

The Grandmother Project: Effective and Controversial

By Paola Gianturco

The Grandmother Project was launched by anthropologist and public health expert, iconoclast and visionary, Judi Aibel.

She knew that grandmothers are revered as authorities on women's and children's health and well-being in communities throughout the developing world.

Working in Laos on a community health project that focused on children's diarrhea, she first observed that grandmothers---if told to let sick children drink lots of water so they didn't become dehydrated--- improved children's health dramatically.

The problem: most development organizations target mothers---never realizing that it is grandmothers who govern family health and nutrition practices.

Judi has, almost single handedly, spread the word. She wrote the first article ever published about the efficacy of including grandmothers in public health programs.

She launched an NGO, The Grandmother Project, to train other development organizations how to involve grandmothers explicitly to transform health in families and communities. The results of this approach surprised even experts at the World Bank and UNFPA.

The Grandmother Project has since collaborated with The World Health Organization, The Red Cross, USAID, The World Bank, UNICEF, Plan International, ChildFund, Helen Keller International and World Vision. They worked in Albania, Benin, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Laos, Mali, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Senegal and Uzbekistan. Their teams tackled health issues as diverse as female genital mutilation, teen pregnancy, breast-feeding, child marriage, diarrhea, as well as women's work and diet during pregnancy. No matter the place or problem, projects that involved grandmothers were consistently successful.

Despite its documented effectiveness, the Grandmother Project's approach is still seen as an outlier by many development groups.

Typically, development organizations deliver "messages" instead of inviting communities to solve their own problems via intergenerational dialogue as The Grandmother Project does.

Typically, development organizations consider culture to be an obstacle, not a resource as The Grandmother Project does.

Typically, development organizations don't even think of recognizing the experience and role of elders, much less grandmothers, and definitely don't involve them in the process of change.

In fact, development experts often consider grandmothers to be the enemy, which is, obviously, the opposite of The Grandmother Project's view.

"Everyone's talking about the need for sustainable change," Judy Aubel says, "but only changing culturally-defined-and-perpetuated norms and roles promotes sustainable change."

Such systemic change sounds as if it would take a long time, but it doesn't. Over the course of only five meetings organized by grandmother leaders, one village in Senegal decided to abandon the age-old practice of female genital mutilation. Over the next two and a half years, 19 other villages made the same decision, with grandmothers leading the campaign for change.

The Girls Holistic Development Project is featured in a chapter of *Grandmother Power, A Global Phenomenon*. It was *not* the first time that development organizations had tried to stop FGM in the Velingara Senegal region. Others, using traditional approaches, had been there before. The GHDP program, a collaboration between The Grandmother Project and World Vision, completed its work in 2011.

Aubel considers GHDP a "success on two levels. In 20 communities, it promoted positive practices like storytelling, which transmit cultural identity and traditions--- while it helped stop harmful practices including female genital mutilation and early marriage, and greatly decreased teen pregnancy. Plus, it strengthened social cohesion, community competence, and communication between generations."

At the moment, The Grandmother Project is fielding research to identify the characteristics of grandmothers' leadership, perhaps the first such research to be done anywhere in the world. "My dream is to develop simple training activities to empower illiterate grandmother leaders to do even more to improve life in their communities. I keep imagining there must be some women's organizations that would be interested in supporting such work," Aubel confesses.

"The question is," she admits, "how can The Grandmother Project grow? We'd like to continue working in Senegal; we'd also like to expand." Funding is a challenge, as it is for all those who dare to break new ground, despite irrefutably successful results.

Undaunted, Aubel says, "If you want a development program that will have a sustainable positive impact on the health, education and well-being of women and children, grandmothers must be involved."

When asked what she's proudest of having accomplished, she laughs, "So far?" Then she cites two things: "We've got grandmothers on the screen in Senegal. Former President Abdoulaye Wade used The Grandmother Project's program as the starting point for his national program that involves grandmothers in health programs.

“And the articles and books I’ve written,” she continues, “are the first to report on grandmothers as learning institutions. Getting grandmothers recognized: that’s what I’m proudest of.”

August 25, 2012