the teacher knew would help push her to acquiesce. Once finished, he abruptly left. Nehivena, with blood soaking her clothes, arduously made her way home to her mother.

High rates of gender-based violence combined with endemic poverty create a dire reality for women and girls in Benin. Most of the population lives in rural settings where attitudes and practices that curtail the rights of adolescent girls and women prevail. Despite constitutional protections, systemic discrimination against girls and women continues. Over 70 percent of adult women are illiterate in Benin, ensnaring them in a circle of oppression and poverty that is difficult to break.

In Benin today, girls continue to face many obstacles to obtaining an education. While difficulties to pay school tuition are often cited, little attention has been paid to addressing gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the educational system: "The sexual harassment of girls is one of the primary reasons for the low enrollment and retention of girl students in school in Benin," stated the 2007 USAID report *Women's Legal Rights Initiative*. In Benin and other African countries, girls are subjected to sexual harassment in the classroom, from male peers and teachers. Girls report this as a factor in deciding to drop out of school, in addition to early pregnancy and early marriage. Sexual abuse and harassment perpetrated by teachers is rarely reported, leaving girls to feel used, powerless and hopeless.

The prevalence of these insidious acts compelled the local organization SIN-DO to take action.

SIN-DO, meaning "it comes from the roots," was founded in 1996 by Setcheme Jeronime Mongbo to "promote women's and children's rights in Benin's most marginalized communities." SIN-DO uses a participatory process to identify communities' needs and develops plans that respond to those challenges. Their programs work to build a safe and productive environment for child development and mobilizes community members to prevent and respond to harassment and gender-based violence.

When Nehivena finally reached home, her mother, alarmed at her daughter's crumpled appearance, rushed her to the hospital. As her daughter was being attended to, Nehivena's mother went to the local law enforcement office where she learned of SIN-DO. Immediately SIN-DO's staff sprang into action and paid the medical exam fees so Nehivena could

get the urgent care she needed and also paid the other legal expenses that were required to prosecute the teacher. He was convicted and imprisoned, but was unfortunately released before two months passed. After recovering with the support and care of SIN-DO, Nehivena resumed her studies in a different school. Her mother believes, "it is thanks to SIN-DO that Nehivena is still alive."

Thanks to SIN-DO the children have the courage to confront those responsible for harassment. . . . Many girls are in school today because of SIN-DO.

Through the National Policy of Education and Training of Girls, formulated in 1990, the Benin government aims to eliminate gender disparity in education and training in Benin by 2015. The most important measure of this policy was free primary education. Other policy goals included a commitment to increase the overall school attendance rate for girls to 60 percent and to sensitize parents to the educational needs of girls. Still, the government lacks the resources and finances to carry out these measures, especially in rural areas. Evidence gathered by SIN-DO indicates that students continue to face fees (registration, supplies, uniforms, etc.) for an amount that often exceeds tuition, which was in theory abolished. The majority of households are unable to cover these costs. In the six



of Benin's 12 districts where SIN-DO works, the baseline enrollment rate for girls is well below 50 percent. Nationwide, the school completion rate is 68.4 percent for males and 52.2 percent for girls. Girl-focused community organizations, including SIN-DO, are critical partners to the Beninese government in improving school environments and practices and reaching the government's goal of 60 percent enrollment for girls by 2015.

Thanks to unique programs and partnerships reinforced by national and international organizations, the media and state structures, SIN-DO was able to obtain significant results in girls' school enrollment in the districts where SIN-DO works. They were also successful in improving confidence and self-esteem through girls' clubs, and mobilizing parents and school authorities to intervene in cases of physical and sexual violence.

"There is a lot of sexual harassment against under-age girls," said Madame Lissassi Gbeban, vice president of the SIN-DO supported Sonayo Aklommè Group. "Thanks to SIN-DO the children have the courage to confront those responsible for harassment. It is also because of SIN-DO's work that an individual responsible for the harassment of minors is currently in prison. We women now have the courage to report cases of violation of our rights or that of our daughters to law enforcement personnel, and SIN-DO provides support to ensure access to justice. Many girls are in school today because of SIN-DO."

SIN-DO began working with adolescent girls in 1998 with a program that expanded the micro-credit for women's small business initiative to offer basic tuition assistance and vacation-time tutoring to girls. SIN-DO provided 1,351 school loans to mothers to enable them to meet the school fees for their daughters. Women's Committees for Monitoring were also formed to assure the dedication to academic work of girls at school and at home. Providing economic empowerment opportunities for parents helps pave the way for SIN-DO to engage them in programs on issues that are generally more difficult to address, including gender discrimination, and is also critical to ensuring some measure of financial sustainability for families of girls in SIN-DO's programs.

Since 1998, SIN-DO has added programs that engage teachers and parents as supporters and

advocates for girls, combat sexual harassment in schools and increase the availability of scholarships for girls with government funding. Integral to SIN-DO's work on sexual harassment in the classroom was the participation of over 400 teachers in programs to increase their own abilities to support adolescent girls in the classroom and decrease harassment in the schools. In communities where SIN-DO works, a five-fold increase in students reporting sexual harassment was recorded. Furthermore, SIN-DO was able to contribute to the state-wide dialogue on creating healthy school environments for girls by publishing a guide widely disseminated to community members, teachers and law enforcement officers, entitled *Sexual Harassment: What You Should Know/What to Do*.

Strategies employed by SIN-DO enabled the organization to directly assist 8,022 girls from 2000-2009 and proved to be especially effective at reaching vulnerable and marginalized girls not served by other systems or programs. Approximately 75 percent of girls who benefitted had dropped out or had never been to school at the time they first connected with SIN-DO. Among them, 246 are teen mothers and 126 are married.

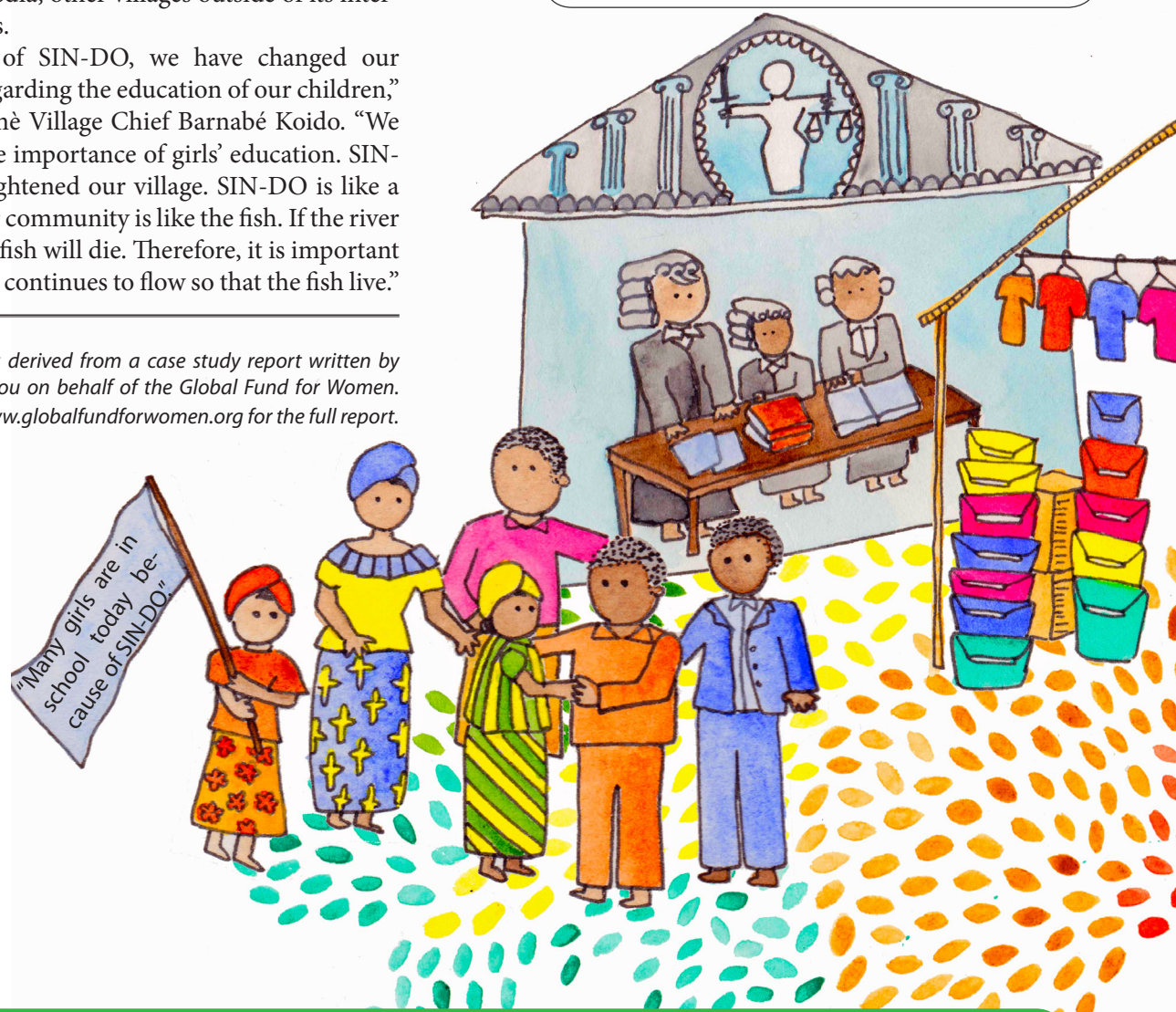
SIN-DO's approach to program design is participatory and community-based, and includes three distinct phases: action research, documentation and community mobilization. By using a cultural diagnostic tool in each community, SIN-DO encourages local populations to define for themselves the obstacles to their development and then to participate in defining action strategies to address them. Issues raised in community-based training sessions include: sexual harassment, forced marriage, child trafficking, violence against girls, abduction, kidnapping, confinement and girls' education. According to a survey conducted by SIN-DO in the communities in which it works, 90 percent of respondents indicated their agreement about the importance of girls' education. SIN-DO perceives this to be a significant change in local support for girls' education. From its earliest days, SIN-DO has also sought to develop strategic partnerships with influential members of communities. Its supporters include local village chiefs as well as ministry officials in the national government. Demonstrating that influential community members publicly support girls' education and empowerment is an

important strategy for SIN-DO. Furthermore, SIN-DO's commitment to engaging parents and community leaders, as well as girls directly, catalyzed a widespread community movement toward girls' education and resulted in a striking increase in both school enrollment and graduation rates for girls in the communities where SIN-DO works. Simultaneously, SIN-DO is able to reach, through the use of media, other villages outside of its intervention areas.

"Because of SIN-DO, we have changed our mentality regarding the education of our children," said Aklommè Village Chief Barnabé Koido. "We recognize the importance of girls' education. SIN-DO has enlightened our village. SIN-DO is like a river and our community is like the fish. If the river dries up, the fish will die. Therefore, it is important that the river continues to flow so that the fish live."

*This article was derived from a case study report written by Honorine Honkou on behalf of the Global Fund for Women. Please go to [www.globalfundforwomen.org](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org) for the full report.*

SIN-DO works with police to catch teachers who have sexually abused students and then coordinates with courts to prosecute offenders. Knowing they have support, girls are now more inclined to report cases of physical and sexual abuse—615 cases were reported in Benin out of which 400 were introduced into the legal system in 2009 compared to 103 cases in 2008.



"SIN-DO's work ensures that the empowerment and the physical protection of girl students becomes a priority for families, schools and entire communities. The group has been particularly effective in addressing the issues of sexual harassment and violence that often deter girls in Benin from completing school, thereby maintaining women in poverty. Its holistic approach to end violence against girls improves environments for girls to thrive in and has produced remarkable results for girls' educational success and future prospects," commented GFW's Program Director for Sub-Saharan Africa Muadi Mukenge. GFW, based in San Francisco, California, has been an avid supporter of SIN-DO since 1998. For more information about SIN-DO, please visit [www.globalfundforwomen.org](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org).



## SIN-DO IN THEIR COMMUNITY



In the past decade, SIN-DO has produced 392 radio and television programs covering the topics of girls' education, along with messages related to the prevention of child labor, trafficking, forced and early marriage and sexual harassment. Interviews with parents indicate that these programs helped them to become advocates for girls' education and were useful in equipping them with tools to work against discrimination faced by their daughters.

Costs associated with sending girls to school, such as uniforms and supplies, is prohibitive for many families. SIN-DO supports the economic security of mothers, and their families, through the development of individual business activities, 27 associations of vulnerable mothers were created. These mothers received a total of US\$442,155 in micro-credit loans over the past decade.

