

Abriendo Oportunidades (‘Opening Opportunities’)

Organisation

Population Council

Country

Guatemala

Length of programme

2004 to present

Supported by

NoVo Foundation, Summit Foundation, UNFPA, Nike Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Interamerican Development Bank

Programme summary

The Abriendo Oportunidades or ‘Opening Opportunities’ programme works with adolescent girls in rural Guatemala to provide them with the skills and support they need to improve their lives.

The programme is working to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in a holistic way by encouraging girls to stay in school and providing them with information on their sexual reproductive rights and the community services available to them to keep them safe and healthy.

Young mentors (aged 18 – 25 years) run and facilitate the programme allowing them to discuss sensitive issues such as sexual health and violence in an informal and culturally sensitive way.

What are the anticipated outcomes as identified in the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change?

- Girls are increasingly aware of their rights.
- Girls have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action.
- Alternative economic and social roles for girls and women exist and are valued.
- Increased access of married and unmarried girls to health, education, economic, and legal support.
- Abriendo Oportunidades also works at the community level to change local norms and perceptions around the value of girls. The programme engages community leaders to support girls decide if,

when and whom to marry, discourage arranged weddings and unions, denounce abuse, and support girls' education and access to opportunities.

What are the key activities of the programme?

Ensuring girls have a safe space within the community

The programme uses an approach that keeps girls at the centre while also engaging parents, guardians, and community leaders. It includes establishing community contracts with local leaders who commit to supporting and ensuring the establishment of a safe space for girls to meet in every week. Community leaders also commit to promoting girls' education and helping mentors engage parents in supporting their daughters.

Mentor led sessions

Girls aged 8 - 12 and adolescents aged 13 - 18 meet on a weekly basis with female mentors for a period of 18 months. They follow a culturally relevant, rights-based curriculum that builds life skills and assets, including communication skills, knowledge of their rights, tools to question traditional gender norms as well as sexual and reproductive rights and health.

Mentors are local women aged 18 - 25 who participate in quarterly 'training spaces' to learn new content, improve their facilitation skills, and learn from other mentors' experiences. Weekly support is also provided by site coordinators, who lead monitoring activities. Site coordinators help mentors improve their own teaching and communication skills by providing input, positive reinforcement, and support in those areas where mentors need to improve. Site coordinators are also responsible for compiling monthly monitoring information from mentors such as attendance, community engagement, and results from specific interventions (for example, when a mentor does household visits to check on girls who have dropped out). This helps identify issues at the household level that are preventing girls from participating. Site coordinators also provide additional support in community advocacy when mentors request it. House visits have been a successful way of supporting the participation of the most vulnerable girls in the community.

Safety in the community

Safety scans are mapping exercises led by mentors, girls, and support staff. Girls use smartphones equipped with a mapping application to identify areas where they feel safe, somewhat safe, or unsafe. These include routes to and from school as well as places frequented by girls such as the school, playing field, corn mill, and church. They are implemented at the community level to increase adults' awareness of girls' perceptions of risk and safety. These strategies help make girls' concerns visible and engage adults in identifying solutions to reduce risks that prevent girls from attending school and moving freely in the community. They also help to reduce harassment and threats by making them visible and engaging leaders and parents to take concrete action to address some of these problems. These have included closing down stores that sell alcohol as well as opening access to playing fields.

Supporting girls' education

As part of a pilot programme, Population Council are partnering with the Ministry of Education's 'Division for Extra-School Education' to provide an accelerated programme for girls in remote rural areas where secondary schooling is unavailable. The programme allows older adolescents to complete lower secondary school in two years, instead of three. Abriendo Oportunidades mentors have become certified by the Ministry of Education as tutors trained to provide lower secondary education to out of school girls. Tutors meet with students once a week to review homework and teach new content. Content follows official curricula but has incorporated Abriendo Oportunidades rights-based material.

Has the programme been evaluated?

Yes. Abriendo Oportunidades is regularly monitored for tracking and improvement and has been evaluated. Its monitoring strategy ensures that monthly and quarterly goals are met and allows staff and mentors to identify problems and act to support and protect girls.

In addition, the programme has been evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively and has demonstrated that participation in the programme:

- **Delays child marriage:** 97% of participants aged 13-18 years remained unmarried, compared to 88.7% for the same age group in national surveys.
- **Increases school attendance and participation:** 98% of girls 8 – 11 years old (versus 87.5% national average for that age group) and 76% of girls aged 12-18 years old (versus 40.7% national average for that age group) stayed in school during the programme's 2 year duration.
- **Prevents adolescent pregnancy:** 97% of mentors, aged 15-20 years old, did not marry or become pregnant during the duration of the programme. 94% of mentors wish to delay their first pregnancy until their 20s.
- **Increases girls' self-esteem, knowledge of their rights and their ability to communicate effectively with each other and with adults in their community:** 68% of mentors reported feeling more confident speaking in public at end-line, girl participants reported an average score of 7.7 in a scale of self-esteem out of 8 and parental support to girls' life plans increased from 18% at baseline to 71% at end-line.

A new randomized controlled trial experiment is currently underway in 40 communities. The study will focus on the programmes impact on girls' education and improved safety in their communities. Results will be available in June 2017.

What are the challenges in implementing the programme and how are they overcome?

- **Education:** one of the biggest challenges has been providing girls with alternatives to education when most communities in the most remote parts of rural Guatemala do not offer formal schooling beyond 6th grade. The Population Council therefore started a pilot programme partnering with the Ministry of Education's 'Division for Extra-School Education' (as previously mentioned). The programme is allowing hard to reach adolescents to continue their education and aims to demonstrate to the Government of Guatemala how distance education, which is rights-based and community-based, is effective and needed at scale.
- **Cultural:** while Guatemala has recently passed important laws to protect girls from marriage and sexual violence, there is a persistent attitude among national and municipal leaders and other public figures that child marriage is 'cultural' and therefore not of concern to the State. Changing local and municipal attitudes takes time but Abriendo mentors are playing a key role by engaging these leaders and speaking publicly about child marriage as a form of violence. The Abriendo curriculum is designed to develop agency among both mentors and participants and a key element of changing local norms and perceptions rests on the important investment made in mentors as agents of change. Their learning process fosters change at the individual level (in terms of their own life plans and empowerment) but also as recognized role models who have the capacity to articulate girls' rights and advocate for norm change regarding marriage. As more mentors talk about forced marriage as a form of violence, they are supported by language incorporated in recent legislation as well as

information and arguments in favour of girls' rights to education, health, and protection. Interestingly, the right to education is often paired with the "right to not be forced to marry".

What factors are important to the success of the programme?

- **Monitoring and learning:** Abriendo Oportunidades is successful because it is an evidence based programme which continuously measures and evaluates its impact on girls' lives. Staff members devote a good percentage of their time to field activities, engaging with mentors and girls in their own contexts. This has helped shape the programme as it responds to local realities and adapts as changes in communities and at the national level occur.
 - **Mentors:** a further key element to the success of the programme has been mentors' dedication to reaching the most vulnerable girls in their communities. The mentors are all young women from the same rural areas so having them be such an integral part of the programme provides the girls with positive role models. Abriendo Oportunidades has been recognized as a valuable methodology and strategy by organizations working to reduce child marriage in the region. We have standardized training strategies through national and international 'Learning Circles' that aim to build skills among grassroots and national organisations that also wish to reduce and eradicate child marriage.
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What pieces of advice would you give other civil society organisations considering implementing a similar programme?

- **Understand the girls you are working with.** Make sure to collect basic information on the girls you want to work with. Investing in baseline research (i.e. through mapping and doing a census of girls in the community) is crucial because, in most countries where child marriage is a problem, there is very little or no reliable information on how many girls live in a community, how many attend school, how many are disabled, are married, have children, who they live with, etc. Mapping and doing a census are key to solid baselines, recruiting techniques, and programme design. They also help improve strategies to reach the most vulnerable girls.
- **Engage local community leaders from the start.** Having local leaders buy-in to the programme and be champions for girls in their own communities is key to the sustainability of the programme and change for girls. Once programme communities are identified, it is important to contact local community leaders, present the implementing organization(s) and key programme goals. This first contact is an important opportunity to explain why you want to work with girls. Obtaining buy-in early in the process is crucial because child marriage, comprehensive sexuality education, and girls' rights are all sensitive issues and you want leaders on your side when inviting girls to participate. Leaders are also knowledgeable about their communities and should be part of the community mapping exercises. These maps are also useful to them, so this first collaboration is usually a win-win situation. Sometimes leaders will question why the programme works with girls or will oppose certain topics. Local mentors are fundamental in explaining the relevance of the programme in terms that make sense to leaders (for example, arguing in favour of school attendance, reducing maternal mortality, learning new skills, and gaining new opportunities are often well understood and endorsed by local leaders).
- **Design culturally appropriate content.** Use baseline information and other available data on the specifics of child marriage in your area to design culturally-appropriate content for your programme. In rural Guatemala, the sequence of contents in the curriculum was designed by programme graduates and mentors. They requested that one of the first lessons focused on the nutritional needs of girls, adolescents, and adult women. Guatemala has some of the highest rates of chronic

malnutrition in Latin America and food scarcity is a constant worry among Maya households. Girls are often the last to eat, get the smallest, and poorest portions. Exercises to foster discussion include examples of food distribution among Maya households, including unequal distribution of portions between males and females. Cases presented also include important issues such as food scarcity and elicit discussions on how parents decide to prioritize who eats what, and when. The guide includes cues to discuss other related subjects such as what happens to girls' nutritional needs if they become pregnant at an early age, the impact of poor nutrition on school performance, etc. After describing the signs of poor nutrition, the lesson wraps up with girls expressing what they hope to achieve if they get to exercise their right to eat.

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