



ANNUAL REPORT



COLORS OF CONNECTION

2024

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01. FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Colleagues, Supporters, and Partners,

As I reflect on 2024, I do so with deep pride in what our team accomplished — and with acknowledgement that since that time our work and the environment around us have changed profoundly. The beginning of 2025 brought unprecedented challenges to our organization and the community and girls we serve, with the takeover of Goma city by the armed group March 23 Movement (M23) and the loss of over 80% of our funding due to the dismantling of USAID.

Yet the progress we made in 2024 continues to guide us through these challenges. In 2024 we strengthened our operations and systems and created a 3-year plan for scaling our impact. These processes created a solid foundation and a road map that have positioned us to better navigate the foreign aid funding crisis and to continue to operate as smoothly as possible under adverse conditions of conflict. We also found opportunities to advocate for creative and girl-centered approaches for mental health on a global scale, building partnerships with like minded institutions such as the Child Marriage and Mental Health Network.

On the program side we witnessed critical progress for the girls and women we work with as they gained greater agency in their lives and improved their ability to protect themselves from violence and further marginalization. This report shares some of these stories, from junior mentors creating a collective saving plan, to parents practicing non-violent discipline, to girls standing up for their innate rights at home. With these advancements in their lives, I am reminded that investment in girls is a bedrock strategy that not only improves their lives but has transformational impact on the communities they live in.

We are thankful to our supporters and donors who, in accompanying us in our work, have enabled bright spots of joy, activism, and healing to grow and flourish in a region shaped by extreme poverty, conflict, and high incidence of trauma. I am excited to share this progress and the steps we are taking to build resilient communities through girls and young women networks.

With gratitude and excitement for what lies ahead,

Christina Mallie

02. WHO WE ARE

Mission: *Our mission is to work creatively with young people and communities impacted by violence to overcome trauma, inspire hope, support well-being, and encourage self-determination.*

Vision: *Our vision is that young people in places that have been devastated by conflict and inter-generational trauma can be in solidarity with each other, creating and reimagining a reality that truly nourishes and supports them.*

Founded in 2011, **Colors of Connection (CC)** is a non-profit organization working with girls, young women, and their communities in conflict and post-conflict settings through creative, girl-centered approaches that foster socio-emotional well-being, mitigate trauma, and drive broader social change. Since 2015, we have focused our efforts in Eastern Congo, working with some of the most marginalized girls in a region shaped by extreme poverty, insecurity, and high incidence of trauma.




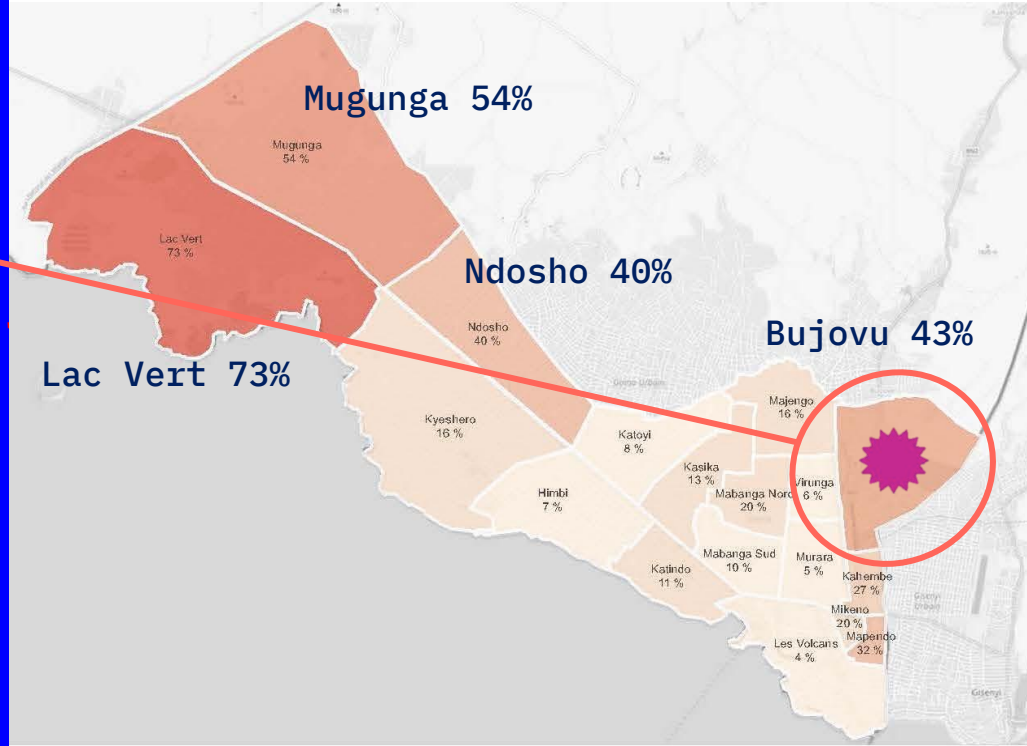
02. WHO WE ARE

WHERE WE WORK:

**Bujovu, Goma, Democratic
Republic of the Congo**

Map of Goma's Neighborhoods by
Poverty Level

 Our intervention in one of the
highest poverty neighborhoods,
prioritizing a high density of girls
facing some of the greatest needs in
a conflict-affected urban hot spot.



Source: Asset based poverty: % in the poorest quartile – based on possession of non-productive assets(data from Harvard Humanitarian Initiative & UNDP 2017)



256 girls

1,225 individuals

205 households



03. OUR IMPACT



Our flagship program, *Musichana Hamuka (Girl Awakening)*, provides intensive support to girls aged 10–14 in Goma's *Bujovu* neighborhood, an area with no other youth-focused services.

In 2024, *Musichana Hamuka* directly engaged **256 girls** (193 participants, 64 junior mentors), indirectly benefiting **1,225 individuals** across **205 households**.

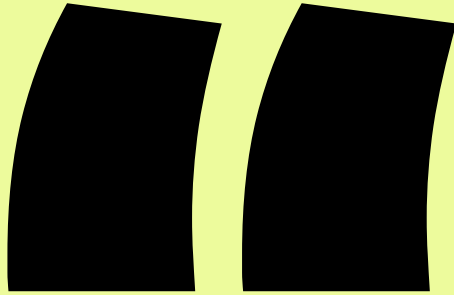
03.

OUR IMPACT

Research shows that life skills programs like ours boost girls' agency and social support, which help them take actions that improve their lives, boosting their health, education, employability and life chances.

"In the neighborhood they already call me aunt (changa in Swahili), because most of my friends in the neighborhood who are my age are married, others are in brothels, but since that session on the risks of child marriage I'm determined to finish school, to no longer follow the influence of other girls in order to achieve my dreams and make my mom proud later on."

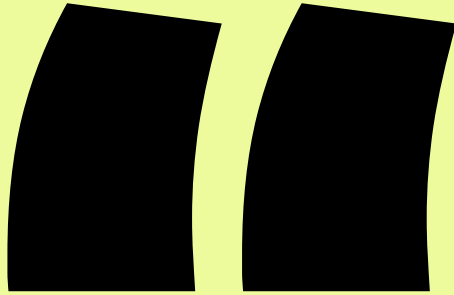
— Junior Mentor



Programs that involve families have stronger and more sustainable outcomes and help change social norms around what's possible for girls.

"My daughter, who is a participant in the program, is already telling her brothers that although she is a girl, she should enjoy her birthright, and she has the same right as her brother, and she tells me about my attitude, about the physical violence, today I have changed."

— Parent of participant



Creative approaches are highly underutilized, cost-effective tools for mental health delivery, especially in contexts with high-levels of need and few mental health resources. Creative activities help process complex emotions, gain self-awareness, lower defense mechanisms, and imagine new possibilities ([Van der Kolk, 2014](#), [Fancourt, Daisy & Finn, Saoirse, 2019](#)).

"During a creative activity, indoor weather, I am impressed by the creativity and interpretation of girls, one drew the snow and said for her it means a long-term feeling of helplessness like in her case, she wants to continue her studies but her parents don't have the means."

— Mentor

"The savings bank helped me to practice what we learned in the savings session and also to be able to know my needs and priorities so that I could save. At the end of the savings I could see with the amount that I will have what to start as a small business and as I am in 6th grade it can also help me pay some fees because I have a lot of them."

— Junior Mentor

04. CORE PROGRAM COMPONENTS



4.1 Life Skills & Creative Sessions

Girls (aged 10) in identified hotspots participate in 1.5-hour sessions every two weeks, delivered by trained local mentors in safe spaces. Sessions equip them with essential life skills, including self-protection, menstrual health, and nutrition, while creative activities support socio-emotional health and trauma mitigation.

Each girl also receives a monthly home visit from her mentor to check on her wellness and safety.



4.2 Public Art for Advocacy

Girls design and paint large-scale public murals, collaborating with community members to highlight issues critical to girls. These murals shift harmful gender norms, amplify girls' voices, and engage the broader public through community forums.



4.3 Junior Mentors: Girls' Leadership

Graduates of the program can become junior mentors, fostering a cascading leadership model for future program scaling. Additionally, all graduates have access to monthly sessions focused on financial literacy, language learning, or technology skills.



4.4 Parent & Guardian Sessions

To create a supportive home environment, we invite parents/guardians (both men and women) to participate in seven life-skills sessions per year, addressing gender discrimination and reinforcing girls' rights within households.



4.5 Investing in Local Capacity

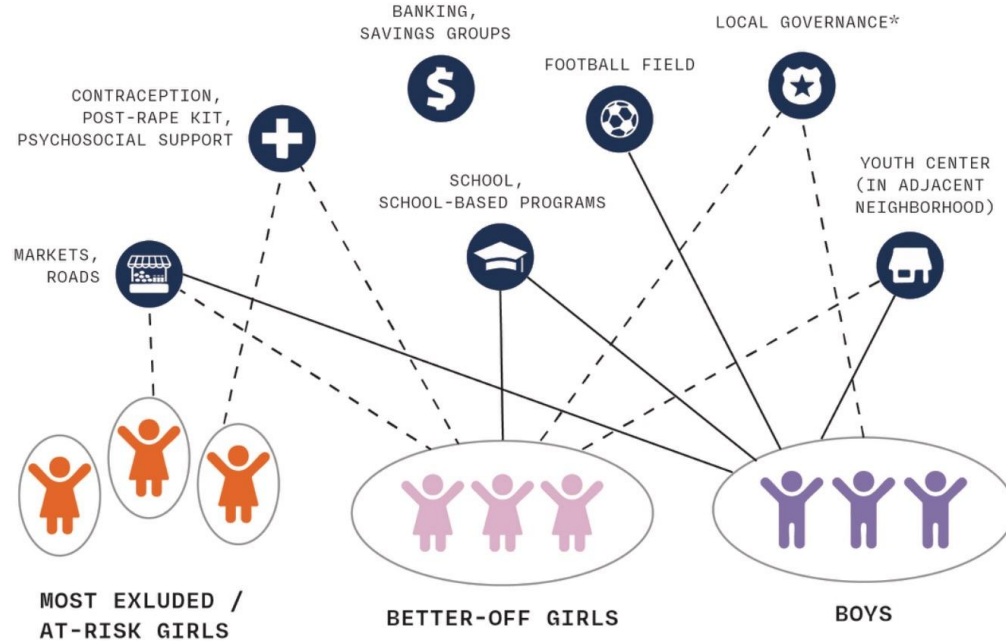
We invest in young women mentors, parents, local leadership, and the broader ecosystem in which our girl participants live to ensure long-term, community-led impact. Mentors (aged 18-24) deliver sessions, and provide peer support, receiving hands-on training in girl-centered design, trauma-informed care, and program management, with the goal of full local leadership.



4.6 Community Advocacy & Resource Access

Our mapping exercise revealed that key resources—such as police stations, healthcare, and water collection sites—are inaccessible or unsafe for girls. We advocate for better resource allocation, foster direct engagement between girls and service providers, and build partnerships with local stakeholders to enhance long-term safety and inclusion.

MAPPING ACCESS TO RESOURCES: BOYS, GIRLS, AND MOST AT-RISK GIRLS



*LOCAL GOVERNANCE INCLUDES NEIGHBORHOOD GOVERNANCE, AVENUE LEADERSHIP, SECURITY COMMITTEE, YOUTH COMMITTEE, BLOCK LEADERSHIP, COMMUNITY LIAISON

05 . HIGHLIGHTS

Program Impact

- **Life Skill & Creative Sessions:** 193 girls attended 24 sessions twice a month building essential skills in areas of menstrual, socioemotional, and financial health.
- **Mentors and Junior Mentors Leadership:** Junior mentors (graduated participants) and 6 young women mentors led sessions, conducted home visits, and shaped curriculum.
- **Entrepreneurship & Financial Literacy:** 5 of 6 mentors completed certified entrepreneurship training (Street Business School, Uganda) and began or grew businesses. 46 junior mentors joined a group savings plan, collectively saving \$943 over 9 months, building financial critical independence. When an emergency occurs, and in such volatile contexts they often do, a girl without savings is at even greater risk of being exploited, abused, or trafficked.
- **Scholarships:** 49 out-of-school girls supported with tuition, uniforms, and supplies, enabling them to continue their studies
- **Parent Engagement:** 7 parent sessions (27 parents on average attended each session) challenged harmful gender norms; parents began adopting supportive behaviors (e.g., nonviolent discipline, open conversations on menstruation).
- **Community Action:**
 - 5-day workshop with 16 local leaders led to adoption of girls' resource-and-risk maps (now displayed in local government offices).
 - Our advocacy led to improved access (e.g., monitoring to mitigate bribes) to post-rape kits & birth control at the Bujovu Health Center, which serves an average of 42,000 people annually.
 - Ongoing initiatives: Improving sanitary conditions in school bathrooms to prevent infection and disease, improving medical access at health center, reducing criminal activity in markets with shared information on best safety practices.

05 . HIGHLIGHTS

Organizational Sustainability & Growth:

- **Multi-phase plan developed with USAID to position CC for scaling up locally-led development**
 - Developed a 3-year strategy for scaling *Girl Awakening (Musichana Hamuka)* from research and development to replication, including key milestones and budget.
 - Refined *Girl Awakening's* theory of change and results framework with monitoring and evaluation consultant and USAID.
 - Strengthened organizational systems by creating a human resource manual, code of conduct, and anti-fraud and bribery policy.
 - Created a comprehensive branding and communications strategy, with a 3-year plan and ethics guidelines for materials.
 - Conducted organizational assessments for CC and our local partner and designed a multiyear capacity-building plan to support sustainable growth.

- **New team members in leadership:**
 - Brought on Melanie Chan, a Program Officer on the US side, and Raymond Nzayo, Director of Administration and Finance in the DRC.

Thought Leadership & Advocacy:

- **ED Christina Mallie presented at:**
 - **Glasswing's 4th Mental Health Conference** (400+ attendees, 37 countries) on creativity in community-based mental health care.
 - **Univerity College London's Symposium on Child Marriage & Mental Health** – showcasing CC's arts-based practices and building global partnerships.

06. LESSONS WE LEARNED THIS YEAR

- **Safe Space and Accessibility**

Girls and mentors emphasized that the program is one of the only safe and supportive environments in their community, which is currently held in a school after hours (see p. 22 on security mapping). We are exploring a dedicated rental space for girls and women. Establishing a permanent, accessible community space strengthens safety, belonging, and program continuity, which are especially key in insecure settings like Goma.
- **Mental Health and Well-being**

We have prioritized developing our mental health delivery given the significant incidences of violence and stress in participants' and mentors' daily lives. We will be strengthening our existing arts-based tools by adding an additional mental health training. Additional resourcing will be trauma-informed, delivered within the existing mentorship structure, and adapted to low-resource settings.
- **Low Father Participation**

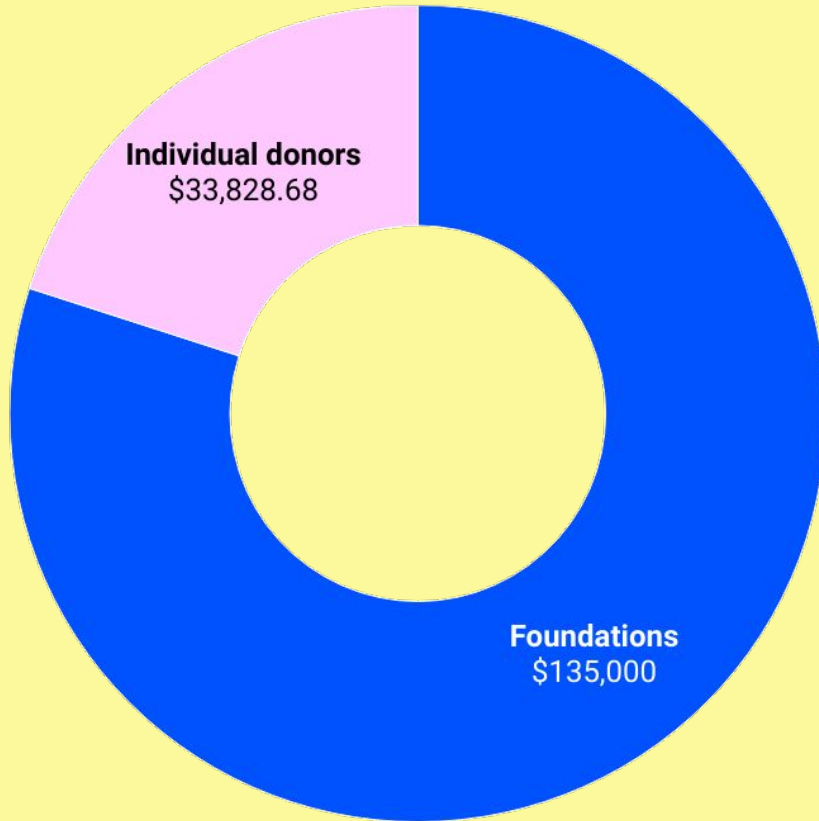
Cultural norms viewing parenting as a mother's role has historically limited male engagement in parent sessions but their engagement is important in shifting gender norms at the household level. We have determined that intentional outreach and tailored strategies are needed to foster fathers' participation, such as providing stipends that cover transport costs for parents to attend sessions.
- **Insecurity and Conflict in Eastern DRC**

The Bujovu neighborhood—bordering Rwanda and adjacent to IDP camps—experienced heightened instability, armed group activity, and GBV. Mentors and girls faced harassment and extortion, prompting sessions to end earlier for safety. This highlighted the need for continued monitoring and adaptability
- **Managing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Cases**

Mentors responded to multiple GBV cases, including incidents of sexual assault. Mentorship structures are vital protection and response mechanisms. Mentors should continue to be trained in how to better use referral systems and coordinate care, which is essential to support and protect participants.
- **Displacement and Disrupted Participation**

Rising insecurity and economic pressures force families into Internally Displaced Persons Camps on the outskirts of the city. Unfortunately, this interrupts girls' attendance and access to mentorship and protection networks. Mentors continued to make trips out to camps to visit girls, and CC needs to explore creative, adaptable, alternative protective systems of support for these girls.

07 . FINANCIALS



Funding Sources
2024

- Foundations
- Individual donors

Total Revenue:
\$168,828.68

Total Expenses:
\$188,147.13

Net Revenue:
-\$19,318.40 *

**This year's financial statements show an excess of expenses over revenues due to the timing of multi-year grant cycles. Our State of Financial Position reports \$83,170.92 by the end of 2024.*

08 . OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM



Christina Mallie
Executive Director & Co-Founder



Anita Babonangenda
Technical Director



Melanie Chan
Program Officer



Raymond Nzayo
Director of Administration &
Finance

08. STAFF & BOARD 2024

Board of Directors

Laura Hoffman, Board Chair, USA Appointed 2019

Christina M. Mallie, Treasurer, USA, Appointed 2015

Amyr Rajan, Secretary, USA, Appointed 2024

Full List of Staff

Christina Mallie, Executive Director and Co-Founder

Anita Babonangenda, Technical Director

Raymond Nzayo, Director of Administration & Finance

Melanie Chan, Program Officer

Pamela Tulizo Kamale, TES Coordinator

Gracy Kiese, Community Engagement Lead and Operations Assistant

Nathalie Milambo, Mentor Manager

Alice Heri, Communications and Media Officer

Board of Advisors

Awet Andemicael, Musician, Writer, Consultant and Educator

Judith Bruce, Senior Associate & Policy Analyst at Population Council

Gayle Embrey, Filmmaker and Licensed Professional Counselor

Kathy Eldon, Founder and Chairman, Creative Visions Foundation

Bonnie Hirschhorn, LCSW, LCAT, LP, NCPsyA, ATR—BC

Dominique Koffy Kouacou, Humanitarian Program Manager

Eva Roca, Implementation Research Advisor, PhD, MHS

Joan Snyder, Artist MacArthur, Fellow 2007

09.WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

- 1. Improving conditions for girls improves conditions for everyone:** Girls are the invisible sustainers of their families and communities—with an estimated minimum 60% of females in the DRC solely economically responsible for their children, and potentially also older dependents within their reproductive years ([Clark and Hamplová, 2013](#)). Despite carrying a disproportionate burden of development challenges as some of the most marginalized members of society, girls are also critical drivers of change. When supported, they lead community responses to food security, education, and public health ([Catino, 2012](#)). Investing in girls is not only a human rights imperative but a proven strategy for community resilience and sustainable recovery. We also collaborate with partners to close service gaps and better leverage existing community resources, improving girls' and women's safety and access to essential services. By transforming how existing services function, we ensure they more effectively serve the entire community.
- 2. Mental Health is fundamental to health & wellbeing, especially for girls:** Activities promoting mental health are vital to achieving development objectives such as economic participation and productivity ([International Review of Psychiatry, 2010](#)). Because of their age and gender, girls are a group in high need of support due adverse risks including child marriage, which is correlated to a range of mental health issues including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, and anxiety ([Burgess, et al., 2023](#)).
- 3. Creativity is a powerful tool for mental health delivery:** creative approaches are highly underutilized, cost-effective tools for mental health delivery, especially in contexts with high-levels of need and few mental health resources. Creative activities help process complex emotions, gain self-awareness, lower defense mechanisms, and imagine new possibilities ([Van der Kolk, 2014](#), [Fancourt, Daisy & Finn, Saoirse, 2019](#)).

09.WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

- 4. Early intervention is most impactful in preventing poverty and trauma:** Early adolescence is the critical threshold of investment for girls when it is still possible to prevent a rapid succession of negative life events experienced in puberty. Girls' experiences in early adolescence are foundational to their and their family's poverty, as well as the well-being of the communities they support ([Chong, Hallman, & Brady, 2006](#)).
- 5. Participants as co-creators and decision-makers:** Girls are not only participants—their experiences, knowledge, and interests are central to programmatic direction and decisions. Exercises like participatory asset-mapping allow participants to identify topics, like emotional well-being and boundary-setting, that actively shape the curriculum based on their needs and lived experience.
- 6. Sustainability through locally-led capacity building:** We are invested in shifting power and resources to local actors, and anchor every aspect of the program in local systems to sustain the program beyond our engagement. This is realized through training up our mentors, our model of cascading mentorship, and establishing tipping point participation (reaching 80% of girls aged 10-14 in hotspot areas) to enable sustainable normative change. We also build local capacity and leadership through TES and women mentors. We recognize the unique value of the network and local contextual knowledge we have prioritized for the last 10 years.

09.WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

- 7. Equity & Access:** We use a door-to-door approach ([Girl Roster Survey](#)) led by young women community members to identify and recruit overlooked girls, including those from the albino community and girls with disabilities. We provide logistical support for safe participation and train mentors to foster a protective environment that addresses social challenges like bullying.
- 8. Employing scalable, contextually-relevant solutions:** Program content is focused on transferable skill sets and competencies, designed for low-resource environments and adapted to the specific context. Our work is group-based, lowering costs and increasing community cohesion.
- 9. Evidence-based:** Our activities are grounded in evidence and practice. We employ evidence-based approaches from the [Population Council's girl-centered program tools](#), a leader in research and programming for vulnerable and marginalized adolescent girls, paired with arts-based tools drawn from the fields of art therapy, and arts-in-education.
- 10. Learning & Intellectual Humility:** We work in a uniquely complex, dynamic, and challenging context. This complexity requires intellectual humility, rigor, honesty, and curiosity. We are constantly reassessing, learning, and responding to our learning.

09. WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Security Mapping of Bujovu Neighborhood

Security mapping of essential resources and services provides a real picture of access and safety for women and girls, and a starting point to improve access and safety as we collaborate with partners and community stakeholders.

	CHURCH	SCHOOL	MARKET	WATER PUMP	FOOTBALL FIELD	HEALTH SERVICES
Time of day	Days and evenings	Days and evenings	Days and evenings	Days and evenings	Days and evenings	Daytime
Used by	Girls, boys, women, and men	Girls and boys	Girls and women	Girls and women	Boys and men	Girls, boys, women, and men
Why do women feel unsafe in these spaces?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Pickpocketing · Poisoning during greetings · Rape during prayer vigil · Harassment to gain a position of responsibility in the choir 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Toilets are a high-risk area for infections · Corporeal punishment · Kidnapping · Bribery for school grades · Psychological violence in the form of threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Motorcycle traffic jams · Theft · Fighting · Rape 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Theft of water containers · Accidents and fights · GBV (male privilege) abuse and intimidation · Traveling long distances to find a working water source 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Rape · Road accident · Theft · Fear of encountering ghosts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Judgement · No referral · Do not receive the care requested (no access to contraception) · Payment for care in case of rape · Stigmatization

09.WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Women's Participation in Bujovu's Decision-Making Bodies 2024

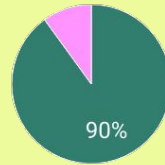
Gender composition of different decision-making groups in the neighborhood by community stakeholders and mentors.

Staff and mentors shared that the most powerful, consequential, and meaningful roles are dominated by men, despite the consequential role of women in the functioning of the community.

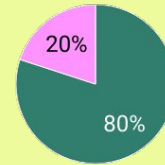
■ % Men ■ % Women



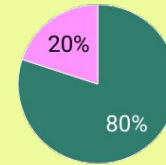
Local Government



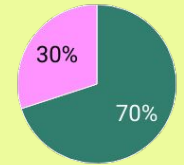
Church Leadership



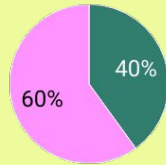
Avenue Leadership



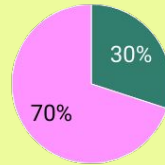
School Leadership



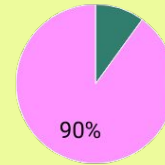
Security Committee



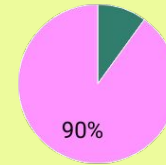
Youth Committee



Block (10 Houses) Leadership



Community Liaison



Water Management

10. THANK YOU

With deep appreciation, a thank you to our partners: **The Adolescent Girls Community of Practice** and **Population Council** individuals Judith Bruce and Eva Roca; the **Community Arts Council** in Goma, DRC, and **Tulizo Elle Space** whose partnership and collaborative efforts make our work a reality.



We thank our foundation funders: The Tides Foundation, the Girls' Opportunity Alliance of the Obama Foundation and the Girls' Rights Project for sustaining our vision.

10. THANK YOU

We are so grateful to the individuals who supported our work over the last year. We appreciate you more than you know.

Elodie-Olivia Bonazzi

Kate Charles

Nancy Choy

Rebecca del Rio

Betty Eigen

Robert Elias

Gayle Embrey

Susan Etscovitz

Donna Fong

Joann Fong

Judith Gillespie

Zbigniew Gozdecki

Michael Hauenstein

Audrey Hawkins

Susan Heinemann

Mischa Ipp

Diana Lyon and Kevin Walter

David and Jennifer Mallie

John and Jody Mallie

Beth Meyer

Amyr Rajan

Carla Soracco

Margot and Larry Spillane

Carol Zukin

The photos throughout this report were taken between 2022 and 2024 of the girls, junior mentors, mentors, parents of participants in our program, with their consent.

Photo credits: Pamela Tulizo, Alice Heri, and Christina Mallie



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256
girls



03.
OUR IMPACT



1,225 individuals
205 households

PROGRAM REACH

	Category	Numbers
Direct Impact	New Girls Cohort	227
	Junior Mentors	20
	Graduated girls (continue to attend monthly meetings)	196
	Mentors	10
	Leaders	20
	Community through forums	80
	Guardians/Parents	100
Indirect Impact	No. households including mentors, jr mentors, graduated girls and new girls (20% girls come from same household)	342
	Girls in same household (2.8 per household; 1.8 in addition to girl reached)	616
	Household members besides girls (5.8 without girls is 3.8)	1,301
	General community (via public art)	34,000

10. THANK YOU

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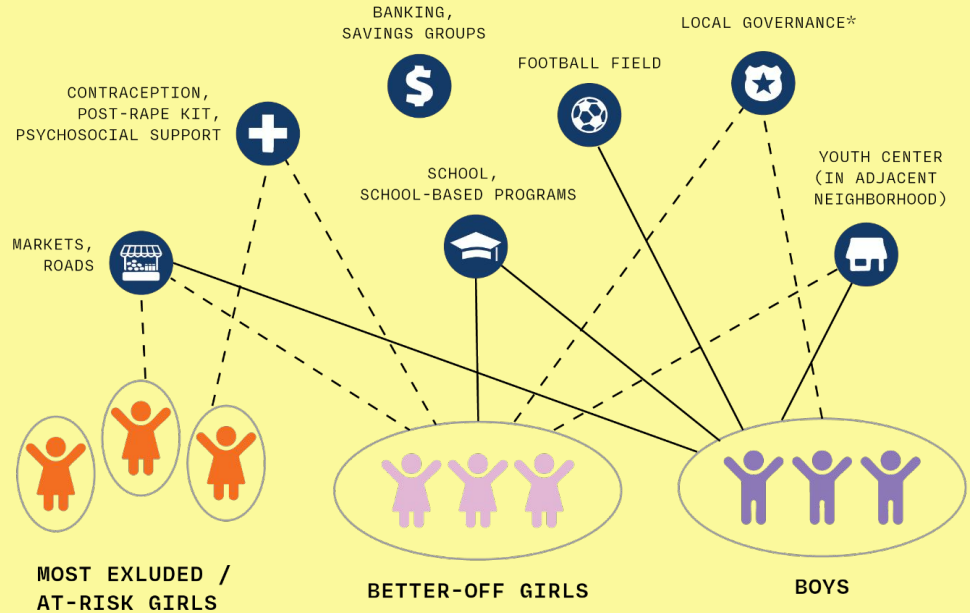


04. HIGHLIGHTS

Our Work Mapping the Community:

The data we have gathered to understand the community and its resources and services has informed our programming and what activities we prioritize to support girls in this specific neighborhood.

MAPPING ACCESS TO RESOURCES: BOYS, GIRLS, AND MOST AT-RISK GIRLS



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✂️ www.x.com/colorsofconnect





Mission: Our mission is to work creatively with young people and communities impacted by violence to overcome trauma, inspire hope, support well-being, and encourage self-determination.



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Vision: Our vision is that young people in places that have been devastated by conflict and inter-generational trauma can be in solidarity with each other, creating and reimagining a reality that truly nourishes and supports them.



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COLORS OF CONNECTION

2024

A group of young children, likely from an African community, are shown in a candid, joyful moment. They are smiling and laughing, looking towards the camera. The children are dressed in simple, everyday clothing. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and what appears to be an indoor community space. The overall mood is warm and positive.

ANNUAL REPORT 2024



COLORS OF CONNECTION

2024



ANNUAL REPORT

COLORS OF CONNECTION

2024



ANNUAL REPORT



COLORS OF CONNECTION

2024

04 . HIGHLIGHTS

Program Impact

- **Life Skill & Creative Sessions:** 24 sessions twice a month building essential skillsets in areas of health, social and emotional and financial. Sessions included: menstrual management, female genital mutilation awareness and prevention, emotional regulation, and understanding budgeting and savings. Creative expression activities built confidence, self-awareness, and peer connection.
- **Mentors and Junior Mentors Leadership:** Junior mentors (graduated participants) and 6 young women mentors led sessions, conducted home visits, and shaped curriculum. Mentors received coaching in leadership, confidence, and active listening.
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 - 5-day workshop with 16 local leaders led to adoption of girls' resource-and-risk maps (now displayed in local government offices).
 - Advocacy led to improved access to post-rape kits and birth control at local health center **servicing an average population of xx (ask Anita for stats of pop served by Bujovu Health Center in 2024).**
 - Ongoing initiatives: Improving sanitary conditions in school bathrooms to prevent infection and disease, improving medical access at health center, reducing criminal activity in markets with shared information on best safety practices.



256 girls

1,225 individuals

205 households



03.
OUR IMPACT



Our flagship program, *Musichana Hamuka (Girl Awakening)*, provides intensive support to girls aged 10-14 in Goma's *Bujovu* neighborhood, an area with no other youth-focused services.

In 2024, *Musichana Hamuka* directly engaged **256 girls** (193 participants, 64 junior mentors), indirectly benefiting **1,225 individuals** across **205 households**.

05 . CORE PROGRAM COMPONENTS

