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Mentoring in Group-Based Adolescent Girl Programs in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Evidence-Informed Approaches

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Introduction: What is a Community-Based Girl Group?

Governments, donors, and practitioners recognize the importance of adolescence (ages 10–19) as both a window of opportunity and a period of rapid and often challenging physical, social, and emotional transitions (Sawyer et al., 2018; Zeid et al., 2015). Commitments to promote gender equality in education, promote girls' rights, and lay the groundwork for girls' empowerment recognize that girls experience distinct challenges as they reach puberty, facing fewer freedoms and new responsibilities (Blum et al., 2017; Kagesten et al., 2016). While many girls face challenges in accessing their human rights, age- and context-specific challenges require tailored and girl-centered approaches that respond to girls' lived realities. With the increased attention to adolescents, practitioners, advocates, and donors need evidence and practical lessons on what works (and doesn't work) to inform decisions about intervention and investment priorities for girls in all their diversity (Devonald et al., 2023).

A community-based girls' group (CBGG), often called a "safe space," is a program delivery model that many organizations use to engage girls across diverse low-resource contexts (Haberland et al., 2018; Marcus et al., 2017; Temin & Heck, 2021). Safe spaces have emerged as a key platform to promote adolescent girls and young women's development, including within large multi-country programs such as the PEPFAR-led DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe) HIV Prevention partnership (Mathews et al., 2022; Saul et al., 2018); the World Bank's Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) initiative (Adotevi, n.d.); and BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents centers (Tofte, 2023). Safe spaces are private, secure venues—which may be in formal or informal locations—where group members meet on a regular basis over a set period to learn, play, communicate, and gain support regarding issues that affect their lives (Adera, 2018; Baldwin, 2011; UNFPA, 2015). In the programs described here, young women mentors meet with groups of adolescent girls in safe spaces within their communities where mentors use structured curricula to facilitate participatory learning sessions.

In this commentary we describe key features of the CBGG model, highlighting the unique roles of mentors

who serve as group facilitators. We draw on evidence from implementers and researchers who have worked on CBGG programs in a variety of low- and middle-income settings, including within the US, to discuss emerging lessons and insights on core features and adaptations of the CBGG model. The programs described here typically rely on strategies to recruit marginalized girls that use context-specific definitions of marginalization. These may include, for example, girls who are out of school or married, indigenous girls, girls living in informal settlements, and others.

The populations included in the studies we cite are heterogenous. What unites them is their status as young females who live with the potential discrimination and marginalization that exists at the intersection of young age and female gender, in addition to locally relevant effects that influence their life experiences. Often, participants in the programs described here reside in marginalized communities and lack access to asset-building opportunities aside from these programs. We recognize the diversity of girls' experiences within and across communities, and ground our analyses in the notion that programming should consider girls' age- and context-specific needs to be effective. Mentors who come from the same populations and communities as program participants also may face context-specific challenges in delivering effective programming, and thus require tailored training and support.

In CBGG programs, a group of adolescent girls typically meets regularly with a young woman mentor who has been recruited from the community. While mentoring is skilled work, mentors often do not start a program with the required skills; mentors are made, not found. Mentors attend trainings in participatory learning methods and group management and deliver set curricula to build life skills, health knowledge, and social support. CBGG-based programs aim to promote participants' opportunities and wellbeing by building their assets and collective power. According to an asset-building theory of change, girls leverage assets such as skills, knowledge, and relationships to build social capital, access services, assert their rights, and protect their health (Plourde et al., 2017; Temin et al., 2018).

Evaluations of CBGG programs have demonstrated variable effects on a spectrum of empowerment and wellbeing outcomes. Most evaluations have measured program "success" by examining individual girl-level outcomes, which include experiences of violence, school dropout, child marriage, HIV, and adolescent pregnancy (Austrian et al., 2020; Chimbindi et al., 2018; Erulkar et al., 2013; Mathur et al., 2022; Plourde et al., 2017). Experience suggests that CBGG programs also may have the potential to build solidarity, broaden opportunities for economic and civic participation, and reshape gender norms and expectations for girls' and women's roles and rights (Haberland et al., 2018; Starck et al., 2022). However, evaluations have found mixed results by context, combination of interventions, and types of outcomes, indicating that more work is needed to fully understand the value of CBGGs (Temin & Heck, 2021). In particular, CBGGs' contribution to collective empowerment at the community level is underexplored (Kwauk & Braga, 2017). Information about how the experience of mentoring changes the mentors themselves also is limited.

Author Identities

As American women (one of whom has a bi-ethnic identity), the co-authors share a strong commitment to advancing equitable responses to the gendered, geographic, and social exclusions girls face across global contexts. In our collective professional experiences primarily with the Population Council, an international research organization, we have moved among global communities of practice and local community-based partners, contributed to evaluations and evidence reviews, and strengthened technical capacity for evidence-informed practices to promote girls' rights, health, and education. Recognizing the limitations of our perspectives, we consulted with international colleagues from the US and other countries with direct experience implementing the programs described here.¹ These colleagues are members of the communities where they work, providing a direct connection to them. We are grateful for their insights and the program documentation they have generated over the years. Their rich contributions based on lived experiences made this review possible.

What is Mentoring in the Context of Community-Based Girl Groups?

To fully realize the potential of the CBGG model, it is important to focus attention on mentors and their roles (D'Angelo et al., 2022; Foulds et al., 2019; Temin & Roca, 2019). While the general concept of mentorship operates across a range of contexts and program models, CBGG mentors have a distinct set of responsibilities. A central mentor responsibility is to cultivate CBGGs' identity as a "safe space." This model relies on a secure, private venue and a sense of social safety, which can enable girls to freely express themselves, explore new ideas, and build skills

without fear or shame. Mentors, with support from supervisors, are responsible for negotiating with community stakeholders to identify suitable meeting spaces and to manage access to meeting spaces so that group members can anticipate a private space for every meeting (Neogy et al., 2022).

During meetings, mentors are responsible for fostering participants' sense of safety by managing group dynamics, ensuring that members set and adhere to collective group norms, and encouraging all members to participate while handling disruptions or conflict in a constructive manner. Beyond the meeting time and space, mentors' roles in supporting girls continues. Mentors often serve as confidants, filling a gap where girls have few female role models, or being trusted adults for girls to talk to about subjects or experiences that they feel embarrassed or afraid to raise with friends or relatives (Tanner & O'Connor, 2017). Mentors can link group members with community resources or support girls and their families as they navigate conflicts and household economic challenges (Erulkar & Medhin, 2017).

CBGG mentor cadres are often made up of young women with similar backgrounds to the girls in their groups. Such mentors can serve as relatable resource people who share girls' experiences, including the challenges they and their communities face (Austrian et al., 2022; Erulkar & Muthengi, 2009). CBGGs' structure makes them flexible enough to adapt to different contexts and circumstances, which may situate community mentors among multiple categories of professionals. For instance, the Biruh Tesfa and Berhane Hewan programs to support marginalized girls in Ethiopia started with younger community-based mentors. When the program integrated literacy and numeracy at a level that would enable out-of-school girls to continue their education, program staff incorporated recent graduates of teacher training colleges from outside the community, who had the skills needed to deliver the training. The programs also used professional counselors when they identified a need to address mental health challenges among group participants (personal communication from Annabel Erulkar, July 12, 2022).

CBGG programs may layer group meetings with other interventions, which can further broaden mentors' roles. Programs complement CBGGs with investments that build the capacity of formal health care providers to deliver adolescent-friendly health care or violence prevention and response services (Chimbindi et al., 2018; Chimbindi et al., 2020; Tanner & O'Connor, 2017). Within formal program structures, some CBGGs combine with cash transfers or other incentives to mitigate economic barriers to girls' education, foster community dialogues around girls' rights, and/or encourage direct engagement with caregivers or brothers (Amin et al., 2016; Kangwana et al., 2022; Ozler et al., 2020; Seff et al., 2022). Complementary intervention components may use mentors to facilitate community activities such as caregiver meetings or intergenerational dialogues. They may also create referral systems or dialogues that link mentors with skilled service providers. In these ways, mentors can be integral members of broader community social networks (Austrian et al., 2020; Foulds et al., 2019; Jani et al., 2016; Polen et al., 2021; Seff et al., 2022).

Unique Features of Group-Based Mentoring

Unlike other approaches to empower individual girls, such as scholarships or one-on-one mentoring, CBGGs revolve around group mentorship. This approach reaches and engages many girls at once, creating space to build connections and, potentially, solidarity, along with connections with mentors. The group structure is especially important during adolescence, when social norms and concerns about girls' safety may restrict girls' movement (Hallman et al., 2014). Mentor-facilitated groups often include activities that are intended to build social support and provide opportunities to practice life skills while girls engage critically with gender norms and roles (Foulds et al., 2019; Neogy et al., 2022). When mentors work with cohorts of girls rather than a few individual girls, the opportunity to participate in programs can become normative rather than appearing as a reward for exceptional girls. These programs have effectively supported inclusive approaches to reach girls who tend to be overlooked or excluded from other programs, such as those who have left school or are married (Erulkar et al., 2013; Erulkar and Medhin, 2017).

What Do We Know About Group-Based Mentoring? Lessons Learned

Evidence from evaluations and operational learning supports programming that takes a holistic, strategic view of mentorship (Haberland et al., 2018; Mathur et al., 2022; Plourde et al., 2017). The evaluation literature and growing body of guidance tools from humanitarian and development agencies and implementers foreground

program delivery strategies across diverse contexts (Foulds et al., 2019; Muthengi et al., 2016; Neogy et al., 2022; Seff et al., 2022; Temin & Roca, 2019). This literature and the experiences it captures emphasize the importance of providing mentors with training, supervision, compensation, solidarity, and opportunities to build their own networks, so they can grow into their roles and beyond. We describe four lessons and program examples of strategic investments of resources, time, and energy that are vital to make group-based mentoring part of that change.

1. Empower Mentors with Training and Supportive Supervision

To realize the benefits of recruiting local mentors, it is critical to commit time and resources to mentor training and support. In settings where women's mobility or educational opportunities are constrained, mentors may start with limited knowledge of key topics and group facilitation techniques and low self-confidence. Restrictive social norms around gender, sexuality, or reproductive health present challenges, not only for individual young women who engage dominant gender norms that take hold early in adolescence but also throughout community life (Blum et al., 2017; Kagesten et al., 2016). Mentors are delivering the program and filling a number of roles, and they are also program participants themselves; as such, they need support to thrive. Mentors also need training and practice to shift from the didactic teaching methods they are likely to have encountered in school to the participatory, skills-based approaches commonly used in CBGGs— an insight that also reflects a well-documented challenge for the education sector (Griffin & Care, 2015; Jarvis & Jarvis, 2006). Trainings include participatory learning methodologies and scientifically accurate, non-stigmatizing content on topics such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), mental health, and social and emotional learning, which form critical foundational skills and knowledge. Regular supervisor visits to club sessions, mentor meetings, and refresher trainings are just as important, providing space and time to hone skills and build confidence in delivering sensitive material that mentors might otherwise skip out of embarrassment or fear of backlash (Tanner & O'Connor, 2017).

In the first year of the Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K) program to improve girls' health and wellbeing, supervisors noted that mentors in AGI-K's rural site in Wajir, a remote area in Northeastern Kenya, tended to skip material related to SRHR, reflecting the restrictive mores of their communities (Austrian et al., 2022). For the scale-up phase, program planners responded to this challenge by changing the sequence of topics that mentors covered. They moved sensitive SRHR content to the end of the curriculum so mentors could introduce it once they were confident in their abilities, and group members were comfortable with each other, and once community members were familiar with girls' groups meeting regularly with mentors (personal communication, Mohamed Abdille, June 13, 2022).

2. Structure Opportunities for Mentors to Build their Own Networks

CBGG programs that encourage mentors to work together can both enhance program quality and, over time, create opportunities for mentors to realize their leadership and movement-building potential. Through participating in regular trainings and meetings, mentors can build skills and share experiences, collaborate to develop strategies, and address challenges. Regular mentor meetings provide space for mentors to build trusted peer support networks of their own. These networks can be a critical resource for mentors as they manage group dynamics, counsel girls on personal or family stressors, and navigate relationships with community leaders (Temin & Roca, 2019).

Where neighboring communities host CBGGs, mentors can meet with nearby mentors and discuss common challenges and approaches to handling them. Virtual meetings and interim digital communication also can be sources of support where internet connectivity allows. In the United States, mentors in the Indigenous Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Network (IMAGEN), a coalition of Native American organizations supporting Native girls, connect through regularly scheduled monthly Zoom sessions. These IMAGEN Circle gatherings have built camaraderie among mentors and across organizations, enabling mutual problem solving and sustaining momentum for IMAGEN's work, even when meeting in person is not possible (Polen et al., 2021).

3. Pay Mentors

Group-based mentoring is skilled work; as such, mentors should be paid. Mentor stipends provide young women with reliable income and tangible recognition of their work as worthy of compensation. Paying mentors

also may reduce turnover. What constitutes fair pay for mentors will vary by context but can be set using pay ranges for local jobs that require similar skills. Programs use mobile money, support mentors to open bank accounts, and otherwise facilitate mentors' engagement with financial tools that promote participation in economic structures. In addition to payment, other forms of recognition for mentors' roles, such as uniforms, certificates and cards identifying them as mentors, have contributed to mentors' motivation (Bacalso & Moxon, 2021; Booth & Abagun, 2023).

Once there is a foundation for mentors' compensation, innovations in livelihoods and payment structures are possible. Abriendo Oportunidades (AO) works to empower indigenous adolescent girls in rural Guatemala in partnership with the Population Council. AO mentors created Casa Productiva, a community corporation that gives young women in marginalized communities opportunities to learn, participate in agricultural livelihoods, and become landowners. Casa Productiva presents opportunities for young women's leadership, enabling them to serve as role models and economic providers in a context where poverty is high and women's land ownership is low (Del Valle, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

4. Support Long-Term Investments in Mentors to Sustain Impact

Long-term commitments to CBGGs in specific geographic areas can foster responsive programming and promote sustainable change. Mentor- and girl-led adaptive management is increasingly a part of CBGG development (Foulds et al., 2019; Neogy et al., 2022; Seff et al., 2022). Over multiple program cycles, mentors may contribute to activities such as review and revision. This can build a sense of shared ownership and ensure responsive content that fits mentors' and girls' realities. When CBGGs continue for multiple years, the program structure can support a cascading leadership model, as older or more experienced mentors help younger mentors establish working relationships with community leaders, local government bodies, and service providers (Neogy et al., 2022). This can enable mentors to take on authority and responsibility for program design and management, collectively building skills, confidence, and expertise.

For nearly two decades, young indigenous women mentors in Guatemala's AO program have facilitated regular sessions while receiving tools, trainings, and certifications that allow them to cultivate their status as community agents of change. AO found that it takes their mentors around two years to advance from managing groups to becoming program leaders and making decisions about program design (Del Valle, 2022). In communities where AO has been active for many years, girls who started as group members have matured into roles as mentors and program leaders. In addition, mentors have established two independent organizations, REDMI and Na'lebak, which now co-manage AO and lead innovations and adaptations in close consultation with girls and community members (Na'lebak | Chisec, Alta Verapaz, n.d.; Population Council, 2021; Historia | Asociación REDMI, n.d.). These long-term investments also established community-level ties that have sustained CBGGs even in crises. AO mentors in Guatemala maintained regular contact with club members throughout COVID-19-related school closures, supporting girls by visiting their households and communicating insights on community conditions to decision makers (Del Valle, 2022).

Conclusion:

What more is needed to realize the promise of group-based mentoring for adolescent girls?

With increased investments in mentor-led CBGGs, program planners have access to more evidence than in the past to guide decision-making. Emerging evidence has demonstrated that CBGGs have promise, with mentors playing a central role. Examples such as AGI-K, IMAGEN, and Abriendo Oportunidades illustrate the potential of strategic, long-term investments in mentors, girls, and their communities, particularly those with histories of exclusion and divestment. While the model demonstrates potential for individual girls' empowerment and related outcomes, further research is needed to learn about the collective, intergenerational, lasting changes that mentors and the CBGGs they facilitate can achieve. Studies exploring the optimal mentor management package and complementary activities that allow mentor-led CBGGs to be effective are needed alongside program investment.

Priority research questions relate to the sustainability and scalability of mentor-led community-based girls' groups. Some of these questions are operational: in what settings is it feasible to integrate public-sector-supported, mentor-led CBGGs into existing social protection, health, or educational institutions (Perera et al., 2022)? More and

better evidence on defining and pricing the minimum package of mentor management is essential: what are mentor training and supervision requirements and appropriate compensation, and how do they vary by context?

Other questions relate to the transformative potential of the program model for addressing girls' and women's social and economic exclusion. For example, what parallel programs, such as livelihoods training, may help to optimize the potential of mentor-led CBGGs? How and to what extent can CBGG programs create a shared "capacity to aspire," which prepares girls and young women to imagine, seek, and create transformational opportunities for themselves and their communities (Ray, 2006; World Bank, 2015)? What role do CBGGs and mentors play in reshaping community perceptions of girls and women's roles? Finally, what is the impact of mentorship on mentors themselves? Long-term funding, paired with programs and research partnerships that support mentors' individual and collective capacities, shared learning, and ongoing program adaptations, will help make CBGGs and community-based mentors part of the pursuit of gender equity.

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