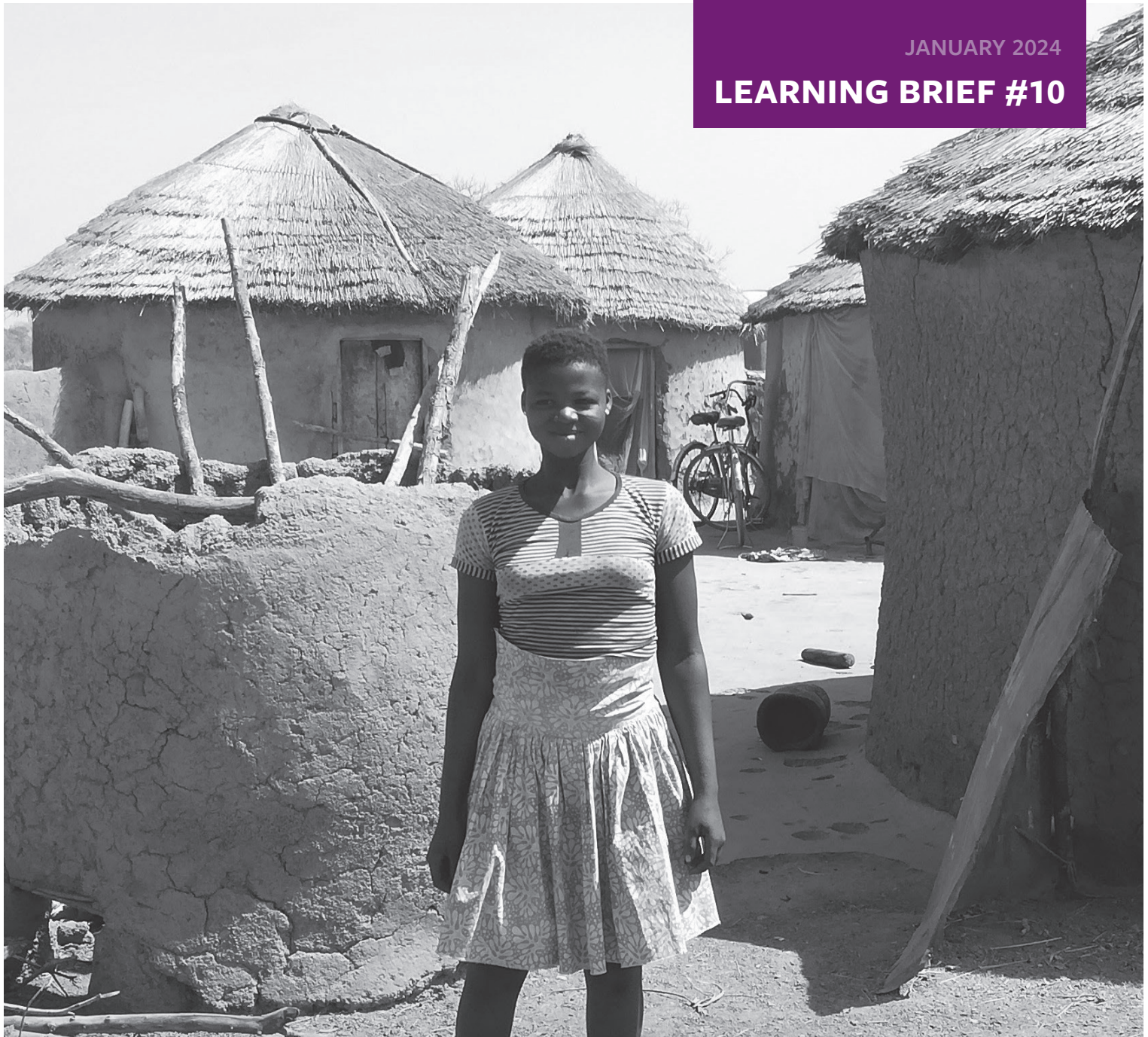


JANUARY 2024

LEARNING BRIEF #10



Educating girls: Making sure you reach the most marginalised

Girls'
Education
Challenge



The Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) is the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's 12-year, £855 million Global Fund which aims to improve the educational opportunities of the world's most marginalised girls. The GEC is comprised of two types of project: 1) GEC-Transition (GEC-T) projects, which work within schools and support girls most at risk of dropping out; and 2) Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects, which target highly marginalised girls who have already dropped out or who have never been able to enrol in school.

Over a third of the world's poorest girls, aged between 10 and 18, have never been to school.¹ Many of these girls are not represented in household surveys and administrative data. Their 'invisibility' makes it very hard to identify them, address their needs and provide targeted support. They are the most marginalised.

Identifying, enrolling and keeping the most marginalised girls in education is a challenge. Doing this at scale is an even greater one. Despite substantial global investments, many education programmes struggle to reach girls who have never had the opportunity to attend school or whose education has been severely disrupted.

That said, the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) has made notable progress in improving access to education and enhancing learning outcomes for over 1.5 million of some of the most marginalised girls, across 17 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa

and South Asia. GEC projects were successful in identifying and supporting girls, aged 10 to 19, who had not been enrolled, had dropped out or were at high risk of dropping out.

This Learning Brief collates information on GEC project approaches to working with the most marginalised girls and the lessons drawn from this work. It is intended to support governments, donors and implementing partners in their efforts to think about who the most marginalised are, how to engage them and effectively support them to access, transition through and thrive in education.

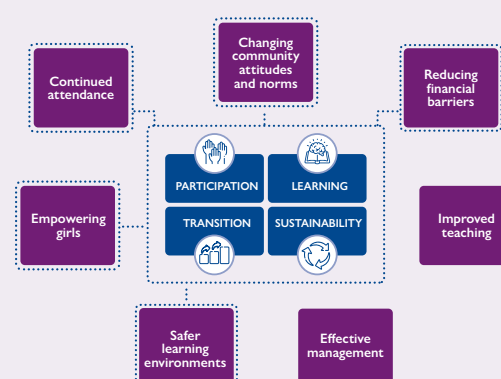


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¹ <https://www.unicef.org/media/63896/file/Addressing-the-learning-crisis-advocacy-brief-2020.pdf>

The Girls' Education Challenge Learning Brief series:

To capitalise on its vast portfolio of 41 projects, operating across 17 countries, the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) has compiled a wealth of project learning regarding key interventions related to girls' education. While these Learning Briefs are rooted in both quantitative and qualitative evidence, they are not research papers or evidence reports. Rather, they provide a synthesis of learning from GEC intervention designs and implementation approaches that have been paramount for supporting improvements in girls' learning. The GEC projects take a holistic approach to improve the educational environment and conditions that support improved learning, participation, transition and sustainability outcomes. This Learning Brief is focused on interventions in the following areas:



With whom did GEC projects work?

The most marginalised girls are those that are not in the formal or informal education system. They are at risk of dropping out of the education system, have dropped out or were never there in the first place. The GEC had two funding windows that targeted these girls:

1. GEC-Transition (GEC-T) projects, which work within schools and support girls most at risk of dropping out – significant marginalisation and disadvantage.

2. Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects target highly marginalised girls who have already dropped out or who have never been able to enrol in school – high marginalisation and disadvantage.

Figure 1 illustrates where the GEC girls were located on a spectrum of marginalisation and disadvantage.

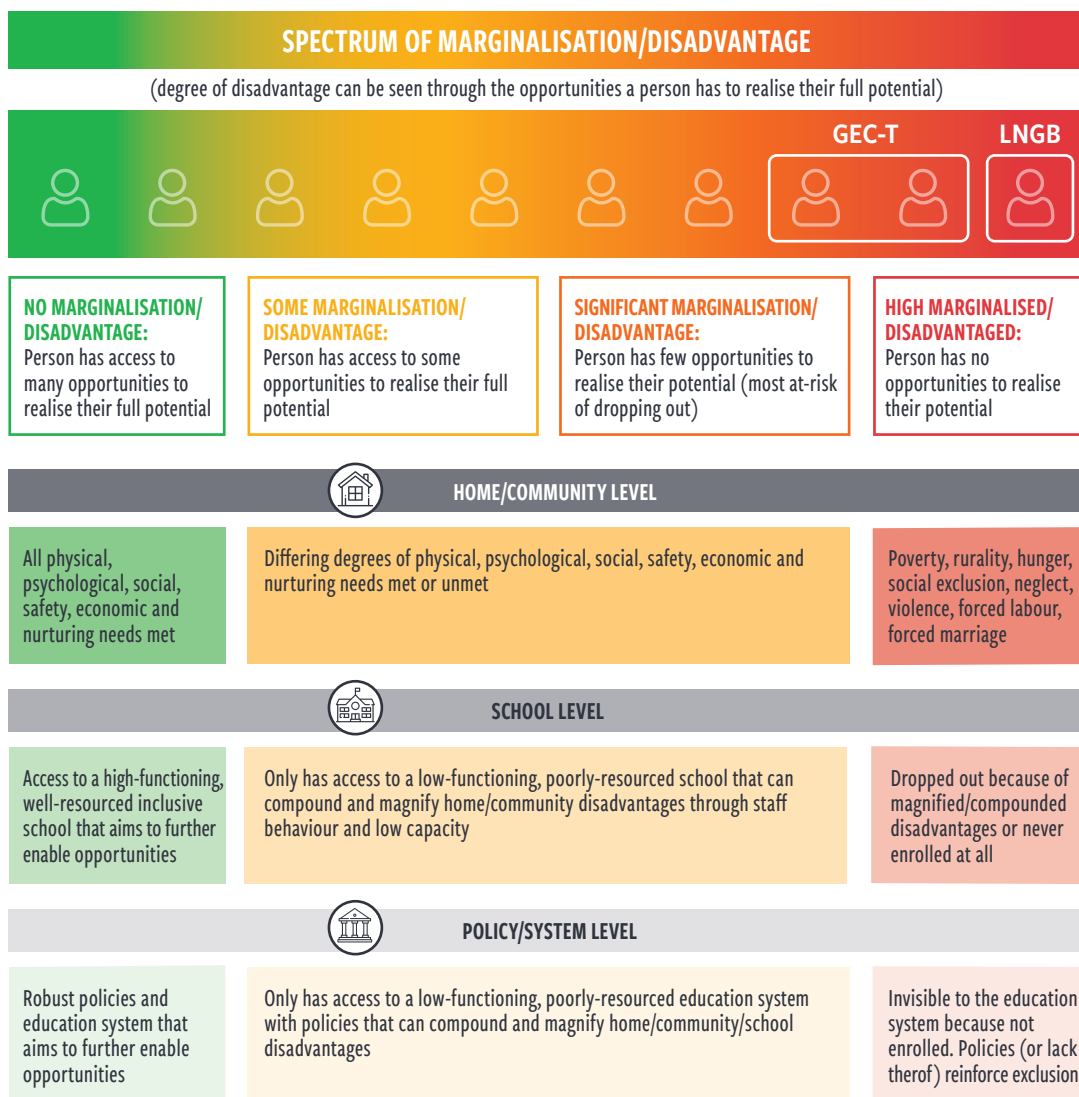


Figure 1: Spectrum of marginalisation

The GEC approach to marginalisation

The GEC approach to marginalisation makes a clear distinction between the characteristics of an individual and the barriers that interact with their identities. In education, these barriers exist at the family, community, school and system levels (see Figure 1). The process through which the characteristics and barriers interact determines a girl's social and academic outcomes and whether they are educationally marginalised.

Figure 2 illustrates girls' multiple and intersecting characteristics in GEC projects. However, characteristics and barriers are often conflated.

For example, it is common to see disability (a characteristic) framed as a barrier to education. However, disability per se is not the barrier, but having a disability may lead to education marginalisation because of the barriers that exist at the home, school or system level. Having a disability, being a girl, being pregnant, or a combination of all three may lead to educational marginalisation. The barriers can include negative attitudes toward girls' education at home, a lack of accessibility or infrastructure at school, or government policies that prohibit pregnant girls from attending school.



Figure 2: Multiple and intersecting characteristics lead to greater marginalisation/disadvantage

The GEC approach has enabled projects to profile and reach the most educationally marginalised. These have included girls with disabilities, orphaned girls, child brides, young mothers, refugees or displaced girls, pastoralist girls, girls from ethnically or religiously marginalised communities, survivors of gender-based violence, and girls living in extreme poverty. Projects then worked to tackle the barriers faced by individual girls across the home, community, school and system levels.

Marginalisation from education is complex. Indeed, education itself can be marginalising if it reflects structural inequalities and asymmetries of power in wider society. For example, if girls who speak a minority language are marginalised within society, their enrolment in a school where their language is not understood, spoken or valued will reinforce this marginalisation rather than challenge it. Before GEC projects implemented their interventions, they spent time understanding marginalisation in their contexts

from a girls' perspective and then determined how best to design and implement interventions.

The Education Marginalisation Approach prompts more critical thinking about the community, school and system barriers that are preventing marginalised children from succeeding in education. Figure 1 uses the approach to highlight how marginalised the girls and boys in GEC projects are in comparison to the overall populations in which they reside.

An in-depth understanding of marginalisation

It was very important to understand why marginalisation mattered and for this to inform how projects worked with marginalised girls. It was key to see girls as individuals with freedom to do and be the things that matter to them. It's not just about learning facts and figures, but the purpose of education involves the development of specific abilities and skills, including the understanding of one's actions and values, with an enhanced capacity for making choices. Thus, education has an inherent and foundational significance in developing agency, values and behaviour. The process of listening to girls identified that education was important to every girl, not just the act of going to school or of attaining specific learning outcomes, but a whole range of freedoms related to education that was valuable to her, such as learning in a safe and happy environment, or forging friendships at school, or exploring subjects that expanded her worldview. Using this view allowed the GEC to identify multiple constraints that constrained girls' educational freedoms and opportunities.²



A detailed and careful approach to identifying and reaching the most marginalised girls

This has been complex and has required careful consideration. A rigorous Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework that disaggregated girls by project-determined categories (e.g. those with a high chore burden, orphan-headed households and those with a disability, etc.) helped projects to identify who they were reaching – and who remained invisible.³ Once barriers were also analysed, this data could be combined with subgroup characteristic data to provide a comprehensive picture of each project's 'marginalisation landscape'.

Projects needed appropriate and sensitive methods to ask girls and families about 'who they were' and which characteristics they held. Projects and their evaluation colleagues felt fairly confident in asking girls and families about circumstances (such as parenting, refugee status, and their economic situation) but sometimes lacked expertise regarding disability. The Washington Group questions proved indispensable, and their use allowed projects to grow in confidence in this area.



Taking an intersectional approach to all facets of implementation

Extremely marginalised girls face the most complex combinations of barriers, which require more tailored support and interventions. If education does not automatically address the combination of barriers and lead to empowerment, greater gender equality or social inclusion, projects need comprehensive approaches to disrupt power dynamics, social norms and unjust policies or structures that exclude marginalised girls from and within education systems. The GEC developed the [GESI Framework](#) to support projects to interrogate and address the drivers and dynamics behind girls' exclusion (both from learning opportunities and within learning spaces). This framework uses an intersectional approach to recognise and tackle discrimination/oppression. It examines the power dynamics and hierarchies among various groups based on factors such as gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and more. This approach was also embedded in the approach projects took to [teaching and learning](#) and in how they addressed [safeguarding](#).

Projects also built in adaptation opportunities to ensure that the girls' lived realities were being considered throughout implementation and whether these had changed.

² The approach taken on GEC is very much in line with the Capability Approach where a girls' capability to live a good life is defined in terms of the set of valuable 'beings and doings' to which she has access.

³ Although this required some initial assumptions to be deployed – risking some sub-groups from remaining hidden or excluded – this process was generally the most efficient way of identifying categories likely to be associated with educational marginalisation.

The impact of GEC project work on the most marginalised girls

Marginalised girls supported by GEC projects experienced a wide range of benefits. Whilst all projects targeted learning and transition, they also strove to contribute to girls' improved wellbeing, safety, self-esteem, economic circumstances, support networks and life skills knowledge. This Learning Brief does not compare the differences in achievements for specific sub-groups of girls, but the section below highlights overall impacts in learning, wellbeing and self-esteem, and community support.

Some projects saw larger improvements in learning for marginalised girls than non-marginalised girls, where their support was highly tailored

A recent '[Educating Girls with Disabilities in GEC](#)' report found that literacy and numeracy outcomes for girls with disabilities improved across the portfolio, over and above the control group. Reasons for this success include assistive devices, classroom adaptations and teaching support, contributing to increased engagement with learning. This was the case with other marginalised groups. For example, The [SOMGEP](#) project in Somalia had a much larger impact on learning among girls from relatively poor or pastoralist households. This can be attributed to the low point from which these girls are starting, along with individualised interventions.

CASE STUDY: Marginalised girls' learning gains in Zimbabwe

The [SAGE](#) project reported that, understandably, girls who had never been to school scored the lowest in literacy and numeracy in the initial assessment but have shown the most improvement in learning scores, closely followed by girls with disabilities. The project also supported married girls and young mothers, who formed almost 45% of the learner population. They also achieved higher literacy scores (2% higher than the average) and numeracy scores (3% higher than the average) at the end assessment point. This was attributed to support including childcare, flexible session timing and individualised learning support.



Being included has intrinsic positive effects on girls' wellbeing and self-esteem

Harder to measure – but seen repeatedly across projects' own monitoring and evaluation results – was the benefit felt by marginalised girls simply by being counted, recognised, included and welcomed into project interventions. Many girls reported increased wellbeing, greater self-esteem and self-efficacy, higher aspirations and more supportive social networks. For example, girls in Malawi had improved life skills outcomes, confidence and self-efficacy. Girls from apostolic communities in Zimbabwe showed greater participation in decision-making at the community level and within their households. In [Leonard Cheshire](#)'s project in Kenya, teachers reported that celebrating the success of children with disabilities and meeting them at their ability level supported their self-esteem development and encouraged them to continue learning and challenging themselves.

CASE STUDY: Girls' increased confidence in Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, the [EAGER](#) project worked to develop empathy and friendship between all girls. The Life Skills curriculum includes a "Different Abilities" session to encourage girls to value and treat each other without discrimination, regardless of disabilities. Girls with disabilities reported feeling confident they would accomplish their goals – a significantly change from baseline. Their self-confidence and positive peer interactions were evident during focus group discussions, where facilitators observed that girls with disabilities participated equally. All girls said that their confidence levels increased, as did their ability to interact with their peers, neighbours and community members, which contributed to positive social interactions.

Inclusion has a positive impact on community support

Many projects found that their work increased support for the education of marginalised girls. For example, families of Af-Maay-speaking girls in Somalia increased their support for girls' education by 17 percentage points higher than the rest of the respondents. Some projects also found that including girls with disability in life skills and social-emotional work reduced stigmas associated with disability. This can also positively impact the social attitudes and beliefs of non-disabled students.

It is important to note that material constraints and worsening economic conditions can offset gains in community support for girls' education. When conditions worsened, community support for girls' education often went down.

"My life has changed. I was a timid girl. I used to be shy. I used not to mix up or relate well with people. This changed since I enrolled in this school. I am no longer a shy girl."

Girl with a disability, Malawi

Factors for success

This section highlights the six core elements needed to reach and support the most marginalised girls.

“...because of [the programme], I have met new people. I had less friends before, now I have more friends. So, I am happy.”

Girl with a disability, Nepal

1 Identify who the most marginalised girls are and where they are

- Build a solid understanding of the most marginalised girls and their context
- Use strong pre-existing relationships with communities to identify and support the girls
- Deploy staff with strong competencies in community engagement
- Mitigate risks and ensure Do No Harm principles
- Conduct a participatory analysis of factors of exclusion

2 Respond to what the most marginalised girls need and want

- “Nothing about us without us”: Use girls’ voices to inform project design
- Find the most relevant pathways
- Structure a graduated response
- Build girls’ social cohesion and collective action
- Work with communities, particularly men and boys, to challenge and shift gender and social norms
- Work closely with families
- Engage mentors and encourage peer support
- Use gender and social inclusion-responsive pedagogy

3 Articulate what success looks like for marginalised groups

- Commit to adaptive management
- Disaggregate data
- Use participatory monitoring systems

4 Understand the risks and contextual change

5 Be accountable to the most marginalised

6 Work towards transformative and sustainable change



1 Identify who the most marginalised girls are and where they are

Build a solid understanding of the most marginalised girls and their context

Successful projects had implementing partners who understood who marginalised girls were and had sound contextual knowledge and long experience working in targeted schools and communities. Frameworks and theories of change thought about who was marginalised, why, and how they might be identified and reached. A far-reaching focus on developing GESI expertise across the GEC portfolio was critical.

Projects faced the challenge of identifying the most marginalised girls differently. LNGB projects were designed to target the most marginalised out-of-school girls. GEC-T projects had less of an initial mandate to focus on the most marginalised and interventions were often designed around the school – and its population. However, even within a school population, there are degrees and processes of exclusion and marginalisation. The table below summarises how projects mapped the most marginalised girls.

Strategies for identifying the most marginalised out-of-school girls

- Forming partnerships with local community-based organisations, particularly women's rights organisations and disabled people's organisations
- Engaging with community leaders and local administrators
- Using gender-responsive participatory mapping processes that include a wide range of children and adults
- Application of assessment tools to an initial shortlist of girls to find the most marginalised amongst them (such as learning assessments).

Strategies for identifying the most marginalised in-school girls

- Working with headteachers to understand what schools know about their girls and to help them strengthen/use data collection to prevent dropout
- Identifying and strengthening formal assessment systems of girls with disabilities so that they can access the educational support they need
- Convening teachers, headteachers, parents and community leaders to discuss who the most marginalised girls in their school are and make action-plans to reduce dropout
- Using Girls' Clubs to talk about the importance of inclusion so that girls themselves actively encourage marginalised girls to participate

Use strong pre-existing relationships with communities to identify and support the girls

Where projects were engaging with a particular community for the very first time, the most successful projects initiated a formal partnership with a civil society or community-based organisation (with representatives and staff from that community) and/or took time to understand community dynamics. In these ways, they forged strong relationships with community leaders, building trust and finding opportunities for community participation in every aspect of mapping, planning and implementation.

CASE STUDY: Reaching girls from the Musahar community in Nepal⁴

From the start, the Marginalised No More project was determined to engage with girls from the Musahar community – a highly marginalised Dalit ethnic group in Nepal. The project reached this community in a meaningful and impactful way, with girls' learning, safety and transition all improving beyond expectation and wider positive societal shifts towards girls' and women's rights being seen. This was largely attributed to the involvement of local partner JWAS and their deep knowledge of the context. JWAS⁵ had built up trust with communities over the years.

"[These communities] came from an ethnically marginalised group, considered to be untouchables....And they don't typically open up to outsiders like us. 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 that's the value of a feminist and locally rooted organisations because there are still so many [marginalised] groups like this, who are very difficult to work with, and mainly because they are not interested in putting their trust in big organisations like us, because they've done it so many times before and haven't really seen the results."

GESI Advisor, Street Child

While working with the Musahar community, it became evident that having staff from the Musahar community was powerful. Not only did it foster trust and cooperation between the project and community, but it also showed everyone that Musahar children, especially girls, can and do grow up to become adults with the types of jobs held by project staff (including teachers).

"She is my friend and we go together to school. It encourages me to go to school so that I should have a better future. I am happy with her."
Girl with a disability, Malawi

⁴ For more see the 2023 report: [Participatory Ethnography: Research for Musahar Girls' Education](#)

⁵ Janaki Women's Awareness Society

Deploy staff with strong competencies in community engagement

Identifying the most marginalised girls often required sensitive conversations with community or school leaders. Older girls with children were sometimes considered a ‘lost cause’, or children with disabilities needing expensive, specialist boarding schools out of the financial reach of their parents. Questions about ethnic minorities or language of instruction could make people feel uncomfortable. As a result, the skills of staff to understand these tensions and act and talk in a way that respected hierarchies but also safely challenged ideas were critical. A project’s ability to reach the most marginalised hinged on these important individuals. Simply having female staff members from a marginalised community, can be transformational if these staff regularly interfacing with girls who previously did not imagine such a future was possible for girls like them.

It is also important to recognise that practitioners bring their ideas, values and assumptions to any scenario due to their culture and experiences. All staff working with the most marginalised girls must examine their own unconscious biases, beliefs, judgements and practices, and those of their organisation, and how these may influence how they work and engage with others.

Mitigate risks and ensure Do No Harm principles

Attention to Do No Harm principles was key because of the risks involved in identifying a girl or her family who had previously found safety and solace in a degree of invisibility (even whilst that invisibility locked out benefits) – such as a girl with severe disabilities living in a community who associated such disabilities with witchcraft. Because mapping processes are designed to identify who became eligible for inclusion in activities, community-facing staff had to dedicate much time to explaining how and why these selections had been made. To do this successfully, projects that mapped other opportunities or resources mitigated risks of backlash as they could point parents and community leaders to programmes or organisations that could help them. Additionally, sometimes projects could rapidly intervene to help an out-of-school child enrol in school when their learning levels aligned with school expectations and their barriers were less complex than girls selected for the final cohort.

Conduct a participatory analysis of factors of exclusion

Structures and relationships that marginalise adolescent girls manifest radically differently, and a ‘one size fits all’ approach is unlikely to succeed. Conducting an initial analysis, followed by regular updates to the analysis, and working to understand the discrimination and exclusion a girl is experiencing is a vital step to addressing the barriers that prevent the most marginalised girls from participating in and benefitting from development programming. A GESI analysis ensures that interventions resonate with adolescent girls and young women’s actual experiences, priorities, and aspirations. Out of their GESI analysis, projects found that a full set of clear recommended actions and methods emerged that helped them address girls’ needs, constraints, capabilities, and opportunities.

A strong GESI analysis, combined with individual-level assessments of girls, allowed projects to go beyond the sub-group – understanding how different identities intersected and identifying both barriers and characteristics and how they were working in concert to exclude girls from opportunities. Successful projects understood and articulated how diverse identities interacted to create unique social effects that vary according to time and place. For example, many girls with disabilities are denied access to health information due to inaccessible formats. Going beyond the sub-group also allowed projects to recognise that a particular characteristic doesn’t have to be a barrier – it becomes a constraining factor because of its structural, cultural and institutional constraints.

“Successful projects understood and articulated how diverse identities interacted to create unique social effects that vary according to time and place.”

What did not work / had limited success?

- Project approaches that did not mainstream disability and instead addressed it as an afterthought or a mandatory exercise instead of using an intersectional and systematic approach.
- Projects which focused on disability and did not always adequately consider gender or other intersecting barriers leading to marginalisation.

2. Respond to what the most marginalised girls need and want

Successful programming and interventions ensured that girls' needs, views and lived experiences drove project design and implementation.

“Nothing about us without us”: Use girls' voices to inform project design

Using girls' voices to inform solutions is the only way to ensure that an intervention is appropriate and resonates with marginalised girls' experiences, priorities and aspirations. Successful projects recognised girls as active agents in their change process. From the start, these projects listened to girls to understand the different aspects of their educational journeys – including positive and negative experiences. They involved them in designing solutions to the intersecting barriers they faced. These conversations happened in private, safe places with an appropriate facilitator, allowing girls to present challenges and solutions to help them thrive.⁶

Find the most relevant pathways

Non-formal education (NFE) may be the only pathway for some adolescent out-of-school girls. NFE can provide the foundational learning these girls need to return to school or, if a return to school is no longer relevant, the skills they need to start a business, take care of their family, or take leadership roles in their community. NFE was often more effective for the most marginalised girls as the content, timing, language and delivery could be tailored to their needs. In the Marginalised no More project in Nepal, girls were grouped based on their learning needs rather than age or grade. Community educators taught foundational, life and social and emotional skills in the local language. During classes, educators used tools such as games, pictures and group discussions which encouraged girls to engage in their learning actively.

CASE STUDY: Reaching pregnant and parenting girls in Kenya⁷

The number of girls giving birth in Kenya increased during COVID-19, likely as a result of an increase in gender-based violence, transactional sex and lockdowns which restricted access to SRH services. The Ministry of Education led the way in ensuring that these girls could return to school but GEC projects made some of the most significant contributions due to their pre-existing focus on the most marginalised and their relationships within communities that made engagement with young mothers possible. Projects found that the longer girls were out of school, the more support they needed to return. Older girls were likely to be positioned as ‘no longer suitable for school’, so projects had use intensive, one-on-one work (ideally by local staff) to persuade parents and caregivers to support the return.

Projects also found that the economic pressures on these girls were particularly acute and they worked to address financial barriers. They ensured that these girls were the first to benefit from their cash transfer or dignity kit provision. Some paid for childminders at every catch-up centre or enrolled toddlers in formal/informal early years centres.

Projects also deployed targeted teaching and learning strategies to help girls catch up on missed time and learn at home when they could – and in many ways, the innovations that emerged from COVID-19 helped improve access to home-based learning solutions.

It is important to note that GEC projects in Kenya could reach this group effectively because they worked within a legal framework that gave girls the right to return to school. They were also working collaboratively with the Ministry of Education. The ministry was highly supportive of ensuring that headteachers followed the law and supported young mothers, and projects were able to provide on-the-ground realities of exclusion(s) to inform their decision/policy making.

“Currently, there are two pregnant girls at the school and another on maternity leave, expected to return soon. As a school, we have been capacitated to accommodate these girls. We even built a guidance and counselling centre with community pooled resources to be a safe space for girls to engage and be supported.”

**Headteacher,
Zimbabwe**



⁶ Examples of the importance of hearing her voice can be read about within GEC publication ‘Five ways to support a pregnant and parenting girl’, available at: https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/cowpbyk3/gec_practice_brief_3_support_teenage_mothers_v2.pdf

⁷ For further reading see: GEC, Learning Brief: Five ways to support a pregnant or parenting girl to thrive in school and Mills, A. (2022) ‘It’s no problem?’. Perspectives on inclusion, parenting girls and education.

Structure a graduated response

Most projects implemented a graduated response across their interventions to ensure that all girls, including the most marginalised, were reached with varying degrees of support.⁸ This started with the project's more universal or inclusive approaches for all girls. Many projects did this at the whole school level, for example, training teachers in inclusive and gender-responsive pedagogy, which benefited all children in the school. The second step is a more targeted approach to provide additional support that sub-groups of girls need. The third step is specialist, tailored interventions to support the most marginalised girls. This last group of girls had the most complex needs, often facing multiple areas of discrimination.

Build girls' social cohesion and collective action

In terms of empowerment, projects that provided a safe space for discussion, built social networks, and encouraged critical thinking about social norms were the most successful. Girls' Clubs⁹ provided girls with safe spaces in fragile and conflict areas where they could develop and strengthen peer networks, often in contexts where they might not be allowed to go to school or to socialise. Such networks have strengthened girls' collective power by providing a forum to address educational challenges and barriers. [The SOMGEP-T evaluation](#) found that girls felt safer in school because of the increased involvement of Girls' Club members in school monitoring and conflict resolution. Leonard Cheshire's project in Kenya tailored Child-to-Child Clubs to address barriers for girls with disabilities. It actively advocated for child rights across the school and community, including those around protection and disability inclusion.

Work with communities, particularly men and boys, to challenge and shift gender and social norms

Negative perceptions and attitudes of families and the community constitute one of the most significant barriers to the education of the most marginalised girls. Even when policies supported marginalised girls to be included in education, attitudes often drove them away. Structures and environments have a significant impact on producing marginalised girls' inequality and disempowerment, so girls themselves should not bear the responsibility of transforming their situations. Projects deliberately and thoughtfully targeted engagement with stakeholders, including boys and men, to challenge and transform gender and equitable norms for the most marginalised girls. This needs to be deeply contextualised but should interrogate gendered constructs, explore alternative masculinities, and hold men and boys to account as well as in alliance.

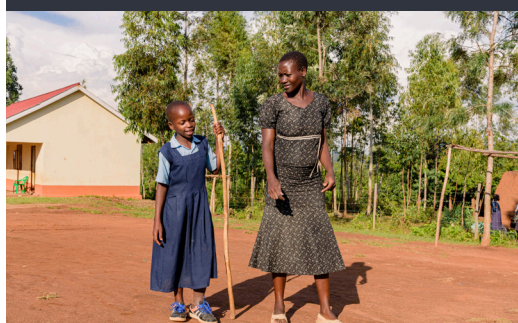
CASE STUDY: Working with communities in Nigeria

The [ENGINE](#) project included very marginalised girls from conflict-affected areas in Northern Nigeria and slum areas in Lagos.¹⁰ The project worked with male and female gender champions (called SHEroes) in schools, communities and amongst religious and traditional leaders to change attitudes and influence social norms around gender and social inclusion. Practitioners were trained on gender, social inclusion and protection issues and were able to raise awareness of these issues. The project promoted positive protection policies and practices that have been taken up beyond the project's scope.



CASE STUDY: Community mentors in Kenya

Leonard Cheshire worked with male and female mentors and their advocacy for the rights of girls with disabilities. Male mentors are given guidance and training on how to understand the intersectionality between gender and disability, 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.



⁸ This builds on the twin-track approach that is often referenced to and advocated for within the disability field. It emphasises the importance of implementing both mainstream and targeted programming. This approach was effective in delivering results. More can be read in this piece on driving value for money in work with girls with disabilities: https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/s3jpurti/gec_spotlight_brief_3_vfm_disability_v3.pdf

⁹ For a discussion on implementing successful girls clubs please see: [GEC Learning Brief: A space of their own: What we have learned about Girls' Clubs](#)

¹⁰ Over 35% of girls were orphans. Of the out of school girls in the project, 39% were married and 37% had children.

Work closely with families

Many projects worked very closely with girls' families. Domestic violence is common and increased during COVID-19 school closures. Unremunerated work at home creates girls' financial and psychological dependence on caregivers and male partners, and prevents them from negotiating their freedom. A lack of control over one's own body, including the ability to regulate fertility, also limits girls' freedoms. The [TEACH](#) project in Pakistan worked with parents, in-laws, and husbands to increase awareness of the girls' value and social and emotional needs. Almost all girls felt that there had been an increase in their ability to make decisions in the household and that they had increased recognition and respect from their family and peers. This contributed to increased self-esteem and confidence.

Engage mentors and encourage peer support

Many projects focused on strengthening relationships between adolescent girls and older girls or women who act as mentors and role models. Female role models can significantly impact girls' attitudes and aspirations and influence emerging norms among adolescent girls. In Sierra Leone, marginalised girls, including survivors of gender-based violence, have formed strong relationships with their mentors, in whom they can trust and confide. The [Let Our Girls Succeed](#) project in Kenya supported girls from slums or remote communities, where they faced negative gender practices, including female genital mutilation, forced marriage and gender-based violence. Female mentors supported girls in decision-making and negotiating with male authority figures.

Use gender and social inclusion-responsive pedagogy

Teachers and the curriculum can often portray a narrow view of what a girl can achieve, with highly gendered expectations and images. Girls with disabilities rarely see themselves portrayed positively. Girls who have children are often judged and feel shamed. GEC projects worked to ensure that teaching and learning materials and teachers give marginalised girls examples of what they could do outside the confines of dominant gender and social norms. The [KEEP](#) project in Kenya worked with teachers to critically analyse examples of negative gender and social stereotyping and discrimination against marginalised groups and develop strategies for challenging these stereotypes in the classroom. The [Discovery Project](#) developed an animated life skills series, My Better World, which featured positive storylines around a child with disabilities.

“Female role models can significantly impact girls' attitudes and aspirations and influence emerging norms among adolescent girls.”

What did not work / had limited success?

- Materials on SRH were often produced in inaccessible formats for girls with disabilities.
- Individuals and spaces intended to support positive change for marginalised girls, such as mothers' groups and Girls' Clubs, sometimes reinforced traditional gender roles and stereotypes. For example, one Girls' Club activity in a conflict-affected area involved cleaning schools.
- Projects do not always have the appropriate level of expertise (such as disability experts) and need to develop partnerships with local specialist organisations.



CASE STUDY: Engaging with domestic workers in Ethiopian cities

The [Biruh Tesfa for All](#) project worked with domestic workers – one of the most marginalised groups in Ethiopia. These girls are generally overlooked in policy and programmes and do not appear in the education statistics because they are an undocumented, mobile population. Government 'night schools' cannot meet their needs and they require additional support such as school materials, hygiene supplies, basic medical care and foodstuffs.

The project was able to support many girls, helping them to read and write and gain confidence. However, there was a significant drop out rate. This was mainly due to girls' movement or migration, or employers' and gatekeepers' resistance. As a response the project ensured extreme flexibility, allowing for prolonged absences and having a mechanism for catching up. Multiple recruitment rounds ensured that newly arriving girls had the opportunity to join. Classes were structured to offer education material at various levels.

The project also worked to address social norms and attitudes among employers. House-to-house recruitment and community conversations were an effective first step in engaging employers and addressing attitudes towards domestic workers and girls' work burdens. Such efforts should be expanded to include community conversations and media campaigns.

3. Articulate what success looks like for marginalised groups and track progress toward this vision

Commit to adaptive management

Projects continuously tested and learned whether solutions worked, how and why, and for whom. Successful projects built data collection into the project design, operating mechanisms and strategies so that it could be used to support programme review, learning and adaptations. This required monitoring and evaluation systems that looked at quality and impact in real-time, with feedback loops fast enough to respond to patterns before they become too entrenched. They also engaged experts, including local feminist or Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs), to target the most marginalised girls better and understand their needs. The EAGER project created feedback mechanisms to allow systematically girls, mentors and community members to inform project learning, adaptations and realignment of activities.

Disaggregate data

Successful programming and interventions ensured that monitoring, evaluation and learning utilised sub-group data, and that data collection and feedback systems supported working with the most marginalised. Projects defined and found groupings of girls through self-identified or project-identified characteristics. Data disaggregation of the individual's sex, age and disability status was the minimum requirement, and all projects were required to use the Washington Group set of questions, which instigated more responsive, focused programming for girls with disabilities. Data was then analysed against specific individual and contextual characteristics which made it possible to track whether barriers to education were changing and assess whether interventions could be replicated and adapted. Projects worked to ensure that this monitoring process did not further stigmatise the girls.

Use participatory monitoring systems

Projects have moved towards supporting girls to shape their narrative, using participatory monitoring and evaluation processes as an empowerment tool which provides participants with skills to design, collect, analyse and understand data. This helps them determine how data can effectively address issues concerning their lives. Collecting and analysing the information gathered is not a neutral process and is subject to bias and cultural attitudes, so thought needs to be given when considering who is being interviewed/ whose information is being gathered, who is the most appropriate person/s to collect that data and who is analysing data.

The [GATE](#) project in Sierra Leone piloted empowering ways of working in [girl-led monitoring and evaluation](#), supporting girls to shape the scope and methodologies. Young female peer leaders were important in monitoring the community learning centres. This developed their leadership abilities, self-confidence, assertiveness, visioning and organisation. EAGER facilitated girls to develop and measure their own Empowerment Plans. These Plans allowed girls to determine what meaningful, relevant and pragmatic transition looked like and then set milestones for measuring success. The project also provided new perspectives to broaden girls' choices for roles and goals for their future.

What did not work / had limited success?

- Tokenistic involvement of girls: they are asked for their input but have no real influence over implementation.
- The time between data collection and response is too long to respond effectively to girls at risk of permanently dropping out of school or the programme.
- Data collection is inefficient or repeated.
- Lack of feedback loops to inform programming.

¹¹ Read more here: [University of Bath \(2022\) Girls' education and language of instruction: an extended policy brief](#).



CASE STUDY: Girls who do not speak the language of instruction¹¹

Many GEC projects worked with girls who did not speak the language of instruction or who spoke a minority language as their mother tongue. Most countries where the GEC works are multilingual, and schools and catch-up centres bring together students and teachers from more than one community. This significantly impacts a girl's learning and experience in school. GEC projects were innovative in response to their local contexts and challenges. The [Making Ghanaian Girls Great!](#) project in Ghana responded to assessments which showed that a specific subgroup of girls who did not speak the dominant local language were falling behind. They recruited and trained language assistants, which improved learning outcomes and attendance of these girls. Other approaches involved remedial lessons and catch-up classes, training teachers to integrate flexible language use during lessons.

4. Understand the risks and contextual change

Successful projects understood risk and accountability. They understood that situations would change and that Do No Harm risks were complex and varied across contexts. Projects were challenging gender norms and power relations, which could, at times, present a heightened risk for the most marginalised girls, particularly around potential backlash, gender-based violence and economic exclusion. This required projects to conduct ongoing analysis to ensure they understood the potential risks of unintentionally perpetuating or reinforcing gender inequalities and social exclusion.

Many project locations were affected by conflict, climate change and refugee crises, where risks were also intensified for the most marginalised. Successful projects had strong child protection and GBV awareness and capacity in place, and carefully considered how and if violence featured in girls' lives. The [STAGE](#) project in Ghana and [Cheshire Services Uganda](#) project worked with families of girls with disabilities to conduct risk management and mitigation strategies (such as transport to and from the school) for when girls go to boarding schools. The projects also worked with the schools to ensure that their safeguarding systems were appropriate.

Many of the most marginalised girls who finished skills training and became self-employed in marketplaces faced risks, including gender-based violence, requests for transactional sex, robbery or extortion. Girls and project staff worked together to develop inclusive risk analyses and mitigation strategies. These included women's marketplace associations (which works to tackle these issues), cooperatives, moving in groups, and being accompanied by a father/husband where necessary.

5. Be accountable to the most marginalised

Projects demonstrating the greatest commitment to the most marginalised carefully interrogated whether ALL girls were succeeding and, if not, who was being left behind. In one project, disaggregated data showed that attendance was rising, *except* for girls from pastoralist families. In another, learning was accelerating, *except* for girls with cognitive disabilities. Sound MEL processes made these differences visible, but what set a successful project apart was whether it held itself to account for these gaps and acted upon them. When the [Team Girl Malawi](#) project identified at midline that girls with disabilities were not learning on the same trajectories as girls without disabilities, they brought in specific teacher training and a more targeted classroom approach.

Successful projects also created opportunities to directly engage with the most marginalised girls and their families and ask questions like 'How do you think we are doing? Are the activities helping you in the way you need them to? How can we do better?' To do this meaningfully, projects needed time, budget and staff with sufficiently nuanced research and adolescent engagement skills.

As already outlined, some projects also got girls to identify their issues, define priorities and set some indicators of success. These projects also reported back to the girls regularly, including after evaluations, to explain the evidence and success of the project. As far as possible, projects worked to be accountable to girls with disabilities, including those with profound or multiple disabilities, recognising that every child, regardless of their circumstances, can express their views.

6. Work towards transformative and sustainable change

Successful projects had rich data and a deep understanding of girls' lived realities that could be used as powerful tools for change. Many GEC projects were unique in their ability to provide data to which Ministries would not otherwise have access. In Somalia, the SOMGEP project identified hidden issues around language of instruction and how it marginalised a particular ethnic community. All projects in Kenya routinely organised visits for government officers from central departments to meet with their marginalised girls to build commitment, mobilise champions in the Ministry and connect the government with the reality of marginalised lives. In Sierra Leone and Kenya, GEC projects engaged with existing government work to include pregnant and parenting girls within policy frameworks and implementation plans. GEC projects have also garnered valuable data on the impact and costs of interventions required to support marginalised learners meaningfully.

At the school and community level, projects saw tremendous changes in people's perceptions of whether such girls could be included. Seeing the success of a young mother re-enrolled in school or a girl with a disability thriving in a vocational training centre was of intrinsic value and contributed to changing attitudes.

“Successful projects had strong child protection and GBV awareness and capacity in place, and carefully considered how and if violence featured in girls' lives.”

Value for money

The value for money approach explicitly includes ‘equity’ scoring, giving GEC projects due credit for reaching the most marginalised and acknowledging the value that equity generates. Costs can sometimes justifiably increase due to the difficulty in achieving scale effects. This can be down to a number of factors. Low population density in the rural/marginalised areas where projects operate can limit the number of girls that can be enrolled and the ability for a project to re-use facilitators and centres. Catch-up interventions to get girls back into the education system often sit outside the system, which limits the ability to draw on existing materials and system actors. Intense, bespoke and specialist support is required support highly marginalised girls. This precludes a ‘one size fits all’ approach that can be easily replicated.

A recurring issue for projects was the severe financial problems marginalised girls and their families often faced. The most responsive projects directly addressed these problems rather than simply proceeding with other non-financial

interventions. This was difficult within constrained budgets, but projects found ways to divert money from less successful activities and instead offer cash transfers or dignity kits. Some projects worked hard to map out other available resources, such as national income support for children with (officially recognised and recorded) disabilities.¹² Frequent and open communication between project and the Fund Manager was essential so that adaptations could be made and clear expectations of ‘success’ agreed upon.

These factors, among others, throw into sharp focus the difficulty of reach and cost when targeting the most marginalised out-of-school girls. By including an explicit equity component, cost economy scores can be more fairly balanced. Including an equity focus also underscores the diverse needs and experiences of different communities. It helps avoid making decisions based on narrow economic indicators rather than on what is truly important and valuable to people.

“Intense, bespoke and specialist support is required support highly marginalised girls. This precludes a ‘one size fits all’ approach that can be easily replicated.”



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¹² Please see ‘What drives value for money in Girls’ Education. Challenge projects that support girls with disabilities?’

Guiding questions for design and implementation

Mapping and reaching the most marginalised

- How are your hiring processes aware and sensitive to individuals, particularly women, from different marginalised groups? Are they accessible, inclusive and gender-sensitive?
- How are you engaging key partners from marginalised groups?
- Does your design identify and include groups or leaders who can be change champions? How have you integrated them into the project?
- How are stakeholder consultations representative of marginalised groups? Can people participate equally?

Responding to the needs of the most marginalised

- Does the project have sufficient resources to contribute towards improved gender equality and social inclusion? Is the project able to convert these resources into GESI-responsive practices?
- 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?
- Is the design sensitive and responsive to marginalised girls/groups? How is the project utilising specific and appropriate equity strategies to increase inclusion and reduce or eliminate marginalisation?
- Is the design responsive to how marginalised identities intersect and how these intersections contribute to a girl's or a group's experiences of marginalisation and oppression?
- How do you assess learning and project materials to ensure the incorporation of content and language that enhances gender equality and inclusion?

Defining and tracking success

- Are the expectations of achievement and success clearly defined and mutually understood between the donor and implementor?
- How strong are the processes through which the project knows whether it contributes to improved gender equality and social inclusion?
- How does your design identify targeted gender equality and inclusion goals for systemic change/ What social level of change will you seek to effect at all levels (i.e. individual, family, community, organisational, societal, e, policy)?
- How are you intentionally identifying and incorporating evidence-based approaches to increase gender equity and inclusion for the most marginalised groups (i.e. decreasing marginalisation and exclusion)?
- How do you use indicators that measure increases in inclusion for marginalised girls/ groups? Have these been developed with girls themselves? How will you report back on this?

Meaningful participation and accountability

- Have you created ample opportunities for marginalised girls and women to participate as part of the target group, as staff, participants, trainers, mentors and agents of change?
- How effectively is the project accountable to girls and women, particularly those from excluded social groups? **In answering this question, the project must also cross reference their work and evidence with the safeguarding standards, particularly those around accountability, do no harm and risk management.*
- Who can't you see? Why not?
- To what extent are girls and women, particularly those from excluded social groups, central to the project structure, partnerships and decision-making processes?
- Do the teams take and respect the views of marginalised girls/communities seriously? How are these views core to the project design, implementation, MEAL, risk management and sustainability?
- How are reporting and accountability mechanisms GESI sensitive? How are reports/ information disseminated to marginalised girls/ groups/communities? Are they translated into relevant languages and made accessible to girls/ partners/participants with disabilities?

Sustaining lasting change

- Is the project's influencing work likely to positively change the unequal structures and relations that sustain gender inequality and other exclusions?
- What are your assumptions around marginalisation and marginalised girls/groups in your context? What is motivating power holders to oppose change around marginalisation? What are the power dynamics?
- How are you supporting local organisations/ communities to effect transformative GESI change through challenging norms and changing institutions?

Mitigating Risk

- How will the project activities differently impact girls, staff, partners, and stakeholders from marginalised groups? How can negative impacts be mitigated?
- How do you consciously and consistently apply a Do No Harm framework to ensure the safety of participants, staff and stakeholders from marginalised groups?
- How will project closeout impact girls, staff, partners and stakeholders from marginalised groups? How can negative impacts be mitigated? How can the project support girls, staff, partners and stakeholders from marginalised groups to continue project objectives and push for transformative change?

Girls'
Education
Challenge



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