

Venture Strategies for Health and Development

Interim Report to Dining for Women

February 2019 - February 2020

1. Program Information

Organization	Venture Strategies for Health and Development
Project Title	Pathways to Choice: Delaying Marriage through Girls' Education in Rural Niger
Grant Amount	\$49,999
Contact Person	Alisha Graves
Address	PO Box 10144 Berkeley, CA 94709

2. Recap briefly what outcomes the project was designed to achieve

The Pathways to Choice project was designed to promote the delay of marriage, nurture the growth of agency and voice of rural adolescent girls, and help them realize their fundamental human rights in rural Maradi, Niger. Specific objectives include:

- Quadruple participating rural girls' junior secondary school completion rates
- Dramatically enhance girls' aspirations, agency, and voice
- Delay marriage by at least 2.5 years
- Improve effectiveness of rural female teachers
- Increase community support for girls' education and delayed marriage
- Increase local and provincial governmental stakeholder support and ownership of project

The Pathways for Choice initiative has recruited over 700 adolescent girls aged 12-14 residing in rural communities in Maradi. Nearly all participants are from farming families with incomes below one dollar a day. Girls' safe space clubs, mentored by their female teachers in their rural schools, greatly enhance girls' literacy and numeracy skills and thus increase their transition rates from primary to secondary school. The safe spaces also provide opportunities for girls to gain crucial life skills not offered in secondary school. The safe spaces expose participants to successful women traders, teachers, health extension workers, and midwives and also create opportunities for them to discuss their reproductive health concerns, visit local health services, develop relationships of trust, and build social networks. This process nurtures the agency and voice that will serve the girls throughout their lives.

3. Has funding changed for this project? Unexpected funding from another source?

The grant from Dining for Women supports critical program elements, including salaries for our Mentor Supervisors and Program Director and snacks and teaching supplies for the safe space clubs. VSHD fundraises year-round to provide sustained support for the safe space program. We have received yearly funding from a private donor for the past four years. In our submitted budget to Dining for Women, funding from the private donor is listed as totaling \$75,000. In late 2019, the donor announced their intention to increase their annual gift significantly. As a result, the safe spaces program has received over \$130,000 in

funding for 2020. This gift will allow the program to grow substantially in the coming years. We intend to leverage the new funding to attract more long-term funders interested in scale. In addition, we received a grant from the French Embassy in Niger in February 2020. This will allow the program to add greater depth to its awareness-raising activities about girls' education in rural Maradi in order to expand the reach of our program to include the broader community.

4. Is your organization or project situation different than presented in the approved proposal? (i.e. major staffing changes, etc.)

No major changes have occurred since the approval of the proposal. The main staffing addition has been the hiring of a Monitoring & Evaluation Officer in Maradi to oversee data collection and analysis. From March through December 2019, our team was supported by a staff member from our sister organization, the Centre for Girls Education, which operates in Zaria, Nigeria. This Program Advisor was based in Maradi full-time. Her involvement provided valuable insights during the startup phase of Hilin Mu, as she has experience implementing safe space programming in neighboring Nigeria. She left in January 2020, and on March 1, we hired a local Nigerien to serve as her replacement.

5. Have the number of beneficiaries changed? (original numbers found in proposal under Number of women and girls directly impacted and Population indirectly impacted)

Dining for Women is supporting the first cohort of girls participating in safe space clubs. At the time of our proposal, we anticipated enrolling 250 girls in the clubs and succeeded in enrolling 248. This cohort has completed their final year of primary school, and 150 of them have enrolled in secondary school and will be continuing with one more year of safe space clubs. Indirect beneficiaries remain similar to our projections, at an estimated 1,612 for the first year. There are two groups of indirect beneficiaries: 1) the girls' siblings, to whom the girls will often pass down what they are learning (namely literacy and numeracy skills), and 2) community families, who are encouraged to enroll their daughters in school following successful implementation of safe spaces in their community.

6. What challenges are you facing as you move forward with this project? How are you approaching these challenges?

Obtaining accurate data from schools and inspections remains challenging. We have encountered ongoing inconsistencies in the data we receive from our government partners regarding test scores, school enrollment, and transition rates. This makes it difficult to get an accurate picture of how well girls are testing and how many girls actually qualified to enroll in secondary school. In response, we organized an intensive work session that took place in Maradi in January 2020 to comb through existing data and pull out the essential information we need to measure impact and ensure accuracy. Additionally, we are revising our monitoring and evaluation strategy to prioritize the other indicators of success that we measure ourselves directly, which will allow us to have a more accurate and complete picture of the impact of our program and reduce our reliance on external data sources that are inconsistent.

Low level of education of the pool of available mentors. At the beginning of every school year, mentors are recruited from the pool of existing female teachers within a school. This allows us to build capacity of the teachers who will be mentoring our participants and the many other students in the school; facilitates logistics because the mentor is already on site to conduct the safe spaces sessions; and increases likelihood of future scale-up as it will be less costly for government adoption. However, this method relies on the presence of qualified teachers at the school sites where we are working. If the teachers do not have a solid grasp of the basics in French and math, then it will be difficult for them to effectively teach our students. For this second cohort of safe spaces beginning December 2019, we have had to replace two mentors because it was clear after a few supervision visits that these mentors did not have the required level of

French and math. As we evaluate the literacy and math scores of our participants and seek to identify ways to improve, we are looking closely at this factor to determine just how heavily it is impacting the girls' learning experience.

7. Have you revised your original objectives since the project began? If so, why? What are the new objectives?

Our ultimate project objectives have remained the same since the beginning of the project. We are seeing promising progress towards our goals. We have set intermediate goals to help us understand our progress towards goals that will take several years of follow-up evaluation to assess, such as quadrupling secondary school completion rates and delaying marriage by 2.5 years. Interim goals include:

- A. Improved scores on quarterly exams, whose average at the end of the year allows girls to enroll in secondary school
- B. Improved literacy and numeracy skills, which can enhance educational success and girls' agency and aspirations
- C. Increased number of girls enrolling in secondary school, which will lead to increased completion rates

8. What progress have you made toward achieving your objectives? Please address each stated objective.

- A. Improved scores on quarterly exams

Our intervention for Cohort 1 began the week of March 23, 2019, immediately following the week of the administration of the Regional Direction for Primary Education's second of three quarterly exams for primary school students. We therefore compared the average score of students in our intervention and control schools on the 2nd and 3rd exams. We looked to see whether students in the intervention schools showed a greater improvement than in the control schools during this period, as it aligned with the period of our intervention. Overall, our intervention sites had a 9% greater average increase in test scores than the control sites. Three of our intervention schools had increases that were 29%, 13%, and 19%, higher than their matched control schools.

- B. Improved literacy and numeracy skills

To measure improvement in literacy and numeracy across the program duration, a baseline and endline test was administered to participants in the intervention and control sites. The results showed that the intervention schools saw reading improve between baseline and endline by 144% more than comparison schools. For math, the improvement was 61.5% more.

- C. Increased number of girls enrolling in secondary school

During the 2018-2019 school year, fewer girls abandoned school between their primary and secondary school years in our intervention schools than in the comparison schools: .08% vs. 3%. This is very important as Hilin Mu aims to support girls to stay in school.

- D. Increased community support for girls' education and delayed marriage

This is one of the original objectives cited in the proposal. Fruitful community meetings were held in four of the five communities. The Safe Spaces team discussed with parents how they can overcome any potential barriers for their girls to continue safe space clubs during the summer vacation. Recommendations and observations were also gathered from parents to help inform program adaptation and to learn about parental

perceptions. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, particularly with regards to the increased respectfulness shown by the girls, their improved hygiene, and the value of the lunch meal the girls receive during the clubs. The meeting in the fifth community did not take place as planned due to the school director's unavailability and the inability to find someone else who could assemble parents.

E. Increased local and provincial governmental stakeholder support and ownership of project

Another of our original objectives, we executed multiple strategies to strengthen our partnership with the Ministry of Primary Education and the Ministry of Secondary Education. In July we invited five representatives from the regional and local offices on a field visit to observe safe space clubs at two schools. The Deputy Regional Director for Primary Education, two inspectors and their two Girls Education focal points were able to speak with girls, the mentors, and the school directors to hear directly from them about the program. The representatives remarked to us that the mentors, parents and girls seem very motivated and engaged in the program. They appreciated the small group size, the fact that lunch is provided in a region with widespread undernutrition, and that the sessions continued into the summer break, to help the students catch up in reading and math.

Additionally, a representative from the Regional Ministry of Primary and Ministry of Secondary Education's SCOFI (Girl's Education Focal Point) accompanied the team to each school site prior to the start of our activities there. They introduced the team to the school directors and spoke to the community about the project prior to presenting the Hilin Mu staff. This demonstrated to the community the official nature of this project and demonstrated to the Inspections that we are committed to working alongside them.

In February of 2020, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed with the Ministry of Secondary Education. This document is important to ensuring the engagement of government partners at the regional level and will protect the collaboration if there is any government turnover.

9. Do you anticipate any difficulties in completing your project in the timeframe outlined in your proposal?

The coronavirus pandemic is having a dramatic impact in Niger. On March 20th, schools were closed by the President for a two-week period, and it is expected that this closure will continue for the foreseeable future. As long as schools are closed, we intend to suspend safe space programs because the risk of transmission of the virus due to the close proximity of participants to one another during the sessions is so great. We will be closely monitoring the situation and if schools do re-open, we will reassess the situation to determine if we can safely offer safe space sessions to our girls. Given the school closure, it is also uncertain at this time if the school year will be extended or if final exams will be held. There is no infrastructure to offer an option for online education in Niger as is being done in countries like the U.S. This will of course delay and perhaps prevent us from measuring transition rates for this second year of the program. It is disappointing that we cannot continue serving our participants, but we prioritize the health of our participants and our staff above all and will do all that we can to ensure that everyone stays safe. Our team continues to work remotely during this time, but our ability to advance the objectives is severely limited by not being able to conduct our program activities, all of which are in-person.

Message to Dining for Women supporters:

Thank you for your enthusiasm for our safe spaces project. Your generosity has helped hundreds of girls stay in school and develop stronger academic and life skills, which will positively impact their lives for years to come. We look forward to sharing further updates on our work over the next year and beyond. Wishing you good health during this challenging time. Merci from Niger!