Respecting the Rights and Responding to the Needs of Adolescent Girls in Niger

In cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Zonta International began supporting the Niger project in the 2014-2016 Biennium. This project is part of a five-year global initiative in which 25,000 girls will be reached over two years, with 400,000 members of their community benefiting from increased awareness. Zonta has continued its support for this project with an additional US$1 million in 2016-2018 to build upon progress already made.

GOALS

- Reduce early marriage and early pregnancy in a critical mass of communities and departments in four regions of Niger
- Adolescents will:
  o Develop health, social, and economic assets
  o Know their rights and be in a stronger position to defend them
  o Be safer and have a measure of protection against violence

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The program is designed to provide skills, health knowledge, and economic and social empowerment to teenage girls, as well as creating a favorable local and national environment for girls to exercise their rights, specifically by:

- Improving adolescent girls' health
- Providing education for adolescent girls
- Protecting adolescent girls against teenage violence and creating safe spaces for girls within their communities
- Encouraging leadership of adolescent girls, providing them access to mentors and women leaders, while giving them the opportunity to build social networks that integrate them in their communities, and encourage their participation as citizens
- Using the data collected for decision-making and advocacy for adolescent girls and to guide investment decisions in regions and communities with the highest concentrations of young populations and where the socio-demographic indicators are the worst
RESULTS
Cycle 2 of the ILLIMIN initiative reached 14,424 adolescent girls in 160 villages in all eight regions of Niger.

Indicators show that adolescent girls' levels of knowledge and skills are improving, while other indicators show that adolescent girls' behaviors are also changing. The ILLIMIN initiative is initiating the process of social transformation as shown in the following results:

- 43 newly endowed girls were registered at the end of the eight-month initiative, compared to 77 girls registered at the beginning
- 19 newly married girls were registered at the end of the initiative, compared to 69 girls registered at the beginning
- 16 girls were reported as being newly pregnant at the end of the initiative, compared to 98 newly pregnant girls at the beginning
- 57 percent of married adolescents were using a contraceptive method at the end of the initiative, compared to 16 percent when the initiative started

In communities, changes are also noteworthy thanks to community dialogues. During the ILLIMIN cycle 2, 1,189 community dialogue sessions were held, reaching approximately 64,282 people.

In Tajaé Roumbouki and Faska (Tahoua Region), the population and leaders have decided to set up monitoring and anti-child marriage committees. In Guidan Amoumoune (Maradi Region), these same committees have begun to debate on radio and to participate in public radio broadcasts in the city.

INITIATIVE CHANGES
Through program implementation, UNFPA found that 10-14 year-olds represent a crucial period in the transition from childhood to adolescence. After evaluation, it was considered useful to make design changes with a focus on 10-14 year old girls, the most vulnerable in the most disadvantaged and poorest communities.

These changes included:

Offer of services
- Introduce manual activities during modular sessions to empower and retain adolescent girls
- Strengthen links between ILLIMIN initiative and public services, including the organization of modular sessions by health providers, in order to improve access to sexual and reproductive health and family planning services
- Develop leadership and economic empowerment components
- Integrate prevention and response to gender-based violence into ILLIMIN
- Develop ILLIMIN related-activities in humanitarian settings

Capacity building
- Emphasis will be placed on mentor training on counseling and orientation of adolescent girls for use of services, especially modern contraception, and strengthening of community dialogues to integrate gender-based violence issues
- Content of the initiative is also in process to be reviewed, to become more adapted on mentor’s profiles.
- Content will become more visual and focus on key messages.

Monitoring and evaluation
- A multi-sectoral committee will be set up to improve government’s ownership of ILLIMIN initiative.
- Key indicators will emphasize contraception use by adolescent girls, early marriage, teenage pregnancy and documentation of good practices. Monitoring tools to collect routine data will be consequently adapted.

The following testimonies show the impact of the ILLIMIN initiative on girls' lives.

"I was born in a very poor family. When I was enrolled in ILLIMIN initiative, I learned how to support my family with jewelery and clothes making. ILLIMIN girls from the previous cycle shared knowledge with us. By selling my products, I could save enough money to develop my business. Sometimes I earn enough money for my family to cook meals. If I don’t, it’s ‘every man for himself.’"
—M., 19 years old, Quartier Lacouroussou, Niamey

"The ILLIMIN initiative allows us to become open-minded. We have learned to read and to write in our natal language and in French. We have shared our knowledge to a lot of girls around us, to tell them to adopt family planning and to go to the health center."
—F., 18 years old, Kargui Bangou, région de Dosso

"In my community, I explain to my friends about child marriage’s dangers. I advise them to refuse to be married."
—L., 14 years old, Kargui Bangou, région de Dosso