



## Learning Brief

### EQUIPPING ADOLESCENT GIRLS WITH HEALTH, LIFE SKILLS AND FINANCIAL LITERACY THROUGH SAFE SPACES

The Adolescent Girls Initiative – Kenya (AGI-K) Learning Series

# Learning Brief – Safe Spaces

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Safe spaces can contribute to improved well-being among adolescent girls if the following can be realized:

- Obtaining adequate support from the adolescent girls' parents to allow their girls attend the learning sessions
- Having safe spaces mentors/facilitators permanently residing in the villages
- Holding the sessions outside schools to encourage non-school going girls to attend the sessions
- Simplifying the curricula used in the safe spaces and contextualizing them to fit the capacity of the mentors and the girls in safe spaces. This can be enhanced further with the use of audio aides developed in the local language.

## Introduction

Adolescent girls in Kenya face a number of risks and vulnerabilities that can affect their health, education status, and general well-being. The Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K) is currently delivering multi-sectoral interventions, targeting violence prevention, education, health, and wealth creation, to adolescent girls aged 11–15 in two marginalized areas of Kenya: 1) the urban slums of Kibera in Nairobi, and 2) Wajir County in north-eastern Kenya. A Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) design is being used to compare the impact of four different intervention packages, along with their associated costs, to assess if and how intervening in early adolescence will impact girls' lives as they transition into early adulthood. Save the Children in partnership with Population Council is implementing the project in 79 villages in Wajir County.

This learning brief is one of three, prepared in the course of the implementation phase of the project, focusing on key areas of best practice and lessons learnt. These briefs aim to share learning with specialists and civil society learning networks, and help inform future design and management of adolescent girls' programmes in hard to reach or marginalized communities.

## Safe Spaces Intervention

A safe space is a place where anyone can relax and be able to fully express themselves, without feeling uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, cultural background, religious affiliation, age, physical or mental ability. It is a place where the rules guard each person's interaction, ensuring self-respect and dignity. Within the context of the AGI-K programme, a safe space refers to an adolescent girls' group that meets over an extended period of time to learn under the mentorship of a trained female community member on a range of topics – including health, life skills and financial education. The girls are ideally in a group of between 20 and 30 and categorized by age sets i.e. 11-12 years and 13-14 years where the total number of girls in the programme exceeds 30 in a village and 11-14 years where there are less than 30 girls in a village. Groups can also be segmented by life-cycle status (i.e. in school/out of school or married/unmarried).

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*Improving adolescent girls' knowledge on health and life-skills through mentor-ship and safe spaces learning*

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The adolescent girls in the safe spaces are taken through a series of topics in the health curriculum including Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH), Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), hygiene and sanitation, nutrition for adolescent girls, family planning for married adolescents, communication skills, self-esteem, effects of Gender Based Violence (GBV), practices such as early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation among others. Equipping adolescents girls with knowledge on health and life skills is aimed at supporting them to make informed decisions on matters affecting their own health.

Using the financial education curriculum, adolescent girls are equipped with knowledge on financial management including differentiating between needs and wants, setting financial goals, budgeting, saving and identifying investment opportunities among other topics. These contribute to wealth creation among the adolescents, improve their access to and control of resources and the use of these resources to improve their health and economic well-being. Girls are supported with KES 300 annually for the two years of the implementation phase of the project to enable them practice the financial education skills learnt through safe spaces.

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## Summary of field observations

- Girls attending safe spaces appeared to have improved on their self-esteem as evidenced by interpersonal engagement capabilities.
- Financial education with support of incentives seemed to have stimulated adolescent girls to initiate income generating activities with the support of their parents.
- Safe spaces appeared to have created a social network for adolescent girls who acknowledged being able to make new friends and cement already existing friendship due to the extended period of time they interacted in the safe spaces.
- Through trainings and facilitation, safe spaces mentors acknowledged improving their knowledge on the topics in the curriculum especially on health and financial education with some reportedly having begun saving alongside the girls in their safe spaces groups.

## Challenges with the implementation of the safe spaces

- The safe spaces mentors were not permanent residents of the villages they were supporting; this made it difficult for them to make follow ups on girls who were not attending the safe spaces. It was observed that majority of the men and women from the communities who had acquired basic education tend to move out of the villages and were likely to reside in urban centres such as Wajir and Habaswein. As a result, the would-be ideal mentors could not be found in the villages with the exception of only five of the 40 villages with safe spaces. The rest of the villages had their mentors commuting from the urban centres where they resided. Even though this was somewhat alleviated with the project tactfully engaging female Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) teachers as safe spaces mentors, these teachers would also leave the villages during school holidays leading to irregularity of the safe spaces facilitation over the school holidays.
- Adolescent girls not enrolled in schools seldom attended safe spaces. These set of girls appeared uncomfortable with the safe spaces being held in a school setting as they felt that perhaps the safe spaces were meant for only girls attending schools. The school setting was selected by majority of the girls in the safe spaces as the ideal meeting venues. Despite the clarifications made to them by the mentors and project staffs that the safe spaces sessions were open for all the girls including those who were not enrolled in schools, majority of these girls did not attend the safe spaces.

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*Safe spaces provide girls with opportunities to play share and learn from each other's experiences*

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They were also not found in the villages most of the time as they attended to other domestic chores outside their villages.

- High number of mentors exiting from the programme in pursuit of their education and other personal ventures made smooth implementation of safe spaces difficult since a lot of time was spent looking for their suitable replacements.
- The long distances between the villages benefitting from the safe spaces also made it difficult to conduct the weekly supervisions required in all the safe spaces in the 40 villages. This often led to delayed supportive actions being taken in cases where the safe spaces had issues that needed immediate attention by Save the Children staff. In addition to the long distances between these villages, unreliable mobile phone network across the project's sites made it difficult for timely communication between the villages and Save the Children. Therefore, transmission of safe spaces data had to wait till the mentors or project staffs collecting the electronic data through an off-line platform reached a place with reliable network. This led to untimely submission of safe spaces data and consequently delayed remedial actions where they were needed.

### Learning Points

- Provision of household cash transfers to a household with an adolescent girl participating in the programme, seemed to complement the successes in the home banks as the parents could not take away the girls' financial incentives of KES 300 provided once each year.
- To ensure sustainability of gains made through the safe spaces, engaging the adolescent boys more directly perhaps would help them understand the importance of supporting their daughters to lead better lives in future by changing their harmful beliefs and practices such as early and forced marriages as well as FGM.
- Refresher trainings coupled with on the job trainings (OJTs) by the project staffs and support with audio aids i.e. radios and safe spaces sessions recorded in Somali language appeared to improve the mentors' knowledge on the health and financial literacy topics as well as their abilities to facilitate the safe spaces sessions. The use of the radios and the recorded sessions in Somali language particularly helped the mentors to structure their sessions and make sure that information being given to the girls in safe spaces was accurate and in line with the safe spaces curricula. This especially filled the gap in the provision of supportive supervision by the project staff who could not visit all the 40 villages in a month to ascertain the accuracy of the information taught to the girls in the safe spaces. The use of the audio aids also helped in tackling the language barrier as the audio sessions in Somali language, helped the mentors and the girls in the safe spaces to understand the sessions more as opposed to the sole use of curricula guides written in English that they could not clearly understand.
- It is important to consider local contexts and work with safe spaces mentors and the local community stakeholders in designing effective curricula that addresses harmful socio-cultural practices. For instance in Wajir, there were some topics that the mentors identified as too sensitive or difficult to be taught based on how they were designed in the curricula e.g. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). This required simplification of the curricula including the use of audio aids (safe spaces sessions recorded in the local Somali language and played with radios) to suit the local context and the ability of the mentors to facilitate them.
- Having a back-up data collection system for monitoring purposes is essential especially in cases where electronic data collection based on internet availability is used. This helps to prevent data loss when the electronic system mal-functions e.g. the use of paper based monitoring data collection tools as well as off-line electronic data collection system that do not require internet connection. Availability of this data that mainly included frequency of girls' attendance to the safe spaces, and the safe spaces sessions taught was used by the project staffs to provide support to the mentors and make management decisions that ensured continued facilitation of the safe spaces in the communities.

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*Deka and Hawa posing with their home banks for savings provided by the AGI-K project.*

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*Hawa and Deka both safe space members in Ibrahim Ure village, used part of their saving to buy a goat each with the help of their mother*

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- Mentors' attrition was experienced more in villages where they were commuting to and from the urban centers where they resided unlike in villages that had their mentors as permanent residents. This would perhaps be reduced if the mentors selected were permanent residents from the villages. Even though their level of education would be low, they would be trained using simplified training materials probably including visual and or audio aids to ensure they facilitate the sessions according to the safe spaces curricula.

## Recommendations

- In contexts where adolescent girls not enrolled in schools are uncomfortable having the safe spaces sessions held in schools, it would be best to consider either having separate safe spaces sessions for these set of girls or where other venues exist, have the safe spaces conducted outside school settings.
- While designing the safe spaces curricula, it is crucial to involve the local stakeholders and pilot-test it to make sure it is simple enough to be used by the mentors. To enhance learning of the safe spaces sessions, the use of audio or visual aids to guide facilitation of safe spaces sessions should always be adopted to ensure optimal learning by the girls in the safe spaces.
- To ensure dedication in facilitation of safe spaces and reduce attrition of mentors, it is best to engage permanent residents of the project sites as safe spaces mentors regardless of their level of education, but engage them more in trainings, regular support supervisions and provide them with simplified training materials including audio or visual aids customized to the local language.



*This learning brief serves to highlight some of the lessons learnt from the implementation of the safe spaces between 2015 and 2016. Further lessons and recommendations will be documented and shared following the mid-line and end-line evaluations of the programme by the Population Council in 2017 and 2019 respectively*

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