“This program is really important for us because it helps us to raise our level in literature and mathematics and especially in life skills. We are taught how to live in harmony in society.”

- Hilin Mu participant, from Kataré Guidan Ousmane
On a business as usual trajectory, the population of Niger will jump from 22 million today to an unsustainable 63 million in 2050. The OASIS Initiative’s mission is to accelerate the demographic transition in the Sahel region of Africa. This can only happen with a revolution in girls’ autonomy.

**Progress**

Hilin Mu is a girls education program that provides safe space clubs to adolescent girls in Maradi, Niger. Hilin Mu means “Our Space” in Hausa, the local language. Safe spaces are a place where teenage girls feel secure, can connect with other girls, and get guidance from a trusted mentor. Girls not only gain life skills, but they also bridge gaps in academic learning—especially reading and writing. Hilin Mu is built on 12 years empowering Hausa girls in Nigeria. The OASIS Initiative’s first safe space clubs were launched in March 2019 serving 246 girls across seven schools. In November the program will nearly triple in size (from 246 to 662 girls) as our first cohort transitions from primary to secondary school and we enroll our second cohort of girls entering the final year of primary school. The goal of Hilin Mu is to delay early marriage and childbearing by keeping girls in school so that they can lead the lives to which they aspire.

The clubs take place for two hours, twice per week, in the girls' own schools throughout Maradi, Niger. There are fifteen to eighteen girls and a mentor in each club. Half the time is spent learning and practicing reading and writing and half on building life skills, including reproductive health knowledge and negotiation and communication skills.

The first challenge was to ensure that the Clubs would be accepted by a conservative, polygamous culture with early marriage. The second was to collect compelling data demonstrating that the program was achieving defined goals.

Prior to the clubs launching in March, much preparatory work was done to ensure acceptability and success of the program. Activities included:

- Opening a new office in Maradi;
- Onboarding Program Coordinator Rachida Issoufou Mani, Program Officer Ubaaida Abdul-Nasir, two mentor supervisors, Maman Chaibou and Bachir Alkali, and 13 mentors;
- Randomized selection of pilot sites for 13 clubs – control and intervention –
and the baseline study conducted by the OASIS research team;
- Three-day mentor supervisor training in Zaria, Nigeria in collaboration with the Centre for Girls Education;
- Three-day mentor training held at the OASIS Initiative office in Maradi;
- Dialogues held in each community to meet with traditional and religious leaders and parents.

Our team will grow with the hiring of three new mentor supervisors and our Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) systems will be strengthened with the hire of a full time M&E officer based in Maradi. We will continue to bring representatives from three government ministries to observe the safe space program, which will build engagement and set the foundation for future scale-up at the regional and national level.

With phase one of the program now complete, our team of mentors and supervisors are beginning a new phase in November to integrate innovations, address areas for improvement identified in phase one and strengthening the overall quality of the program.

**Monitoring and Evaluation**

Hilin Mu's monitoring and evaluation is essential to ensure course correction during implementation and to provide the evidence base for scale-up and replication. Mentor supervisors observe 3 to 4 safe space clubs each week. They record their observations on tablet templates and the findings inform rapid feedback for the timely adaptation and refinement of the program components. We are also tracking school performance and transition rates from primary to secondary school, comparing the girls in the participating schools with those from the control schools.

This innovative, but also potentially controversial project in a low resource setting had been remarkably successful. Regular supervision showed that 96% of mentors were always prepared for their sessions and 92% of mentors provided the girls with appropriate assistance and guidance to facilitate their learning. Supervisors reported that 87% of girls felt they could express themselves freely in the clubs. We have seen a steady increase in the number of girls asking questions and making comments within the group. In March, just 25% of girls actively participated during sessions, and by May the rate had increased to 47%.
In April, we noted a decline in the amount of content being covered during each session. Typically, 89% of mentors covered all material in the curriculum for a given session. In April, the rate dipped to 73% due to high heat, which made it difficult for mentors and students to focus during sessions. Mentors worked through the content more slowly, and were able to return to the usual pace of learning in the following months.

Preliminary results suggest that test scores have improved. Several girls from the Kataré village who were previously not eligible to take the final exam due to their previous poor test scores were permitted to take the exam in light of their significant progress. Data analysis is being conducted to understand whether it is likely that this improvement was due to their participation in Hilin Mu.

**Participant Spotlight**

Charif Saadou, age 14, joined the first cohort of the Hilin Mu program. Charif is one of 12 children and her parents often struggle to feed the whole family. After spending months living with her brother, unable to attend school due to the demands of home life, Charif was able to return to her parents’ home and resume school in 2019. After being away for so long, however, she had fallen behind and could no longer keep up with her classmates. Charif is now retaking her final year of primary school and has the support of the Hilin Mu program to ensure she passes her exams and can advance to secondary school next year.

Charif is ambitious and compassionate, saying:

“I want to become a nurse to help my community, especially women. I'm proud to have had the chance to participate in this program. I love the life skills course, especially on menstruation because it helped me a lot and I intend to teach my little sisters how they will go about it once they face this situation. I really thank the people who brought this program to my school so I can be supported to realize my dream of becoming a nurse.”

**Challenges and Solutions**

Data collection of previous primary to secondary transition rates in the participating schools has proven difficult. School enrollment data is centralized in Maradi but is not often updated regularly. Government leaders in Maradi have been helpful and we are hopeful that we will be able to obtain the data from the requisite schools in the region in order to establish a baseline.
The launch of the clubs was delayed by one month, which compressed the amount of time mentors had to get through the curriculum. We increased the club frequency from once per week to twice per week. During the month of Ramadan (May) the team decided to pause programming, since both the girls and the facilitators were fasting, and had limited energy to spend learning the content. We have now increased the frequency to three times per week to ensure all material is covered before the next phase.

Community engagement is essential to ensure that programming meets local needs and is appropriately adapted. We conducted extensive community dialogues to gain the support of parents, community and religious leaders, and schools. For example, one leader, the chief of the Garin Yari Idi village, was hesitant to support the project. A local Ministry of Education representative accompanied the Hilin Mu team members to introduce the program to the chief and hear out his concerns. Following this personal introduction and honest discussion, community dialogues were held, where community members came to better understand and welcome the program. Having a deeper appreciation of the program and seeing how important it is to his community, the chief then offered his support, speaking favorably about safe spaces.

One father opposed the enrollment of his daughter into the program, even after the OASIS team responded to his concerns. While it is disappointing to let go of a potential participant, our Program Coordinator, Rachida, assured the father and the whole community that participation is voluntary and we respect his choice not to enroll his daughter. Our sister program, the Centre for Girls Education in Nigeria, has found that community norms change as the number of girls in secondary school grows from ten to twenty to fifty to two hundred per rural community and increasing numbers of adolescent girls are seen in school uniforms.

“This program not only helps these children in terms of education, it also helps them in terms of food because most of these children can not eat in quality and quantity in their respective families. Thanks to this program they are able to eat twice a day.”

- Maradi Regional Director of Primary Education

Finally, there are a few challenges associated with feeding the girls at lunchtime. Community mothers take turns preparing meals so that the girl participants can stay on campus during lunch to attend the safe space session. Meals are often delivered late, which delays the start of the club.
There are also instances where boys and other non-participants try to eat with the group. It can be difficult for the mentor to turn them away (given the periodic food scarcity in these communities) and to maintain order. By educating girls through this program, we believe that over time they will have greater economic opportunities to support their current and future families so that everyone has enough to eat.

**How your funding was used**

Thanks to your generous donation, we have been able to successfully launch Hilin Mu and enroll 246 girls. Our team sees a bright future ahead for the program and the girls. Here is a breakdown of our program funding allocation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount (% of total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff:</strong> Mentors, mentor supervisors, and program coordinator. People make up the heart of this program and are the main facilitators of connection, academic enhancement, and agency-building for the girls</td>
<td>$11,945 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program Activities:</strong> Community and government engagement meetings, mentor trainings, snacks for the girls, supplies, and travel to program sites</td>
<td>$19,276 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operations:</strong> Technology like tablets for the mentor supervisors, government fees, insurance, rent, and one-time purchase of a used vehicle for weekly site visits</td>
<td>$16,489 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monitoring and Evaluation:</strong> Data collection trips, meetings with schools, and data analysts*</td>
<td>$1,287 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrative costs</strong></td>
<td>$3,800 (7.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>$52,797</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*A significant part of M&E costs are the Mentor Supervisors who collect data on tablets during supervision visits. They are currently captured under “Staff.”

To date, the program has cost $52,797. This cost is higher than the anticipated cost of $190 per girl for two reasons: 1) Start up costs for the program were not sufficiently accounted for in our cost per girl estimate; and 2) Costs in Maradi, Niger are significantly higher than in Zaria, Nigeria, where our partner CGE runs safe spaces and from where we used cost data to estimate our initial budget. We anticipate expanding the program to reach 662 girls by mid-2020 and the annual program budget for July 2019 - June 2020 is $172,000.
Venture Strategies for Health and Development and the OASIS Initiative in Niger would like to thank you for your support of Hilin Mu. Our work would not be possible without the generosity and enthusiasm of change-makers like you. Should you wish to support Hilin Mu in 2020 with a gift, you can do so via check made out to VSHD or online at www.venturestrategies.org/donate

For more information, please contact:

Alisha Graves  
VSHD President, OASIS Co-Founder  
agraves@venturestrategies.org  
PO Box 10144  
Berkeley, CA 94709

Nouhou Abdoul Moumouni  
OASIS Regional Director  
anouhou@oasisinitiative.org

Safe space sessions take place with all girls sitting together in a circle. Here they watch their mentor demonstrate literacy skills at the chalkboard.