

# Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

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## Sisters for Sisters' Education project

NEPAL

APRIL 2017 – JUNE 2021

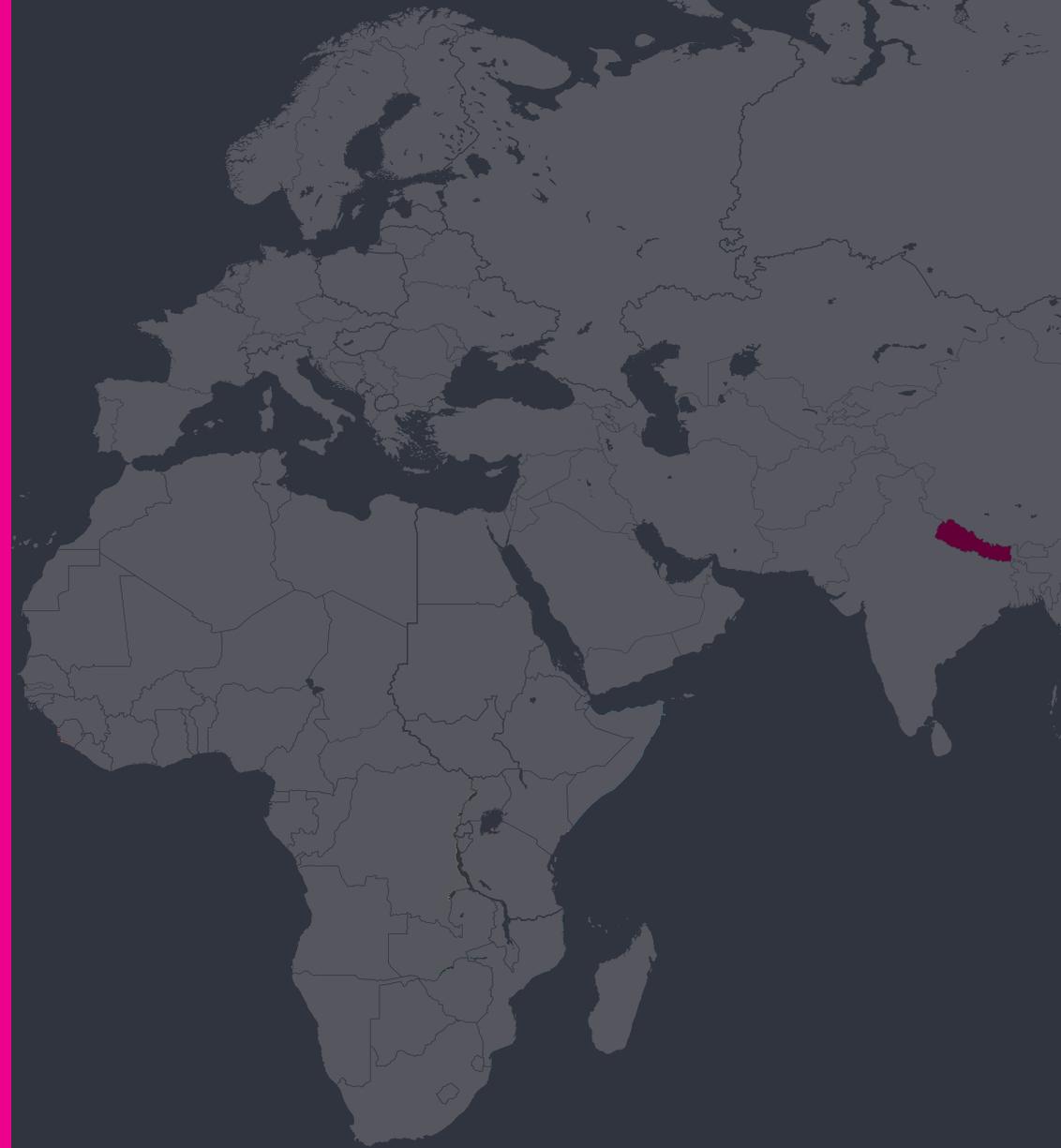


Girls' Education Challenge



**“Schools generally tend to take the school improvement plans as a formality and very little effort is made by most of the schools in their formulation. However, as a result of project interventions at the school level, treatment schools are taking the school improvement plans very seriously and ensuring inclusive requirements of the school in their plans.”**

Education officer



● Nepal

# What did the Sisters for Sisters' Education project do?

**The Sisters for Sisters' Education project was implemented in Nepal by the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the Girls' Education Challenge. The project supported girls' transition from school into either livelihood-related employment or the next phase of their education.**

The Sisters for Sisters' Education project was implemented across four districts of Nepal (Dhading, Lamjung, Parsa, and Surkhet) from 2017 to 2021. The second phase of the project built on the achievements of the first phase (implemented between 2013 and 2016) which focused on increasing girls' access to quality formal and non-formal education. The project worked with in-school girls in Grades 6 to 10 (12 to 16 years) at the time of project inception. In Parsa, beneficiaries also included out-of-school girls. Throughout its duration, the Sisters for Sisters' Education project reached out to a total of 16,257 students (8,158 girls and 8,099 boys), among which 7,382 girls were the direct learning beneficiaries. Out of the total beneficiary population, 1,255 were extremely marginalised girls identified as 'Little Sisters.' The Little Sisters received additional interventions through a peer-to-peer mentoring scheme. This mentoring approach was at the heart of the project, whereby Little Sisters were supported and mentored by senior girls known as 'Big Sisters' in their academics to boost their self-efficacy and deal with everyday challenges.

The Sisters for Sisters' Education project provided direct academic support to girls through remedial learning classes – called Learning Support Classes – in math, science and English. Also, the project conducted English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE) clubs to support girls with digital and literary skills. The school-level support included infrastructural support such as building libraries, providing health and hygiene kits and developing a model classroom to showcase what an effective classroom looks like.

The project also trained teachers and head teachers on student-centred learning methodologies, gender-sensitive learning environments and improved school governance. The project helped establish a complaint response mechanism at schools which helped the students put forward their complaints and concerns. The project also assisted the schools in developing and implementing their school improvement plans through their school improvements committees. At the community level, the Sisters for Sisters' Education project conducted door-to-door campaigns and street dramas to raise awareness on the importance of educating girls and preventing early marriage among parents and community members. At the system level, the project worked with local government officials on developing education policies, strengthening safeguarding processes and developing child protection plans and guidelines.



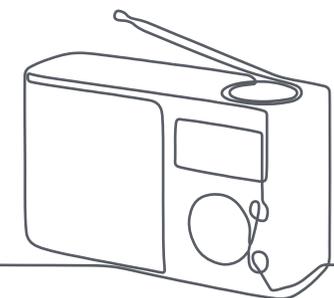
# How did the Sisters for Sisters' Education project adapt during COVID-19?

As COVID-19 hit Nepal in March 2020, many project activities, such as the Learning Support Classes and the EDGE clubs, were suspended.

Responding to the most pressing needs of the communities, the project diverted towards distributing masks, sanitisers and WASH kits. The project worked closely with the local government and designed and distributed handbooks to facilitate learning at home. The schools also mobilised teachers to reach the girls in clusters and provide psychosocial first aid and emotional support to them. The project conducted mobile clinic sessions where teachers could share their experiences of creating conducive learning environments during and post-crisis periods. Teachers were also provided with radios, TV lessons, SD cards and printed learning materials. Moreover, as the girls could not meet in person for the EDGE classes, lessons were aired through local radio stations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, community volunteers, including the Big Sisters, played a key role in supporting girls with continuing their education and disseminating COVID-19 messages. The community volunteers' contributions had also a significant impact to bring the children back to school when schools reopened. Once schools reopened the project assisted schools with WASH facilities to ensure a safe return to school.

**“I found the door-to-door Big Sisters campaign the most effective as it is not a one-off activity. A dedicated Big Sister visiting our house regularly and talking with family members about the education and future of our daughter has made me more serious and committed towards the future of my daughter.”**

A mother



# What did the Sisters for Sisters' Education project achieve?

**Improved learning outcomes – and COVID-19.** At [midline](#), the difference in difference was 11.56 percentage point over and above comparison for numeracy and 4.70 percentage point for literacy, both of which are statistically significant achievements. Considering the challenges related to COVID-19, mainly the closure of schools for a prolonged time, the learning outcome indicators were revised before the [endline](#) evaluation. The revised learning outcome indicators shifted the focus from literacy and numeracy assessments towards the girls' perceptions of their learning in the last two years of implementation. Based on this, 78.7% of the girls expressed confidence towards their improved learning performance since midline, reinforcing the learning outcome achievements recorded at the midline. Some of the common examples of learning improvement highlighted by the girls included 'improved examination score,' 'increased interest to learn,' 'more active classroom participation,' and 'better comprehension of the lesson.' Most of the girls attributed these different forms of learning improvement to the Learning Support Classes and increased confidence to make inquiries with the teachers in the classroom. The study also found the changed parental attitude facilitated by the project to have supported the girls in their learning, mainly through reduced engagement in household chores and creating a conducive learning environment at home for the girls.

Additionally, an improved learning environment at school was also found to have substantially contributed to the perceived learning progression among girls. The [endline](#) evaluation also explored the impacts of COVID-19 on learning. 82.1% of the girls believed that the pandemic had affected their future aspirations regarding education and employment. The girls could not continue their studies and their learning competencies also diminished with the prolonged lockdown. Also, the pandemic created new challenges for many girls, especially in terms of their access to learning. For instance, not all girls had access to smartphones, the internet, radio and television to participate in remote learning. Therefore, most girls did not

have exposure to learning interventions and activities throughout the nine months of the school closure.

**Improved transition outcomes.** Findings from the [endline](#) evaluation showed that 94% of the girls were found to have successfully transitioned to the next stage of education or employment. Some of the most cited reasons for the remaining 6% were marriage and drop-out from school due to financial constraints brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The occurrences of self-initiated early marriages were high during the endline evaluation even though parent-led marriages had remarkably decreased. Parents' awareness regarding detrimental impacts of child marriage was found to be higher during the endline evaluation than in the midline.

**Sustained partnership with local government.** The [endline](#) evaluation suggests that the infrastructure support to schools is sustainable, as schools demonstrated ownership and readiness to maintain and sustain the infrastructure in the longer run. Similarly, the project's achievements in improving the quality of teaching are also likely to be sustainable, with evidence of teachers keenly applying their skills from the training into their classrooms. The endline evaluation also provided some encouraging evidence of the project's sustainability at the system level. For instance, the project's support to local governments in formulating child protection policies of the project municipalities can be expected to improve the education status of the respective areas and contribute to the municipalities' education plans. Moreover, local governments across all project districts appeared optimistic about continuing the project activities, specifically the Little Sister-Big Sister mentorship scheme and work on tackling climate change under the Girls and Inclusive Education Network, which is a loose network at community level to support girls' education and continue their learning through peer mentoring. Even with a limited budget and debilitated education planning, the local governments hope to scale up the scheme under the government's leadership to address the barriers to girls' education.

**“Students were very excited to come to the Learning Support Classes since there they were taught basic concepts. And once the student grasps basic concepts, confidence is boosted in that individual to study further no matter how weak that student was in regular classes. Teachers could also concentrate on delivering knowledge and seeking ways to make students understand without having to worry about curriculum pressure.”**

A teacher

**Improved girls' self-esteem and empowerment.** The [endline](#) evaluation did not come across any remarkable changes in the degree of girls taking critical decisions independently or jointly with family members since the midline evaluation. The rate of girls taking all key decisions independently or with their family members was 54.9% and 54.2% at the midline and endline, respectively. Nevertheless, statistical significance is seen in terms of the girls' ability to decide on continuing school in the subsequent years, age of choice to get married, the decision to work after completing studies, and the type of work to opt for after completing studying.

**Improved parental engagement in girls' education.** Between midline and endline the project evaluations assessed the time girls spent on household chores and parents' involvement in their daughters' education. The [midline](#) findings showed that the girls spent 1.8 hours on average per day in household chores. By the [endline](#), girls' engagement in household chores was found to have reduced to 1.7 hours; a difference deemed statistically significant. Tailoring girls' engagement in household chores to the period of school closure caused by the pandemic, the study found that they had been devoting 2.3 hours to household chores. However, this trend of increased engagement in household chores should not be taken negatively. It is usual for parents to expect their children to work for a slightly more extended period when they are at home, especially when they do not have to go to school. Moreover, despite girls allocating a relatively higher amount of time to household chores during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were still getting enough time to study at home.

**Improved gender-responsive school management and governance.** At [endline](#), schools were found to be promoting different activities to ensure a gender-friendly environment in school, including separate toilets for girls and boys and free distribution of sanitary pads. Additionally, schools were found to have designated gender focal teachers to support and listen to the girls. Marginalised girls were also played leading role to initiate extracurricular activities through mobilising child clubs as well. These endline results present an encouraging picture compared with the midline evaluation findings, where only 47.3% of the schools achieved satisfactory progress regarding gender-responsive teaching and learning practices.

## // NIRMALA'S STORY



Nirmala is 16 years old and lives in Surkhet, Nepal. Nirmala used to struggle at school, get low marks and missed school often as she thought she was not good enough to study. From the 'untouchable' Dalit caste, Nirmala was told by her parents to prioritise domestic work over her studies. "My mum is usually sick, and during the time of planting and harvesting, I have to support my mum. We work in other people's fields to make some

money. My younger sister and I help hand working in the fields. At home I cook rice, feed the cow, cut the grass and bring water from the tap which is very far from the house. That is why I do not have enough time to do my homework."

After joining the Sisters for Sisters' Education project as a Little Sister, Nirmala's grades and confidence improved. Her Big Sister Durga convinced Nirmala's parents the value of education and inspired Nirmala to attend school regularly. "Durga is my Big Sister. She has helped a lot. She has shown me how to become more confident. The way she acts is like a role model. She is like a teacher and a sister to me. Last year Durga and I went to a national event in Kathmandu. I performed in a drama in front of over 100 people as part of the Sisters for Sisters' project. Thanks to Durga I was able to travel to Kathmandu for the first time and perform. It was like a dream. I was able to meet other Little Sisters from other districts and make friends".

Durga also taught Nirmala how to make reusable sanitary pads. "I could not buy the disposable pads available in the market. The market is far away, and the disposable pads are expensive. So, I had to use the reusable pads or folded cloths. Like me, many girls used to miss classes during their periods. But then the Big Sisters trained us to make making reusable sanitary pads. After Durga taught me, I made and distributed some extra pads among my friends who missed the training." Talking about her aspirations for the future, Nirmala says, "My ambition is to become a teacher. I also want to raise awareness of the stigma around the Dalit community and help remove some of the harmful practices that affect us."



**“Besides simply enrolling daughters in school, we also need to understand what is going on in the school. We need to discuss with the teachers whether our daughter is progressing or not. If we take an interest in our daughter’s education, her future and her desires, she will be motivated to study. Otherwise, she will be demotivated.”**

**A father**

# The Sisters for Sisters' Education project in numbers



Number of students reached directly and indirectly

**16,257**

(8,158 girls and 8,099 boys)

Number of teachers trained in student-centred methodologies

**459**

(female 112 and male 347)



Number of in-school girls that participated in the EDGE clubs

**1,152**



Number of girls reached directly

**7,382**

(out of which 1,255 were extremely marginalised)

1,292 in-school girls and 1,400 in-school boys participated in the Learning Support Classes

800 Little Sisters and 235 Big Sisters trained in life skills

110 out-of-school girls trained in financial literacy and business skills

4,683 (3,016 female and 1,667 male) parents and carers engaged in project activities

335 school focal points trained in child protection

285 school member committee members trained in inclusive school improvement plans

# What did the Sisters for Sisters' Education project learn?

**Improving teaching quality.** Qualitative findings from the midline and endline evaluations found a positive change in the attitude of teachers and a change in teaching techniques, such as using more respectable words to address students or making classroom learning more child friendly. Nonetheless, there were some barriers that limited teachers from fully implementing pedagogical techniques in regular classes. For instance, a large number of students in classrooms, limited availability of learning resources, time limitation, and a rigid course structure, among others, hinder full implementation of student-centred teaching methods in the classrooms. It is also important that the teacher training activities offer continuous support and monitoring rather than being a one-off activity. Also, coordination with schools and local governments is key for replicating best practices and sharing skills and knowledge among teachers who were and were not part of the teacher training.

**Working towards scalability, sustainability and replicability.** Working closely with the schools and local government may lead to replicating interventions such as the Learning Support Classes and the EDGE clubs, tapping into a larger capacity and allowing for more inclusiveness. Consultations with schools could be about developing sustainability plans aimed to replicate and sustain the activities and achievements. It is also important to work with the local and federal government to share project findings and to encourage the government to incorporate plans of replicating the most effective project activities. It is also recommended to plan for a widespread dissemination and sharing of project achievements at large scale, targeting not just the federal and provincial government.

**Improving girls' self-esteem and confidence.** Extra-curricular activities, such as poem competitions, quizzes, debates and school fairs, create opportunities for girls to develop self-esteem and self-confidence and to grow multi-dimensionally developing both knowledge and skills. It is important to create opportunities for sharing girls' success stories among the girls involved in the project activities.

#### **Engaging parents and communities in their girls' education.**

Continuous engagement of actors at household and community levels is key to reduce the amount of house chores that girls are expected to attend. Parents and communities can be engaged through door-to-door campaigns or street dramas.

#### **Strengthening gender-responsive school management and governance.**

In order to ensure that the compliant response mechanism works as an effective referral mechanism for girls against any safeguarding threats they may face at school, girls need to be able to develop trust that the confidentiality and anonymity are kept throughout the reporting process. This can be done by engaging in dialogue with girls to sensitise them about the use of the compliant response mechanism. Boys should also be engaged to increase their awareness about the traditional gendered roles.

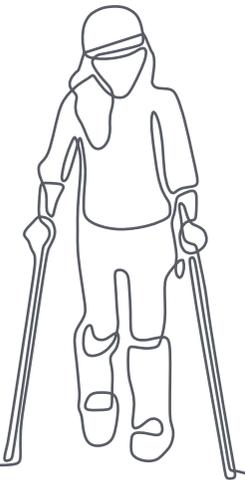
**“Whenever a teacher participates in any training, apart from the skills, the teacher also gets a sense of self-worth that s/he is responsible in shaping children's future.”**

Head teacher



**Involving girls, communities and governments in education programming.** Girls' education programmes should consider the needs of girls throughout its various phases, from design to closure. These needs are context-specific and should be based on evidence rather than on a one-size-fit-all approach. Girls' needs may vary from district to district. Involving the community in the design phase helps ensure mutual ownership of the project activities. It is also important to align the project objectives and activities to national and international priorities. Active engagement of local government from very initial phase of the project design and throughout implementation is instrumental for its sustainability and replication of project learning.

**Reaching the most marginalised.** It is important to consider and address the needs of the most marginalised when designing and implementing a girls' education programme. This includes the communities' needs, barriers to education, economic hardships and lack of access to employment opportunities. These barriers contribute to further perpetuating the gender discrimination and inequality. Providing cash vouchers and income generation opportunities to parents of marginalised girls can help support their girls' education up to graduation. Providing infrastructural support to schools is important to create an enabling environment for all students including children with disabilities.



## // ANJALI'S STORY



Anjali is 15 years old and is one of the Little Sisters in the Sisters for Sisters' Education project in Parsa district, Nepal. She was in Grade 4 when her Big Sister Muni started providing her with mentoring support. Anjali believes that her Big Sister's mentoring was life-changing for her. "My Big Sister is the closest person I can share my problems with," Anjali said. "We belong to the same community and she comes to my home for regular

mentoring. Through mentoring, Muni helped me in my lessons and taught me about health, hygiene and life skills. I look up to her in life which gives me the confidence to be myself." She added: "When I was 10 years old, I would rarely go to school as I was occupied with house chores. My parents also did not think it was important for me as a daughter to go to school. It was Big Sister Muni who came and talked with my parents about how important it is for me to access education. I also joined an after-school club at school which encouraged girls to speak up and have their voices heard. Together we spoke about the need for separate girls' toilets in school too."

"Over the phone, Big Sister Muni taught me about menstrual hygiene. During the lockdown, I was unable to buy sanitary pads. When we were in school, we would get it there but during the lockdown, we were unable to go to school. The pharmacy also went out of stock. Thankfully, my Big Sister came to my home – as she lives in my neighbourhood – and taught me to make homemade sanitary pad which we learned earlier in school. This helped me and my mother to access pad during the height of lockdown. I also received hygiene kits that included useful essentials like, soap, sanitary pads, towel, underwear, nail cutter, toothbrush and toothpaste. Most of my days during lockdown were spent doing house chores and taking care of my nephews. The schools were closed and we are unable to get an education. However, my Big Sister visited me often and helped me with my lessons. With her help I feel I can continue learning at home – although I am looking forward to going back to school too."

Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



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**Find out more:** [www.vsointernational.org/our-work/inclusive-education/system-strengthening/sisters-for-sisters](http://www.vsointernational.org/our-work/inclusive-education/system-strengthening/sisters-for-sisters) | [www.girlseducationchallenge.org](http://www.girlseducationchallenge.org)

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