

# MindLeaps

A Global Educational Model for At-Risk Youth



## **Dining for Women “Building Our Bodies and Our Lives”**

Final Report  
Nouakchott, Mauritania  
July 31, 2020

### ***A message to Dining for Women members and donors:***

MindLeaps is deeply grateful to Dining for Women for its high-impact support of women and girls enrolled in our health and educational program in Mauritania. Through your support, we have not only exceeded our goals, but also leveraged the positive outcomes to attract new funding and sustain the program. Our success in improving learning skills, psychosocial health, nutrition, and access to education for vulnerable girls was profound. This success, in a context in which girls are exceptionally vulnerable, makes us eager to expand the program to include new cohorts of girls in Nouakchott who could further amplify the ripple effect which has begun in the community of El-Mina. We would be honored to continue our partnership with Dining For Women as these girls navigate the disruption caused by Covid, which presents a significant threat to their livelihoods. Thank you again for your support and the profound impact it has made for at-risk girls in Mauritania!

1. *Please provide the following information:*
  - a. *Organization Name:* **MindLeaps**
  - b. *Project Title:* **Building Our Bodies and Our Lives**
  - c. *Grant Amount:* **\$47,840**
  - d. *Contact Person:* **Rebecca Davis**
  - e. *Address:* **email – [davis@mindleaps.org](mailto:davis@mindleaps.org); physical – 315 W. 36<sup>th</sup> Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10018**
  
2. *Recap briefly what outcomes the project was designed to achieve.*

This project provided a dance-based program to attract 120 of the most vulnerable girls in the capital city of Nouakchott, Mauritania, to a safe space. By visibly changing the lives of these girls, a shift in the community began that encourages households to support the advancement of girls. The intended long-term impact was that the community would see reduced levels of child marriage and increased levels of female literacy as the program continues after the initial one-year project supported by Dining For Women (DFW).

There are three specific outcomes this project was expected to generate:

- 1) the formal education of 50 vulnerable girls;
- 2) documented, quantitative improvement in learning skills and psychosocial health of 120 vulnerable girls; and
- 3) increased nutritional health of 120 girls over 12 months.

We exceeded each of these outcomes, as described below. [This video](#) summarizes our program in Mauritania.

3. *What was accomplished in connection with this project? Please address each stated objective. If any project objectives were changed, please also explain the circumstances leading to the modification of the objective(s).*

We are pleased to report that MindLeaps significantly surpassed targets in each of the three dimensions of this project – education, psychosocial health, and nutrition. This was achieved on a faster timeline than initially forecast, with most of the goals being reached before the 12-month period concluded. Given the onset of Covid-19 during the end of our grant period, we are thrilled that local support was already in place to help the beneficiaries and most of our girls were already accustomed to going to school. This will make it easier for them to resume studies when schools re-open, likely in the next two months. The work was also accomplished with a gender ratio favoring women. Of the 20 people working on the project, 11 were women who featured primarily in roles that had the most contact with the girls enrolled in the program, including two of the three lead

dance instructors and the education coordinator. Our accomplishments in each of the goal areas is described below.

### Education

Objective: Enroll 50 girls in formal education by the end of the program.

Accomplishments: We exceeded the target by 150%, as 75 girls were enrolled in formal education and vocational training schools. This was accomplished for the same amount of money that was initially budgeted in the grant for school enrollment fees. The additional 25 older girls were enrolled in vocational education in January 2020, equipping them with income-generating skills. Their entry into formal education came at a critical point after their completion of the program, as they would have otherwise faced hard choices, such as prostitution, in order to survive. Vocational training is unlocking opportunities for them to earn a living with dignity and safety.

### Psychosocial Health

Objective: 120 vulnerable girls will each receive 72 hours of life skills training through the MindLeaps dance program.

Accomplishments: We exceeded the target number of hours by 236%, as 124 vulnerable girls each received 170 hours of life skills training through the MindLeaps dance program. We had initially planned to rotate 30 girls through the program in four cohorts, with each cohort running in consecutive 12-week segments with three lessons per week (for 36 two-hour lessons total). Thanks to the generous in-kind donation of space from our local partner, SOS Pairs Educateurs, we were able to run all four cohorts simultaneously by using the hall morning and afternoon, six days per week. Since we had already reserved the space for several months to run the cohorts consecutively, we decided it was in the best interests of the girls enrolled to stay in the program for as long as possible. Thus, the girls participated in dance training for 28 weeks each over seven months for a total of 85 lessons (170 hours) each. MindLeaps generated the funding to cover the additional cost to pay the African dance instructors for more of their time.

The improvement of the girls in the seven life skills that are part of the dance curriculum – memorization, language, discipline (“respect and tolerance”), grit, self-esteem, teamwork, and creativity – are shown in [this linked document](#) with graph data from Tracker, our custom-build measurement and evaluation software application. The data shows psychosocial health improvement as profound as any we have seen across our other programs in Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, and Guinea. Another noteworthy observation is that in most of our programs, the participants peak around 12 weeks. The girls in our Mauritania program peaked much later, which affirmed the decision to keep them in the program for longer, even at considerable extra cost to MindLeaps.

### Nutrition

Objective: 120 girls will be fed with a full meal program, 3 days per week for 3 months; 120 girls will receive nutritional supplements and clean water daily for 12 months.

Accomplishments: All 124 girls enrolled in the dance program received the full meal program and access to clean water for the entire 7 months they were enrolled. This significantly surpassed the target, which would have provided meals for 3 months before shifting to a nutritional supplement for the remainder of the program timeline. The decision to provide the full meal program was made in correlation with the decision to keep the girls enrolled in the dance curriculum for 7 months instead of three. The access to quality nutrition and calories was essential, given their physical activity in the program. Despite this deeper level of nutritional support, MindLeaps was able to bring this line item in underbudget since our local partner negotiated with wholesalers to decrease the price of raw ingredients. Once Covid conditions caused suspension of the Nutrition program activities, these girls were supported by a separately-funded emergency relief program through our partner, SOS Pairs Educateurs.

4. *Has funding changed for this project? For example, have you received unexpected funding from another source?*

Funding during the project timeline did not change, but MindLeaps did receive a grant from the US Embassy in Nouakchott to continue and expand the program launched through Dining for Women.

While we did not receive unexpected funding per se, we did benefit from unexpected cost savings. In the "Nutrition" category of the budget, actual spending was lower than projected. One of the reasons for underspending is attributable to the pandemic. In the beginning of March, Covid conditions started to appear in the country. At that time, classes were reduced and nutrition service was suspended. ExxonMobile, a funder of our partner SOS Pairs Educateurs, started to fund Covid emergency relief distribution. While MindLeaps has implemented emergency relief for families in our programs in Rwanda and Guinea, we did not have funding to implement relief in Mauritania. However, our students were fortunate to be supported through the Exxon Mobile-funded distribution. Nutrition spending in this regard does not show up in our budget, but our girls were still well taken care of during this period. We redirected those funds into the Psychosocial Health component to make sure the girls had sufficient support during the time when dance classes have been suspended. We provided this support through a series of home visits the trainers carried out wearing masks and with PPE. This is where the trainers shifted to starting in the beginning of March (described in more detail below).

5. *Have the number of beneficiaries changed? To report this please refer to the original numbers in your grant proposal under Number of women and girls Directly Impacted and population Indirectly Impacted.*

According to the approved proposal, we identified 120 women and girls directly impacted and 600 women and children indirectly impacted. The actual number of beneficiaries was 144 direct and 620 indirectly impacted. In addition, the level of services offered to them was more extensive than originally proposed. This will be described further below.

6. *What challenges did you face in connection with this project? How did you address these challenges?*

In our original proposal, we identified two potential challenges: oversubscription to the program (too many girls would attempt to sign up) and the safety of international colleagues participating in the program. In fact, we have not experienced these challenges thanks to the credibility and strength of our local partner, SOS Pairs Educateurs.

We did encounter two minor challenges and one major challenge. First, given that the vast majority of Mauritians are Muslim, the holy month of Ramadan created significant disruption in the schedule. In 2019, Ramadan fell just a few weeks after the program launch with the enrolled girls. Although we were aware of this in planning the project, we underestimated the reactions locals (unassociated with our program) would have to the continuation of regular programming activities during Ramadan; thus, it was essential for us to make modifications.

Second, we also underestimated the amount of technical assistance (e.g. follow-up visits) we should plan for from the International Team after launch. We realized our local team in Mauritania needed more support to manage Tracker, our custom-built M&E system. We are addressing that in the future by preparing our new Technical Director to replace the Executive Director on some follow-up visits, adding more capacity on the international side.

The major challenge we faced was disruption to the program caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid conditions appeared in the country in March, which immediately resulted in suspension of our dance classes, nutrition support, and formal education. Fortunately, by that time, MindLeaps had reached almost all of the objectives in the program funded by Dining For Women. The only remaining objectives were to track the girls through the disruption in their formal education. We have developed solutions to all three disruptions, but feel urgently that the girls need to be supported in their education while they are out of school. This will be important for preventing adverse effects in their home lives brought on by under-engagement in their education.

To support the girls in our program even after dance classes were suspended, we redirected our dance trainers to make weekly home visits to check on each of the girls. Reporting data was tracked from these visits.

To continue providing nutritional support, we were able to incorporate our girls into a Covid emergency relief distribution program funded by ExxonMobile through our partner, SOS Pairs Educateurs.

To provide formal educational support during the suspension of schooling, we will implement our Virtual Academy model which has been highly successful in our other international programs. MindLeaps recently received confirmation of funding for this implementation from the US Embassy. We view it as absolutely critical to ensure the impact of our previous investment in the girls. This will be described in more detail below.

- 7. Is your organization or project situation different than presented in the approved proposal? For example, new executive director, significant project staffing changes or NGO affiliation, loss of large funding, or other significant changes?*

MindLeaps has experienced no significant changes in the organization or project from the way it was presented in the approved proposal, apart from the effects of the Covid pandemic.

- 8. What were the most important lessons learned?*

The most important lessons learned were about the girls we serve in Mauritania. Of the contexts in which MindLeaps operates across six countries, the environment is the most challenging for women and girls in Mauritania. Therefore, the shift in community mindset toward the importance of education for girls – and the girls’ belief in themselves – required a more sustained and intensive effort than we have seen in other contexts. The girls who participated in “Building Our Bodies and Our Lives” responded with some of the most profound effects we have in any of our programs.

Now we must find creative ways to sustain our investment in their education during the disruption of the pandemic. In our Guinea program, four girls have become pregnant during Covid. We became aware of it through our Virtual Academy. The Virtual Academy is how we innovated in response to Covid, and that innovation has now changed our organization. In our Guinea program, we had instances in which girls reached out asking for help, urgently. We have responded with some emergency support operations. The Virtual Academy also provided a safe space for girls to express themselves in the WhatsApp groups prior to going back to school. Knowing Mauritanian girls are the most vulnerable, it would be unthinkable for us not to bring this new opportunity to them. Our

youth trainers are very strong Mauritanian girls and would be able to manage it well.

9. *What has changed within your organization as a result of this project?*

Our deepening knowledge of our beneficiaries in Mauritania as well as our pandemic-related innovation have led us to implement our new Virtual Academy in Mauritania. We are grateful to the US Embassy for funding implementation in Mauritania, which will be the last of our programs to be inducted into the Virtual Academy.

MindLeaps Virtual Academy organizes youth into groups of 8 – 25 students in WhatsApp groups and sparks an interest in learning through fun, engaging TikTok videos in their own languages. To accommodate low bandwidth locations, minimal electricity and poor living conditions, the classes are delivered through WhatsApp classes and by low-resolution videos on smartphones. Each subject runs for 4-5 weeks depending on learning speeds, and one “expert” guides the course with weekly real-time voice messaging lecturing. Assignments and tests use Google Forms and Tools. As of June 1, 2020, 130 youth between the ages of 14 – 25 years are enrolled in the Virtual Academy. Another 120 youth are expected to enroll by the end of July, giving MindLeaps a student population of 250 youth online – every day and actively communicating with one another. The methodology of the Virtual Academy is further described in the document [linked here](#).

Twenty youth, including our 10 youth trainers and another 10 youth selected by our local partner SOS will go into the Virtual Academy starting in August. We would love to bring the Virtual Academy to the girls who graduated from the program which was funded by Dining For Women, as taught by the trainers who are going through it now. We have just started this progressive methodology in Rwanda, and have found it is helping to stabilize the youth during this time of disruption, before they go back to school. The digital literacy component especially will be a skill they can carry with them and is a part of the program through which we have learned much about the youth we serve. We are eager to figure out how to socialize it across organizations and countries.

We are very grateful for the funding from Dining For Women which we were able to leverage to attract funding from other partners. Now we have an opportunity through which we can continue to engage and track the girls who have graduated from our program. This opportunity is possible to carry out during Covid conditions, our trainers can implement it, and it is available in Arabic, French, and English. The Virtual Academy for the prospective cohort of girls would not be difficult to implement, and it would be especially important for these girls.

Another powerful aspect of the Virtual Academy that would be amplified in Mauritania: it generates interactions and exchanges between people in different countries. For example, youth in Uganda presented their “business pitch” presentations in Zoom, and

youth from MindLeaps Rwanda and MindLeaps Guinea joined the zoom and met these youth. Our five experts in the Virtual Academy that guest lecture by Zoom and WhatsApp voice messaging are all women with esteemed careers. Our Mauritanian girls would have another level of exposure to female leaders, role models and peers if they were enrolled in this digital learning space.

The Virtual Academy also helps youth develop skills that can help them find respectable employment and positive ways to sustain their lives – even after completing formal education. The Academy has five subjects, each taught in 4-5 weeks: Business Entrepreneurship, Project Management & Budgeting, Child Development, Communication and Inclusion.

*10. Describe the unexpected events and outcomes, including unexpected benefits.*

One major unexpected positive outcome was our ability to enroll 75 girls in formal education as opposed to the originally proposed target of 50 girls. We made the decision to enroll the additional 25 girls after keeping them in the dance program longer because they were not yet prepared to succeed in school. We also took time to vet the proper schools and made the decision to send them to multiple schools, including some through our partner SOS. This allows us to control the process and tracking better. The additional 25 girls started school at the beginning of March, before Covid conditions took over. School was suspended that month and is supposed to come back this fall. These girls will come back and finish the school year. Their school fees are still being held by SOS, so more funds will not need to be paid for school fees and all 100 girls' education will be covered.

As of January, we had to scale back from 10 trainers to six getting monthly salaries on the permanent team after disbursing all of the Dining For Women funding. Fortunately, our partner SOS onboarded the other four to a new project, so they have “graduated” from MindLeaps and are still funded indirectly. Thus all of our trainers are still working, though only six are reporting to us.

At the end of January, instead keeping just 25 girls in the program, we recruited another 75 new youth to join through additional funding beyond DFW. In the new group of 75, we have three cohorts of 25 – one all girls and two mixed. To be clear, this is a new phase of the program not using DFW funding. Those classes were suspended due to Covid as well. Hopefully soon we can bring the youth back in smaller, socially-distanced groups for dance and school.

In the coming days, MindLeaps is due to release a new document about digital literacy and other outcomes related to our Virtual Academy. Because the Virtual Academy forces everyone to only communicate virtually, using digital ways to understand content, we have seen an increase in understanding of Google tools, email, and Zoom – and, as might



be expected, the youth were more adept at using WhatsApp than the program administrators were. We can send this document upon request.

11. *Did you change your strategy as a result of obstacles you encountered? How will you address these challenges in the future?*

We decided to keep 25 girls longer in our dance program than just three months because their learning curves and social emotional development took longer than expected. We are fortunate that Tracker, as a tool, could inform us of that behavior and allow us to adjust strategies easily within the project period. We would definitely enroll children in this program for a minimum of six months going forward, which we began in January 2020.

Going forward, we think that more and more leadership and M&E roles should be placed in the hands of the lead trainers. These instructors are more deeply connected to the beneficiaries than even the project staff or SOS staff; given additional training, these youth instructors will become competent and passionate coordinators of the entire project.

12. *Approximately how many lives have been touched, both directly and indirectly, by the project?*

Approximately 670.

13. *What are the measurements used to monitor success and how was this information measured (e.g. surveys, observation)? Be specific and include measurable results.*

MindLeaps measures students' development in learning and life skills utilizing its own software tool developed with Carnegie-Mellon and Drexel Universities, called Tracker. It implements a data-collection app on Android tablets with a data-visualization website that allows stakeholders to see the cognitive skill development and social-emotional learning that takes place through the kinesthetic curriculum.

Instructors use the Tracker app on a tablet provided by MindLeaps to score each participant in seven indicators of cognitive development and social emotional learning in each class. When WiFi is available, the data syncs. "Analytics," the website associated with Tracker, then updates and stakeholders can see graphical representations of the indicators. Tracker helps teachers and stakeholders understand learning development in real-time at an individual level. Over the course of the entire project, broader conclusions

can be drawn about the behavioral transformation of at-risk youth as a result of the data patterns seen in the program. More information about Tracker can be found [here](#).

Tracker is how we measured our impact in the Psychosocial Health component of the project. In addition to that data, school reports will be collected at the end of each term, but this will not be consistently done until schools reopen. (Technically, most of our girls have finished one term, but we do not have all the school reports yet). Home visits were being carried out weekly along with school visits since November 2019 when we enrolled the first group of students. Although school visits are suspended, home visits have continued during Covid, observing proper safety protocols.

14. *If the project is ongoing, provide plans and expected results, including projected timeframe.*

At the time we filed the Interim Progress Report on December 31, 2019, we had completed most of the program activities and achieved the objectives. The remaining programmatic activities we accomplished since the Interim Progress Report pertained to following the girls through school and evaluating the program. Below is an outline of the timeline we have followed:

March 18, 2019 – Train The Trainers started

- 21 youth trainers participated
- We selected 10 to receive stipends and continue with us after 1 month of training – 5 females, 5 males
- Trainers completed 284 hours of training by June (average of 28 hours per week)

April 15, 2019 – Enrolled girls in the program

- 4 groups of 30 girls each – all four cohorts ran at once

November/December 2019 – 50 girls enrolled in formal education

- School year changeover is in October in Mauritania

January 2020 – 25 more girls enrolled in vocational training

March 2020 – Funding from Dining For Women concludes

August 2020 – Virtual Academy Launch (funded by US Embassy)

Fall – Possible return to school & resumption of socially-distanced dance classes

\*\* If more funding were to be secured, we would recruit another group of girls in January 2021 (only if new funding is found)

15. *Provide a detailed list of all expenses incurred during the grant cycle which have been paid for with the Dining for Women grant.*

The budget versus actual report [linked here](#) shows disbursements totaled slightly lower than budgeted during the grant period. Funds were rolled forward into the continuation of the program.

One note on payment of school fees (line 6 in the attached Excel sheet): The last set of school fees that rounds out to about \$17,000 were disbursed from our account in January to our partner, SOS Pairs Educateurs. SOS paid out the school fees March after vetting schools and in time for the next term to start. We have receipts tied to the disbursements. This is an example of the strength of our local partner in ensuring the funds are applied judiciously.

16. *Did this grant and relationship with DFW assist your organization in obtaining other funding, partnerships with other organizations, or public recognition of some capacity?*

This month, MindLeaps closed on funding from the US Embassy to fund implementation of our Virtual Academy, which enables us to adapt to a digital model during the continued uncertainty of the pandemic. In addition, our partner SOS was funded by the soccer club Real Madrid to implement a major program of after school activities designed to decrease school dropout rates. MindLeaps was asked to provide activities for that program, which is the key factor in ensuring participation from girls. While MindLeaps is not receiving funding for this activation through Real Madrid, we have agreed to provide support because it is an indicator of the community's changing mindset toward the importance of education for girls and an opportunity for us to continue to foster that change.

### **Attachments and Links**

- Final Budget with detailed accounting is [linked here](#)
- Program Data collected from our M&E system Tracker is [linked here](#)
- MindLeaps Virtual Academy Theory of Change is [linked here](#)
- High-resolution images posted in Dropbox are [linked here](#). MindLeaps has secured the right and consent from each of the program participants for public use of the photos.
- Stories, experiences, and quotes from two girls in our program are [linked here](#)