

**Final Report to Together Women Rise**  
*February 2019 - February 2021*

**1. Program Information**

<b>Organization</b>	Venture Strategies for Health and Development
<b>Project Title</b>	Pathways to Choice: Delaying Marriage through Girls' Education in Rural Niger
<b>Grant Amount</b>	\$49,999
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**1. Recap briefly what outcomes the project was designed to achieve.**

The Pathways to Choice project (our program is called *Hilin Mu*, or “Our Space” in Hausa) 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:

- Improved scores on quarterly exams
- Improved literacy and numeracy skills
- Increased number of girls enrolling in secondary school
- Increased community support for girls' education and delayed marriage
- Increased local and provincial government stakeholder support and ownership of project

Long-term goals for the program include quadrupling participating rural girls' junior secondary school completion rates and delaying marriage by at least 2.5 years.

Hilin Mu has reached 904 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. 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.

**2. What was accomplished in connection with this project? Please address each stated objective. If any project objectives were changed, explain the circumstances leading to the modification.**

A. Improved scores on quarterly exams

Our intervention for Cohort 1 began in March 2019, and the girls finished the final safe space program in July 2020. Girls in Cohort 1, who were in the first year of secondary school in 2020, improved 133% more

in French than the comparison groups. Girls in primary school who participated in safe spaces in 2020 (Cohort 2) improved 64% more in French and 56% more in mathematics than the comparison group. Additionally, Hilin Mu participants were 40% more likely to pass their qualifying exams to be admitted to high school.

#### 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 (primary and secondary combined) saw reading improve between baseline and endline by 99% more than comparison schools. For math, the improvement was 27% more.

#### C. Increased number of girls enrolling in secondary school

As mentioned above, girls in the safe space program were 40% more likely to qualify for secondary school after participating in one year of safe space clubs (66% qualified vs. 47% in the comparison group). Additionally, girls in the primary school cohort were 93% less likely to drop out during the school year (1% vs. 14%). Girls in secondary school were 75% less likely to drop out of school (1% vs. 4%). Hilin Mu is both focused on increasing girls' enrollment in secondary school and maintaining their enrollment to improve graduation rates, as every additional year in secondary school improves girls' livelihood outcomes and leads to smaller, healthier and more prosperous families.

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

In 2020, the Hilin Mu team held dialogues to get parents' consent for the new girls in 24 primary school sites. After the meetings, all parents agreed to integrate their daughters into the Hilin Mu clubs and all signed the consent forms. During these meetings, the Safe Spaces team discusses with parents how they can overcome any potential barriers for their girls to continue safe space clubs. Recommendations and observations are also gathered from parents to help inform program adaptation and to learn about parental perceptions. The feedback has been 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.

In October 2020, the girls in the safe space program put on an event in the community to promote girls' education and empowerment. With funding from the Alliance Française and support from the Hilin Mu staff, girls from the program performed skits on education and early marriage for community members, school staff, and members of government. The activity was broadcast on ANFANI radio and at ORTN in Maradi which increased the visibility of our activities.

The team also hosted a religious leaders' workshop, which brought together village chiefs and imams to discuss and generate buy-in for the content of the life skills module for primary and secondary level. The workshop enabled these leaders to understand the themes that are taught to girls, and they all approved the content of the life skills curriculum, including the discussion on birth spacing using family planning.

#### E. Increased local and provincial government stakeholder support and ownership of project

We executed multiple strategies to strengthen our partnership with the Ministry of Primary Education and the Ministry of Secondary Education. In July 2020 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.

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.

**3. Have the number of beneficiaries changed (direct and indirect)? To report this refer to the original number in your grant proposal.**

Hilin Mu currently reaches 904 girls (up from 648 girls in 2019-2020), 554 girls from primary schools and 350 girls from secondary schools. In our proposal, we anticipated reaching 700 girls, and have exceeded this goal by over 200 girls. Together Women Rise 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. Of this cohort, 150 of them have now enrolled in secondary school and finished their final year of safe space clubs in July 2020. Indirect beneficiaries remain similar to our projections, at an estimated 1,612 for the cohort of 248 girls. However, given we are reaching 904 girls total across all cohorts, we estimate the total number of indirect beneficiaries to be 5,876. 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. We assume an average of 5 siblings per girl and 1.5 additional community members.

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

At the secondary school level, the greatest challenge we faced was the absence of female teachers (who serve as mentors) able to effectively teach math. Most of the female teachers employed in our schools were hired to teach other subjects, like French or Family & Social Economics, and they had a harder time learning the math curriculum and teaching it during the safe spaces. To address this challenge, we adapted the program for the 2020-2021 school year to allow male teachers to teach the math portion (and at times, the French portion) of the curriculum where female teachers were unable to do so. In all schools, the female teachers who were trained as mentors continued to facilitate the life skills component for the clubs. The results we gather at the end of the school year will help us determine if this shift had the expected benefit of improving girls' scores in math, helping them to pass the end of year exams to qualify to advance to the next grade level.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a 10-week school closure in March - May 2020, necessitating moving to community-based safe spaces for girls during the summer vacation. Furthermore, severe flooding in Niger caused the state to postpone the start of school from October 1 to October 15, 2020. This added another two-week delay to starting the recruitment of mentors and girls and thus a delay in safe space sessions. Schools were closed again a week before the Christmas break due to national elections. These disruptions prevented us from completing the targeted 6 safe space sessions before the holidays for Cohort 2 in order to provide girls greater support before they took their first quarter exams. We were able to make up the sessions in 2021.

**5. Is your organization or project situation different than presented in the approved proposal? For example, a new Executive Director, significant staffing changes or NGO affiliation, loss of major funding, etc.**

Venture Strategies for Health and Development has gone through a few exciting changes since the proposal was approved. In August 2020, we began a 5-year strategic planning process, which reaffirmed our commitment to the Sahel region and our focus on women and girls' education and empowerment. Following the strategic planning process, we changed our name from Venture Strategies for Health and Development to OASIS (Organizing to Advance Solutions in the Sahel) to better reflect our regional focus. Our mission is now to advance education and choice for women and girls in the Sahel.

We also launched community listening groups in the wake of COVID, which allowed girls to continue their life skills and academic training even when schools were shut down. These sessions were pre-recorded and distributed to our communities, where girls met with a community mentor to listen to the sessions and complete assignments in their workbooks. Now that the girls are back in school, we are continuing to develop this program to benefit girls who live in communities outside of where we work or who are not in school. We aim to have these sessions broadcast on the radio to allow thousands of girls to benefit from listening to our programming.

In terms of staffing, the Girls Education Technical Advisor, who was based in Maradi, Niger for the past two and a half years, has returned to the U.S. She contributed greatly to the start up of the Hilin Mu safe space program. Hilin Mu is now run by a fully local team of seven people, who registered a nonprofit in Niger in November 2020 called Lumière des Filles et des Femmes (Light of Girls and Women). LFF's vision is "A Sahel where girls and women are able to fulfill their potential to help build resilient communities." In June 2021, a new OASIS staff person, Elizabeth Desser, moved to Maradi, Niger, to continue to support the LFF team as they grow the Hilin Mu program.

**6. What were the most important lessons learned?**

One of the important lessons we learned concerned stakeholder engagement. In the first year of the program, we had some difficulty securing the engagement of some school directors at the sites where we work. When the program was first introduced, the team emphasized to the school directors that our approach involves supportive supervision. We did not want mentors feeling intimidated or openly criticized by their superior being present during the sessions, so we asked them to give the mentors space to work with the girls. This had the unintended consequence of making several of the school directors feel excluded from the activity and disrespected. Over the last two years, we have worked to remedy this by inviting school directors to contribute to the activity at appropriate times, such as when revising the curriculum or during community meetings. This year we have seen a very positive shift, with school directors being more excited about having the program at their school. They are seeing the benefits that it is having on their students' academic performance and they appreciate that they have a contributing role that is respected by the program team. Our mentors are able to go directly to their school director for teaching advice, and the director can support the mentor to address real-time challenges in the club if needed, so this has also had a direct positive impact on the girls' experience in the clubs.

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

The growth of the safe spaces project has allowed our organization to have a greater focus on girls' education in the Sahel region. The safe spaces program is now one of our largest portfolios, representing about 45% of our budget.

As described under question five, VSHD (now OASIS) supported the establishment of a local Nigerien nonprofit, Lumière des Filles et des Femmes, to lead the Hilin Mu program. Because of the success of the safe spaces program funded by Together Women Rise, LFF was able to attract more funding to support their girls' education work. For example, in October 2020, the French Embassy in Niger granted LFF \$5,000 to lead a girls' education advocacy campaign in their communities.

#### **8. Describe the unexpected events and outcomes, including unexpected benefits?**

For the 2019-2020 school year, we found that we needed to move our program out of three schools for reasons relating to either unavailability of a female mentor or lack of stakeholder engagement. This was only done after several attempts to remedy the situation with the help of our government partners and the community. In one of the villages where this was the case last year, the School Management Committee and school director noticed that the primary school girls who had participated in one year of our safe spaces program scored very highly in their quarterly exams in secondary school this year (2020-2021). They contacted the Hilin Mu team to request a meeting to find a way to bring the program back next year. They were so impressed that the vast majority of girls passed their exams the year after they had been in the program, and that the three girls who did not pass were very close. We are looking forward to restarting our collaboration with that school.

Another unexpected outcome has been Hilin Mu participants outperforming their male classmates. Promoting gender equity is one of the goals of the program, and by providing safe space clubs to the girls, we hoped to support their academic performance so that they can advance to the next grade levels at greater rates than in previous years. Our monitoring has therefore focused on girls' grades and not the boys', but we have been receiving reports from schools that their top students are girls who participated in the program. For example, at Sabon Gari Kolta, 52% of girls (22 out of 43) passed their exams compared to just 11% of boys (7 out of 66). At Elkokia, their top student this year in CM2 was a Hilin Mu participant. This same student had struggled to qualify to advance into the last year of primary school. In the period of just one year, she turned around to become the top student in her class.

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

In the wake of COVID shutdowns, the Hilin Mu team adapted 40 sessions of safe spaces for broadcast by radio stations. This project, called Hikima, or "strategy" in Hausa, aims to strengthen French oral comprehension and writing and reinforce life skills, to make it easier for girls to stay in school. During the summer vacation in 2020, 391 girls in 20 clubs participated in at least one session of Hikima.

We have also altered our mentor strategy to help ensure girls receive the best instruction possible. This means that when the only qualified teacher available to serve as a mentor is a male, Hilin Mu will hire him to teach the necessary subject. For example, clubs might have a male mentor to teach the math lessons, but will always have a female mentor to lead the life skills lessons.

**10. Approx. how many lives have been touched, directly or indirectly by the project?**

As described in question 3, we calculate that the Hilin Mu program is impacting 6,708 people in total, 904 girls in the program and 5,876 indirect beneficiaries.

**11. What are the measurements used to monitor success and how was information measured (e.g. surveys, observation)? Include measurable results.**

Several indicators are used to measure program success, including:

1. Literacy and math skills: measured by a Hilin Mu-administered baseline and endline test
2. School performance: measured by quarterly school exams
3. Transition rates: measured by school enrollment records

Results are found in response to question two (page 1).

Program monitoring is conducted by mentor supervisors, with each club receiving approximately two supervision visits per month. The supervisor records her structured observations in tablet-based templates featuring Likert scales measuring attendance, mentor preparedness, clarity of instruction, level of participants' engagement, etc. For example, for the most recently completed school year (2019-2020), these observations showed us that during the first three months, 17% of the sessions had mentors dominating the session discussion (as opposed to encouraging dialogue among the girls themselves). After seeing this data, the supervisors were trained on how to support the mentor to facilitate dialogues, and the final three months of the program's observation questionnaires showed the indicator had dropped to just 3% of sessions.

Participant attendance sheets are collected from the mentors every month to account for girls' presence at the clubs. For the 2019-2020 school year, 71% (355) of primary school girls had zero absences and just 10% (49) missed more than two sessions. Attendance was lower for secondary school girls, with 34% (51 girls) having zero absences and 43% (63) missing more than two sessions. The greater absences noted in secondary school allowed the team to identify a challenge with the timing of the scheduled clubs, and this was adjusted for the 2020-2021 school year to facilitate more girls' participation.

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

The Hilin Mu program will continue to grow in the years to come. We anticipate enrolling 1,000 girls in the upcoming primary school cohort and expanding our geographic range to include more rural communities. In total, we anticipate serving 1,350 girls in 2021-2022. In addition, the team will begin preparations for a Montessori preschool pilot program when Nigeria's borders are opened.

**13. Provide a detailed list of all expenses incurred during the grant cycle which have been paid for by the DFW grant.**

Please see the attached financial report.

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

The Together Women Rise grant allowed us to connect with many women throughout the Bay Area who were very supportive of our work. Pat Payne, the West Regional Leader, invited our team to speak at the DFW International Women's Day Event in 2019. She has been a great ally and attended our fundraising event in October 2019. Additionally, Susan Wright and other members of the Oakland/Berkeley chapter included OASIS Executive Director Alisha Graves to join a meeting with a staff person to House Representative Barbara Lee to advocate for increased funding for women and girls.

*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. Given our strong program outcomes, we would like to request consideration for a Sustained Grant. We hope to continue a fruitful partnership with Together Women Rise into the future. Merci from Niger!*