



Project Update

Title of the Project	PSYCHOSOCIAL EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM
Name of Organization	HIGH ATLAS FOUNDATION
Project Location (district, town, city)	Marrakech-Safi Region, Morocco
Project Duration	February to June 2024
Project Budget	35 000 \$
Number of Program Participants Served	428 PEOPLE: 229 women and 199 children

I. Program Overview

a. Description of Context and Project Purpose

On September 8, 2023, a devastating magnitude 6.8 earthquake hit Morocco just after 11 p.m. local time. The earthquake's depth was 11.5 miles, and the epicenter was 44 miles southwest of Marrakesh in the High Atlas Mountains, concentrating in the Al Haouz province. This powerful seismic event sent shockwaves throughout the region and was felt by residents in dozens of Moroccan cities, including Agadir, Casablanca, Rabat, Mohammedia, and their surrounding areas. As a result, significant damage was caused to critical infrastructures and homes, leaving communities in the affected areas struggling with the aftermath of this natural disaster. The earthquake left more than 2,946 people dead and 5,674 injured, most of whom lived in the provinces of Al Haouz, Taroudant, and Chichaoua. Many buildings and historical monuments were also damaged in Marrakesh, Taroudant, Agadir, and Ouarzazate.

This project emerged as a response to the earthquake, which disrupted people's stability, especially for those who lost their homes, loved ones, and safety. The project addresses affected communities' urgent need to rebuild their lives and address the erosion and fissures in material, social, economic, and psychological aspects caused by the earthquake. Evaluations indicated a significant need for primary healthcare, mental health services, water, sanitation, hygiene, and protection measures for vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. The program aims to assist affected people in establishing a "new normal" by offering psychosocial support, including post-disaster counseling, empowerment, safe referral processes, and support tailored to children and adolescents.

The Post-Disaster Psychosocial Support and Empowerment (PSEPD) project is being implemented by the High Atlas Foundation, funded by the GF Foundation, over a five month period, from February 2024 to June 2024. During this period, fifteen workshops will be conducted under the guidance of two facilitators, with an educator providing educational activities for children during the workshops.



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Resilience emerged as a central concept discussed during the workshops. Participants explored the importance of accepting past events, such as the earthquake, and redirecting focus towards the present moment. Exercises like the friend system provided a space for participants to express and release pent-up emotions, highlighting the significance of sharing sorrows for emotional well-being.

Additionally, the concept of stress is thoroughly examined in the workshops, as it has a profound impact on participants' daily lives and their responses to personal and environmental challenges. The workshops serve as a platform for participants to recognize and address the effects of stress on themselves and their surroundings.

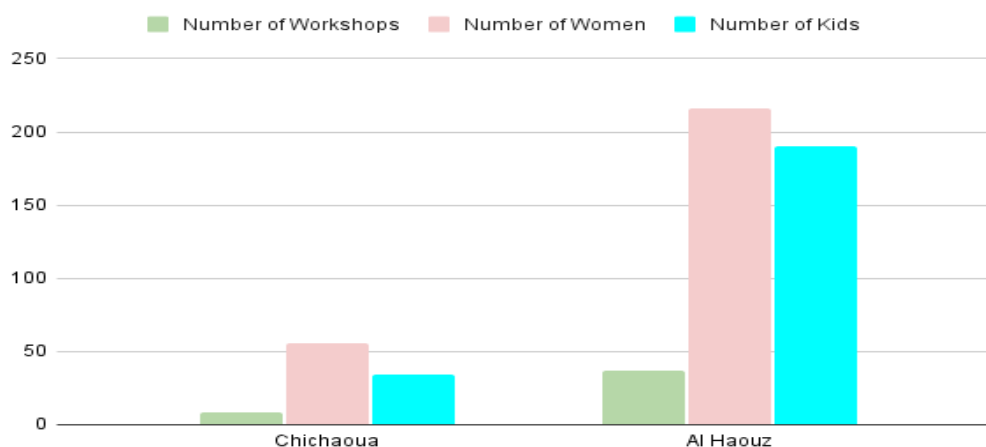
On the second and third days, it usually becomes apparent to the facilitator that the participants are comfortable to place more trust in their guidance, which leads to smoother sessions despite the sensitive topics. The first concept discussed is emotions. Participants recognize the importance of internal self-awareness, understanding various feelings and psychological states they experience. They also learn about the impact of effective compassionate communication on individual well-being, realizing the significance of expressing both positive and negative feelings. Next, they discuss the concept of self-love. Participants learn about the importance of caring for themselves internally and externally, focusing on allocating personal time for hygiene, rest, and paying attention to diet and exercise.

Finally, the concept of personal strength is explored. This topic touches on how female participants often feel weak, incapable, or victimized by their society. Thus, participants learn about seven basic sources for creating and supporting growth in their lives, recognizing that each person is unique with personal strengths and weaknesses shaped by their experiences, challenges, and situations.

As we wrap up our workshop on the last day, we delve into two key topics. Firstly, we explore spirituality, which is closely tied to religion. We discuss how spirituality can bring about positive changes in society and help individuals cope with life events. This discussion helps participants better understand and accept different aspects of their lives.

In the second part of the day, we have a serious conversation about the future. Specifically, we talk about the goals and aspirations women have in their careers. They want to figure out their next steps and create a clear plan for what they want to achieve professionally. This discussion is important for helping women feel empowered and confident about their future paths.

Up to now, we have reached nine villages and supported a total of 496 people, including 272 women and 224 children. We are dedicated to reaching out to those in need and improving their lives through our ongoing efforts.



e. Map (or list of communities, districts and provinces) of project area:

A total of nine workshops were conducted in seven villages within the Al Haouz province, covering municipalities such as Amghras, Ouzguita, Setti Fadma, and Ouirgane. Furthermore, workshops were also conducted in two villages in the Chichaoua province, specifically under the municipalities of Lalla Aziza and Zaouia Nahlia. These sessions commenced in February and are scheduled to conclude in June 2024.

Details of the villages can be found in the table below:

Number of Workshops	Province	Commune	Village	Dates of the workshop	Number of Women	Number of Kids
1	Chichaoua	Lalla Aziza	Tabia	13-16 Feb	26	24
2	Al Haouz	Setti Fadma	Agd n Ourtan	20-23 Feb	29	20
3	Al Haouz	Setti Fadma	Timichi	26-29 Feb	29	25
4	Al Haouz	Amghras	Laoubar	12-25 Mar	26	31
5	Al Haouz	Amghras	Ouchfilen	19-22 Mar	36	30
6	Al Haouz	Ouzguita	Taouzart	26-29 Mar	29	28
7	Chichaoua	Zaouiya Nahliya	Idazen	15-18 April	30	10
8	Al Haouz	Setti Fadma	Amazzer	23-26 April	35	30
9	Al Haouz	Ouirgane	Agni	29 April - 2 May	32	78



f. Major Challenges, Constraints and Lessons Learned:

A significant challenge we encountered in our work was the presence of cultural barriers, particularly in rural areas, which affected the participation of women in the program. Initially, some women were hesitant to join the sessions, and some men resisted allowing their wives to participate. Overcoming these deep-rooted cultural norms required persistent efforts and patience to build trust within the community. Through ongoing engagement and community outreach initiatives, we were able to gradually break down these barriers and encourage greater female involvement.

Additionally, our assessment of psychological needs highlighted the importance of having access to psychiatric expertise, especially in addressing critical cases.

Another significant challenge we faced was the limited availability of suitable training spaces for women, particularly in villages most damaged. This presented logistical difficulties in organizing workshops and accommodating both women and children. To address this issue, we had to adapt our approach. Instead of doing children's activities in close proximity to women, the educator organized outdoor activities for the children, allowing the women to participate in the training sessions without disruption.

These challenges provided valuable learning experiences for our team. They taught us the importance of flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration in effectively supporting communities facing adversity. By understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by each community, we were able to better tailor our interventions and make a more meaningful impact on the lives of those we sought to assist.

II. Impact Stories, Photos and Videos:

When we conducted these workshops, many success stories emerged, contributing to the overall success and effectiveness of the project. Two particular stories stand out, one shared by a facilitator and the other by a children's educator.

The facilitator recounted the story of Nadia, a young mother in her twenties with two children, who expressed feelings of discomfort, sleeplessness, and overthinking on the first day of the workshop. She revealed that following the death of her closest brother, she struggled to trust anyone with her secrets. However, by the fourth and final day of the workshop, Nadia underwent a remarkable transformation. She shared how the pressure she had been carrying had vanished after the simple exercises during the workshop. She closed her eyes before bed, imagined her brother, and confided in him about everything she had been holding inside. Nadia reported feeling a sense of relief and joy as she opened up to her brother, leading to a night of restful sleep like never before.



Photo credit: HAF

The educator also shared a touching story from our trip to the Al Haouz province, where she witnessed significant change among the children. Mohammad Amin, a 10-year-old boy deeply affected by the earthquake, displayed aggressive behavior during our activities. Upon noticing his actions, the educator attempted to have a private conversation with Mohammad to understand what was happening. Despite initial resistance, Mohammad's mother explained that he had changed drastically after his father's passing, becoming prone to anger. Armed with this understanding, the educator worked tirelessly to engage Mohammad in activities. By the last day of the workshop, Mohammad had transformed, acknowledging his previous behavior and promising to continue to improve. The educator and Mohammad shared a heartfelt hug, symbolizing a newfound bond of trust and friendship.



Photo Credit: HAF