

Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

Supporting Transition of Adolescent Girls through Enhanced Systems (STAGES) – Link Education International

ETHIOPIA

MAY 2017 – AUGUST 2024



Girls' Education Challenge



LINK EDUCATION

“Our involvement with STAGES has been transformative, aligning seamlessly with the government’s priorities and policies on gender equality, inclusive education and safeguarding children in educational settings. The project’s interventions have become deeply embedded within our regular programmes, reflecting our commitment to institutionalising its successful models and practices.”

Zonal official



● Ethiopia

What did the STAGES project do?

The Supporting Transition of Adolescent Girls through Enhancing Systems (STAGES) project was funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC). It was implemented by Link Education International (Link) in Ethiopia's Wolaita Zone between 2017 and 2024.

The STAGES project targeted 144 primary and secondary schools in four of the 22 zone's woredas: Damot Pulasa, Damot Sore, Damot Woide and Kindo Koisha. The project worked on improving learning, transition and sustainability outcomes for girls through improving attendance, teaching and school leadership, management and governance. The project also focused on improving community support for girls' education.

Key activities included:

1. Providing girls with basic needs (school uniforms, stationary) and bursaries, as well as feminine hygiene products in schools, and holding additional tutorial sessions at schools to reinforce learning.
2. Providing induction for girls transitioning from primary to secondary school (Grade 8 to Grade 9).
3. Providing continuous professional development (CPD) training on pedagogical leadership training for girls' education linked to head teachers.
4. Strengthening community-school structures, including PTAs, School Improvement Committees and Kebele Education and Training Boards.
5. Introducing Mother and Father Groups to strengthen community support, focusing on challenging social norms and championing girls' education.
6. Providing training, regular mentoring and coaching support for teachers, and encouragement for communities of practice at school and cluster level.
7. Establishing gender clubs for girls and boys to challenge the gender stereotypes and social norms which limit girls' attendance, transition and learning.
8. Building the capacity of Girls' Education Advisory Committees (GEACs) to provide social and emotional learning (SEL) and counselling support to girls.
9. Training teachers on gender and inclusive responsive pedagogy, language (English and Wolaitatto) and numeracy competency, social and emotional learning approaches and school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV).
10. Embedding mechanisms to safeguard children in schools.
11. Establishing gender-inclusion school improvement and action plans.
12. Conducting annual School Performance Appraisal Meeting (gender, inclusion, safeguarding, SEL-responsive)
13. Establishing and supporting reading corners in schools.
14. Providing schools with reading books and conducted teacher training on teaching reading.
15. Constructing four secondary schools and repairing and constructing separate latrines for girls.



How did STAGES adapt during COVID-19?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the STAGES project, alongside government and community partners, conducted a rapid assessment to ascertain the status of project-supported girls following school closures. The data collected from the assessment was used to develop short and medium-term responses to challenges including the loss of learning, dropout from school, COVID-19 infection and increased safeguarding risks. It highlighted the very limited access that these girls had to the technology which was supporting learning in more urban, connected areas.

Keeping in contact with girls: The project kept in contact with girls via kebele leaders and district education officers, especially cluster supervisors with responsibility for a small number of schools. In turn, they kept in close contact with Mother and Father Groups and School Leaders, encouraging girls to continue to study and revise for their exams. Many teachers had left the schools and returned to their homes, and bringing students together to learn was not an option. Emphasis was put on maintaining contact with bursary recipient girls who were the most vulnerable, based on disability, orphan status, as well as marriage and child status.

Using local FM radio: Radio platforms were used to provide accurate information about COVID-19 and how to avoid infection. They were also used to encourage girls to keep studying before returning to school. Messages spread within school communities from the radio programmes.

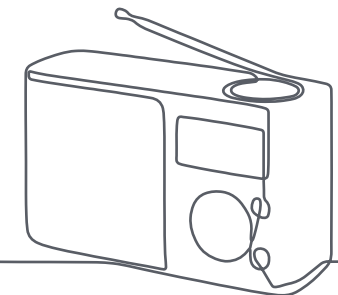
Addressing early marriage: Following the rapid assessment, findings suggesting that a number of girls had been married during school closures. The project staff visited 72 girls across the four districts. Only six of the girls were above the age of 18. The visiting teams collected information on the wellbeing of the girls, the reasons for their early marriage, and held discussion with them, their husbands, parents and communities on how they could continue with their education. The main reason given by girls for their school drop-out and early marriage was their parents' inability to fulfil their basic needs during the risky economic times of the pandemic. The positive role of Mother and Father Groups in household discussion about girls' education and wellbeing was noted by project and partners during the visits, with over 60% of the girls stating they would return to school with the support of their families.

Economic support: The bursaries and support for basic needs that were already provided to the most vulnerable girls were extended to girls who were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic, including those who had been married early. This reduced drop-out when schools reopened after five months.

COVID-19 Coordination: The project team attended and contributed to coordination meetings led by regional government and attended by all education partners.

“The training from STAGES made our families understand the importance of girls’ education so we don’t face pressure from obligations at home anymore.”

Girl



Girls' wellbeing and safety: As schools reopened, hygiene and sanitation items were provided to all supported schools, as per government priorities, and to help reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19. Items included jerry cans and water containers, soap, disinfectant and cleaning items. Also, in line with the government plan to reduce class sizes, the project provided items such as blackboards and story books for school libraries and additional classrooms. The project also supported Cluster Supervisors to deliver workshops in their schools as part of a 'back to school/school readiness' intervention.

Social and emotional learning (SEL): SEL support was strengthened to reflect the impact of COVID-19 on girls' resilience and confidence with learning. On return to school, particularly vulnerable girls received SEL and psycho-social support, and teachers in project schools received training on applying SEL approaches in the classroom. The STAGES Endline Evaluation highlights the importance that girls in project schools attached to this support.

Gender and inclusion-responsive pedagogy: The project adapted the teacher training approach during the pandemic to reach new teachers recruited by the government for additional classes, as part of the recovery strategy. Training materials were revised, introducing information on COVID-19, and strengthening teaching methodologies for gender, inclusion and SEL. School leaders and cluster supervisors participated in the training, to support regular follow-up coaching and mentoring. Sessions on school improvement planning (SIP), aimed at school leaders, introduced COVID-19 and other possible crises to the SIP process including data collection for school self-evaluation, preparation for crisis, response and recovery. To support girls to catch up with learning on their return to school, selected teachers received additional tutorial training, for the delivery of extra-curricular tutorials.

// EYERUSALEM'S STORY



Eyerusalem, is 19 years old and a student supported by the STAGES project. When she was in Grade 7, her family faced economic challenges, and her family decided that she would be married. Eyerusalem wanted to continue her studies and become a doctor. Fortunately, Eyerusalem's mother arranged for her to stay with an aunt, who supported her education until she passed Grade 9.

When Eyerusalem entered Grade 9 she started getting support from the STAGES project. The project provided her with uniform, scholastic and sanitary materials. As she was able to continue her education, her father decided not to pursue a marriage for her.

"The project is like a father to me and a light in the dark," says Eyerusalem. "If it wasn't for the support of the project, I would have been forced to get married and drop out of school because of my father's wishes. But the project made me believe that I can continue my education and achieve my dream of becoming a doctor in the future".

Eyerusalem was also received a bursary which enabled to fulfil her basic needs (e.g. rent) while she was in secondary school. She consulted the Girls Education Advisory Committee (GEAC) coordinator, who advised her to use the bursary to start an income-generating activity. Eyerusalem bought breeding goats as a source of income. This financial support relieved her parents from additional educational expenses, allowing her younger brother to pursue his education as well.

"I will never forget the training I attended in Grade 10," says Eyerusalem. "It was a social and emotional learning training. It had a profound impact on how I perceived myself. I am now in Grade 12 and the training has significantly contributed to my journey, particularly in boosting my self-confidence. It has instilled in me the belief that I can overcome any challenge. Additionally, the training has enhanced my collaborative skills, leading to improved academic grades in my studies, and I'm grateful for this. I am very confident that I could be a doctor who will be competent with my counterparts."

"Though my dream to be a doctor was a dream from my childhood, it seemed like an illusion. But now I am gearing it forward to be real. All this confidence is because of my consistent performance improvement. Particularly this year, I achieved exceptional scores in all subjects. My mathematics score is the highest score in the entire school. I convinced all my teachers, and they have recognised my abilities and invited me to participate in tutorial classes to motivate and support other students."



“SEL training increases the emotional intelligence of girl students and builds their confidence. Because of this training a lot of shy students become confident and introduce themselves and present class activities in front of others with confidence. Even their families were surprised by their changes, and last year some of them joined university.”

Head teacher

What did STAGES achieve?

Improved learning outcomes. At endline, 85.4% of Grade 8 girls were improved learners in literacy and 73.3% of Grade 8 girls were improved learners in numeracy. The project saw significant gains in average literacy and numeracy scores among Grade 8 girls. Specifically, they had statistically significantly higher aggregate literacy scores in English compared to those in Grade 6 at midline, indicating a positive trend. The gains were statistically significant from midline to endline on all literacy and numeracy subtasks.

Improved transition. At endline, 80.2% of Grade 8 girls said they wanted to transition to secondary school, while 93.1% of Grade 10 girls said they want to transition to Grade 11. The Endline Evaluation indicated that project interventions successfully mitigated the factors that prevent girls from transitioning to secondary school from midline to endline. Firstly, the home-based factors such as early marriage, lack of parental support, early pregnancy and illness declined. Secondly, the proportion of Grade 10 girls who considered dropping out decreased from 18.08% to 6.80%. Finally, girls and teachers spoke positively about the changes they had observed in families' attitudes, as well as in communities' beliefs, with respect to girls' education.

Improved teaching. Qualitative data from endline corroborates the overall gains in girls' gender perceptions and life skills, with head teachers, teachers and girls themselves describing the positive change in well-being. Respondents said the gains had occurred for multiple reasons, including improved gender-inclusive teaching practices, greater community acceptance of girls' education and numerous project activities focused on girls' self-esteem and well-being. Girls noted how the social-emotional learning (SEL) training had benefited them by building their confidence, improving their interpersonal skills and helping them manage their emotions better.

Improved school management. The project demonstrated effective management, with head teachers being more likely to say Woreda officials were responsive to the needs of girls in their school. This increased from 83.33% at baseline to 97.67% at midline.

Improved attendance. Attendance among Grade 10 girls was similar from midline to endline.

Improved direct support for girls. Girls' Education Advisory Committees (GEACs). Capacity development of GEACs in project schools contributed to girls' retention, attendance, confidence, agency and self-esteem. GEAC members supervise 'GEAC rooms' in schools where girls can go to wash, rest, receive advice, and read during menstruation. GEAC members also provided SEL to girls via sessions focusing on skills to build their self-esteem and confidence including self-awareness, managing emotions, motivation, and relationships. Safeguarding was integral to the role of GEACs and in collaboration with the Gender Clubs they formed a powerful alliance to combat violence, challenge harmful social norms and create a peaceful learning environment. At the midline evaluation (2021) 99% of teachers interviewed stated GEACs to be responsive to girls' needs, and highlighted that girls were more willing to speak up in relation to gender-based violence.

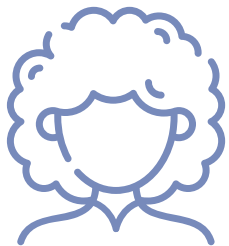
Improved girls' confidence and self-esteem. Endline results suggest that girls were more confident in making important decisions about their lives. Head teachers and teachers said they noticed how girls' well-being and SEL skills had improved and that the formation of Girls' Clubs was transformative.

“The GIRP training opened our eyes to unconscious gender biases in things like the examples and language we were using.”

Teacher



The STAGES project in numbers



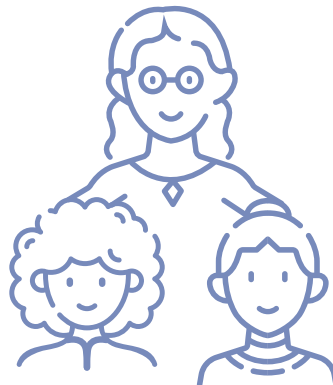
Number of
girls reached

61,345



Number of
schools reached

147



Number of GEACs
established in
secondary schools
and separate
latrines for girls

17



Number of new
secondary schools
constructed and
handed over to
government, now
fully operational

4

Additional **460,070** learners, **456** schools and **12,182** teachers reached within 18 non-target woredas through government scale-up of STAGES interventions in the last two years of the project

To what extent did the project deliver value for money?

According to the Value for Money (VfM) assessment carried out by the GEC Fund Manager, STAGES was a strong and relevant project targeting marginalised girls in formal school. It was well delivered with some scaling of teacher training with government financial contributions. It addressed socio-economic, cultural and language barriers faced by girls. Marginalised girls were given access to formal education opportunities. Financial barriers were responded to through financial support provided to girls. The project implemented effective activities that built on Link's previous experience of working in the region.

High learning levels were due to adaptive and evidence-based trainings in SEL, language, literacy and numeracy. There were also improvements in classroom teaching, with engagement of government officials in observations and supervisory oversight. The project's resources were well allocated to meet the needs of the beneficiary populations. The relevance of project design was evident in improved outcomes demonstrated by marginalised girls after participating in STAGES. Woreda officials shared how the project's interventions were connected to their priorities and how they did not have the necessary tools to implement them until the project intervened. The activities that were undertaken by the project were activities which the government would have wanted to do but were not able to due to a lack of capacity, ideas and resources.

“I'm much more intentional now about making sure I call on girls equitably, use examples relevant to females and depict women in non-traditional roles.”

Teacher



What did STAGES learn?

Addressing barriers to transition. At endline, early marriage, lack of parental support, early pregnancy and illness were the four reasons that girls cited most frequently for preventing their peers from transitioning. These factors are notably related to girls' lives at home. Also, poor or unsafe infrastructure, gender-specific latrines and access to water were the factors that girls reported least frequently as barriers to transition. Understanding the socio-emotional well-being of the girls who have successfully transitioned helped to uncover the attributes that have helped sustain their enrolment. Endline results suggest that high levels of socio-emotional well-being, as well as a positive perception of gender equality in and out of the classroom help girls to surmount the barriers that prevent them from continuing their education. Girls interviewed at endline reported that the main factors that kept them in school were support for basic school needs, encouragement from family and friends and teacher encouragement.

Improving literacy. The endline evaluation suggests that focus on improving reading comprehension skills and strategies in both English and Wolaitatto in future iterations of literacy interventions should primarily be focusing on training teachers intensively on classroom activities and instructional strategies focused on reading comprehension. Through classroom activities and instructional strategies, teachers can encourage their students to adopt certain skills related to reading comprehension, including making connections, visualising, predicting, inferring, asking questions, summarising, synthesising and determining important ideas and maintaining meaning. At endline, girls and teachers said that tutorials were one of the most impactful activities in improving learning outcomes. Tutorials helped girls catch up on learning and improve their fluency in English.

Sustaining results. Sustaining key project interventions was at the top of stakeholders' minds with the project nearing its end. In its long-term sustainability plan, STAGES identified three primary interventions

it deemed to have the most potential for sustainability: pedagogical leadership and supervision (including school improvement planning), gender and inclusive responsive pedagogy (GIRP), and safeguarding mechanisms and practices (including through community-based mothers' and fathers' groups). Zonal and woreda officials reported that these specifically targeted interventions have been successfully incorporated and scaled at varying levels into the Wolaita Zone's educational system, with pedagogical leadership and supervision furthest along in being integrated, followed by GIRP and then safeguarding.

Encouraging continued community involvement in girls' education.

At endline, respondents described how instrumental community-based groups such as the mothers' and fathers' groups were in supporting education in their communities by encouraging children to remain enrolled in schools, raising awareness about the importance of education, ensuring safeguarding mechanisms are actively applied and organising income-generating activities. With the project closing, a zone-wide meeting of these groups' representatives was held to recognise exemplary results and promote best practices. This was seen as an effective way to validate their importance, motivate them to continue their work and expand the use of best practices.

Supporting girls' social and emotional learning. At endline, respondents credited the project's SEL interventions in helping girls develop emotional intelligence, better manage their feelings, become more confident communicators and improve their knowledge of topics such as SRGBV and sexual and reproductive health. In order to strengthen the provision of SEL, future programmes may consider training girls to be mentors or 'Big Sisters' and identify women, especially those who have transitioned to university, who could share their experiences.



// TESFANESH'S STORY

Tesfanesh grew up in a rural area of Ethiopia where girls' education is not usually encouraged. She has two sisters and two brothers. Unfortunately, her father passed away when she was just one year old. Their mother had to work tirelessly to support them and while growing up, they all faced economic hardship.

Due to the financial barriers, compounded by the fact that her mother had to move to another city for work, she was forced to drop out of school at Grade 5. During her mother's absence, Tesfanesh's uncle took care of her, but she had to do all the domestic chores, leaving her with no chance to attend school. This situation deeply saddened Tesfanesh, especially when she saw her friends going to school while she was left behind, causing her psychological distress. After a year, her mother returned and then Tesfanesh resumed her studies.

Due to her financial problems, Tesfanesh was supported by the STAGES project and received support including scholastic items and sanitary pads. This enhanced her self-esteem and self-confidence, which positively influenced her learning performance. She started receiving tutorial support at Grade 7 which was a critical step to unlock her hidden talent and significantly improve her academic progress. "I am convinced that this project is a true blessing, not only for me but also for thousands of female students."

When Tesfanesh reached Grade 9 and transited to secondary school, her main worry was how she would afford educational materials. The STAGES project included provision of bursary which allowed Tesfanesh to continue her learning.

Tesfanesh says, "The head teachers of our school always helped us get special counselling and support for female students, which is unusual in many schools. After I understood it, I realised that it was the result of the training that the project had provided them. Teachers also give special support to female students. They helped and supported us to participate in class, to focus on our studies, and to ask questions that we did not understand. This helped me not only to become stronger in my

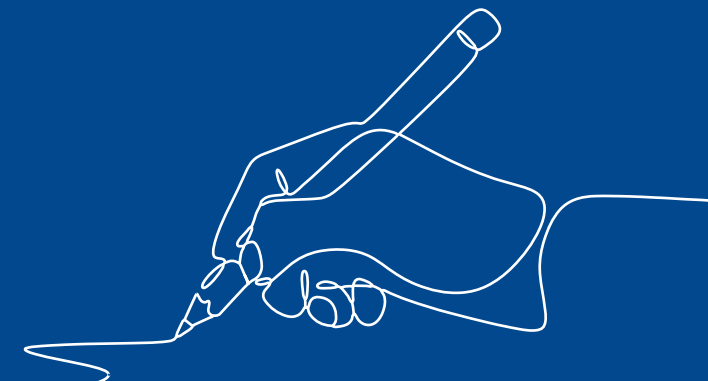
studies but also helped me to believe in myself. These and other support from the project made me have more self-confidence and change society's view that men are better than women".

Tesfanesh and her mother received an annual learning performance award. These awards recognise girls and their mothers who have shown outstanding performances in the course of the academic year. This encouraged other mothers in her area to teach and encourage their daughters, affecting the community at large.

"This project made me believe I'm equal to men," says Tesfanesh. "It made me think and believe that I could do anything. It showed me that no matter what problems I faced, I could overcome them. The project helped me to get good results in my studies and made me believe in myself. As a result, when I was a student in secondary school, I received encouraging awards every time. Currently I am studying medicine here at Wolaita Sodo University and I am at my second year. Overall, the project holds significance not only for me but for all women."



"This project made me believe I'm equal to men."



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Find out more: www.linkeducation.org.uk/project/stages/ | www.girlseducationchallenge.org

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