Feminist organisations and girls' education: harnessing the power of women's rights organisations to support educational outcomes for girls

A think piece from the Girls' Education Challenge on the role of women's rights organisations (WROs) in creating enabling environments for girls' education and addressing harmful gender norms. Based on the engagement of WROs within the work of the GEC, we consider the constraints they faced and how they were overcome, their impact on education, and the 'factors for success' that can enable them to deliver unparalleled change.

Introduction

The global focus on gender equality within education has prompted a welcome expansion of interest in identifying existing gender expertise and forging links with diverse allies. The recently published FCDO International Women and Girls Strategy 2023 to 2030 and its recognition of women's rights organisations (WROs) as critical partners in this space exemplify the increasing focus on WROs' role in tackling inequality.

There is ample qualitative evidence[1] that WROs are key in driving progressive change across different dimensions of gender equality and strong quantitative evidence, particularly their role in certain dimensions, such as violence against women and girls.[2] This think piece explores why and how WROs involved in a large girls' education programme were able to contribute to positive **educational** outcomes for girls and reflects on the implications of this.

Research conducted for this think piece identifies an important role for WROs in contributing to expanded capabilities and educational outcomes for marginalised girls in low-income contexts. The experiences of projects delivered by WROs within the largest girls' education programme in the world – the FCDO-funded Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) – are used to explore the role of WROs in education more broadly. When the GEC was first launched in 2012, the potential of civil society organisations, including local WROs, in education and development was less well recognised than it is today. Several consortia implementing the GEC involved WROs as partners and, therefore, have valuable lessons to share regarding the value they added. The think piece determines that supporting WROs in their work around education is critical and that they play a unique role in transforming the social norms around gender and education, which underpin many of the constraints girls and young women face. It explores 'what works' when feminist partners are engaged and also looks at what partners learned from being involved in this large and centrally funded programme. Findings are shared in the spirit of prompting questions about the role of women's rights organisations within education and how both non-state actors and ministries of education can better include them.

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[1] The Equal Measures 2030 Report on Strengthening Girls' Education in Emergencies with WROs (Ahidjo 2022) contains examples of some of this evidence. Available at: https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GAC-policy-report-spread-pages-English.pdf

[2] The WOW report on 'what works to promote women's empowerment' (Hearle 2023) finds WROs as impactful in this area. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1149167/WOW_What_works_to_promote_women_s_economic_empowerment_Feb_2023.pdf. With regard to impact on violence, a large-scale quantitative study based on data from over four decades in 70 countries found that autonomous women's movements are the single most significant factor in influencing progressive policy on violence against women. Their influence surpasses that of having more women in the legislature, progressive political parties in power or improvements in national wealth (Htun and Weldon 2012).

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What do we mean by feminist partnerships?

This paper uses the word 'feminist' to refer to individuals and groups working within women's movements or as part of other social or community movements to advocate for the equality, rights, safety and justice of girls, women. As a result, a feminist partnership would need to involve at least one group which met this definition, but also one which actively emphasised feminist principles in its work: non-hierarchy, collectivity, participation, diversity and inclusion. This paper also recognises the plurality of feminisms and in particular the right of feminists to define meaning and usage of this word for themselves, rejecting any exclusionary usage of the word. The recently published FCDO International Women and Girls Strategy 2023 to 2030 also names WROs as central to FCDO's ambition, arguing that 'grassroots women's rights organisations (WROs) and movements offer on the-ground expertise and the ability to tackle the toughest issues'. Both terms, 'feminist organisations' and WROs will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

What the term feminism means to GEC women's rights advocates

"In a layman's language when you say locally here, 'you are a feminist', means they just say 'Ay! those are things for women!'. But as an organisation, although we have not boldly written down feminism, we use feminist approaches. And we are a feminist organisation. Some of us think we are very extremist! When it comes to girls and women, we really stand up for them. And also, looking at it in terms of gender equality, not necessarily just for women, but also to advocate for gender equality in all aspects."
Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Sauti ya Wanawake

"Feminism for us, is equal opportunity for women and girls, as the men and boys are getting in the society. Slowly [people in Nepal] are taking and owning this word, and I hope this will make our environment easier for us as an organisation, for those of us working in the women's empowerment sector. Feminism is now becoming a common word."
Programme Manager, Janaki Women's Awareness Society (JWAS)

"It's all about having equal opportunities and having equal rights. And when we are respecting our diverse experiences as women, our knowledge and different strengths and identities, fighting for equality as women, it's what we call feminism. But with us as AWET, we would not mind being termed as a feminist organisation or women-led organisation, CSO or an FBO. As long as the impact we're making in the communities is being seen, it's the most important thing for us. Because the name in itself cannot do much. But the impact of the work that we're doing would then have to speak for itself. So we are for equal opportunities, we are for equal rights, we are for strengthening the movements, the women's movement, we are for all that. But most importantly, our main goal is to ensure that women are empowered and women's voices are heard and the girl child, especially, is protected."
Head of Programmes, Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET)

Inclusion of feminist participation within this think piece

For the purposes of the analysis behind this think piece, 108 organisations implementing the GEC under the GEC-Transition (GEC-T) window and 59 implementing under the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) window were analysed as to whether they met a set criteria for being classed as explicitly 'feminist'. This criteria was split into five categories, and to meet the benchmark an organisation had to meet at least two of the five categories.[3] The five categories[4] were:

1. Self-described as feminist in mission or values
2. Mention of feminist mission/values/outlook/approach on website
3. Girls' and women's rights named as central to organisation mission
4. Self-defined as a local women's rights grassroots movement or actively work with those that do
5. Women are core constituents/central to identity

A total of 20 organisations met this criteria, representing nearly 12% of the portfolio. Of these 20, four were operating at the 'lead' level; seven at the 'Tier 1' level of downstream partners; and nine at the 'Tier 2' level of downstream partners.[5] This is an important finding in itself and will lead to implications around the level of seniority and funding at which feminist partnerships tend to exist (see below). This paper draws upon the experiences of four lead and four downstream organisations: ActionAid, AWET, Care International, JWAS, NAGAAD, Plan International, Sauti ya Wanawake and StreetChild[6].

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[3] This methodology was evaluated against several other identification and benchmarking options and found to be most appropriate for the small-scale study and for fair reflection of feminist organisations on the GEC. No claims are being made as to applicability to other studies or usage elsewhere.
[4] Categories were drafted based on recurring themes within different definitions of a feminist organisations from a diverse range of sources working in low-income contexts, such as FRIDA the Young Feminist Fund, Association for Women's Rights in Development, and feminist foreign policy approaches of the governments of Canada and Scotland, as well as academic explorations of feminist terms, such as Jenkins, K, Narayanaswamy, L orcid.org/0000-0003-1172-0583 and Sweetman, C (2019) Introduction: Feminist values in research. Gender & Development, 27 (3). pp. 415-425, and Aguinaga et al (2016), available at https://www.tni.org/files/download/beyonddevelopment_critiques.pdf
[5] Tier 1 (downstream) partners are those who are contracted by the lead organisation (which holds the GEC agreement with FCDO) to deliver specified services, and Tier 2 (downstream) partners are those who are contracted in turn by Tier 1 partners.
[6] All of the lead organisations were international and all of the downstream organisations local/national.

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The interface between girls' education and women's rights work

WROs described a variety of pathways that their organisations took towards working within girls' education. Most had gradually expanded their work and influence in this area over many years after thematic links with their other focus areas became obvious. Three main arguments were made as to why it is so important that local WROs work within the girls' education space.

Firstly, a strong case was made that education is one of the most important ways to secure women's participation in society for the long term. The education process was perceived as leading to a generation of women who are better able to make decisions and articulate their thoughts.

> "We have seen for the girls who keep in school, we have seen tremendous confidence being built, opening their minds beyond just settling for being married and just staying at home. So, I think [education] is a big game changer and looking at leadership currently, those women who have accessed education are able to articulate issues in meetings, and make decisions about their household."
>
> **CEO, Sauti Ya Wanawake**

This focus on girls needing the skills, confidence and language to speak up for themselves was also echoed by the partner in Zimbabwe. Vocal girls grow up to become women who can participate more meaningfully. However, having the confidence to speak up also benefits girls in the here and now by allowing them to advocate for themselves and normalise the inclusion of girls' ideas in community life. The phenomenon of community leaders treating women as equals becomes a social norm rather than an anomaly.

> "[Through] intergenerational dialogues, we created that opportunity for girls to speak about what they felt was part of church doctrine or was being done in the church, but was a harmful practice to the women or the girl child. So, in the process, it was us trying to have level ground, where the leadership then starts to hear the girls, to hear the women, instead of just seeing them as people who have to obey. So, girls move from a point where things happen, and they keep quiet, to a point where they actually speak up."
>
> **Head of Programmes, Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET), Zimbabwe**

The second link was between gender-based violence (GBV) and girls' education. Working to eliminate GBV is often a core mission of WROs, and the organisations interviewed here had long histories of working in this area. Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS) worked on the issue of early marriage and found that girls in school were at a much lower risk of early and forced marriage. So, it became evident that girls' education could be one of their strategies for preventing child marriage. Sauti ya Wanawake found that many incidences of GBV occurred while a girl was at home or not in school and determined that if they could get more girls enrolled and prevent drop-out, it would affect GBV rates.

Finally, education was spoken about as a way of reaching a new generation of feminists who could drive social change and work towards transformation in the fabric of society. The challenges of working with older women who have been more exposed to gendered socialisation and may have internalised and normalised inequalities were discussed in contrast to the ease of engaging young people in discussions about gender. Girls' education becomes a way of creating intergenerational and long-term change.

> "If you need radical change, we have to invest in education so that we can create a generation. And it will have replication also – if a girl is educated, the other girls from other households also replicate and follow. 'Oh! She's going to the school I need to go', and that's how it is. The process will have a bigger impact. Bigger impact in education can bring bigger impact to the women and girls."
>
> **Programme Manager, JWAS**

What sets a women's rights organisations apart from other local, grassroots civil society partners?

When exploring this question, the resounding answer related to the intensity and commitment of the focus on girls and women in particular. Some skepticism was expressed around whether more broad-based, generic local CSOs really do prioritise girls and women as much as they say they do, and the difficulty they can face – without the banner of an explicit feminist mission above them – in challenging the status quo and not becoming co-opted by male-dominated structures of power in communities. One advisor said, "I don't think it would have been a disaster if a more kind of generic CSO had led this work but the results and the outcomes for girls and women wouldn't have been as good as they were." Additionally, feminist organisations are often highly focused on increasing women's participation (in all sorts of ways) in the long term, allowing for a more strategic, ambitious and transformative approach that thinks about is deeply concerned with the future of the girls with whom they work, not just the present period of project implementation.

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Constraints faced by feminist partnerships within girls' education

Although it is very promising that more than one tenth of the GEC portfolio involves feminist organisations – which is higher than the average proportion of donor funding going directly to WROs[7] – it is still the case that within education programming as a whole, the majority of funding is allocated to other kinds of organisations. One technical advisor noted a disconnect between the rhetoric of support and the reality of funding, with most funding still flowing to larger international organisations even when a donor articulates a commitment to local partnerships.

The following sections will examine the impact created by WROs working on the GEC and the impact that the GEC had on them. However, first, it is worth exploring the dynamics and constraints that can sometimes make it hard for such organisations to a) join a consortium implementing a large programme like the GEC in the first place and b) get their voice heard and messages taken up within key decision-making fora such as national education taskforces or committees. This paper explores how partnerships within the GEC sought to overcome these constraints. It details factors that make inclusion of WROs successful and concludes with implications for future programming.

1. Operational and financial barriers

The first barrier many representatives from the eight organisations spoke about was the absence of policies and procedures that met the donor standards required to lead a project. Examples included safeguarding policies, survivor support policies, child protection policies and financial policies. Some noted that local WROs often have mechanisms and processes that would fall under these areas, but they are often not articulated comprehensively or on paper and would not meet the standards required by a programme like the GEC. WROs called for greater dialogue around what is needed in the context that the WRO is working in and more conversations about how the bar for 'standards being met' is set.

The second barrier to involvement in large programmes was financial conditions. One project director gave the example of the GEC, which operates via a post-implementation payment model – i.e. projects implement activities, and only afterwards, once a process of reporting and verification takes place, do they get paid.

> "I'll give you an example of the GEC, where you have a condition of pre-financing.[8] So, most of these [feminist] organisations do not have the capacity to pre-finance their programmes. [INGOs are] able to use those unrestricted funds to create that competitive advantage over other organisations. So, [WROs] end up being co-opted in consortia led by these big international organisations."
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> **Programme Manager, Plan Zimbabwe**

2. Donor requirements

Both of the barriers described above relate to capacity and resourcing issues. Other gaps in capacity were also mentioned as reasons for difficulty in accessing funding.

Many funding opportunities require solid evidence that research has been conducted within the applicant's intended work context. Certain research standards are expected, which are often difficult for local feminist groups to attain or prove that they have met. One CEO of a WRO compared the kind of locally driven, qualitative, day-to-day research and knowledge that they have with the 'global research and baselines' that the 'muscles' of big international organisations can produce and identified the higher value placed by donors on research with larger sample sizes, partnerships with universities and published studies.

Several others mentioned the capacity to write strong proposals as a key gap. One programme manager from a WRO explained that those skill sets are generally not their staff's key competencies, leaving a gap in their capacity to win bids.

> "Suppose any funders have calls for proposals, they have a sophisticated template, and we need to find qualified personnel to develop a proposal and a qualified person to work on templates. Most of the feminist organisers who are working in a low-profile way and on the ground don't have those types of human resources."
>
> **Programme Manager, JWAS**

Another gender advisor from a lead organisation noted that often, local feminist organisations have strong ideas on what is needed but can find it difficult to 'organise their thoughts' in a way that a proposal template might demand.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, is the barrier created if you do not have a track record of receiving similar funding before – what one advisor called a 'chicken and egg situation'. The track record is often the way that potential applicants' capabilities get measured, with a bias towards organisations that are well known.

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[7] A 2016 OECD DAC report found that the majority of aid to gender equality supported international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) or CSOs based in the donor country. In 2014, 8% of gender focused aid to civil society went directly to CSOs in developing countries. Little was reported as going directly to women's rights organisations – USD 192 million in 2014. *https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/OECD-report-on-womens-rights-organisations.pdf*

[8] The GEC model did include mobilisation payments at the start in order to mitigate against cash flow risks. However, since these were one-off and relatively small, some pressure on cash flow still existed.

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> "The funding basket is shrinking, and everyone is rushing towards trying to get a part of it. So, at the end of the day, people don't look at capability. And in most instances, I've realised it's names that have been known for a long time, that are prioritised over grassroots organisations or smaller CSOs."
> **Head of Programmes, AWET**

This puts smaller local WROs in a difficult position because they need someone to give them an initial chance to spark further opportunities. All of the grassroots WROs named in this paper are now in a much better position to receive further funding because of their involvement in the GEC – but had they not been part of such a large programme, they may have been unable to progress further within funding processes due to the lack of a demonstrable track record.

3. Shrinking space and the marginalisation of women

Finally, some organisations mentioned the difficulties of being heard in a crowded policy arena. The new FCDO International Women and Girls' Strategy 2023-2030 also identifies 'reduced civil space' as limiting the ability of WROs to function, and one CEO further explained how this is gendered.

> "When it comes to shrinking space, women always feel the shrinking space more, because issues for women are always marginalised."
> **Executive Director, NAGAAD**

One head of programmes at a WRO went further. It analysed this phenomenon as linked to broader issues of gender inequality and reflective of underlying and unsaid beliefs that women cannot lead such implementation or decision-making efforts, requiring them also to work to challenge gender norms within policy-making spaces.

> "When resources have to be divided, they are not given to women-led organisations. Because at the end of the day…, it's the unspoken truth that women are still not viewed as capable enough or still not equal to men. On a daily basis, we speak of gender equality, we speak of equal rights we speak of the feminist movement, but there is a force that is fighting that, and part of it may be done by people who are not aware that they are doing it."
> **Head of Programmes, AWET**

One final reason for WROs being side-lined also relates to resourcing. Within low-resourced policy contexts, attendance at decision-making meetings often requires attendees to contribute towards the costs of holding the meeting. One project director explained that in one country of implementation, the government tended only to invite international organisations because they knew they would sponsor the meeting or pay for refreshments. The same invitations will not be extended to those who cannot contribute, regardless of perception of how valuable their input might be. The same director suggested that when designing the structure of collectives like steering committees, more could be done to reserve specific seats for local WROs so that their attendance is guaranteed and not linked to the ability to cover costs.

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Four ways in which grassroots feminist organisations brought about change:

1. Through deep contextual knowledge and relationships built on trust

The deep knowledge of context held by grassroots WROs was often identified as a core reason behind their success. This is partly because of their institutional roots; many of their staff and volunteers come from the communities. 'They will always be the ones who will know what's needed best for a particular group of women and girls', said one GESI advisor. Many organisations felt that this sometimes makes tools like needs assessments redundant as they often confirm what WRO staff knew already. This knowledge was particularly powerful when GEC projects sought to work with extremely marginalised or oppressed communities. For example, JWAS worked with the Muhasar communities in Nepal and understood the 'intersectionality' between ethnicity and other characteristics. AWET, in Zimbabwe, was described as the only organisation that could have worked so successfully with apostolic communities to get girls back into school because of their knowledge.

> "This [apostolic] community is very closed, is very conservative and normally their practices
> perpetuate child marriages. So, to gain entry into those communities, into those spaces, if you're
> an outsider – someone who doesn't know their practices, someone who doesn't know what their
> belief system and the way they operate – you can hardly penetrate and achieve results."
> **Programme Manager, Plan Zimbabwe**

This deep contextual knowledge is bolstered by communities' trust in local WROs – trust that has often been developed over many years. Again, the example of JWAS working in Muhasar communities is particularly demonstrative of this trust and its importance against a backdrop of disillusioned community leaders who have received many empty promises in the past.

> "It wouldn't have been possible for us to deliver [the project] without the good relationship that
> JWAS had with the community. [These communities] came from an ethnically marginalised
> group, considered to be untouchables. And they don't typically open up to outsiders like us.
> They are a community that is very disillusioned by development organisations because
> they have been approached before…but they just haven't seen outcomes. It took a lot of work
> on JWAS's part to go back into the community, speak to the women and girls, and men and
> community leaders to then convince them to be part of the programme. So, I think that's the
> value of women's rights organisations, like JWAS and others, and which is why I think more
> investment is needed in them so that they can do this work more effectively."
> **GESI Advisor, Street Child**

This contextual knowledge, when combined with trust, was also noted to have contributed to reach and impact. In particular, AWET in Zimbabwe surpassed their original reach targets by more than 50% because it can effectively engage with apostolic communities and convince them to support out-of-school girls in the programme. The head of programmes from AWET credited this ability to reach with their organisation's strengths in contrast to 'outsider' organisations.

> "And the reason why this [exceeding of targets] has happened is that for a long time,
> organisations have tried to penetrate the apostolic community, and they failed. For a long time,
> organisations have tried to bring programmes within the apostolic community. They have called
> it a very 'hard-to-reach' community, and it's a closed community, but AWET is made up of people
> from the apostolic community. We are people who know what happens within the apostolic
> community; we are part of the apostolic community."
> **Head of Programmes, AWET**

2. Through genuine representation and the power of role models

It is also advantageous when organisations can claim to genuinely represent the women and girls they are allied and advocating for – because they are those women. One of the advantages of this is that it brings legitimacy to advocacy.

> "Women's rights organisations are in a better position to do a lot of advocacy. Because of course,
> we keep tabs on what the government is doing. And with this legitimacy, we can stand up
> against the government and tell them no, this is not working. This is because we don't fear that
> they will say we are not allowed to operate in this area because the women are the community,
> so you can't get rid of our community. Not like you can get rid of an organisation."
> **CEO, Sauti ya Wanawake**

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Another advantage, which is very specific to a girls' education programme that directly engages with girls, is that girls – as well as families and community gatekeepers – can see for themselves examples of women who are from the same community, raised in similar ways, with similar resources, who have taken quite different pathways from the norm and who openly challenge and contest accepted wisdom. One WRO staff member noted that 'what the women and the girls are saying is that, oh, there are actually opportunities, opportunities out there for girls who were out of schooling, who did not complete their education'.

Trust was also further cemented when organisations could prove to communities that the girls involved were benefiting and could go on to transition elsewhere (such as back to school). A GESI advisor from a lead organisation noted that it was important that everyone in the community could see that girls were making progress and were transitioning – 'That itself was evidence enough that it does work.'

In the GEC programme in Nepal, around 60% of the staff were from the Muhasar community, partly because the community demanded that participation increase.

> "The social workers, the teachers, many of them female, were actually delivering the programme, and for the girls to see that they can also aspire to be like this, the social workers or the educators, had an incredible impact."
> **Usha LImbu, Street Child**

Another project colleague used the word 'validation' to describe why it was important that staff were from the communities and said this was particularly important within the apostolic community, which has its niche structures and hierarchies.

3. Through a commitment to transforming social norms

'I think you cannot do without feminist organisations if you want to push for a gender equality agenda', said a Project Director from CARE Somalia. This sentiment, which was strongly held amongst all organisations, reveals that a major factor in achieving gender equality is transforming social norms relating to gender.

The ability of feminist organisations to work effectively on shifting social norms was named as a key strength and an area of significant impact on GEC programming. Much of this was tied to WRO's ability to target, message and change attitudes and behaviours.

> "When we look at where we feel we made the most impact, I think it was where we had to engage and convince the leadership and the families that it was important for the girl child to have those literacy and numeracy skills, considering the overwhelming numbers [of out-of-school girls] that we had. The overwhelming [positive] response that we got from the leadership, from the families, from the mothers-in-law, even from the husbands of those girls that had been married early, it shows that we made a lot of impact in mindset shifts."
> **Head of Programmes, AWET**

AWET's partner, Plan International, also said they had done a 'great job' in 'engaging in very difficult spaces with gatekeepers on difficult conversations and issues which are not easy to talk about'. Much of this success was down to appropriate messaging, which responds to the concerns of the 'gatekeepers'. AWET argued that girls with literacy and numeracy would 'contribute to households' and that the actual church leadership would see the benefit. The household contribution argument was strongly tied to ideas around economic collective benefit to the family. By tapping into two dominant concerns of church leadership – the desire for their families to have economic stability and fear around sex work – AWET could speak directly to gatekeeper concerns. AWET also identified a belief amongst church leaders that marital arguments and domestic violence were connected to conflict over limited resources. As a result, they argued that more equal income generation in the family would reduce this risk.

> "We then say to them [male gatekeepers who need convincing], 'Just look at it this way…if [women] get the [economic] empowerment, it's a benefit for you as a family, because at the end of the day, if the children are fed, your wife will not [be forced into] other ways of getting money, for example, through prostitution."
> **Head of Programmes, AWET**

JWAS identified that convincing disillusioned communities would not be quick and that a much longer-term strategy of repeated engagement would be needed to prove that results are possible. They described some of the resistance they encountered in the beginning.

> "Initially, the main members and older people were not welcoming the programme because they just expected something quick in return, like, 'If you have come for the education of our children, our girls, so what are they going to get? What are we getting? What are we going to get from you?' So, these were the questions in the initial phase when we launched the project. And it was really hard to convince them."
> **Programme Manager, JWAS**

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In response, JWAS used an approach of involving the most resistant gatekeepers in all project activities, so that they could see the impact on girls themselves and feel involved in every decision made. They formed a centre management committee in every learning centre that involved community elders, teachers and key community persons and tasked them with tracking whether each girl was progressing and how well each facilitator was performing. This accountability process enabled a parallel process of what JWAS called 'mindset change'.

"Later on, when they understood the project by involving themselves in that centre management committee, by taking part in the monthly meetings, and by taking part in the weekly progress update, our communication board and then help desks every week, those elderly, male members started to be aware that, 'Oh, [the project] has come really, for the change of our girls, the intention is not bad. And it's not that they are immediately going to support us; it's that they're going to support us via the education of our children. And once our children are educated, they can have many opportunities. The guy who was against or a bit negative about feminism was the same person who started welcoming us very much. This is the way we could bring change in their mindset by involving them in the project activities. And I believe that if we ignore them, avoid them, and do not provide spaces in the project activity, they will be more negative. So, it's better to involve them in the project activities."
Programme Manager, JWAS

In Kenya, the COVID-19-related school closures showcased Sauti ya Wanawake's ability to maintain community support for girls' education even in the context of a crisis, as described in the case study below.

CASE STUDY

When COVID-19 led to widespread school closures in Kenya in 2020, the Sauti ya Wanawake, part of the Education for Life project, matched every GEC girl with a 'Mama Sauti' – a designated woman from a community with training, support and relevant experience to act as a figure of support, friendship and advice for the girl. The project gave every Mama Sauti enough airtime to be able to make as many calls and send as many SMS messages as they needed to reach the five to seven girls to whom they were allocated. The project designed a system to ensure that every girl would be called at least every three days to check on her location, wellbeing and safety. When girls and Mama Sautis could meet in person, they did, but outside of these times the conversations by phone never stopped. Sauti ya Wanawake credit this intensive and personalised approach with their success in keeping girls in-school and engaged. "When we look at the statistics and the numbers we started with it's incredibly amazing that we were able to retain around even 95% [of girls]", said their CEO. "So for me that's something that really worked during that period."

This case study from Kenya highlights another strength raised by many project staff – that grassroots feminist organisations have a deeper commitment than that held by other organisations, enabling them to engage more frequently and intensively.

"For the women's rights movement, I think there is a deeper connection. And there's a deeper analysis. I don't think a major organisation would sit down with a parent and beg her please take care of your child's child. The other thing maybe they will not be able to do is link each child with a mentor who will continuously call them within the community and talk the same language, just to find out how are you doing? How is your day? How is your child?"
CEO, Sauti ya Wanawake

This example speaks to an emphasis on the personal and the human connection –especially one that is forged between women and based on solidarity. This idea of solving a problem together was also echoed by AWET, who spoke of 'co-creation' as something they aim for when engaging with church leaders.

"In engagements, we would have we a co-creation process, where we would sit with the leadership, and have different groupings, have intergenerational dialogues."
Head of Programmes, AWET

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Other simple actions to build wider community ownership were sourcing materials within communities rather than from outside.

NAGAAD, in Somaliland, saw that their biggest impact was their direct engagement with religious leaders. Their partner, CARE, helped explain why this is not easy and how the potential risks were managed well due to NAGAAD's experience and ability to be precise when mapping out which gatekeepers with whom to work.

> "NAGAAD were able to build on the work they did with religious leaders in promoting expanding space for women, especially in politics, for instance, in pushing against FGM, and child marriages, and those kinds of things. They had that experience. It's not easy to identify religious leaders. If you don't have the experience, you might end up with a religious leader who pulls out in the middle of the programme. So, NAGAAD already had that experience, they knew which religious leaders to work with to push that agenda."
>
> **Project Director Girls' Education, CARE Somalia**

Another strategy used by organisations was identifying and championing local individuals who were going against social norms and practising alternative behaviours.[9] Many of these individuals were female staff and volunteers from the grassroots WRO itself, as already discussed, but sometimes organisations would bring in outsiders to give girls and families new levels of exposure:

> "We used to bring women from that village who have made it, like a lecturer, like someone who works for the county government, but [someone] from that village to just talk to [girls and their families]. So that has really strengthened them to see. It's not just about boda-boda [motorbike taxis] or tailoring or anything but girls can be able to do anything."
>
> **CEO, Sauti ya Wanawake**

Many people spoke of ways the above approaches led to observable attitude changes. For AWET in Zimbabwe, a major change was seen in adults moving from perceiving girls as 'currency' to parents seeing girls as 'equal'. Some churches had started building schools as community support for girls' education expanded. In Nepal, evaluations saw a change in perception amongst non-Muhasar stakeholders and Muhasar community leaders around whether Muhasar girls and women are capable of learning, from believing that Muhasars are 'not a group that can be educated' to believing that 'they can, in fact, do it, and do it successfully.'

4. Through transforming girls' self-belief

Girls' attitudes and self-belief changed when WROs were involved in the GEC. AWET achieved this through a gradual process of showing girls that they could hold power themselves and could be heard.

> "We made sure that we gave those girls leadership positions within peer groups[10] where perhaps there would be the chairperson, there'd be the secretary, and when engagements or dialogues were going on we would give them those small roles. This is something that might be looked at or viewed as something small. But those were steps that we were taking."
>
> **Head of Programmes, AWET**

JWAS also observed a change in their girls' willingness to speak and be heard.

> "What we have seen is there were girls who were very afraid of speaking to any stranger in their community, and were not able to even say their name and family details. Now those girls are even able to speak up. I mean they're able to speak up and demand their rights to the local government service providers. And they can talk, they can speak up with any strangers in their community without any hesitations, like covering their head, they can speak very frankly."
>
> **Programme Manager, JWAS**

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[9] The term 'positive deviants' is often used as a collective term for such change-agents. *https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/positive-deviance*
[10] More can be read on what the GEC learned about the importance of peer mentoring here: *Sister support: Lessons on peer mentoring from the Girls' Education Challenge*

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Three ways in which the GEC had an impact on grassroots feminist organisations:

The benefits of such partnerships were overwhelmingly described as two-way: WROs explained how involvement in the GEC had benefited them institutionally and sometimes created new links and opportunities.[11]

1. Through strengthening capacity

Five areas in which WROs felt their capacity had been strengthened were identified: safeguarding, monitoring, evaluation and learning; strategic approaches; gender equality and social inclusion; and geographic reach.

The first area and the only one mentioned by all eight organisations involved in this think piece, was **safeguarding**. The requirements of the GEC compelled every consortium to ensure that every partner receiving GEC funds had to meet certain safeguarding standards.[12] Lead organisations had to make sure that downstream partners were supported to meet these, and this often meant fairly intensive training and technical input not only into staff knowledge but also into the development of written policies and procedures. Many organisations ended up with a safeguarding approach that met the high standards of the GEC – where previously, they had none or more of a piecemeal approach. Similarly, **monitoring, evaluation and learning** were mentioned as a second area where monitoring was taking place, but not necessarily in a systematic way that could be reported.

Another area was related to **strategic thinking**. One women's rights advisor from a lead organisation gave the example of how their capacity building with WROs was often focused on better conceptualisation of the problem and how to address it.

> "It is about conceptualising the change and putting that into a process of implementation. So [colleagues from grassroots WROs] would have the change in their minds, and they'll say,' Okay, we want to end FGM in our community. And they know they need to do 1,2,3, but the whole planning, the processing, the sequencing, the putting that into action, needs help."
>
> **Programme Manager, ActionAid**

Another element of improved strategic work mentioned was expanded ability and willingness to make constant and small adaptations to improve things. One advisor from a lead organisation in Nepal gave the example of the local WRO learning a lot from the decision to run classes for out-of-schools at a different time of day than originally decided, based on looking at attendance data and seeing that it was not working for the girls.

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[11] The GEC Fund Manager has documented much of this learning in the Portfolio and Practice Series:
  • *Managing and supporting diverse implementing partners: Insights from the Girls' Education Challenge*
  • *Driving gender equality and social inclusion across a portfolio: Lessons from the Girls' Education Challenge*
  • *Protection is possible: Ensuring high safeguarding standards across a portfolio*

[12] These standards, and the ways in which the GEC adhered to them, are described in detail in this guidance: *Protection is possible* but broadly fall into six categories: safeguarding, whistleblowing, human resources, risk management, code of conduct, and governance and accountability.

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One partner was also able to play a role in encouraging and expanding the movement-building work that the WRO wanted to do, even though this was officially outside the remit of the project.

> "One of the things that we have seen emerging from our engagement with AWET is we have given them the platform to do whatever that is necessary and essential to be able to make the impact that they want. And as a result, they've even started to create some network within their communities, young people's networks, girls' networks, there's a small group, but they're beginning to reach out, girls, a groups of girls from these communities, linking to groups of girls in another community and trying to build a movement of girls who are also advocating for girls' rights. So, capacity development may also be needed to support this — how can you create and maintain such a network so that movement-building becomes bigger."
> **Programme Manager, Plan Zimbabwe**

Assumptions might be made that WROs are some of the strongest in capacity around programming for gender equality and social inclusion (GESI). While this was the case in many ways, as described in the section above, organisations articulated how involvement in the GEC had challenged them further in this area.[13] One WRO noted that they had realised the importance of having a GESI-specific person involved in every decision so they could be completely sure that a GESI lens would be taken. Attention to disability was something noted by many feminist organisations that had been greatly enhanced by involvement in the GEC because of the programme's focus on disability.

> "We got to learn, we got to grow as well, and learning from these other organisations too. Being able to make an impact in the lives of children with disabilities 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 in Kenya as well, who also noted that the GEC's GESI focus had also 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.

> "Another positive thing, as an institution, is seeing girls moving norms in terms of a career. Most of the girls will either go for hairdressing or tailoring, which is what they know. And we can't blame them. But having girls even doing masonry was quite exciting for me, personally. So just looking at telling people or showing people that more exists beyond what they know, then we can create interest in girls who can do mechanics, they can sort out a motorbike at the village. It's just changing and transforming the attitudes, the behaviours of a whole entire community, on what girls can do, what women can do, just breaking the socialisation stereotypes on what is allowed for men and what is allowed for women."
> **CEO, Sauti ya Wanawake**

Finally, one change mentioned by the partnerships in Nepal and Somaliland related to **geography**. For all of the organisations, this was the largest programme they had ever worked on in terms of the number of girls, and this had often involved them working in new geographies or communities. "10,500 girls is a big number!" one programme manager said. The INGO partner confirmed that this organisation is now exploring other provinces in Nepal because of this boost of confidence in expanding. This expansion into new geographies is important because it helps create the track record needed to access new funding opportunities in the future. For the partnership between CARE and NAGAAD in Somaliland, a change in target geographies had a different impact. NAGAAD was already very strong at the central policy level as an umbrella organisation primarily lobbying for women's rights policy reform. The partnership with CARE gave NAGAAD a chance to reconnect with the constituents they were trying to represent in states and districts that were very far away from the capital and with whom they had not engaged directly and more intimately for some time.

> "We also expanded their main types of limitation from national level to project level to district and to some scale when working in villages. I don't think NAGAAD had that big experience working in villages. Their main strength was working on political issues, working on the push for legislation, for instance, basically women's rights issues, but I think they have been able to get the advantage of seeing how things work at the villages, for instance, in terms of the VSLAs [village saving loan associations], in terms of girls' empowerment. I think that all that they have learned from SOMGEP is going to really help give them that comparative advantage in terms of how things work within the communities, in villages, and you know, marginalised locations. That has helped NAGAAD I'm sure."
> **Project Director Girls' Education, CARE Somalia**

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[13] The Portfolio in Practice Paper *Driving gender equality and social inclusion across a portfolio: Lessons from the Girls' Education Challenge* describes in detail the ways in which the GEC supported projects to contribute to gender equality and social inclusion

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2. Through linking to other stakeholders and layering with other services

The opportunity to engage with different kinds of individuals or organisations, particularly those with the power to influence or formulate policy, was mentioned by many staff as a major benefit of the GEC. One example given was how WROs sometimes had access to staff from FCDO, such as on monitoring visits, when they could raise their profile and directly influence their thinking.

Another example was the new linkages made with the government bodies responsible for technical and vocational training, with whom previously no relationship had been held. The idea of helping WROs to be better at 'layering' was also mentioned – thinking about who else is working in a complementary area, such as rights to water and sanitation, and then coordinating and building on those interventions to have an impact. This was done in Zimbabwe when Plan helped AWET link with UNICEF's health work.

These new links gave WROs more confidence –conversely, having more confidence allowed new links to open up, too.

"It is the building of 'power within that the programme brought. For Sauti [the feminist partner organisation] to be able to be in the middle of that, to facilitate that. I think for them, they now felt able to do all these changes, to expose themselves to so many stakeholders and platforms, policy platforms. They were able to give their input. It was also an elevation of the local organisation. Now, they were part of the same policy platforms where ActionAid would sit normally. They would sit there and drive that conversation. So, it was growth for them, it was the exposure for them, and it was also the realisation that they can also do that alongside organisations like ActionAid."

Programme Manager, ActionAid

3. Through developing opportunities to impact girls' lives

Finally, many organisations noted that they valued the opportunity to impact girls' lives in and of itself. One thing that greatly enhanced this feeling was the cohort design inherent to the GEC: the fact that projects are asked to work with the same cohort of girls over several years, following them on an individualised basis to enhance their learning and transition outcomes. This was not a design that any of the partners had used or worked with before – especially at such a scale – and many interviewees mentioned how much they had enjoyed and learnt from working in this way.

"It's different from other programmes that I've seen is that it worked with cohorts of girls. Usually, we go to communities and you know, we don't have a set out criteria to work with a specific girl for a certain number of years. Usually, the girl that you meet today you will not meet tomorrow. But for Sauti, in this project, it was easy for them to see the change from the beginning to the end. Of course, they have been reaching the hard-to-reach girls, but they have not walked a whole journey of years with specific cohorts of girls for them to actually see the change gradually and, in the end, report outcomes. But for this one, I think, for them, it was the whole investment that was put forth for very hard-to-reach girls, and they were able to see the transformation."

Programme Manager, ActionAid

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Factors for success in the inclusion of feminist organisations

This section explores key themes emerging from discussions with feminist organisations around what made their partnerships successful and what we can learn from this.

1. Identify appropriate feminist partners

Many staff members from lead and downstream feminist organisations spoke about the fact that there are so many impactful and effective women's rights organisations out there, but often, they are not known about or considered for partnership by project planners. The GESI advisor from Street Child explained that their identification of JWAS as a good potential partner required effort and intentionality and that larger organisations need to be prepared to put this level of effort in.

"I would recommend and encourage other INGOs to do that as well because there are so many incredible women's rights organisations who are probably a lot smaller as well, who do amazing work, and with support, they can do so much more meaningful work and help enhance our work. So yeah, maybe more innovative ways of seeking those organisations out and actively partnering with them, I think is, is one [recommendation]."
GESI advisor, Street Child

2. Enable everyone to play to their strengths

While it was considered important to create space for growth, expansion and new linkages, many people also noted that this must not come at the expense of enabling feminist organisations to play to their strengths. One project director described this as a 'comfort zone' for WROs that tends to be around campaigning, local advocacy and community mobilisation, which partnerships must not accidentally stifle or prohibit engagement within. One example of this comes from the CARE-NAGAAD partnership in Somaliland, where a decision to make NAGAAD in charge of all of the women's village savings loan associations (VSLAs) could have been made, on account of their experience in working with women, but that together they identified that this was not a big enough strength of NAGAAD's and would have been a distraction.

"If we'd said, because they're the experts in working with women, let them do the VSLAs, that would have been a lot of work for them. It would have diluted their key strength of advocacy and mobilisation and their use of the religious leaders and, you know, organising meetings at the national level to drive the change at that level. I think that might be the case for a lot of women-led organisations; their strength might be women's rights and pushing for gender equality, as opposed to, you know, day-to-day implementation of activities at scale."
Project Director Girls' Education, CARE Somalia

3. Create space for everyone

At the same time, this approach only works if such decisions are taken in a genuinely collaborative way, and new space is created for feminist organisations to have a louder voice – both internally to the project, such as within project steering groups – and externally too, within forums with gatekeepers and policy-makers. A Programme Manager from ActionAid described how they use specifically designed tools to help WRO partners identify the changes that they want and then discuss with them how to access the resources needed to achieve this – including resources internal to the project, saying that 'they do the process with us pushing from the back'. Listening is key, with one example given of a feminist organisation saying they need something and the importance of actually listening and trying to find resources to be able to make this happen. One Research Director explained that the privilege of having a seat at the table must be taken advantage of to amplify the voices of marginalised people.

"It's a matter of fairness. It's also a matter of using the power we have and using it in an ethical manner. So, wherever we are behind very large programmes that aim to have a seat at the table with ministries, with national groups, it's a matter of using that space to amplify the voices of those who otherwise might not be here. We are working with women's rights organisations associated with identities that have been systematically excluded. For instance, if you are working with domestic workers, or if you want to work in networks of VSLA participants as we do in West Africa, which is mostly formed by women from groups that have been historically excluded, or in Zimbabwe, where we were working with mothers' groups, to what extent are we listening to what they are saying and bringing it to the table, and also rethinking some of what we're doing, based on what they perceive as being necessary?"
Director of Research, Advocacy and Learning, CARE International

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4. Value power, trust and feminist principles within the partnership

Everyone mentioned the importance of establishing trust and equality within partnerships with WROs. One advisor from an INGO said, 'I'm not going to pretend like we don't have the upper hand because we do in many ways, as an INGO, but still, we always maintain an equal partnership with an implementing partner'. Trust can be built through listening and responding to what WROs advise, but also through demonstrating this faith in WRO recommendations by finding ways to help them secure what they often need most – more funding. This can be one way of cementing trust and proving that the partnership is valued.

> "I do also want to note that that trust has also come because we are able to bring in funding as well. If it was just limited to [a small partnership], then I think that trust again wouldn't exist, but we have had important funding through the GEC and again through our UK DIRECT Project; we have another nearly £2 million for a girl-focused programme and other smaller pots of funds to JWAS. And that's why I think resourcing is so important because we can do all this work and say that we trust each other. But if there is no kind of tangible outcome yet, then that is just not going to be there. So that then circles back to donors and fund managers, putting their trust in local organisations and giving them that resourcing."
> **GESI Advisor, Street Child**

A major advantage that feminist organisations have in terms of disrupting inequalities within partnerships is their knowledge of and adherence to feminist principles. ActionAid, for example, has 10 feminist leadership principles to which all staff must subscribe. At the heart of this is an understanding of power, its influence and the way gender structures our world, and this enabled ActionAid to have more equal partnerships even when resources are uneven.

> "I think embedding our work within the feminist leadership principles, where then we are checking our power, we are helping others to build their power, checking our bias and the influence and power that we have, then being very cognisant that the constituents and partners that we work with are primary partners and not muzzle the community and the local organisation."
> **Programme Manager, ActionAid**

Table 1: Challenges to realising success

1. Elite capture and social cohesion issues	One potential challenge of working with grassroots, community-based organisations is difficulty in being able to cross ethnic lines – either metaphorically or literally. The most obvious example of this was given from the Somalia context, where clan-based identity can cover very small areas, and social fragmentation and fragility can make it difficult for an individual or group who are associated with a particular clan or sub-clan to engage with others – especially if that engagement is intending to work towards social change. As a result, while localised WROs are important in such fragmented contexts, they may not be able to have an impact outside of their immediate and limited locality. Socially advantaged WROs – perhaps because of clan identity – may be able to gain control over financial benefits intended for all feminist organisations, and any programming with feminist partnerships needs to be cautious of this.
2. Capacity within sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR)	One downside of working with grassroots organisations as observed by lead partners – and in general (not specific to WROs) – was capacity around SRHR. The fact that staff were from the community themselves is of immense value, but necessarily means that staff are more likely to reproduce the socially ascribed values and norms of the community from which they come – and these may result in attitudes or beliefs that make it difficult to deliver rights-based SRHR content to girls. One lead partner noted that if they could redesign the project they would have invested in more training, exposure, support and monitoring to their WRO partner from the start to mitigate against this risk.
3. Lack of institutional capacity building	Several of the WROs working on the GEC mentioned that there could have been more resources directed at institutional capacity building. Although there was some training and technical input, it tended to be in specific areas, such as supporting safeguarding policies designed to benefit the project (as opposed to the broader organisation). A more systematic, comprehensive and broader approach to strengthening institutions would have been welcomed, particularly in the form of flexible funding to be used as decided by the organisation themselves.
4. Insufficient project durations	Given the dynamics of building trust, engaging disillusioned and marginalised communities, some WROs noted that a longer project duration would have enabled them to embed more deeply changed social norms, integrate adolescent girls into their wider feminist activism work, and influence key policy content as a result of the new linkages and influence that had taken some years to build up and cement. Many GEC projects have much longer timeframes than other education programmes, but the length was primarily determined by how long lead organisations initially applied for, which was sometimes only a three-year duration.

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Conclusion

Implications for governments concerned with improving girls' education

Being intentional in inviting feminist organisations and WROs to be part of decision-making spaces had multiple positive impacts on GEC programming. WROs bring deep knowledge of the context, genuine representation of marginalised girls and women, passion and commitment, and proven ability to shift social norms.[14] If engagement in such spaces is constrained if an organisation cannot contribute financially, then powerholders can explore how these rules can be relaxed for local WROs or others asked to contribute more to make up shortfalls. Education has the potential to improve women's participation and to keep girls and women safer – just as it also has the potential to reproduce gender inequalities. Therefore, schools and other educational institutions are critical spaces where WROs can work but must be welcomed, supported and consulted.

Implications for donors and fund managers

Bilateral and multilateral donors and the fund managers contracted to manage a programme are exceptionally well placed to make structural alterations to their ways of working and resourcing priorities that would prioritise and privilege feminist organisations.[15] Every donor and fund manager would benefit from conducting a comprehensive review of their funding to feminist organisations to identify and dismantle barriers that have been unintentionally placed. Flexible funding and processes that allow exceptions to rules, such as pre or match-funding, would benefit, as would the inclusion of institutional capacity-building activities within all budgets. Partnership agreements and project design should reflect feminist principles and reward and incentivise meaningful listening to WROs' recommendations and their proposed adaptations.

Implications for INGOs

WROs should be prioritised during searches for new partners within education projects, regardless of whether the focus is on girls. Time and effort will be needed to identify these new partnerships and create relationships built upon trust, mutual respect and principles of feminist leadership. INGOs are well positioned to help feminist organisations develop and prove a track record, generate the kind of research valued by government and donors, and be better placed to comply with future donor demands. Using their influence and giving technical input in these areas can be invaluable, but this needs to be planned (and resourced) from the beginning.

It is clear that when feminist organisations implement girls' education programming and engage meaningfully in this via partnerships founded upon feminist principles, trust and equality, girls' outcomes are improved. These are not only outcomes relating to girls' self-belief or their learning but also the achievement of full gender equality in practice.

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[14] Further exploration of how the GEC engaged with issues of marginalisation can be found within this think piece on *Foundational Learning for All*
[15] Other lessons learned when managing diverse partners are described in the GEC Portfolio in Practice brief *Managing and supporting diverse implementing partners: Insights from the Girls' Education Challenge*

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Further reading

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Endnote

Interviews were held between 2 and 27 February 2023 with eight feminist organisations implementing the GEC as per the table below to solicit contributors' views.

Dates of interviews	Lead organisation	Downstream partner	Country
2 and 3 February	Street Child	Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS)	Nepal
3 and 16 February	ActionAid	Sauti Ya Wanawake	Kenya
9 and 16 February	Plan International	Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET)	Zimbabwe
10 and 27 February	CARE International	NAGAAD	Somalia

Cover photo: Street Child