IMPACT
The power of Unbound mothers
MOTHERS: ‘gatekeepers to change’
Empowered mothers are a force for positive change. Unbound’s program model is based on that conviction. And new survey results indicate the program contributes to mothers’ empowerment in employment, decision-making, community involvement and other areas.

In 2017, Unbound concluded an extensive evaluation aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of empowerment as experienced by mothers in the Unbound program. Seven hundred mothers at 26 Unbound program sites in Asia, Africa and Latin America participated.

The study focused on three indicators of empowerment that align with what Unbound aims to achieve and have also been validated in external research: increased choices in life, positive change and greater personal control. The responses of the mothers in the Unbound program were compared to responses from mothers of children on a waiting list for sponsorship. This provided an “apples to apples” comparison of families in similar circumstances, and provided an understanding of how the sponsorship program contributes to the empowerment of mothers. >>>>
When Unbound’s late co-founder Bob Hentzen first traveled to Latin America as a Christian Brother in 1959, he quickly discovered the importance of learning from those you seek to serve. “It didn’t take the wise old missionaries very long to communicate the message,” he said. “Roberto, eyes open, mouth shut, and just love God’s people.”

A culture of learning has characterized Unbound’s work from the start, following the founders’ conviction that, given opportunity, people can usually find their own solutions. Nothing has illustrated that point more dramatically than the evolution of Unbound’s community-based mothers support groups.

“Mothers groups, in fact, started in India … many years before [Unbound],” Saritha Mendenha, coordinator of Unbound’s program in Hyderabad, India, said. “These were started to economically, socially and holistically empower women.”

When Unbound staff saw the potential of the small groups, they adapted the concept for the mothers of sponsored children. It wasn’t long before it spread from India to other countries in the Unbound world.

Today, creative initiatives are growing out of the mothers groups everywhere Unbound works. In Kenya, groups are providing venture capital for members through their own savings and credit cooperatives, while in the Philippines mothers are working
A key finding from the survey was that more women in the Unbound program have their own businesses and fewer are unemployed than mothers on the waiting list. Half of Unbound mothers surveyed reported having complete choice in deciding or changing their occupations, compared with just more than 40 percent of mothers on the waiting list.

“That is something our program specifically tries to accomplish, helping women start their own livelihoods, gain that sort of economic control,” Becky Findley, international evaluations manager for Unbound, said.

The evaluation also found that mothers in the Unbound program were generally happier than those in the wait-list group, and that they reported being more involved in making decisions within their households and communities. About 40 percent of Unbound mothers said they had complete choice in making important decisions that could change the course of their lives, while 30 percent of wait-list mothers said they had total freedom in that area.

“We see mothers as being gatekeepers to change,” Findley said. “When you empower a mother you are empowering a family. By empowering the mother you are providing better care for the child.”
“So it’s catalytic. You empower one mother and then she becomes an agent of change.”

— Becky Findley, international evaluations manager for Unbound

One indicator of such change was more than 60 percent of Unbound mothers reported membership in a community group, organization, network or association versus 40 percent of wait-list mothers. This speaks to the value of Unbound’s support groups for mothers.

“Unbound mothers form groups that not only keep them accountable to each other, but give them the strength in numbers to organize and have their voices heard,” Melissa Velazquez, international program director for Unbound, said. “It’s easy to ignore one mother, but you can’t ignore 500 of them who have formed a powerful cooperative that will have local economic and civic strength.”

One of the benefits of the mothers groups is the ability of members to take loans for personal livelihood.

Forced to leave their hometown in Kenya because of post-election violence, Joseph (left) and Phyllis moved their family to Nairobi in 2007. When their two children became sponsored through Unbound, Phyllis was able to join the local mothers group and take out small loans to start a new livelihood. Today, she and Joseph work together making and selling curtains and mosquito nets.
initiatives. Members regularly contribute small amounts from their own children’s sponsorship benefits, which are then made available for members of the group to borrow. They agree to pay back the loans by a certain date and are held accountable by the other mothers in the community.

The system has been so successful that, in some countries, the groups have expanded it to create cooperatives that provide economic stimulus not only for individual families, but also their communities.

One finding from the survey showed that a small number of mothers were involving all family members, including their children, in making household, health and education-related decisions. That small number included more Unbound mothers than mothers on the waiting list.

“Even though this is happening in very few families at the moment,” evaluation specialist Nimisha Poudyal said, “a higher number of those families are participating in our program. To have families that ask for children’s input, that value their voice, that engage them in decision-making — to me, it means contributing toward creation of a generation that understands the responsibility, value and accountability of making decisions for yourself and those around you.”

Visit Unbound.org/EmpowermentStudy to read the full evaluation summary.
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ON THE COVER:

Thomaiyammal, left, is visited in her home in India by fellow Unbound mothers group member Mary. Recently, Mary trained Thomaiyammal in carpet weaving, a skill that now allows both women to earn a living. The loom Thomaiyammal uses stands in the background.