

Chicas en Conexión: Empowering Girls & Young Women in Honduras

2014-2019



Implementation Story

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ACRONYMS

AYSRH	Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health
CHeC	Chicas en Conexión
CLA	Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PASMO	The Pan American Social Marketing Organization
PROHECO	Honduran Program for Community Education (<i>Programa Hondureño de Educación Comunitaria</i>)
PSI	Population Services International
SDS	Secretary of Health (<i>Secretaría de Salud</i>)
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
VYA	Very Young Adolescents (Under the age of 15)

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The following Implementation Story of Chicas en Conexión was made posible by the support and vision of Vicki Sant. As founder of The Summit Foundation and a long-time advocate for the equality women and girls through evidence-based strategies, Vicki brought meaningful change to thousands of girls around the world. She was also a founding member of the Maverick Collective, a group of philanthropists redefining how to end extreme poverty through innovation and investment in girls and women. It was through her support of the Maverick Collective that Chicas en Conexión was born. She is deeply missed.

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Finally, and most importantly, we would like to thank the program participants and every girl who was a part of the Chicas en Conexión family. You continue to inspire us with your courage, strength, and ambitious dreams for your futures, but most of all your voices. We are excited for the world to hear what you have to say. This implementation story is your story.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It's tough to be a girl in Honduras. The statistics paint a bleak picture—high rates of violence against women, lack of access to secondary education and basic health services, few job prospects, and some of the highest rates of unplanned pregnancies in Central America. For adolescent girls in particular, who must balance their dreams against pressures from their peers, family, and society, the road to accessing higher education and climbing out of poverty is long and uncertain.

Despite these challenges, girls in Honduras also represent a powerful force for change. As they begin to find their voices, they are paving inroads to community development and a better future. The empowerment of girls has been proven as a critical link to ending poverty, but remains difficult to define, document, and finance. Thus, the purpose of the following implementation story is to share the experience of one such girls' empowerment initiative in order to inspire and support others doing this critical work. Though the project will not claim to have found the only or best definition of empowerment, a favorite was that shared by project participant, Xiomara. In her words, *"It's a girl that doesn't give up even though there are obstacles in her way, she never backs down."*

In 2014, Population Services International (PSI) and its network member in Honduras the Pan American Social Marketing Organization (PASMO), came together with the Summit Foundation under the leadership of Maverick Collective member Vicki Sant to strategize new approaches to empowering girls in Valle de Sula, Honduras. Building on the work of Population Council's evidence-based *Abriendo Oportunidades* project in Guatemala, the Chicas en Conexión project was founded in six rural communities in Valle de Sula with girls ages 10-24. The project sought to: 1) increase gender equity and empower very young adolescents (VYA) and adolescent girls by improving access to education, providing safe meeting spaces, and enhancing leadership and decision-making skills; 2) increase access and use of quality youth friendly AYSRH services.

Over the last four years, Chicas en Conexión has contributed to empowering more than 1,200 in rural Honduras to stay in school, make healthy decisions, and pursue their dreams. The end of the four-year project period represents an opportunity to reflect not only on the results achieved, but also on what the experience has meant to girls and their communities and their vision for moving forward.

The purpose of this implementation story is to capture the experience of program implementation, including the process, challenges, successes, lessons learned, to provide a guide to future implementors who are interested in replicating evidence-based strategies for the empowerment of girls in Central America.

HONDURAN CONTEXT

Despite promising gains in economic growth, women and girls remain disproportionately affected by worsening income inequality, poverty, and violence. The exclusion of women and girls as full participants in the economy contributes to vicious cycles of crime and emigration¹. The extreme poverty rate hovers at 17.2%, the second highest only to Haiti². Poverty rates are higher among rural and indigenous communities, with extreme poverty affecting nearly one out of five of homes in rural areas³. While the homicide rate dropped by 50% in 2017, it still remains among the highest in Central America (surpassed only by El Salvador) with 40 homicides per 100,000 people recorded in 2017⁴.

Girls have it especially tough as they navigate trying to achieve their dreams among violence, extreme economic limitations, and social and economic pressure to prioritize marriage over school. Up to 24% of girls are married by age 18, with 8% married before the age of 15 even though prohibited by law⁵. While most attend primary school, nearly half drop out of high school due to safety concerns, cost, marriage, or the competing priorities of marriage or pregnancy⁶. By age 19, 24% of girls in Honduras will have experienced their first pregnancy, representing the highest teen pregnancy rate in Central America⁷.

Girls in rural areas face especially unfavorable odds in achieving their dreams. High rates of violence, including gender-based violence and gang violence, mean difficulty getting to school and few interventions offered by either the state or civil society. Crumbling infrastructure, gender norms that favor the suppression of women, and few opportunities for employment even for the lucky few who can complete an education make for dreams that can feel impossible and create challenges for young women to be heard and effect change.

ADAPTING ABRIENDO OPORTUNIDADES FOR HONDURAS & VALLE DE SULA

In response to the challenges faced by women and girls in rural Honduras, PSI/PASMO sought to identify promising interventions that could be adapted to the Honduran context to give girls in Valle de Sula their best chance at achieving their dreams. Chicas en Conexión represented an adaptation of an evidence-based model known as *Abriendo Oportunidades*, shown through a rigorous random control trial to contribute to girls' empowerment in Guatemala. The Population Council launched Abriendo Oportunidades in 2004 to increase the social support networks of Mayan girls, as well as to connect them with role models, help them develop leadership skills, and provide them with professional experience and training. A 2007 program evaluation and a 2011 quantitative household study both revealed measurable impact on autonomy and decision-making, retention in school, and delayed marriage and pregnancy⁸. PSI/PASMO signed a pledge of support to replicate the model and in 2014, in partnership with The Summit Foundation, launched the Honduran adaptation of Abriendo Oportunidades, Chicas en Conexión.

¹ The World Bank in Honduras. Overview. Available from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/honduras/overview>

² “

³ “

⁴ InSight Crime's 2018 Homicide Round-Up. (January 2019). Available from: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/insight-crime-2018-homicide-roundup/>

⁵ Girls not Brides. Honduras. (2019). Available from: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/honduras/>

⁶ Guttmacher Institute. Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young Women in Honduras-Fact Sheet. (July 2014). Available from: <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/sexual-and-reproductive-health-young-women-honduras>

⁷ Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) Honduras 2012-2013. Available from: <https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr274-dhs-final-reports.cfm>

⁸ PopCouncil. Project Abriendo Oportunidades (“Opening Opportunities”). Available from: <https://www.popcouncil.org/research/abriendo-oportunidades-opening-opportunities>

Chicas en Conexión launched with a learning journey to Guatemala to observe program implementation of Abriendo Oportunidades, discuss best practices and lessons learned, and share ideas with colleagues committed to similar goals. This invaluable experience brought clarity to the planning, execution, and monitoring required for Chicas en Conexión and renewed enthusiasm to bring the successes of Abriendo Oportunidades to Honduras. The coaching sessions, in combination with the site visit to Quiché, Guatemala not only served to strengthen program concepts but also to create strong partnerships between PASMO, Population Council, and local implementing partner, *Voces Vitales* (Vital Voices).

In the Honduran adaptation, PSI/PASMO and partners focused on addressing specific challenges related to the lack of resources and opportunities for youth participation by building the capacity of communities to support ASRH and youth empowerment, removing additional barriers to secondary education, and increasing access to alternative education programs to expand access to education beyond the sixth grade. Additionally, PSI/PASMO has trained community leaders through adult learning techniques to self-finance these programs and secure additional resources for their communities that promote youth empowerment.

CORE STRATEGIES

The Chicas en Conexión model in Honduras was adapted based on the socioecological model, a framework that considers that individual decisions are made in the context of many levels of influence, including interpersonal, organizational, societal, and political influences⁹. Within this framework, Chicas en Conexión focused on addressing barriers to health and education at various levels as follows:

Individual	Interpersonal	Organizational	Societal	Political
Sharing knowledge and building decision-making skills to achieve dreams	Building the capacity of parents to support girls in their families and communities	Coordinating with the ministries of health and education to build institutional support for AYSRH and girls empowerment and increase access to services, such as SRH and higher education	Addressing harmful gender norms that contribute to cycles of violence	Advocating for ending child marriage and updating national guidelines for AYSRH

Chicas en Conexión sought to address barriers for girls empowerment at each level and included adaptations that align other known evidence-based strategies for youth empowerment, such as:

⁹ Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513-531.

- **Key soft-skill development for sexual and reproductive health outcomes**¹⁰, violence prevention & workforce development, which are building positive self-concept, higher order thinking skills and self-control; and **Positive youth development**¹¹, including the following 7 features: i) Build skills, assets, competencies, ii) Healthy relationships and role models, iii) Youth engagement and contribution, iv) Belonging/membership, v) Safe spaces, vi) Access to integrated youth friendly services, vii) Positive social norms, expectations and perceptions.

Taking into account the Abriendo Oportunidades model as well as the socioecological framework, Chicas en Conexión centered implementation around the following five core strategies:

1. Safe Spaces and Mentorship

In Honduras, many girls live in communities where their streets, homes, and schools are not safe spaces for self expression and reflection. Chicas en Conexión sought to create safe spaces for girls in order to foster an environment where girls could express their thoughts and feelings, ask questions, engage in activities with their mentors, and be themselves. In order to participate in the program, each community was asked to designate a safe space just for girls. Usually a classroom or room in a community center, the safe space had to be in a secure, well-lit location and available for the exclusive use of girls during the mentoring sessions. Girls were given the opportunity to decorate the space and make it their own.

The safe spaces were crucial to providing a space for organized mentorship. Mentors were young women from the same participating communities who were trained in facilitation, girls empowerment, and sexual and reproductive health. While the PASMO senior management team led the mentor selection process initially, the team learned that mentorship selection and retention was stronger when led by community leaders and the girls themselves. Mentors also conducted home visits with parents to strengthen guardian to child relationships, foster strong buy-in from families, and share back results.

2. Teacher Training

Teachers were key allies in the success of Chicas en Conexión. Teacher engagement was critical to sustainability beyond the life of the project, as managed the schools for parents and helped to generate buy-in for girls empowerment and sexual and reproductive health for both parents and community leaders. Teachers were trained on the national sexual and reproductive health methodology “Caring for my health and my life” through collaboration with the Secretary of Education under the USAID Healthy Youth Project (Oct 2012- Feb 2020).

3. Strengthening Community Leaders

Community leaders included both the formal and informal members of town councils (*patronatos*), teachers, and respected elders. While the project initially focused only on getting their consent to implement the project, the project involved to seek more active engagement with the *patronatos* and to empower them to become advocates for girls. *Patronatos* were trained on developing action plans for

¹⁰ See <https://www.youthpower.org/youthpower-issues/topics/peer-education> for a compilation of the evidence base for soft-skill development for youth

¹¹ Positive Youth Development Framework. Youth Power. Available from: <https://www.youthpower.org/positive-youth-development-pyd-framework>

girls empowerment and in techniques to advocate with their municipal offices for specific resources to fund their action plans.

4. Strengthening Health Providers for Youth-Friendly Health Services

Health care providers in the health centers of each community were trained in youth-friendly health services in order to increase access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and modern methods of family planning for adolescents. The training sought to move providers along the “adoption stairway,” guiding skeptical providers to become advocates for comprehensive SRH services for adolescents. Additionally, youth were trained as “mystery clients” to create accountability for youth-friendly health services in their communities, with the results of the mystery client survey shared back with the Secretary of Health to continue improving services for adolescents.

5. Sustainability

Future implementors should know that Chicas en Conexión in its entirety is a model that is likely to require donor subsidization. However, every cycle of the project produces graduates who are more empowered and more likely to speak their minds, pursue their dreams, and spark changes in their communities that favor women and girls. In that sense, Chicas en Conexión brings life-long and sustainable change.

As thinking in sustainability evolved over the life of the project, Chicas en Conexión also sought to position communities to support the core strategies beyond the life of the project. Key examples of long-term sustainability included:

- Empowering local leadership councils to know how to advocate for resources for women and girls by developing action plans and meeting with their local municipalities;
- Advocating with the office of the Secretary for Education to expand education options beyond the sixth grade but either adding grade levels to existing schools or offering free or low-cost alternative education programs;
- Linking new partners with the communities such as the national vocational training program (INFOP), increasing the likelihood that collaboration will continue into the future;
- Training mentors who were from the same communities selected by the project who could continue to serve as informal mentors beyond the life of the project and examples of young women achieving their dreams;
- Instilling the values of youth-friendly health services in each community health center and training youth to be able to monitor these services;
- Installing safe spaces that can be used beyond the life of the project.

PATHWAY TO IMPLEMENTATION

Needs Assessment & Community Selection

Community selection was conducted in close collaboration with the Secretary of Health, which identified Valle de Sula as a priority, underserved area not reached by traditional programming. Communities were selected based on health indicators, availability of community leaders to support the program, and

geographic location. The project began in 6 communities, which completed a full cycle. An additional 5 communities were selected for a total of eleven communities reached.

Selection Criteria

Chicas en Conexión is designed to benefit small rural or peri-urban communities. Above all else, site selection should be conducted in partnership with a government health, education, or development agency, and in close coordination with the communities themselves. Chicas en Conexión also selected sites that were:

- Identified as part of a priority area (Valle de Sula), but underserved but government and civil society organizations
- Had a least one *centro básico* (elementary school 1st-6th grade) and health post or center
- Had an active *patronato* supportive of the project and willing to engage in recruiting mentors and project participants
- Was not already being served in a similar capacity by another non-profit organization

Needs Assessment

Chicas en Conexión is not prescriptive about how to conduct the needs assessment, but emphasizes honest conversations with as many community stakeholders as possible, and in particular, with potential beneficiaries. At minimum, potential implementors should seek to understand:

- Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to girls empowerment and which gaps the project will seek to fill and which it won't
- The day to day reality of girls living in the community and their networks of supporters, including teachers, health professionals, peers, and parents, among others
- The perspectives of other organizations working with the community (i.e. Secretary of Health, Secretary of Education, local NGOs, community leadership councils, etc.)
- Security concerns for both beneficiaries and project staff and potential locations for safe spaces for girls to meet

The needs assessment informed the development of archetypes, used to customize programming according to the unique needs of different segments of the target population (adolescent girls). An archetype is an aggregate of demographic, social, economic, and psychological factors that summarizes a segment of the target population, based on both demographic and behavioral (psychographic) characteristics. For CHeC, girls were segmented by their stages of life into younger adolescents (10-14) and older adolescents (15-18) (see Annex X).

Building and Training the Project Team

One of the core concepts of the project was mentorship, or empowering girls to learn through someone who they could relate to, who could listen to them, and who could support them in new ways of thinking. Initially, the project team recruited and hired the mentors as they would with any project, seeking people already skilled in education and facilitation. However, by the second year of the project, the team realized that to increase retention of the mentors and engagement of the project participants, mentor selection should be led by the communities. Rather than focusing on experience, the project recruited for young

women who wanted to make their communities a better place and had the energy and passion to learn the skills they would need to be successful. The defining qualities of a good mentor included:

- Support from the community leadership council
- Completed high school education
- Positive attitude and willingness to learn and grow as a professional
- Unafraid of challenges and designing creative solutions

Mentors participated in a week-long training at the beginning of each cycle, learning more in depth about each of the topics covered in the curriculum as well as techniques for facilitation with youth. After training, mentors received supportive supervision visits from their supervisor, who gave realtime feedback on strengths and opportunities for growth. Mentors also received refresher trainings once every six months, where they could address challenges as a group and provide feedback on their experience that was used to improve the project. Mentors received a stipend each month, along with travel and professional development opportunities.

Understanding and Adapting the Model

The program team came back to Honduras and adapted the curriculum to the Honduran context and the needs they had identified in the community assessments, tailoring the focus to gender equity, financial planning and planning for life goals, human rights, and sexual and reproductive health. Separate, age-appropriate curricula were developed for girls ages 10-14 and 15-19. Modules were broken down by quarters, for a total of 6 quarters and 6-7 modules per quarter. Each module lasted 1-2 hours. Modules were often accompanied by extracurricular activities, including arts and crafts, dance, and music. Groups also put together at least one social mobilization event per year to rally their communities around themes that promoted girls empowerment.

Girls were considered to have graduated from Chicas en Conexión after completing at least 80% of modules (37 sessions for girls 10-14 and 38 session for girls 15-19). While PSI/PASMO would recommend this as a minimum, the right “dosis” for maximum effect was not studied as a part of the implementation. Future implementors could consider conducting a cost/benefit analysis to determine a minimum number of sessions needed to impact empowerment.

Partnerships

Chicas en Conexión identified many more gaps in girls empowerment than it could fill. Partners were key not only to identifying participating communities, but to expanding the ability of the project to address these gaps and increase the possibility of sustaining core strategies beyond the life of the project. Key partners and their roles included:

Key Partners

Partners	Roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Secretariat of Health -Honduran Institute of Social Security -ASHONPLAFA -Honduran Association of the Woman and Family (AHMF) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Improve the system of referrals for adolescents to SRH, GBV and Zika services and serve as referral points; provide youth-friendly health services and information on ASRH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Working Group on Integrated Child Protection (includes over 30 NGOs and government agencies) -Dirección de Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia (DINAF) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Develop referral pathway for survivors of GBV and child abuse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -National Institute of Youth -National Institute of Women -Ministries of Health and Education -National Institute of Professional Formation (INFOP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Facilitate implementation of SRH and school-based activities -Aid in the implementation of community-based campaigns on girls' empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -National Institute of Professional Formation (INFOP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide free technical training to 40 girls 15+
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Municipality of San Pedro Sula: Programa Municipal Juventud, Infancia; Oficina Municipal de la Mujer, Programa de Educación Municipal -Municipalities of Villanueva, El Progreso, and Choloma -Instituto Nacional de la Mujer (INAM) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Support for defining the critical route to prevent and address child abuse -Collaboration to bring INFOP to new communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Local municipality governments & city councils -Parent associations -Churches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Aid in engaging the community in the project -Facilitate the implementation of community-based campaigns on girls' empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Local judicial system -Local NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Facilitate community engagement with the project -Improve legal action and response taken for cases of GBV -Provide referral services for legal advice & counseling for GBV -Coordinate social mobilization events -Coordinate trainings with field educators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Programa Asistido por la Tecnología (PAAT) -Asociación Bayan -CEPUDO -Azucarera Hondureña (Azucarera Matilde) -EDUCATODOS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Support the opening of alternative education programs

Monitoring and Evaluation

Developing the Logical Framework

The approach to *Chicas en Conexión* was based on a logical framework updated each year. Objectives and activities were developed around the social barriers identified in the needs assessment. The objectives remained consistent in years 1-3 to track progress over time. In year 4, the project pivoted towards a stronger focus on sustainability, looking at specific barriers around education and creating a sustainable enabling environment by working closely with parents and community leaders (See Annex X).

Establishing the Baseline

Baseline information was established via a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) study in June 2015, and again in 2017, which also examined the influence of adults in the sexual and reproductive health

of adolescents in the geographic areas of focus for the project. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with a non-random sample of project participants based on their consent and that of their parents or guardians.

The quantitative component sought to:

- Understand the beliefs, attitudes, intentions and social norms related to early pregnancy and family planning among the young women reached by the project.
- Understand the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and social support related to gender inequality and interpersonal violence among young women intervened by the project.
- Determine the level of knowledge, perception of quality, use and intentions of using SRH services among young adolescents intervened by the project.

The qualitative component sought to:

- Establish the attitudes of adults in relation to gender equity, gender-based violence, and the formal education of young women.
- Identify social norms in terms of the ideal age for young girls to marry or establish a family.
- Identify social norms around the sexual and reproductive health of girls between 10 - 14 years old and between 15 - 19 years old.
- Establish the knowledge of adults about the need for sexual and reproductive health of young women.
- Identify the attitudes of adults around the sexual and reproductive health of young women.
- Report the practices of adults in the instrumentalization of young women in sexual and reproductive health.
- Identify the expectations that adults have of adolescents and pre-adolescents in the future.

In 2017, the study was repeated, but faced the limitation that the project had shifted to 5 new communities and thus results were not comparable to the first study. However, results still revealed critical information, including:

- Out of 173 active *Chicas en Conexión* participants surveyed, 98% of girls 15-19 knew how to protect themselves from an unplanned pregnancy
- 96% believed young women should pursue a university degree, and 88% believed in finishing a university degree before marriage
- Study results indicated promising attitudes in favor of delaying pregnancy and early marriage. 92% of girls ages 15-19 and 96% of girls 10-14 indicated the ideal age for marriage was 20 years of age or older; 92% of girls ages 15-19 and 96% of girls 10-14 also indicated the ideal age for a first pregnancy was 20 years of age or older.
- Over the course of the year, over 80% of participants remained active with *Chicas en Conexión*.
- 96% of adolescents ages 15-19 indicated they disagreed it was ever acceptable for a man to hit his wife.
- Results also revealed that 67% of adolescents surveyed did not know they could become pregnant during their first sexual encounter and that less than one-third were aware of long-acting methods of contraception.

- Overall, 9 participants (6%) became pregnant while enrolled in the project¹², and while this rate is lower than the rate among adolescents in the general population (24%), it still represents a reminder of the work that remains to be done.

In order to assess progress on the objective related to improved access to youth-friendly health services, the project carried out a mystery client survey of five health centers serving Chicas en Conexión communities. A total of 4 trained youth researchers supported visits across the five clinics. While the project had hoped to train at least 14 youth, it was challenging to find youth with the availability, willingness, and skills to conduct the study. Insights included:

- Health services are geographically accessible, but youth still fear going to a location where their parents might become aware of their visit
- While services are free, some products and medications are not
- Overall youth found providers to be friendly and receptive; their barriers to accessing services were mostly structural.

Because the quantitative results were not comparable between communities, PSI/PASMO undertook a qualitative evaluation near the close of the project to understand the potential impact of the project over the complete life of the project. Working closely with The Summit Foundation, the project selected the Most Significant Change method, which allows evaluators to collect stories of change that may be related to the project and identify important patterns, themes, and values¹³. The people interviewed included adolescents and young women, program educators and mentors, community leaders, teachers and health providers. In total, 6 discussion groups and 12 individual interviews were conducted and 32 stories sharing the perspective of individual participants were written.

The stories collected reflected a strong shared perception among health care providers, project participants, mentors, parents, and educators that the project was related to positive trends in *decision-making, health, and empowerment of project participants*. For example, one project mentor shared that even though it wasn't easy for her to participate in the project, *"I no longer see myself alone at home as a mother. Yes I see myself working and attending to my children, but I also see myself empowering them. I see myself working with young people, finishing my career and not stopping. I am starting my university career in Social Development. I found my vocation in Chicas en Conexión."*

Another community leader and member of the patronato shared how she felt the project inspired her to be a role model to her granddaughter, *"I have seen changes in the girls, the talks have opened their minds. Now they look more responsible, more active, with the desire to study and with the desire to participate in anything....it's like they are the teachers now! Programs like Educatodos have helped them to plan to continue their studies."*

A doctor trained by Chicas en Conexión in youth-friendly health services had the following to share: *"What Chicas en Conexión left in my life is the relationship with the young women, the girls trust me, greet me, look for me and even come to me from other communities to get family planning methods. Now I have more of a relationship with young people, they have more trust in me."*

¹² This is anecdotal data collected from the project mentors and thus is not an official project indicator.

¹³ https://betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/most_significant_change

Graduating Girls and Communities

Chicas en Conexión took a similar approach to Abriendo Oportunidades, considering girls graduated who completed 80% or more of planned sessions, meaning:

- Girls 10-14 completed a minimum of 28 sessions
- Girls 15-19 completed a minimum of 32 sessions

Unfortunately, Chicas en Conexión wasn't able to assess the minimum number of sessions that could generate maximum impact, but future implementors should evaluate if the same impact could be achieved with a more streamlined curriculum.

In some cases, girls continued to participate after graduating where resources were available. While the MOUs established with each community defined the length of time for collaboration, communities were reluctant to closeout. Having loosely defined graduation and sustainability plans made it challenging to both track graduated vs. non-graduated girls for monitoring and reporting purposes and to closeout communities without any hard feelings. While girls who have graduated are expected to experience life-long benefits and effects and to be among the leaders transforming their communities, girls who had not had the opportunity to participate and parents who were hopeful the project would continue indefinitely were disappointed when the project ended. When asked "what's next?" the project didn't always have an adequate response.

To address these issues, PSI/PASMO worked with the Summit Foundation during a post-project extension to train community leaders to secure resources for girls empowerment (such as mentor stipends) and to develop a toolkit with a new module for mentors, including tips on carrying forward CHeC after closeout.

RESULTS-LIFE OF PROJECT

- 11 communities reached in Valle de Sula
- 987 parents and 793 boys reached
- 1,200 girls reached and 947 girls graduated from Chicas en Conexión (Completing at least 80% of modules)
- 111 girls completing vocational training
- 36 girls graduating from at least one grade level of an alternative education program
- 2 communities with sustainable plans to extend education through the 9th grade
- 2 quantitative and 1 qualitative study completed to capture the realities and experiences of youth in Valle de Sula, Honduras
- 13 providers trained in youth-friendly health services and one youth-led mystery client survey completed to assess progress towards the offering of youth-friendly health services
- 116 educators trained on the national comprehensive adolescent sexual and reproductive health curriculum "Cuidando mi salud y mi vida"
- 32 mentors trained in mentorship, youth SRH, and group facilitation
- 6 community leadership councils, including 103 community leaders, trained in youth work plan development, advocacy, and strategies to secure resources

- 2 computer labs installed in elementary schools
- Municipal support received for security of the computer lab for one school
- 3 organizations trained to replicate the Chicas en Conexión methodology via in-depth technical assistance from PASMO, including Ciudad Mujer, GoJoven, and PROHECO.
- One toolkit developed and shared online and via print for current and future implementors
- One learning lunch held to disseminate projects results

SUSTAINABILITY

Building the Capacity of Local Organizations

In 2019, PSI and PASMO partnered with The Summit Foundation to identify opportunities for continuing Chicas en Conexión beyond the life of the project. PASMO held a closeout event designed not only to share the Chicas en Conexión experience, but also to invite organizations working with youth to think through how the Chicas en Conexión methodology and best practices could be applied to their own youth work. The First Lady of Honduras made a public commitment to supporting the integration of the Chicas en Conexión model within other programming.

Ultimately, 13 organizations identified concrete steps to integrate Chicas en Conexión best practices and three organizations with the best possibilities of completing a replica (GOJOVEN, Ciudad Mujer, PROHECHO) were selected for a hands-on transferal process, including full technical support and materials from PASMO. Despite not receiving direct financing, each organization was able to successfully replicate the model in several communities. The model was met with enthusiasm in communities, who were quick to identify ways they could collaborate to implement the project in partnership with local organizations to keep costs manageable.

There organizations already working with youth in rural areas were selected for more in-depth technical assistance to replicate Chicas en Conexión, including Ciudad Mujer, PROHECO, and GoJóven. PASMO held a series of coordination meetings with each organization to elaborate on the Chicas en Conexión model and to help each organization begin to identify their own implementation plans. An agreement was signed by the directors of each organization, who then defined their geographic areas and strategic areas of focus. PASMO also convened a technical committee, including representatives from PASMO and participating organizations, in order to establish a centralized mechanism for sharing information across all organizations. A kick-off training was held to cover the operational guide in-depth, including best practices, sustainable strategies, community assessments, identification of mentors and participants, and development of results-based strategies.

Following the launch of the replicas, organizations came together for a workshop to share challenges and lessons learned. Organizations shared they felt the replicas were made possible by the technical support from PASMO and they would need to work through the strong community committees they had established, comprised of mentors, parents, educators, and health care providers, to sustain the model beyond PASMO's involvement. Organizations and communities alike were excited about the model, but also nervous about sustaining it without a guarantee of specific funding and unstable support from local municipalities.

Community leaders and mentors from PASMO's own Chicas en Conexión communities in Valle de Sula also received copies of the implementation guide. Some community leaders and mentors are continuing to donate their own time to continue the educational sessions, while others are in the process of getting support for mentor stipends.

We learned from the transferal process that local organizations working with youth are well-positioned to replicate Chicas en Conexión and adapt the model for rural and resource-constrained settings even when donor funding may be limited or non-existent. Their long-standing relationships with communities provide an extremely supportive and receptive environment for the implementation of youth empowerment programming. Replication among government entities like Ciudad Mujer was challenging to obtain in a limited time frame and likely requires a longer term engagement

Opportunities for Sharing

To reflect on the journey over the last four years and develop creative avenues to share lessons learned and recommendations based on the experience, PSI/PASMO has created a short documentary of the Chicas en Conexión experience. This video will be presented to partners (IDB, Embassy of Canada, other INGOs working with youth, etc.) to explore possibilities for co-financing and partnership on new youth and girl empowerment initiatives. Materials will also be shared with local and international partners (Secretary of Education, USAID, Maverick Collective, etc.) to explore opportunities to integrate lessons learned from Chicas en Conexión into future initiatives and priorities. The video is available at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2xHbQWiAjc>.

In addition to the implementation story you are reading now, PSI/PASMO has developed an implementation toolkit for future implementors of Chicas en Conexión who wish to adapt and implement the strategy within their own operational contexts. The toolkit includes the curriculum and all supporting documentation. Digital copies are available through the PASMO website at: <http://asociacionpasmo.org/en/>.

LESSONS LEARNED

Community Involvement & Sustainability

The project's successes would not be made possible without the support of the community. Approaching and involving community leaders and elders, involving parents in meaningful ways and inviting the community to participate in the mentor selection process has been crucial to the project's sustainability and community engagement beyond the life of the project. Additional methods of engaging the community that PSI/PASMO did not contemplate or resource at the outset but would recommend to future implementors include: providing opportunities for increased commitment and collaboration include the creation of the infrastructure for continuous involvement of graduated girls; the development of WhatsApp groups, a Fanpage, and/or other social media outlets to engage with participants and community members; and increased involvement of men and boys.

PSI/PASMO also learned the importance of being honest about what the program can and cannot deliver as well as the shared responsibility between all partners to seek resources to support the continuation of the program beyond donor funding. All partners should be clear on the time period for the project, the closeout/transition plan, and resources for support beyond the life of the project.

Partnerships

The project successfully engaged local health providers; however, increasingly literature points to the importance of bringing health resources closer to youth rather than pushing youth to seek out health resources at static sites. We would encourage future implementors to think about how health services could be offered outside of a clinic setting, whether through pop-up clinics at schools, virtual sessions/resources, or others.

Additionally, the project was not designed with a shared sustainability goal with the Secretary of Health. While the project has achieved self-sustaining components in several communities, it is recommended to other implementors to outline together with government partners the handover and sustainability strategy for continued implementation after the life of project. The project had more success with the Secretary of Education. By identifying a high-ranking champion within the Secretary of Education and inviting her to have a hands-on experience, the project was able to secure commitments from the MOE to expand education from the 6th to the 9th grade in two communities.

PSI/PASMO also had a successful partnership with the national vocational training institute (INFOP), resulting in 111 girls completing a technical course. However, we would also encourage organizations to think through partnerships with businesses, chambers of commerce, universities, banks, and other institutions as conversations around entrepreneurship and finance represent especially important avenues to broader conversations about sexual and reproductive health rights, decision-making, and empowerment. All partnerships should be considered after conducting an initial gender analysis and seek where possible to challenge and transform harmful gender norms.

Collecting Evidence

The process for collecting evidence has evolved with the progression of the project. One challenge in terms of monitoring impact was related to the fact that the geographic focus of the project shifted between the first and second studies; rendering them incomparable. PSI/PASMO recommends defining the number of communities and the length of engagement with each community from the beginning, in order to establish an evaluation plan that will allow for comparable baseline and endline data. This also sets clearly defined expectations with communities on where the project begins and ends. Long-term data on progression to higher education, employment, etc. can be difficult to measure as contact information changes and participants migrate away from their communities. Especially if resources are limited, PSI/PASMO recommends focusing on shorter-term outcomes, while relying on DHS or data collected by the ministries of health and education for longer-term outcomes. Where possible, youth should be engaged as active participants in data collection and analysis.

Since Chicas en Conexión first began, there have been many exciting developments to the body of evidence around youth empowerment and as new best practices evolve, these should be taken into account for any youth programming. PSI/PASMO is a fan of YouthPower (<https://www.youthpower.org/positive-youth-development>), and we encourage you to check out the resources from PSI's own flagship youth program, Adolescents 360 (<https://www.a360learninghub.org/>).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

- Include youth in every step of the process! Listen to them, learn from them, grow with them. Recruit youth not only as participants but as mentors, researchers, and programmers to help you tell their story and build out meaningful solutions.
- Perform a community needs assessment and understand the full panorama of barriers facing girls and where your organization can add the most value; involve youth in this critical step and ensure your assessment includes a thoughtful gender analysis.
- Build a strategy to collect evidence (qualitative in addition to quantitative) of impact from the beginning.
- Involve key stakeholders to ensure a smooth transition plan and institutionalization of your approach.
- Work with communities to develop strategies to sustain youth networks and initiatives beyond the life of the project
- Weave in youth voices into existing infrastructure such as local leadership councils, municipal meetings, etc.
- Document your successes and failures as you go; consider building a Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) plan for continuous learning and sharing.