



Photo: Community Primary School of Diatouma, Ndeye Ba

2022

Passerelles to the Last Mile:

How USAID Passerelles helps out-of-school girls and boys transition to school



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

fhi360
THE SCIENCE OF IMPROVING LIVES

global 
education



Background

Education in Senegal is shaped by social and gender norms that often have a negative impact on access to and retention in school, and learning achievement. Adolescent girls are less likely to continue to secondary education because of gender- and school-based violence, discrimination, and societal factors such as early marriage and pregnancy. Southern Senegal has distinctive historical, social and religious traditions that shape the educational landscape in a variety of ways: in Ziguinchor, the Diola communities are matriarchal and place a high value on formal education, while in Kolda and Sédhiou, the Peul and Sossé ethnic groups place a higher value on religious education — frequently enrolling their sons in daaras (Quranic schools) to become talibés (religious students) and giving their daughters in marriage at a young age. The rate of child marriage is highest in the Kolda and Kédougou regions, hovering at 70% for girls under 18 years of age.

The USAID-funded Passerelles project in Senegal, implemented by FHI 360 addresses challenges to increase access to education and retention for remote and vulnerable children and teens in four regions of southern

Senegal: Kédougou, Kolda, Sédhiou and Ziguinchor. To do so, Passerelles builds bridges for out-of-school and nonformal school learners to join the formal school system and offers learning remediation services. Its operating principles are to be inclusive, conflict- and gender-responsive, and to offer children and teens the opportunity to catch up on education and forge a new future.

School-related violence and gender-based violence decrease motivation to be in school, and the financial and opportunity costs of formal schooling weigh on families' decision-making. In addition to increasing the likelihood of abuse, the COVID-19 pandemic complicated implementation of this project: schools shut down, thus halting all school visits, teachers' coaching and training, and student support. Yet, despite the largest disruption of schooling in the world, significant progress has been made in Casamance.

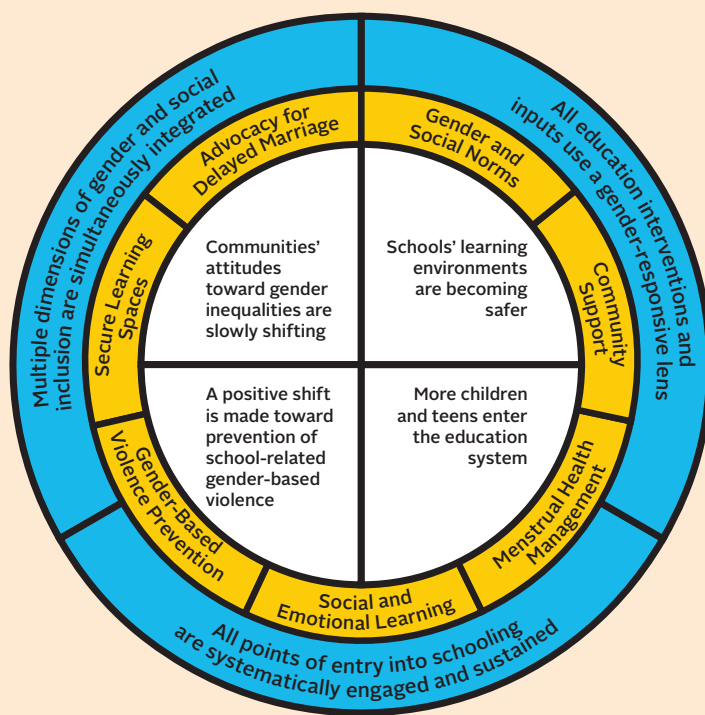
One of the main objectives of the Passerelles project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is to create safe and supportive learning environments that promote the physical, social and emotional safety and well-being of all students and reduce school-related gender-based violence. It intentionally avoids a "one size fits all" approach, instead investing in localized, contextualized and community-centered strategies that address some of the harmful gender drivers that prevent out-of-school children and teens, especially girls, from going to school. This brief focuses on how the project molded its interventions in community schools, in bridging classes ("Classes Passerelles") and in formal lower secondary

schools (equivalent to U.S. middle school grades) to address the barriers to girls' education and achieve better quality, equity and access to education for the hardest-to-reach children and teens in southern Senegal.



The Approach

Passerelles adopted a model that delivers a package of cross-cutting interventions to make a dent in the wall of school-related gender-based violence and the lack of gender equity and social inclusion. The model forms a web of connected interventions that address gender simultaneously so they can mutually influence behavior and attitudes, as well as school enrollment, retention, and performance. The structure of the model is built on three operating principles that are fully localized and contextualized. The package of interventions is presented in the above graphic and described on the following pages.



1. All education interventions and inputs use a gender-responsive lens.

- All levels of education staff — school administrators, inspectors, primary and lower secondary school teachers, borom daaras (Quranic masters), volunteer teachers and school governments — received training, coaching and ongoing skill-building. By 2022 the project had trained 4,790 teachers and head teachers and 369 school government members on school-related gender-based violence. These stakeholders learned to develop and maintain a positive school climate and violence-free, inclusive classrooms and school communities. Where borom daaras could not or would not attend formal teacher training sessions, coaches came to them and provided coaching.
- Village by village, and neighborhood by neighborhood, religious, secular, traditional and remote community leaders, accompanied by school-based management committees, engaged in ongoing dialogue spurred by social and gender mobilization campaigns. Each advocacy conversation catered to the specific beliefs

and traditions of the community: can education add value to a community? Can traditional or religious practices coexist with education services and contribute to local development? Can children and teens, including girls, play a role in making their communities and families stronger because they learn to read and write and do math? Some communities appointed gender champions; others acknowledged a newly found understanding of biases and inequalities. Only then did some more traditionally minded communities accept the introduction of education services into their communities and permit their sons and daughters to attend school.

- The students themselves, both adolescents and children, learned to advocate for safer learning. For the first time, learners in lower secondary schools in the Casamance (an area that includes the Ziguinchor, Sédhiou and Kolda regions) formed their own parliaments to ask for no “chicotte” (whips used for decades by teachers in many schools) and no corporal punishment. Teachers started using nonviolent positive discipline techniques, resulting in learners feeling safer in schools.

2. All points of entry into schooling are systematically engaged and sustained.

- Issues involving gender, school-related gender-based violence, and social inclusion tend to be sensitive topics, and the risk of antagonizing communities is high when gender and social barriers are the very obstacles to education. This model of implementation caters to local specificities and social, cultural and religious identities, adopting a “one village at a time” approach.
- Training in gender-responsive and safety-related approaches to education was customized for target audiences but also connected to government-sanctioned policies and principles. The Passerelles project acted as a facilitating agent. For instance, rather than receiving formal training, borom daaras engaged in dialogues about educating girls and safe learning. Inspectors, school principals and teachers worked together in seminars to consider pedagogical practices in line with the government education plan and policies.
- Nonformal school teachers asked to be included in the formal schools’ teacher trainings; this was authorized by the local government authorities. At lower secondary schools, learners who formed school parliaments gathered outside of school hours to commit to challenging safety issues in their school. Finally, holding combined meetings with mayors, communal councils, traditional leaders, and religious leaders led these key development actors to join the campaign for more safety in school and attention to inequalities. In short, no point of entry into education services was left untouched by the equity and safety portfolio.

3. Multiple dimensions of gender and social inclusion are simultaneously integrated.

- The model adopted a cross-cutting approach to gender and safety education that tackles interconnected and interdependent factors at the same time. All interventions included strategies for social and emotional learning, school-related gender-based violence prevention, safety in school infrastructure, and improved menstrual health management.



Results and outcomes

1. School learning environments are becoming safer.

- Communities have set up a variety of mechanisms to make their schools safer. Some school management committees have worked with government authorities to set up a school-related gender-based violence referral system. Others contributed to the building of fences, sex-disaggregated latrines, and sources of clean water. Others asked for and distributed menstrual management hygiene kits in school.

After 600 students completed training in safe learning environments, gender-based violence and inclusion, they proceeded for form school parliaments in their schools. Over 400 additional children, teens, and members of youth associations led initiatives throughout the region to raise awareness of school-based gender violence in their communities.

- Some communities have set up safety committees (Cellules d'Alerte et de Veille) to observe and promote equitable treatment of boys and girls in school. These committees also monitor vulnerable children, especially girls who are exposed to gender-based violence, and provide support.
- Volunteer instructors in nonformal schools reported a notable reduction in the incidence of violence in their schools and a growing commitment from the management committees in their communities to prevent gender-based violence.
- School governments developed and implemented action plans to promote a safe, inclusive, and violence-free environment in their respective schools.

2. There has been some positive shifting toward the prevention of school-related gender-based violence.¹

- The proportion of students stating that they experience physical, emotional or sexual violence decreased significantly in nonformal community schools and among Classes Passerelles students.
- Students in formal schools in Kolda and Ziguinchor reported a significant reduction in sexual violence, from sexual harassment to rape — an indication that schools are safer.

1. See USAID Passerelles Midline Report. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZH79.pdf

- The coaching of teachers in both nonformal and formal schools is linked with students selecting aggression strategies less often and using more problem-solving strategies for conflict resolution. Similarly, the coaching of teachers is linked with a positive shift in students' attitudes and behavior related to gender equality and equity.
- Learners in formal schools report that the school climate and the learning environment are safer now than before.

3. Communities' attitudes towards gender inequalities are slowly shifting.

- The attitudes of parents toward the treatment and roles of women and girls have evolved in the direction of more equal treatment in formal schools and nonformal schools. However, the belief that girls should be married by 18 years of age has not changed.
- There are many instances where communities took small-scale but innovative actions to raise public awareness about gender inequality. For instance, local organizations, such as the Youth Association in Niaguis and the Committee of Actors for Child Protection in Ziguinchor, mobilized 250 people to show support for the national campaign of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.
- In the Kolda region, some schools and their teachers developed action plans to prevent early marriage and early pregnancies of adolescent girls. Committees worked with parents to ensure safe travel to and from

schools, especially for girls. Following the national campaign of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, three young mothers who had dropped out of school after early pregnancy returned to school, thanks to the collaboration among committees, local education authorities and the Passerelles project.

4. More children and teens enter the education system.

- Through intensive community mobilization activities at the regional level, the project identified 5,029 children and teens — including 1,832 girls — as out of the education system. Just as importantly, over 500 adolescents who would not have pursued schooling entered lower secondary school — half of them girls who previously would not have gotten the chance.
- As part of a package of multiple interventions to remove barriers to entering the education system, Passerelles worked with local youth associations to help families register as citizens and obtain birth certificates and identification cards. These papers enabled community members who had never registered as citizens because of displacement, poverty, or marginalization to send their children to school and take the exams required to move up to lower secondary school.

It takes time to complete a project aimed at removing barriers to schooling, reaching out to the most remote and isolated communities, shifting traditional norms to enable children and teens to pursue an education, enabling populations to become official citizens of the country they live in, and creating new learning paths. Passerelles is about opening doors that have been closed for decades and building bridges that were not thinkable a few years ago. Now, one community at a time, children and teens in Casamance can envision a future ahead of them.