The GEC ‘Portfolio in Practice’ series consolidates best practice and lessons learned regarding how to drive performance across a complex and diverse portfolio of projects. This knowledge and experience come from the GEC Fund Manager, a team drawn from a consortium of organisations, who manage the GEC portfolio of 41 projects across 17 countries on behalf of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

This series is aimed at individuals and organisations (including Fund Managers, INGOs, donors, foundations and consultants) involved in managing large portfolios. The briefs provide practical guidance on how to set up technical, operational and managerial systems or tools to ensure that a large and diverse set of projects effectively delivers for girls. They also provide reflections on successes, challenges and lessons learned.
Introduction – the challenge of driving gender equality and social inclusion across a diverse portfolio

The Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) aims to improve educational opportunities for the world’s most marginalised girls. It is central to the FCDO International Women and Girls Strategy, which supports ‘the right of every girl everywhere to secure the knowledge and skills she needs to reach her full potential’. The Strategy sets out an ambitious focus on educating girls, empowering girls and women, and ending gender-based violence (the ‘three Es’). The GEC programme clearly contributed to the first of these Es, however, a majority of the 41 GEC projects also had a concerted focus on – and made a significant contribution to – girls’ empowerment and ending gender-based violence, as these are often necessary conditions for marginalised girls to learn to their fullest potential.

In order to achieve these three Es, applying a gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) lens to every element of a project’s approach was imperative. Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. However, in many GEC contexts, educational rights and opportunities for girls are often not equal to boys. Social inclusion refers to the inclusion of those who are excluded from political, economic and societal processes, which prevents their full participation in society. In GEC contexts, social identities such as socio-economic status, rurality, (dis)ability, caste, race, ethnicity and parenting status, both explicitly and tacitly exclude girls from education. Moreover, having multiple and intersecting identities in addition to gender, often leads to greater marginalisation and disadvantage, which was indeed the case for GEC girls.

One of the roles of the Fund Manager (FM) was to support a collective understanding amongst projects that educating girls does not intrinsically lead to greater gender equality or social inclusion, and to develop more comprehensive approaches in order to disrupt power dynamics, social norms and unjust policies or structures that favoured boys over girls or certain social groups over others. This often necessitated interrogating project design to look at the drivers and dynamics behind girls’ exclusion (both from learning opportunities and within learning spaces).

Applying a GESI lens to every element of a project’s approach enabled the GEC programme as a whole to contribute more effectively to education, empowerment and ending violence by asking critical questions as to how activities could champion equality between women/men and girls/boys, and better include those on the margins. Table 1 gives some examples of how applying a GESI lens to project interventions surrounding the three Es helped to achieve these ends.
Table 1: The benefits of applying a GESI lens to interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention as originally planned</th>
<th>Enhanced intervention through application of a GESI lens</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training a cohort of teachers on improved pedagogical practices</td>
<td>Providing inspiring messages to girls about their potential through school-based Girls’ Clubs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adapting teacher training (and coaching) so it includes modules on inclusive pedagogy and gender-responsive pedagogy.</td>
<td>Facilitating Girls’ Clubs and Boys’ Clubs that give children and young people an understanding of the socially constructed nature of gender and the way it impacts the world around us, and the critical skills to deconstruct and safely challenge gendered norms.</td>
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Table 1: The benefits of applying a GESI lens to interventions

Analysing and designing programming to address the complexity of marginalisation is not a straightforward task, and it was clear that across the 41 GEC projects there were differing perspectives, approaches, capacities and levels of understanding of how to address inequalities surrounding girls’ education. As a first step, the FM ensured that all projects undertook nuanced analyses of the complex barriers to girls’ learning and transition, and developed comprehensive strategies to overcome them. Implementing partners also needed to turn the gaze inwards and were supported by the FM to examine how they could make their own cultures, resourcing, data and processes more inclusive and GESI responsive.

These principles formed the basis for the GEC’s GESI Framework, which was a tool to help implementing partners build knowledge, capacity and commitment to address gender inequality and social exclusion through implementing their GEC projects. In addition to the Framework, other areas of work were imperative to ensure that systematic GESI analysis and implementation were achieved. These included:

1. **Clear guidance** on how projects are expected to contribute towards GESI, clear definition and conceptualisation of GESI, and a GESI framework to draw upon and use to evaluate performance.
2. **Cross-portfolio sharing**: Multiple (and inclusive) opportunities for projects to share resources, experiences, successes, challenges and technical support with each other.
3. **Capacity development**: Training partners through bespoke individualised workshops, webinars and regular engagement.
4. **Mainstreaming GESI across the GEC**: Ensuring that all other technical guidance and support promotes inclusive approaches and finds opportunities to contribute towards gender equality.
5. **Reviewing all monitoring and evaluation strategies**, tools and outputs with a GESI lens to ensure visibility of differences between gender and subgroup, and to capture GESI-related change.

This Portfolio in Practice brief elaborates on how the FM developed and employed the GESI Framework, along with its associated tools and procedures, to drive GESI transformative change across the portfolio.
Developing the GESI Framework

Decisions about how to contribute towards GESI outcomes varied across GEC implementing partners and were largely informed by organisational capacities and culture. This led to a diverse and fragmented approach to GESI across the GEC portfolio. Therefore, it was necessary to cement a collective understanding of what GESI good practice looked like, and to establish GESI benchmarks and processes to drive forward gender equality and social inclusion across all projects.

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1. Gaps in capacity

had the resources or time to enable staff to explore and challenge their own values or attitudes towards gender, and, in doing so, build a more GESI-sensitive workforce. Additionally, a broader definition of resourcing invited projects to consider whether their budgets were constraining their ability to be more inclusive. For example, few projects included a sign language interpreter when budgeting for events or trainings, automatically precluding those with hearing difficulties from being involved. Budgeting for manuals, learning products or information, education and communication materials was often restricted to publishing in the national language only, making these inaccessible to many.

2. Accountability: A broader approach to accountability towards girls and their families was needed, together with opportunities to create downward accountability mechanisms with girls and solicit their feedback. Downward accountability was sometimes thought to have been achieved when project teams were engaging with a handful of community leaders, parents or headteachers to ask for their feedback on the project. Instead, the GEC approach to GESI-responsive accountability advocated for a more systematic approach that made targeted efforts to create spaces for the most marginalised girls (and a more representative sample of other stakeholders) to hold the project to account, rather than just to give feedback.

The process of holding a project to account in a meaningful way necessitates a shift in power. Everyone, and especially the girls have sound knowledge of what the project is trying to achieve, feel entitled to assert power over the project team and hold them to account for any failings (in the way that the FM would within processes of upward accountability). This often constitutes a dramatic shift in power dynamics and few projects were able to identify this as a goal and come up with strategies to achieve it. Solid project understanding of the power dynamics within organisations, projects and communities was generally very good, but internalisation of social hierarchies (e.g., a belief that an educated NGO worker from a capital city has better ideas than a rural woman who dropped out of school) sometimes meant that a disruption of power was not prioritised.

Initial tools and approaches centered on GESI Minimum Standards and self-assessments, which raised standards to a level of ‘GESI accommodating’ for a majority of projects (see Figure 1).

However, the FM renewed its approach based on the desire to push the GEC ambition towards a more transformative position and to address a number of on-going capacity gaps noted amongst implementing partners.

Gaps in capacity

1. Resourcing: While there was a Minimum Standard on resourcing from 2017, projects tended to interpret this as having team members with experience in implementing girl-focused projects, rather than thinking about a broader interpretation of resourcing with attention to staff, budgets, time and in-house GESI expertise. In 2020, there were still gaps in project and/or organisational capacity in relation to GESI, with many teams having little experience in strategies such as transformative work with men and boys, or classroom approaches to teaching children with disabilities.

Commitment to staff professional development in this area was very high, but few organisations...
3. **Intersecting exclusion:** The dynamics of exclusion meant that projects did not always see who they had not included. Projects did not always consider the social identities which overlapped and compounded exclusion simultaneously. For example, the barriers faced by adolescent, rural girls living in a poor, conflict zone. If the project only had an emphasis on one group at risk of exclusion, such as girls with disabilities, refugees or domestic workers, it often did an outstanding job of focusing on this and along the way strengthened their expertise in this area. However, it sometimes meant that girls who had multiple characteristics of vulnerability, such as refugees with disabilities, or domestic workers with disabilities, did not receive a sufficiently individualised approach that responded to their personal circumstances.

4. **Contextual analysis:** For a project to succeed, it must be grounded in the context where it is being implemented and must be informed by accurate, ethical and quality data. A significant improvement was seen over the course of the GEC in the way that projects disaggregated data by sex, age and disability. However, they did not always conduct a thorough analysis of vulnerabilities, needs and barriers to participation and learning, or review these on a frequent basis based on girls’ changing circumstances (and increasing age).

These gaps informed the renewed GEC GESI Framework. This Framework included a set of six Domains and Standards that facilitated projects’ assessment of how far their practices contributed towards GESI transformation.

These six areas worked in tandem to lift overall standards and raise GESI-related ambitions. However, clear definitions and ideas of ‘what good GESI practice looks like’ were fundamental to all kinds of technical support provided. The section below takes a deeper dive into how the Framework was developed and what the FM learned about its deployment and potential impact.

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**GESI Framework Domains**

1. **Capacity and culture:**
   The project shows ownership of, understanding of and commitment to GESI, ensuring that their culture and project resource allocations are GESI responsive. For example, Education for Life reviewed their budgeting processes and included provision for a sign language interpreter in all of their national dissemination events.

2. **Programming and interventions:**
   The needs, views and lived experiences of girls drive the design, implementation and results of GEC projects. For example, CARE used frequent external evaluations, tools which check how faithfully an activity is being implemented compared to the original intention and adolescent-friendly storytelling-based qualitative methodologies, in order to review their project design at frequent intervals. This led to multiple adaptations over the lifetime of both the GEC projects they implemented, from the provision of water during times of drought, to greater support to teachers with positive discipline skills.

3. **Monitoring, evaluation and learning:**
   The project has GESI-responsive data, data collection and feedback systems. For example, AKF identified that space could be created within their monitoring, evaluation and learning strategy for more open, flexible and unstructured engagement with girls, in addition to soliciting answers to specific questions.

4. **Risk management and accountability:**
   The project demonstrates transparency and accountability to those we work with through GESI-responsive practices and programming. For example, Street Child Nepal’s strong community engagement processes identified risks around having insufficient team members from the ethnically marginalised Muhasar community and recruited new colleagues accordingly, allowing for improved interactions and for female Muhasar staff to be seen as role models by girls and their families.

5. **Partnership and participation:**
   The project actively partners with GESI-transformational organisations and promotes active and meaningful participation of girls and stakeholders from excluded social groups. For example, WUSC Kenya identified that they could be explicit in seeking partnerships with local organisations for people with disabilities and women’s rights organisations and committed to raising this within a wider ongoing organisation conversation about decolonisation.

6. **Influencing and sustainability:**
   The project is working towards transformative and sustainable change in gender equality and social inclusion including at the individual, household, community and societal levels.
Applying the GESI Framework

There were several steps that the FM facilitated with projects to support engagement with and action against these Domains. These included:

**Step One: Identify gaps and priority areas to strengthen**

The first step was to assess which Domain/s a project needs to focus on to strengthen their GESI approach. To facilitate this process the Domains Tool (below) starts with six critical questions related to each Domain. This starts the initial conversation with the project team, and GESI technical specialists (both from the project and the FM) and helps them to identify key priority areas. For a particular gap/area to strengthen.

### GESI Domains Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six critical questions for GEC projects</th>
<th>Relevant GESI Domains</th>
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| 1. Does the project have sufficient resources to be able to contribute towards improved gender equality and social inclusion? Is the project able to convert these resources into GESI-responsive practices? | 1. Culture and capacity: Project shows ownership of, understanding of and commitment to GESI, ensuring that their culture and project resource allocations are GESI responsive.  
1.1 Capacity: Project is adequately resourced to be GESI sensitive and has staff, partners and contractors with appropriate gender equality and social inclusion expertise.  
1.2 Culture: Project demonstrably seeks to build more GESI-responsive organisational cultures. |
| 2. How well has the project planned activities that will contribute towards improved gender equality and social inclusion? How likely is it that these activities will transform inequitable relations and structures? | 2. GESI-responsive programming: The changing needs, views and lived experiences of girls drive the design, implementation, adaptation and results of GEC projects.  
2.1 Analysis: A progressive gender and social inclusion analysis of the context is conducted and used to inform all aspects of the project cycle.  
2.2 Implementation: Project has strategies in place aimed at the transformation of unequal structures, institutions and norms at the school and community level.  
2.3 Empowerment: Project applies a critical and thoughtful approach to activities that make claims around girls’ empowerment. |
| 3. How strong are the processes through which the project knows whether it is making contributions towards improved gender equality and social inclusion? | 3. Project has GESI-responsive monitoring and evaluation and learning systems. |
| 4. How effectively is the project accountable to girls and women, particularly those from excluded social groups? | 4. Risk management and accountability: Project demonstrates transparency and accountability to those we work with through GESI-responsive practices and programming.  
4.1 Risk management: Do No Harm and other risk management is informed by a GESI lens.  
4.2 Accountability: Project is accountable to women, girls and those from excluded social groups they work with, as a necessary and central part of all programming. |
| 5. To what extent are girls and women, particularly those from excluded social groups, central to the project structure, partnerships and decision-making processes? | 5. Partnerships and participation: Project actively partners with GESI transformational organisations and promotes active and meaningful participation of girls and stakeholders from excluded social groups.  
5.1 Partnerships: Project seeks to partner with organisations representative of the most marginalised groups with which they work, and work with partners in a way that shifts power away from dominant organisations and towards excluded social groups.  
5.2 Participation: Project meaningfully engages girls in all aspects of the programme, amplifies and listens to their voices, and includes them in decision-making processes that affect their lives. |
| 6. Is the influencing work carried out by the project likely to lead to a positive change in the unequal structures and relations that sustain gender inequality and other exclusions? | 6. Influencing and sustainability: Project is working towards transformative and sustainable change in gender equality and social inclusion including at the individual, household, community and societal levels. |
Step Two: Conduct in-depth analysis

Once areas to strengthen were identified (this could be one or two Domains at a time), the next step was to do a more in-depth analysis of each domain. The process of doing this should be consultative and collaborative. Each Domain area includes good, better and best exemplars (See Figure 2) and the purpose of the bullet points (which are not exhaustive) is to facilitate critical and reflective discussion. Teams can discuss whether current practice falls under good, better or best and where the gaps may be.

Whilst one person may lead a workshop, (e.g., GESI Expert or Project Manager), this analysis works best when other team members, including those from downstream partner organisations, also participate. Evidence and learning on GESI needs to be collected to show what is working well and what are some of the challenges in relation to the chosen Domain(s). Then, as each Domain is discussed, the team can bring in project evidence to inform the discussion. Through discussion and analysis, projects can reflect on what is working well, and not working well, and list the evidence from the project that informs where the project is currently placed ‘good’, ‘better’ or ‘best’. The team can also identify areas which are not working well.

Step Three: Develop a GESI Action Plan

Once the analysis is complete, the team completes the Action Plan. This includes outlining actions for improvement and the timeframe for actions. This is completed for each Domain analysed.

Step Four: Critical friend discussion and action planning with the FM

The project then shares their reflections and actions with the FM GESI Adviser who acts as a ‘critical friend’ and discusses and moderates how the project assessed themselves against the Domains. Actions will then be tracked by the project and the FM agrees at what points to check in with monitoring. Where there are significant gaps or any serious concerns, the FM is more extensively involved in monitoring processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of attainment</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Better</th>
<th>Best</th>
<th>Examples of evidence</th>
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| Examples of what would constitute practice at each level | • All staff across the project have basic conceptual understanding of the social model of disability  
• All staff across project have basic conceptual understanding of gender  
• All staff across the project can list how different girls with whom they work are differently impacted by identity-based, social and geographical oppression | • Project has policies aimed at dismantling constraints on those excluded from groups joining staff and this is reflected in the make-up of the team  
• Every discussion around progress and adaptations considers the different impact on different individuals but also on approaches that tackle the structural causes of inequality  
• Influencing and advocacy strategies across project are based on solidarity with those from marginalised subgroups and actively works to support their voices being heard  
• Those with GESI-dedicated roles have senior-level influence and routinely input into direction of programming | • Senior management structures across the project include representation at the leadership level of women and girls from subgroups with which they work, as well as champions responsible for continuously advocating for equality  
• Decisions are made using wholly participatory model in which girls genuinely influence the project direction  
• Influencing and advocacy strategies across the project creates non-tokenistic processes where girls lead the agenda and represent themselves  
• Project’s organisational culture creates space for staff to routinely and self-critically discuss issues around sexism, ableism, racism, historical and current oppression including colonialism, the organisation’s role in perpetuating such structures etc | • Discussions with a diverse range of staff  
• Analysis of disaggregation of GESI representatives or GESI or education champions, as appropriate  
• Discussions with GESI-dedicated staff  
• Extracts from HR policies relating to the support given to staff  
• Minutes from reflection and team meetings  
• Advocacy/ influencing strategy |

Table 2: Exemplars of ‘good’, ‘better’, ‘best’ for each Domain
Additional complementary strategies for improved approaches to GESI

The implementation of the GESI Framework can be made more effective by deploying additional strategies.

**Cross-portfolio sharing**

Cross-portfolio sharing allowed for multiple (and inclusive) opportunities for projects to share resources, experiences, successes, challenges and technical support with each other. This created a positive space of solidarity and collegiality amongst projects facing very similar challenges, particularly in times of crisis. Sharing opportunities such as webinars, or in-country events allowed practitioners to bounce ideas around, suggest solutions to others’ problems, and make professional connections that they could pursue outside of the GEC in order to improve their wider programming and coordination work.

**Applying a GESI lens to projects’ life skills components during the COVID-19 pandemic**

In May 2020, the FM held a webinar on ‘Life skills in emergencies and Girls’ Clubs’ for all projects and FM staff which aimed to help projects understand the importance of providing life skills opportunities during a crisis. It recommended adapting content to be more relevant and increasing access for all girls (especially the most marginalised) to attend life skills classes. Lessons from the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone were shared, and the four tenets of the GEC Girls’ Club Framework (participation, facilitation, content and monitoring) were reshared. The webinar also helped projects to identify GESI-related risks to relying on media and technology as a way of imparting life skills. This was critical to cautioning projects against implementing tech-heavy solutions during the pandemic that might prove inaccessible to some.

**Capacity development**

The FM also provided capacity development to implementing partners through bespoke individualised workshops, webinars and regular engagement. This was also a critical part of any monitoring assignment, with time factored in towards the end of a trip for the project team and technical advisor to workshop solutions to identified problems, and to expose the wider project team to new ways of thinking or doing.

**Strengthening the capacity of Girls’ Clubs’ mentors**

In 2019, FM monitoring of a multi-country GEC project found that members of some Girls’ Clubs were receiving gender-exploitative messaging that reinforced harmful gender norms. The project’s intention was to create safe spaces for girls to come together to discuss issues, boost each other’s self-esteem and learn about sexual and reproductive health issues. However, in the absence of specific facilitation instruction, mentors and teachers were sometimes using the space to pass on their own beliefs around gender roles and expectations, some of which reinforced discriminatory ideas.

FM and project colleagues realised that mentors needed more training and structured content that they could use within the club setting. A capacity building plan was rolled out to all mentors which dramatically reduced the risk of girls being exposed to inappropriate ideas or values. By the end of the project, the clubs had become one of the most successful components. The high-quality content was absorbed into schools’ curricula and disseminated in other ways (via media platforms for example). Many schools have continued the clubs and mentors are still expanding their own GESI expertise.

“Cross-portfolio sharing allowed for multiple (and inclusive) opportunities for projects to share resources, experiences, successes, challenges and technical support with each other.”
Mainstreaming GESI across the GEC

Capacity development amongst FM team members was also imperative, which was part of a broader effort to mainstream GESI across the GEC. All technical guidance and support now promotes inclusive approaches and finds opportunities to contribute towards gender equality, whether in the area of safeguarding, teaching and learning, finance and operations, risk management, or MEL.

Mainstreaming GESI into teaching and learning technical support

Strategies were introduced to ensure that GESI was considered within all components of a project, rather than being associated with particular activities. All projects had an explicit approach to teaching and learning and received technical support from the FM to review and strengthen this. In this way, projects could contribute towards GESI and the FM could improve practice overall. All iterations of the Teaching and Learning Framework included GESI-related objectives and question such as:

- Which teachers are we selecting for professional development and who is excluded from this (and what can we do about this)?
- How can we help teachers with competencies relating to teaching children with disabilities?
- How can we integrate principals of gender-responsive pedagogy into teacher training and coaching content?
- Which languages of instruction are we using within remedial or catch-up classes and are these appropriate and inclusive?
- Which images have we chosen within the content we produce? How are we representing girls and boys, women and men, and particular groups?

Even projects with high capacity and a strong track record on teaching and learning were able to identify GESI-related gaps in their practice and make adjustments.

Integrating GESI into MEL approaches

Finally, in order to ensure a holistic approach to GESI was had, the FM reviewed all projects’ monitoring, evaluation and learning strategies, tools and outputs with a GESI lens to ensure visibility of differences between gender and subgroup, and to capture GESI-related change.

Applying a GESI lens to monitoring, evaluation and learning

The Making Ghanaian Girls Great! Midline Evaluation revealed that certain groups of girls were achieving significantly lower learning outcomes than other girls, particularly young mothers, girls from certain minority linguistic groups and those with disabilities. These inequalities were only made visible because the project had collected data disaggregated by subgroup, and had used appropriate tools such as the Washington Group set of questions in order to do so. The project adapted their approach to ensure that they specifically reached these girls through interventions. These included using language assistants, cash transfers, partnering with District Education Offices and their Special Needs Officers, supporting young mothers in income generation activities, and increasing the emphasis on inclusion and disability for community, teachers and District Education Officers. During COVID-19, the project provided additional support to these girls to ensure that their learning continued and they could return to school when schools reopened. Further monitoring showed that these interventions had a positive result across learning, transition and other outcomes.
The impact of a holistic GESI approach across the portfolio

The FM analysed the projects’ use of the Framework, their changing confidence in GESI integration, and their project adaptations related to GESI. Overall, it found that the use of the GESI Framework encouraged processes of self-reflection, critical thinking and an adaptive approach to intervention design and implementation. Projects’ confidence level in their GESI approaches generally increased with time.

1. Improvements in organisations’ GESI policies and practices: Programme feedback showed that, as a result of the GEC GESI approach and Framework, some organisations integrated GESI-transformative approaches across their organisations beyond the GEC. There are many examples of organisations applying the GESI Framework, or an adapted framework throughout programme design and implementation, and using the Framework to help inform GESI-responsive institutional practices, policies, operations and accountability mechanisms. In some instances, organisations even influenced the practices of external partners.

Improving access to data on vulnerable girls in Ghana

The STAGE project, led by World Education in Ghana, faced a challenge at the start in identifying the girls who would need support. This was particularly true for girls with disabilities who were often not ‘visible’ or included in social gatherings. The FM provided support in the form of tailored technical advice and the provision of tools and frameworks designed to improve understanding of marginalisation and intersectionality. As a result, the project developed a comprehensive mapping tool for the identification of marginalised girls. They carried out detailed mapping and validation to look at different categories of vulnerability and marginalisation to ensure they were reaching the girls who most needed support. This comprehensive tool reflects an advancement in data collection for a targeted programme for marginalised girls in extremely poor settings. It is a tool that enables a project to coordinate policy and implementation very strongly among key actors. This tool is now used by the Complementary Education Agency and the Education Outcomes Fund (EOF) team.

“Improving monitoring and analysis by subgroup in Zimbabwe

The GEC’s strong focus on GESI prompted the SAGE project, led by Plan International in Zimbabwe, to disaggregate all data by seven subgroups. This involved in-country gender advisors and the support of technical staff across partner organisations. Disaggregated data was shared with FM advisors and used as a basis for conversations about which groups of girls were seeing the greatest – and least – positive change in their lives, and what the project could do about this. The SAGE team grew more confident in using data on a frequent basis to check progress, resulting in quick action being taken when issues were identified, such as a particular group having high absenteeism.

“It has driven us to build tools and databases which can facilitate this and meant we always examine project progress in terms of ‘which sub-group is doing well?’. But more importantly, which group is not doing as well, and what do we need to do for them. It was very helpful working with the GESI Advisor last year in consolidating learning on GESI. [This] really helped the team to reflect on practice across a number of thematic areas, consolidate learning and identify further activities into a coherent approach.” SAGE team member, Zimbabwe

Tensions could arise between the constraints of a finite budget and ambitions to take a more GESI-responsive approach to budgeting, but conversations between the FM and projects often identified small changes that could be made within existing budgets (such as choosing a cheaper location for an event in order to be able to cover transport costs of those who could not afford to come), or more substantive structural issues that project teams could discuss with senior management and shift their own organisational cultures.

2. Improvements in projects’ understanding and practice: Projects became more reflective, more open to self-criticism and more open to exploration of gaps in their GESI approaches. Projects also grew in confidence in their monitoring systems and increased the capacity of staff to really understand the barriers the girls face, how best to address them, as well as to really listen to girls’ experiences, wants and needs. Projects started to systematise the use of evidence and grew in their confidence to analyse data effectively to inform project design and GESI approaches. Projects demonstrated increased ability to make appropriate adaptations to their GESI approaches, with enhanced agility, flexibility and capacity to improve and adjust.

“Overall, [the FM] found that the use of the GESI Framework encouraged processes of self-reflection, critical thinking and an adaptive approach to intervention design and implementation.”

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3. **Willingness to engage in work that challenges the root causes of exclusion and inequality:** A deeper understanding of what gender transformation means has led projects to challenge the root causes of vulnerability that perpetuate gender inequality and social exclusion, such as restrictive socio-cultural norms, unequal power relations and disempowering systems and structures. For example, through this work, the GEC has had conversations with projects about feminism, particularly the promotion of a particular westernised feminism that pays inadequate attention to intersectionality. Feminist principles of non-hierarchy, collaboration, participation, diversity and inclusion permeate this Framework and guidance. Projects now recognise, understand and measure how barriers intersect to create different experiences of privilege, vulnerability and/or marginalisation.

**Adapting the male mentor scheme in Kenya**

One example of this richer understanding was seen within the Expanding Inclusive Education Strategies for Girls with Disabilities Kenya project, led by Leonard Cheshire, in both their work with male mentors and their advocacy for the rights of girls with disabilities. The male mentor scheme was set up based on analysis of the patriarchal communities within which the project was working: men had more authority than women and the project believed that their advocacy would be more impactful if it involved men. The FM worked with Leonard Cheshire to understand whether support to male mentors was actually reinforcing ideas about men being above women on the gender hierarchy, leaving women out, and missing opportunities for more positive engagement with men and boys. The project had very strong expertise in disability, but less experience in thinking about disability, intersectionality and gender.

The use of FM tools and deployment of FM expertise via monitoring visits and conversations built on trust and respect, allowed for the interrogation of assumptions and values. This process of critically analysing their GESI approaches led to the adaptation of the male mentorship scheme so that it included women who were supported to become advocates and leaders in the community. It also gave male mentors guidance and training on how to explore masculinities with other men and promote behaviours such as: stepping away from power; explicitly inviting women into processes and decision-making forums; modelling masculinities associated with caring, parenting, discussion and emotion; and advocating on behalf of girls from a rights-based perspective rather than appealing to men’s sense of themselves as the decision-maker or power-holder.

4. **Promotion of local ownership of GESI:** The GEC’s approach towards promoting GESI involved endorsing culturally appropriate and locally driven initiatives. Projects found that engaging local community groups, local women and feminist organisations, and organisations of people with disabilities was critical to ensuring marginalised groups were engaged and represented. With a deeper approach to GESI interventions, many projects created partnerships that recognised the importance of the contextual knowledge and connections that these organisations and their staff could provide. These organisations can often address social attitudes and norm changes in a longer-term way. For example, Street Child Nepal’s partnership with the Janaki Women Awareness Society was critical in allowing for deep understanding of and connections with the excluded Muhasar community to be built. Similarly, partnerships between INGOs and women’s rights organisations in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Somaliland resulted in better outcomes for girls than consortia without this kind of deep, local knowledge and experience. FM technical support on GESI was able to trickle down to these local partners, and sometimes prompted even highly GESI-focused organisations to rethink and strengthen their approaches.

**Trickle-down impacts on local organisations**

It is often assumed that women’s rights organisations are some of the strongest in terms of capacity around programming for GESI. However, some of these organisations have said that involvement in the GEC has challenged them further in this area. One women’s rights organisation noted that they had realised the importance of having a GESI-specific person involved in every decision so that they could be completely sure that a GESI lens would be taken. Others said that the GEC’s focus on disability had greatly enhanced their impact in this area.

“We got to learn and we got to grow as well, learning from these other organisations too. Being able to make an impact in the lives of children with disability who have been hidden in these Apostolic communities for many years. And for them to be able to come out, for parents to actually say we do have children with disability that we have. We’ve had children with disabilities in these homes for a long time, but they’ve been hiding. For us it was something that was incredible.” Head of Programmes, AWET

This was echoed by the feminist organisation Sauti ya Wanawake in Kenya, who noted that the GEC’s GESI focus had pushed them to think more deeply about the gendered nature of the opportunities that they were giving girls and women, and rewriting their ideas on what kinds of livelihoods they could encourage girls to go into. The team began to gently challenge girls, their families and vocational training centres on why girls always chose tailoring or hairdressing rather than mechanics, carpentry or electrician courses (which also tend to be higher-income vocations). These conversations resulted in girls having greater choice, opting for more diverse courses, and blazing a trail for other young women.
5. **Using evidence to inform GESI adaptations:**
   Systematising the use of evidence and data to inform GESI programme design and adaptations has helped projects move towards transformative programming. It is also important that evidence looks at intersectional factors. The use of the Washington Group questions, along with project monitoring guided by the GESI Framework, provided evidence to highlight the intersectional nature of the lived experience of girls with disabilities. Projects found that a girl with a disability is likely to face barriers to education based on multiple identities rather than just her impairment status. For example, the relatively higher levels of girls reporting difficulties with remembering and concentrating generated some interesting discussions amongst some GEC projects.

   In projects working in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, there were often high prevalence rates of girls reporting difficulties with remembering and concentrating and levels of anxiety and depression. This is likely to be related to girls' experience of psychosocial challenges, trauma and food insecurity which impact their health and wellbeing. The effects of these difficulties can significantly impact educational outcomes. Visibility of these issues prompted GEC projects in Somalia to introduce psychosocial components into their programming and to take a more focused approach to girls' mental health.

6. **Supporting girls to shape their own narrative:**
   Projects have moved away more from extractive approaches to monitoring which simply takes information out of communities and have moved more towards supporting girls to shape their own narrative. For example, the Girls' Access to Education (GATE) project, led by Plan International in Sierra Leone, used girl-led monitoring to amplify marginalised voices and piloted more empowering ways of monitoring. This recognised the importance of not just listening to girls' views and aspirations, but also engaging them in decision-making and working with them as partners.

7. **Increased capacity to respond to crises:**
   Projects who were strong in their GESI-related understanding of girls and their context, and strong in their response to GESI-related barriers, were able to respond more effectively to girls' needs during crises, such as COVID-19, or natural disasters. For example, the Education for Life project in Kenya, led by Action Aid, had taken a highly individualised and girl-responsive approach from the start. An ambition to know each girl, her situation and her aspirations had been fulfilled via frequent and deep engagement with girls from teachers and mentors as well as multiple opportunities for qualitative monitoring. The project established and maintained databases of girls' contact information prior to the pandemic and were therefore able to reach and support more girls more quickly. The project was able to make contact with its entire cohort within days of national lockdown being announced and made plans for mentors to call or visit girls on a regular basis. A key lesson was that establishing fit-for-purpose contact systems, no matter the size of the project, is critical in maintaining the impact of interventions during crises.

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**The GESI Framework and COVID-19**

During COVID-19, GESI analysis, guided by the Domains in the Framework, identified that girls' vulnerability to gender-based violence had increased. This was due to the removal of school as a potential safe space and greater incentives for parents to address their escalating financial worries by arranging marriages or sending girls away to work. The IGATE project, led by World Vision in Zimbabwe, found that the networks of support they had established in communities to support survivors of gender-based violence were effective in dealing with increased incidences of abuse during COVID-19 and had the potential to be scaled up. Another related concern was the mental health of girls. They were often experiencing severe stress caused by reduced social contacts (e.g., from meeting friends within catch-up centres) and increased unpaid caring and household work. When these constraints were investigated, they were found to be highly gendered and were having different impacts on different sub-groups. The FM responded to these complex and connected issues via intensified GESI-specific technical support in developing adaptations in the form of response plans in the form of regular conversations, webinars and targeted support (such as online workshops) where needed.
A value for money (VfM) analysis of the GESI Framework should not only consider the costs required to develop and implement it, but also the degree to which the Framework was used and its effectiveness. This can be gauged through its impact (as explored above). Locating costs in relation to tangible and intangible results gives a more comprehensive analysis of the value of the Framework, both to individual projects and across the portfolio. It is also worth noting that ‘equity’ is one of the 4Es within FCDO’s understanding of VfM, and as such the FM’s attention to GESI was critical to overall programme VfM in encouraging projects to unpack who would benefit from the cost incurred and whether everyone in the target population can benefit equally without additional support. VfM questions around how fairly are the benefits distributed, and to what extent will we reach marginalised groups? were fundamental to the FM’s GESI approach, and allowed projects to have budget discussions that considered the complexity of balancing the 4Es.

With regard to costs, the FM invested staff time to develop the Framework and accompanying tools and guidance, including revisions based on user feedback, to maximise its relevance and effectiveness. This investment equates to the full-time equivalent of 15 days for a senior technical adviser. This represents a one-off cost that can be amortised when spread over the 41 projects in the portfolio, and the number of years it is used. The Framework’s flexible design increased its usefulness by ensuring a proportionate and pragmatic application rather than a one-size-fits-all approach across the portfolio. This fixed development cost will reap further returns to the investment by projects and others using the Framework and tools as open-source materials for their own purposes, noting that there will be some costs for tailoring them.

There were also costs associated with embedding the GESI Framework within projects – set up costs and recurrent costs. These costs were incurred by the FM and projects. The initial set up comprised of FM and project staff time to conduct and attend online workshops and briefings to understand and embed the GESI framework in project thinking and operations (a one-off cost of approximately three days of FM time). In addition, the FM invested an average of five days annually per project to monitor and support implementation, which entailed a technical adviser having ‘critical friend’ discussions during the Review and Adaptation process, twice a year. When/if targeted in-person support was required, time and travel was strategically shared with other aims for the project visit, such as FM monitoring and/or implementation of other FM tools (like the Teaching and Learning Self-Assessment Tool). Hence, the FM was able to reap great efficiencies by avoiding duplication of resources and making use of existing planned trips and workshops.

Projects also incurred set up costs as well as recurrent costs to implement the Framework. These costs varied by project and were dependent on: 1) the number of core-project staff spending time in the introductory workshop, and 2) the number of staff involved in conducting their self-assessment and critical friend discussions with the FM twice a year (some projects also utilised the Framework at other points, in addition to those required by the FM). Overall, the total costs incurred by the FM to implement the GESI Framework across a portfolio of 41 projects was the full-time equivalent of 205 days for a senior technical adviser (this full-time equivalent was often divided by three or four different advisers). This is less than 3.75% of the annual FM expenditure of roughly £4.1 million that year. To put this into perspective, the average spend on monitoring and evaluation is 13.7% of the total FM expenditure. Therefore, the relatively low cost of the GESI Framework’s implementation, paired with efficient delivery and the significant effects on projects’ GESI results, makes the Framework very good value for money.

“We The Framework’s flexible design increased its usefulness by ensuring a proportionate and pragmatic application rather than a one-size-fits-all approach across the portfolio.”

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2 We have not provided actual costs as these will vary over time and context. Fund managers and projects should use the number of days provided and type of staff specified to calculate their own relevant costs.

3 This relatively high percentage for Fund Manager monitoring and evaluation reflects the resource-intensive, experimental and quasi-experimental designs used for project evaluations across the portfolio. Source: GEC Fund Management financial data FY 20-21.
How to make the GESI Framework work for you

The GESI framework is versatile and can be customised to suit different groups and contexts. It is especially pertinent for organisations or individuals overseeing a portfolio of projects. While it has been developed for use throughout project implementation, it can also be useful at the design stage to help teams think through GESI issues and approaches. Below are recommendations for those who are interested in adapting the GESI framework for their own use:

1. **Ensure input into project resourcing decisions**: The FM provided input to key resourcing decisions in the procurement stage of the projects. However, this could have been expanded into the area of GESI, with appropriate levels of GESI capacity in place. If every project were required to have a senior-level GESI advisor, the GESI Framework could have been even more effectively deployed, and greater strides towards more ambitious, transformative work taken. GESI staff members should be senior members of staff. There was a risk that the GESI advice would not be heeded if it came from a more junior member of staff. Such advisors often felt disempowered to make the required changes and depended upon FM colleagues to reinforce concerns or make suggestions.

2. **Ensure buy-in from all implementing partners at all levels**: Gaining buy-in at the institutional level of implementing partners and downstream partners, including from senior level management, is vital. As part of this Framework, organisations look at their own individual and organisational identity, including the uncovering of any biases that may affect work with marginalised girls and women. It is also important for any fund manager to look at their own policies and practices, regarding gender equality and inclusion and to document possible strategies to improve these. The FM for example developed a Race and Power Working Group which discussed issues relating to equality and inclusion.

3. **The GESI Framework and Action Plan process should create a space for open and reflective discussion**: The GESI Framework should not seek to establish whether projects are doing the ‘right’ or the ‘wrong’ things. Instead, it should encourage a reflective conversation around whether things are on the right track – and the basis (or evidence) for this. Creating the space and time for these open, reflective and honest technical discussions is what is important and valuable. If the framework and action planning process is not facilitating constructive dialogue, the fund or portfolio manager should be open to adapting or simplifying the tools as needed. In addition, the fund/portfolio manager should establish a respectful relationship with projects in order to be a productive and helpful ‘critical friend’. Establishing a mutually respectful relationship will allow for more in-depth discussion and constructive criticism between the ‘critical friend’ and the project staff.

4. **Promote a shared understanding of ‘what good looks like’**: It is important that implementing partners and their downstream partners have a common understanding of what GESI means, and how to move towards GESI transformation. Some projects fed back that it can be difficult to gauge how well they are doing in an area if they do not know ‘what good looks like’. By providing exemplars of good, better and best, projects could identify practical ways in which they could improve domains such as organisational cultures, monitoring systems and implementation of activities. This matters because implementation of a girls’ education project does not inherently lead to GESI outcomes: this depends on how projects implement activities. The Framework aimed to illustrate best practices and aimed to help projects to better think through their own opportunities for improvement.

5. **Remain versatile and flexible**: The process changed from providing a list of mandated Standards that each project had to focus on, to allowing more flexibility for projects to focus on Domains most relevant to them. The GEC Framework is now used as a resource to identify gaps, and to develop and drive forward GESI Action Plans. In some cases, the Domains facilitated an in-depth workshop, and in others, a lighter-touch process was used focusing on the one or two Domains most relevant at that time. Projects can also use it to test underlying GESI assumptions and to make adaptations based on monitoring. It was also important that the FM had processes in place which allowed projects to make these adaptations based on evidence coming out of monitoring, evaluations, and the GESI Framework Analysis.

6. **Recognise context sensitivity**: Organisations need to ground GESI in their specific contexts, while still following fundamental principles set by international instruments and commitments to human and women’s rights. The FM worked to set up a framework and guidance that was broad enough to allow each organisation to apply these in their context. Although an understanding of global or regional trends may provide guidance, it is vitally important to understand local norms and to incorporate that understanding into all projects. Recognising the power dynamics and marginalisation patterns at the local level is crucial to eliminating obstacles to inclusion, preventing unintended negative consequences, and creating opportunities for inclusion in projects.
7. Understand that progress towards GESI is a process: Working towards being GESI transformative has no end point, but is a process carried out in different ways by different types of organisations. It required that the FM and the projects constantly questioned and challenged the usual methods of working and ways of thinking, with a focus on learning from what worked and what did not. This process can also be uneven, with staff changeover or shifts in organisational priorities affecting how consistently progress is able to be achieved. Additionally, as understanding of GESI concepts and consequently organisations’ own insight and practices have continued to strengthen over the past five years, organisations are judging themselves more harshly. This meant that at times it seemed as if scores or ratings had reduced, when capacity and understanding had actually increased.

8. Support implementation of the framework through monitoring: Occasionally, FM staff would uncover GESI-related issues through monitoring that were not uncovered through the use of the GESI framework. This sometimes occurred when the FM visited project schools and communities, where GESI-related gaps were identified that had not surfaced in discussions with project staff. A key example is related to the targeted work that the FM conducted on Girls’ Clubs. Projects often stated that their Girls’ Clubs were the site of some of their most GESI-transformative work: places where gender norms were challenged and girls’ needs were responded to. However, monitoring visits by different FM GESI advisers identified that very similar GESI-related gaps were being seen time and time again. Club facilitators were reproducing gendered stereotypes and ideologies, girls were being given too great a burden to change attitudes themselves, and girls from different subgroups were being left out. This disconnect is important because it points us to the importance of triangulation via monitoring assignments and also points to the complexity of implementing transformative programming.

9. Align with other safeguarding and other internal processes and guidance: To improve efficiency and avoid duplication, the GESI Framework should be closely integrated and aligned with all other operational and technical processes. Most importantly, all GESI work needs to be done in line with safeguarding standards and guidelines, policies and practices. All projects must be able to demonstrate that they have strong safeguarding, child protection and gender-based violence awareness and capacity in place. This link needs to be made even more closely when projects work with children or adults who are more likely to be at risk of violence, abuse or exploitation: adults at risk, or adults and children who experience oppression based on identity, social or geographical determinants. In addition to this, the GESI Framework’s format and processes were aligned with the Teaching and Learning Self-Assessment Tool for ease and efficient use by projects and the FM.

10. Provide opportunities for projects to learn from each other: Regular learning interactions were facilitated by the GEC. These were done through webinars, in-country or regional meetings and cross-project meetings and addressed GESI and safeguarding gaps and promising practice. These learning opportunities were based on practical analysis and done through facilitated discussion and cross-project sharing of experience. Projects found these particularly helpful.