In sub-Saharan Africa, girls are 3 to 5 times more likely to be infected with HIV than are boys of the same age. In response to this gender disparity in HIV infection rates, the U.S. Agency for International Development through the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief funded the three-and-a-half year Go Girls! Initiative (2007-2011) to develop innovative program approaches to address the contextual factors that place adolescent girls at heightened HIV risk and to make recommendations for future programming.

Go Girls! was implemented in Botswana, Malawi and Mozambique by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Centers for Communication Programs (CCP) in partnership with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and schools.

**Defining Girls’ Vulnerability**

Findings from a literature review augmented by qualitative research with community members in Botswana, Malawi and Mozambique guided the Go Girls! understanding of factors that increase girls vulnerability to HIV infection.

**Definition of vulnerable girls**

The girls most vulnerable to HIV are those who are orphans, early school leavers, socially marginalized, migrants and/or who live in impoverished conditions. Additional factors identified that contribute to vulnerability were low levels of HIV knowledge, low self-efficacy, alcohol consumption, social influence and weak relationships with parents or guardians.

**The Go Girls! Approach to HIV Prevention**

Although individual sexual behaviors heighten adolescents’ risk, a complex interaction of social, legal and economic factors outside of girls’ control fuel the epidemic. The Go Girls! Initiative sought to address this constellation of factors by using a social ecological or “whole community” approach to preventing HIV. This approach recognizes that a girl’s ability to protect herself from HIV is influenced by a system of socio-cultural relationships—families, social networks, communities and nations. Thus, interventions were simultaneously implemented to reach out to communities, leaders, teachers, parents/guardians as well as adolescents themselves. Though the focus is on girls, most interventions were also designed to include men, women and boys.
The following eight field-tested interventions were designed to achieve changes at the structural, community, family and individual levels:

**Go Communities!** Community mobilization motivates community members to take action to reduce girls' vulnerability to HIV.

**Go Families!** Helps adults strengthen their communication skills and relationships with young people so they can talk to them about their needs and aspirations, as well as about sensitive topics such as HIV/AIDS prevention.

**Go Girls! Community-based Life Skills** Improves the knowledge and ability of vulnerable girls to address the specific factors that put them at risk to HIV.

**Go Teachers!** Enables teachers and school administrators to cultivate a safe school environment for students through a recognition of girls' vulnerability in schools, gender equitable teaching practices and adherence to the teacher's code of conduct.

**Go Students!** Gives teachers the knowledge and know-how to facilitate life skills sessions for girls and boys that will help reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

**Economic Strengthening** Links vulnerable girls and their families to existing economic support programs.

**Cross-sectoral Fora** Bring leaders from the communities and various government sectors together to garner support for Go Girls!

**Reality Radio Programming** Uses real-life stories to inspire community dialogue and action regarding girls' vulnerability to HIV.

Information about laws, regulations and enforcement is woven into every Go Girls! component to ensure these structural factors are addressed as part of a comprehensive approach.

A toolkit of key materials - including training manuals and research tools - is available from the U.S. Agency for International Development at GHCommunicationsTeam@usaid.gov, http://www.k4health.org or http://www.aidstar-one.com.

**Go Girls! Research and Evaluation**

Go Girls! was guided by a comprehensive, five stage research portfolio.

- The literature review provided an overview of studies about girls’ vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.
- The formative research study explored how community members themselves define and characterize girls' vulnerability to HIV.
- The baseline survey established benchmark measures of communities prior to program implementation.
- An extensive process evaluation was conducted to provide insight into whether the program was implemented according to plan, how Go Girls! was carried out, and what obstacles and opportunities influenced implementation.
- Finally, an endline survey was conducted to assess what proportion of community members took part in Go Girls! activities and with what effects.

Survey findings found:

- A positive association between girls’ participation in Go Girls! and HIV knowledge
- Improvements in relationships between girls and their parents who participated in the Go Families! Adult-Child Communication activity
- Improvements in the school environment in Go Girls! intervention schools
- Increases in legal literacy among girls and adults who participated in Go Girls!

The survey data were also used to develop and test the *Vulnerable Girls Index and the Supportive Community Index*. These indices can be used to assess levels of girls' vulnerability and support for girls in communities prior to implementation as well as to measure program-related changes. Details can be found in the technical brief entitled *Go Girls! Indices* and the report, *Vulnerable Girls’ Indices Guide*.

These documents together with companion technical briefs and research reports are available at GHCommunicationsTeam@usaid.gov, http://www.k4health.org or www.aidstar-one.com.
Recommendations for Future Programming

- **Phase the implementation of Go Girls! project components.** Begin by designing the radio program to establish a broad-base of understanding and interest in Go Girls!, followed shortly by community mobilization as it brings people of diverse backgrounds together, challenges adults to take responsibility for creating a supportive environment for adolescents and creates a platform for advocacy to support structural changes.

- **Plan for a three-year (or longer) implementation period.** Allow time to reach a broad swathe of community members, for structural interventions to take hold and to enable changes in social norms to support changes in individuals' behaviors.

- **Engage a broad range of adults in adult-child communication.** The formative research identified a strong felt need for improved adult-child relationships. Process evaluation findings indicated an eager receptivity among participants, and the outcome evaluation demonstrated the effectiveness of this activity.
- **Encourage male involvement in program activities.** Male involvement strengthens community engagement and reduces girls’ vulnerability.
- **Intensify school-level interventions.** School interventions should include a school-wide training, emphasize the code of conduct and develop school action plans.
- **Increase legal literacy and engage with the judicial system.** Ensure that existing laws to protect girls are understood and enforced at all levels of the system.

For questions about Go Girls! program implementation, monitoring or research activities contact the US Agency for International Development at GHCommunicationsTeam@usaid.gov. To access an online version of the Go Girls! toolkit, please visit www.aidstar-one.com or http://www.k4health.org.

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