Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

A think piece from the Girls' Education Challenge on why we need to rethink how we reach and support adolescent girls to ensure they thrive in education systems.

Introduction

Adolescents comprise one-sixth of the world's population and are going through one of human development's most rapid and formative phases. Over these years, girls and boys undergo distinctive cognitive, social, emotional and sexual development. This is also a time when gender norms become more entrenched and have more of an impact on the lives of boys and girls. While these norms can negatively impact boys, social norms tend to subject girls to more restrictions on their behaviour, freedoms and mobility. The years between 10 and 19 are critical phases during which the negative impacts of previous adversities can be mitigated, and positive development trajectories can be fostered – particularly important for the most marginalised adolescents.

Education systems are central to adolescents' lives and cut across many levels – primary, secondary, non-formal and higher education. However, it is often the case that systems are not always set up to respond to the unique needs and each unique phase of adolescence, such as pre-teen, early adolescence and older adolescence. For example, it is a common assumption that interventions that have worked for younger learners can also be used for older learners, leading to the delivery of 'more of the same' – just to an older cohort.[1] This is especially true in contexts of late enrolment, high repetition and high drop-out, resulting in high numbers of over-age students.

There is a strong case for putting adolescent girls at the centre of of policy making and programming.[2] The evidence for investing in adolescent girls is strong, not least due to the multiplier effect that can be realised through such investments. Furthermore there are three important global trends in the education and development sector are linked to adolescents. First is the focus on foundational skills – skills many adolescents have not acquired for various reasons. Second, given the considerable achievements made towards universal primary education, systems are now turning their attention towards the secondary level.[3] And finally, there is a welcome focus on equity and the most marginalised girls and boys.[4] Within these trends, it is important to recognise the uniqueness of adolescence and its different phases, the educational implications, and the unique attention adolescence deserves within national development policies, programmes and plans.[5]

Drawing upon the experiences of GEC projects, this paper explores the specific needs of adolescent girls, how projects have responded to these needs, key learning and the challenges involved. Using the GAGE framework, it will further explore what adolescent-responsive education could look like and offer some policy and practice recommendations.

© VSO

[1] The GEARP 'smart buys', for example, are mostly based on an evidence base of studies looking at the primary level. The paper urges caution in applying these to the secondary level and suggests they be accompanied by strong monitoring plans. *World Bank Document*
[2] *Investing in adolescent girls: mapping global and national funding patterns from 2016-2020 (GAGE)*, *Adolescent Girls – The Investment Case (UNICEF)*
[3] *Quality, universal secondary education: what will it take? | IIEP-UNESCO*
[4] *Extreme poverty and the Sustainable Development Goals: Government response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2022-23 (parliament.uk)*
[5] *Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!)*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

2

Adolescent-responsive education needs to be informed by evidence

There is increasing awareness that the way in which education is delivered for adolescent girls and boys needs to be updated and more 'fit for purpose'. Thus, it is essential to learn more about the needs of adolescents and how education systems should respond to them.

Some research hubs and programmes dedicated to adolescence have recently been set up. The FCDO-funded Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme is the most prominent among these and is generating crucial evidence about the diverse experiences of adolescents living in low and middle-income countries. Similarly, the Girl Innovation, Research and Learning (GIRL) Center[6] is a global research centre that generates, synthesises and translates evidence to transform the lives of adolescent girls.

Within the health space, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) newly revised guidance on Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!)[7] describes significant scientific, political and programmatic advances in adolescent health and well-being that have further strengthened the investment case. It also mentions meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and the increasing visibility of adolescents in topic-specific agendas. As outlined in its guidance, 'Adolescents are not simply old children or young adults.'[8]

In addition, thinking around adolescent wellbeing has expanded with far greater attention to emotional, sociocultural and cognitive wellbeing. Evidence has grown in this area in the last decade, demonstrating the positive impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes on adolescents' social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes and overall health and well-being. Social and emotional skills help prepare adolescents for a healthy transition to adulthood. This has implications for educators as outcomes for education expand beyond just academic to wider positive social, wellbeing and mental health outcomes.

Improvements in developmental neuroimaging have enabled a greater understanding of the changes that occur in the human brain during adolescence. Historically, the teenage brain was seen as more of a burden than an asset, and adolescents were conceptualised as 'risk machines' who lack decision-making skills.[9] However, while adolescents, risks and rewards should be closely examined, there is also increasing recognition that what was previously classed as immaturity is actually cognitive, behavioural and neurological flexibility that allows adolescent girls and boys to explore and adapt to their changing inner and outer worlds.[10]

While we know more about what happens during adolescence and their needs, education systems still need to catch up with the research in most cases. To ensure education systems are adolescent-responsive, it is important that the most up-to-date evidence on social-emotional skills, gender, pedagogy, well-being and neurology are informing new policies, education planning, and practice and that education actors are identifying ways of structuring systems and interventions to be in line with the dynamic needs of adolescent girls and boys.

A decolonising perspective on adolescence

This thinkpiece draws upon literature from diverse disciplines, including those of psychology and neuroscience. Within these fields – as in every area including education and international development – there needs to be acknowledgement that much of what is taken to be 'knowledge' is based upon a modern, individualist understanding of a person that reflects a narrow base of research in settings within the global North amongst richer and educated populations.

Rather than understanding this perspective and these adolescent lives as cultural forms, a tendency can exist to think of them as 'the norm'. If these ideas become elevated to the status of 'default', this universalist approach can lead to assumptions being made about adolescents in non-Western settings that do not hold true, or undervalue or marginalise their lived experience. This thinkpiece and its authors acknowledge the severe limitations of such a perspective, and have sought to emphasise the heterogeneity of the adolescent experience and to privilege research from low-income settings.

[6] _Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center | Innovation Hubs | Population Council (popcouncil.org)_
[7] Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!): guidance to support country implementation, second edition. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO
[8] Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!): guidance to support country implementation, second edition. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO
[9] _Teens aren't just risk machines – there's a method to their madness (theconversation.com)_
[10] _What neuroscience tells us about the teenage brain (apa.org)_

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

3

The Girl's Education Challenge's adolescent girls

In 2012, the then Department for International Development (DFID) launched the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC). The GEC was designed to support up to one million of the world's most marginalised adolescent girls, aged between 10 and 19. It focused on improving girls' learning and supporting girls' transitions to further education or economic security. At the same time, all GEC girls were going through their journeys of learning and transition: learning about themselves, making meaning of their place in the world, and transitioning into adulthood.

Much has been learned about the linkages between adolescence, gender and educational outcomes over the GEC's lifetime.[11] The GEC has been engaging with these issues from the outset because of its particular focus on adolescent girls.

The GEC benefits from the unique vantage point of learning from groups of girls longitudinally – following and supporting them as they progress through adolescence. Additionally, the GEC's focus on the most marginalised girls and girls who are out of school is important. These girls faced significant and intersecting constraints, and education interventions often provided a second window of opportunity to alter their life course significantly.

The GEC programme was structured to be able to better respond to the changing needs of girls as they got older and encountered new challenges or developed new aspirations. This necessitated adaptive programming and collecting an immense amount of quantitative and qualitative data from and about adolescent girls, generating nuanced learnings from the hundreds of project staff working with these girls. This paper aims to draw upon this evidence and prompt further thinking around adolescent-responsive programming within education and how practitioners might better support adolescent girls during this vital and often turbulent part of their lives.

© WEI

The widening of the gender learning gap during adolescence

Adolescence transitions shape both boys' and girls' learning outcomes, and these transitions are highly gendered. As girls progress into adolescence, gaps in learning outcomes widen between girls and boys. In many instances, girls and boys perform at the same level at primary, but more significant differences in low pass grades between girls and boys are seen at the secondary level.

In Rwanda[12], GEC data showed that girls and boys have equally low pass grades for the English language at the primary level, but by the end of lower secondary, gender differences are striking, with 51% of girls failing the English exam nationally compared to 41% of boys.[13] Similar trends were found across other GEC projects, with the gender gap in learning starting to widen at secondary school. In Ghana, EGRA scores were similar for girls and boys in primary school, but in the first year of secondary, boys began to outperform girls significantly, with girls' average SEGRA score at 56 and boys at 68.

---

[11] *GAGE-on-adolescence-and-gender-norms_0.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)*
[12] The GEC project implemented in Rwanda, REAP, succeeded in reducing the negative effect of a high chore burden on English literacy, but struggled to make similar gains with two groups of the most marginalised girls – out-of-school girls and girls who had been pregnant – illustrating the intensity of support required for girls who are particularly impacted by adolescence when it has led to drop-out and/or parenthood. *hpa-rwanda-midline.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[13] *Girls_Education_and_Language_FINAL.pdf (bath.ac.uk)*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

4

Drop-out and attendance

Adolescence correlates with a high risk of drop-out and absenteeism for girls, which has clear links to the gaps in learning outcomes. Significant progress has been made towards achieving gender parity, particularly in the first few years of primary school.[14] However, over the following years, girls' presence and participation in school starts to drop, often leading to poor completion and transition rates.[15]
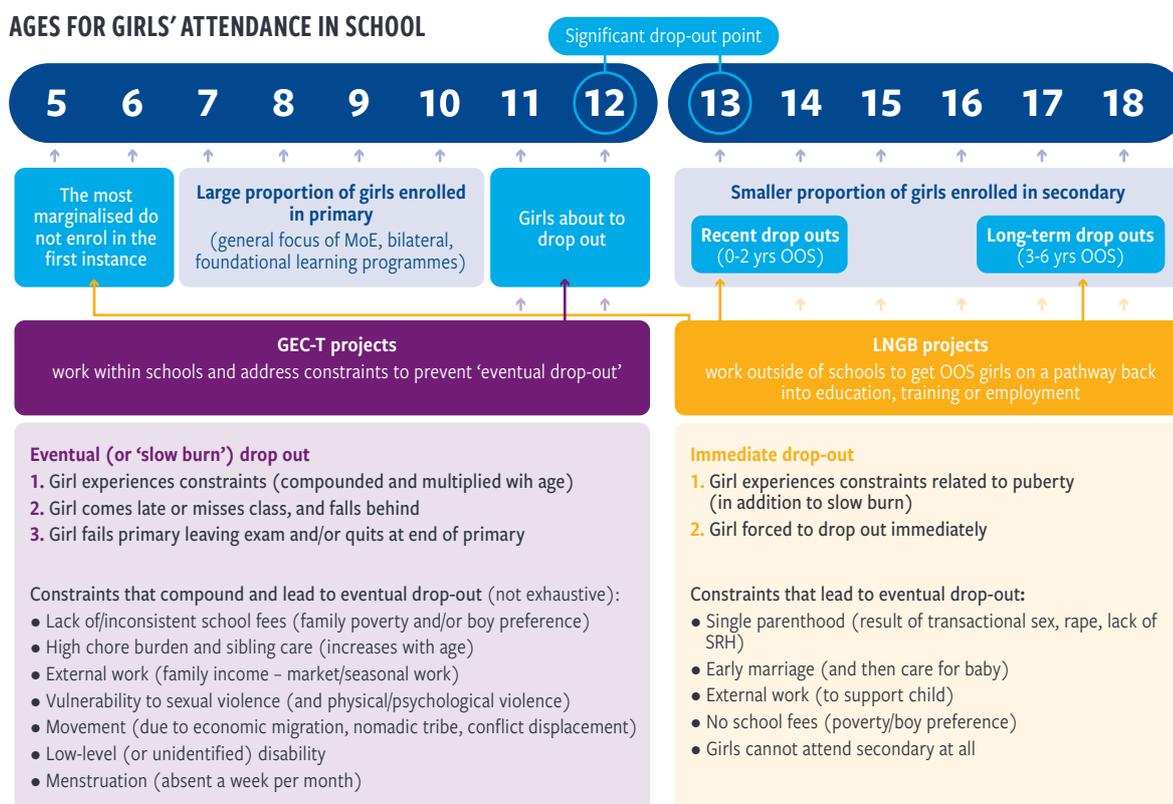
Figure 1 illustrates that girls are at significant risk of dropping out aged 12 and 13. This is, firstly, a time when girls are transitioning from primary to secondary education. Secondly, a time when they are going through puberty and in many contexts, this marks a girl's transition to adulthood. Her education is no longer deemed important as entrenched gender norms result in her value being linked to her household and familial responsibilities. Education is not considered necessary for these responsibilities.

What is happening during adolescence that results in these gendered learning gaps?

Figure 1 illustrates some additional constraints girls face during adolescence linked to gender norms. During adolescence, her chore burden may increase, she may have less control over her free time and homework time, and more value may be placed on boys' education, particularly if there are limited resources to fund education in households.

Social norms have more of an impact on girls' lives during adolescence and can result in restrictions on girls' mobility outside their community, limiting their access to secondary school. Social norms are also closely linked to social and cultural beliefs that once a girl reaches puberty, her value lies in her role as a wife, mother and homemaker, leading to high rates of early marriage in many contexts. In addition, during puberty, early pregnancy may result from transactional sex or a lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health. Early marriage and early pregnancy correlate with early drop-out from school. Since girls often go through the physical changes of puberty earlier than boys, these negative effects of social norms (such as restriction on mobility) have an earlier negative impact on their education.

Figure 1: *Zones of exclusion – Out-of-school girls and girls at risk of drop out*

AGES FOR GIRLS' ATTENDANCE IN SCHOOL

Significant drop-out point

5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		13	14	15	16	17	18

The most marginalised do not enrol in the first instance	Large proportion of girls enrolled in primary (general focus of MoE, bilateral, foundational learning programmes)	Girls about to drop out	Smaller proportion of girls enrolled in secondary

Recent drop outs (0-2 yrs OOS)   Long-term drop outs (3-6 yrs OOS)

GEC-T projects
work within schools and address constraints to prevent 'eventual drop-out'

LNGB projects
work outside of schools to get OOS girls on a pathway back into education, training or employment

Eventual (or 'slow burn') drop out
1. Girl experiences constraints (compounded and multiplied wih age)
2. Girl comes late or misses class, and falls behind
3. Girl fails primary leaving exam and/or quits at end of primary

Constraints that compound and lead to eventual drop-out (not exhaustive):
● Lack of/inconsistent school fees (family poverty and/or boy preference)
● High chore burden and sibling care (increases with age)
● External work (family income – market/seasonal work)
● Vulnerability to sexual violence (and physical/psychological violence)
● Movement (due to economic migration, nomadic tribe, conflict displacement)
● Low-level (or unidentified) disability
● Menstruation (absent a week per month)

Immediate drop-out
1. Girl experiences constraints related to puberty (in addition to slow burn)
2. Girl forced to drop out immediately

Constraints that lead to eventual drop-out:
● Single parenthood (result of transactional sex, rape, lack of SRH)
● Early marriage (and then care for baby)
● External work (to support child)
● No school fees (poverty/boy preference)
● Girls cannot attend secondary at all

[14] *UNICEF Think Piece – Girls' Education.pdf*
[15] *UNICEF Think Piece – Girls' Education.pdf*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

5

Adolescent-responsive education: observations and considerations from the GEC

Inattention to adolescence and the additional support needed by girls will allow gender gaps in education to continue and worsen, particularly when intersecting with other factors of marginalisation such as poverty or conflict. This section outlines some of the observations and lessons learned across GEC projects. It explores some areas that require additional attention to support girls' education outcomes during adolescence.

For school attendance, focus on the blind spots

Figure 1 illustrates four zones of exclusion which need particular attention to ensure the most marginalised girls are attending school and do not drop out:

1. Girls who are at risk of dropping out,
2. Girls who have recently dropped out,
3. Girls who are longer-term drop-outs
4. Girls who have never been to school.

GEC-T projects worked with over 1.4 million girls and paying attention to the pre-cursors of drop-out, such as low attendance, and support girls at risk to mitigate drop-out. They engage with girls before the real pressure points of adolescence kick in, which has enabled projects to identify individual girls at risk and engage with them and their families to discuss the gendered reasons for absence and make follow-up plans of action.

In Kenya, the Education Development Trust initiated a system which sends an SMS alert to community health volunteers (CHVs) if there are more than three days of unexplained absence, after which the volunteer goes and visits the family to talk through reasons – such as girls being pulled out of school to help parents at a market or to attend burial ceremonies – and support continuation of education.

LNGB projects worked with over 230,000 targeting the most marginalised girls – those who had dropped out of school or had never been to school. Despite improvements globally, an estimated 250 million children and young people are out of school worldwide.[16] The most marginalised do not enrol in the first place. For example, only 6% of Musahar girls in Nepal can enrol in primary school. These are learners who have fallen outside the formal education system, become invisible, and are forgotten about. It is imperative that these adolescents become visible and that their educational needs are met. This has been the aim of LNGB projects. Many LNGB projects delivered education directly in non-formal education centres (rather than through government schools). This meant they could timetable lessons to be far more in line with girls' needs and preferences, which reduced the risk of drop-out and improved attendance.

Focus on shifting gender norms

As previously outlined, gender norms begin to exert a much greater impact on girls' lives during adolescence.[17] Patriarchal constructs around women as reproductive carers by nature and the lack of power or value accorded to this association mean that perceived progression into womanhood brings with it a significant increase in social pressure around adhering to gender norms. As girls move away from being constructed as a more gender-neutral 'child' and into the realm of 'young women', ideas about how girls and women should behave and the roles they should play within the family, school, community and larger society become increasingly aired and enforced. Girls often internalise these beliefs. This has direct and tangible impacts on the behaviour and freedoms of girls, including within education.

In Somalia,[18] GEC projects found that girls' ability to remain in education decreased as they progressed through adolescence because of the increased likelihood of marriage and motherhood. A girl in a focus group summarised what she saw as the rationale for that pressure: "Marriage is compulsory. It is one of our religious obligations. This is how all human life has been started, and everybody needs to have children."

These norms are policed by community members, who expect wives to care for the house and produce children once married. One girl explained, *"When the girls have family problems and decide to marry a man and move in with him, she might be the only girl in the home."* Being the "only girl in the home" subtly suggests that the newly married girl will have many household responsibilities, which will be paramount for her. Schooling becomes implicitly a secondary priority or perhaps a conflicting priority.

GEC projects found that sometimes, this transition from being constructed as a girl to being constructed as a woman can happen rapidly, which brings about significant changes in expectations.[19] Concurrent changes in physical terms, emotional needs, priorities and relationships, and self-identity – and the fact that these may well be colliding with life changes such as a change in grade or school – can easily overwhelm an adolescent girl and lead to feelings of distress. As a result, support needs to be in place well before the adolescent phase starts – support that responds to the individual needs of each girl.

[16] UNESCO (2023) SDG4 Mid term progress review
[17] GAGE-on-adolescence-and-gender-norms_0.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)
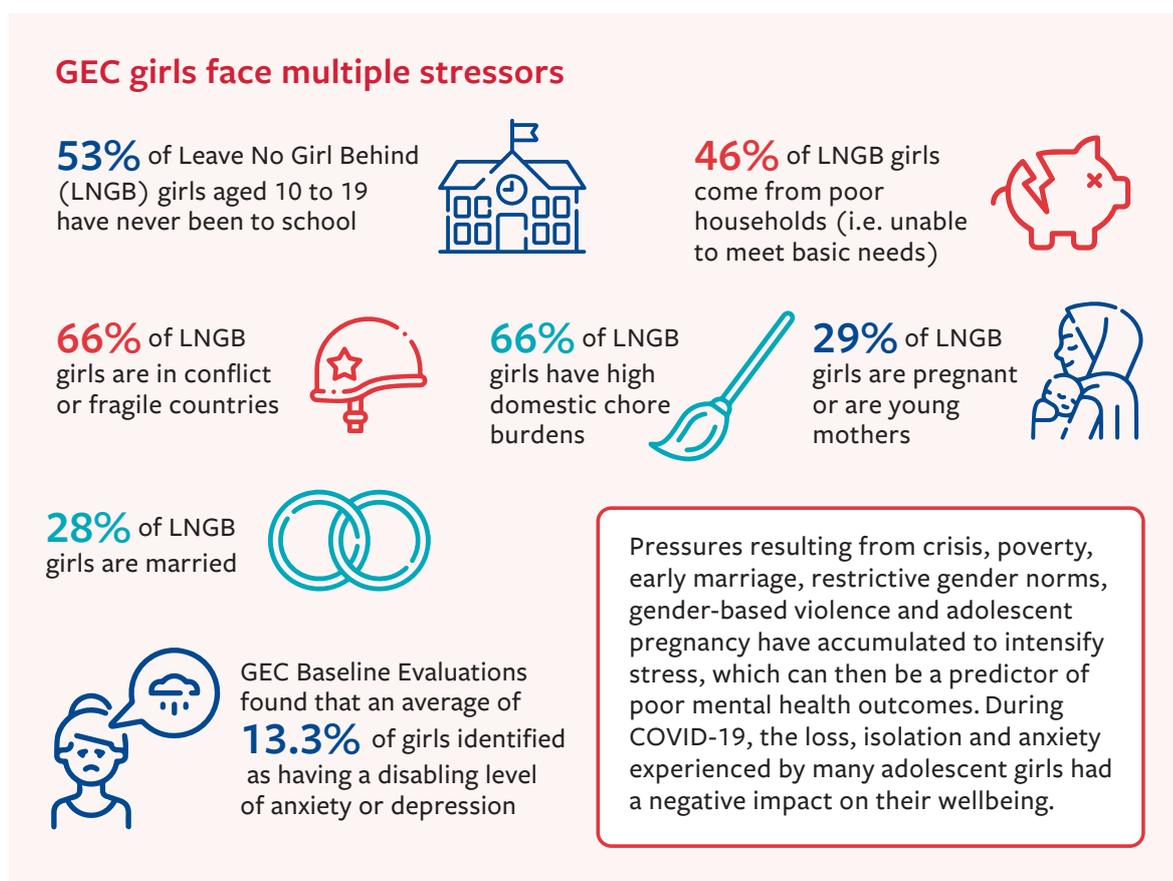[18] somgep-t-gect-baseline-evaluation.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)
[19] Disruptive Discourses: Kenyan Maasai Schoolgirls Make Themselves

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

6

Focus on mental health and psychological well-being

There is a rapidly expanding evidence base around adolescence and mental health suggesting that mental health problems tend to increase sharply during adolescence.[20] This was also a finding across GEC projects. Factors connected to the physical and cognitive development experienced during adolescence combined with life changes (such as how adolescence tends to coincide with a change in school and friendship groups) and socio-cultural shifts (such as increased expectations around gender) make stress and anxiety more likely. As illustrated in *Figure 2*, GEC girls face multiple stressors which impact negatively on their mental health. Across GEC projects, nearly 8% of girls were experiencing anxiety and depression – and this was the endline figure, a marked reduction from the 13.3% rate at baseline.[21]

Projects provided protective factors against anxiety and depression, such as ensuring a safe learning environment with supportive adults, building girls' life skills and self-confidence, building skills to manage stress, and building girls' friendships and support networks.[22] There must be a focus on well-being in adolescent girl education projects to support girls in navigating changes and challenges, mitigating stressors, and getting more specialised help when needed.

Figure 2: The multiple stressors that girls face

GEC girls face multiple stressors

53% of Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) girls aged 10 to 19 have never been to school

46% of LNGB girls come from poor households (i.e. unable to meet basic needs)

66% of LNGB girls are in conflict or fragile countries

66% of LNGB girls have high domestic chore burdens

29% of LNGB girls are pregnant or are young mothers

28% of LNGB girls are married

GEC Baseline Evaluations found that an average of **13.3%** of girls identified as having a disabling level of anxiety or depression

Pressures resulting from crisis, poverty, early marriage, restrictive gender norms, gender-based violence and adolescent pregnancy have accumulated to intensify stress, which can then be a predictor of poor mental health outcomes. During COVID-19, the loss, isolation and anxiety experienced by many adolescent girls had a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Focus on social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is increasingly being recognised and included in education programming. Evidence shows that SEL can promote sustained positive mental health and psychosocial well-being among adolescents. Social and emotional skills are thus not only important to help them navigate adolescence but are also important for adulthood and are linked to future success in education, work and life more generally. SEL is particularly important for the most marginalised girls as these skills can help mitigate previous negative effects of stressors girls may have been exposed to. Evidence suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have, on average, weaker SEL skills at all ages than their more affluent peers and lower SEL skills are linked with poorer mental health, lower academic performance, and reduced life satisfaction.[23]

GEC projects explicitly set out to support marginalised girls. Central to this aim is recognising that marginalised girls need additional support over and above learning inputs to access, engage and thrive in education.[24]

[20] *Common mental disorders prevalence in adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analyses | PLOS ONE*
[21] *gec_learning_brief_sel_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[22] *gec_learning_brief_sel_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[23] *https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/*
[24] *GEC (2023) More than grades: The importance of social and emotional learning in girls' education*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

7

Across the GEC, projects have positioned SEL largely within their life skills frameworks and tailored their curriculum to different ages and stages of development. The Curriculum focused on:

1. The self (self-management, self-awareness)

2. The other and society (social awareness, communication and relationship building)

3. Agency, behaviour change and action (cooperation, responsible decision-making).

In the GEC, SEL was delivered alongside a wider approach to supporting girls' mental health and well-being, as illustrated in *Figure 3*.[25]

Figure 3: Project approaches to SEL – 4 levels of intervention
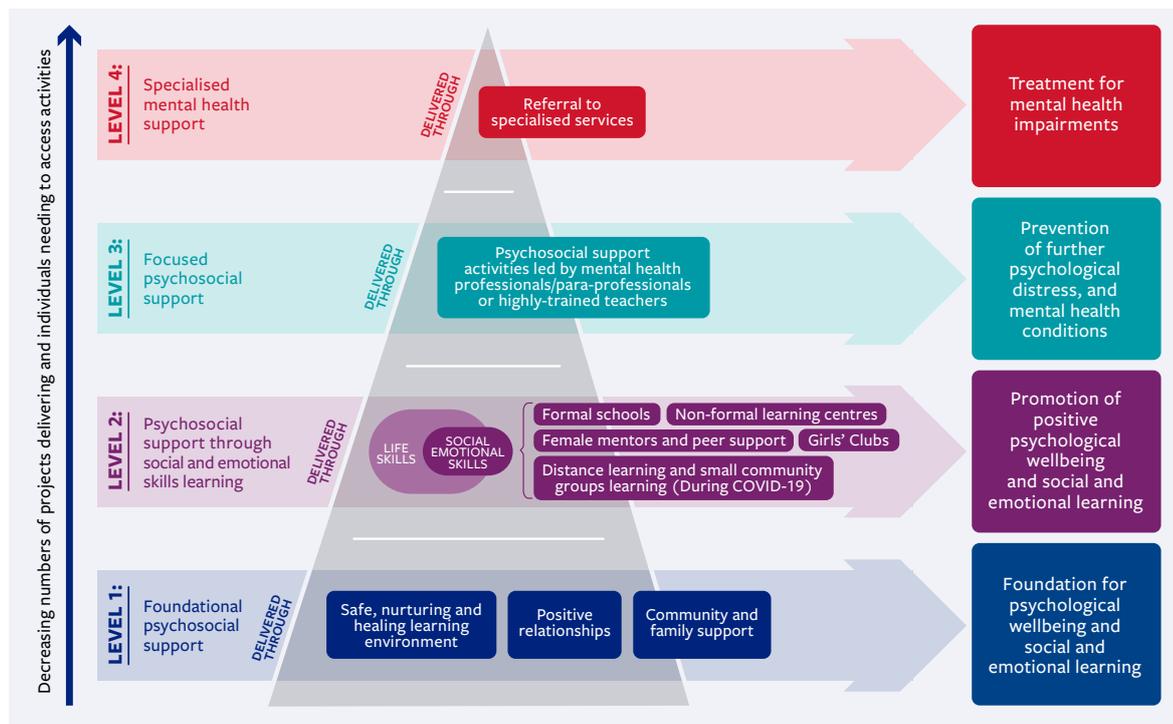
Peer relationships and identity

The social and emotional development of adolescents is rooted in their relationships, and healthy relationships are crucial for healthy emotional development. When adolescents have positive relationships with their parents and other adults like teachers or mentors, they are more likely to be resilient and able to develop socio-emotional skills.

Adolescence is also a time when peer relationships become more important, and girls seek their identity and sense of individuality and autonomy. This search for identity is often associated with giving greater value to how you are perceived and fit in with your peers. As a result, relationships outside those girls hold with their families become much more important as the need for affiliation and belonging becomes more pronounced, and they focus more on social status within peer groups.

Therefore, it is paramount to create opportunities for girls to form affirming and healthy peer relationships and explore issues that affect them with their peers. Unlike boys, girls are likelier to lack the physical space and leisure time to connect with friends. This is due to gender norms relating to regulations (e.g., behaviour and mobility) and household responsibilities. As a result, many GEC practitioners established Girls' Clubs, weekly 'safe spaces', where girls caught up on subject areas, learnt about their sexual and reproductive health and rights, formed friendships and shared experiences.[26] As their social networks and friendship groups become more complex, the emotional and social competencies to manage these relationships become more important. GEC life skills programmes focus on building these competencies.

Girls' Clubs were not just a space for exploring relationships between girls but also between boys and girls. For example, Plan International's mixed clubs in Ghana led to girls and boys seeing each other as friends and equals rather than pitted against each other within a hierarchy of gender or the frame of sexuality. Similarly, Leonard Cheshire in Kenya facilitated the formation and strengthening of school child-to-child clubs and found that the opportunity for friendships within these was most valued.[27] This work also appeared to reduce the prevalence of bullying in schools.[28]

[25] *GEC (2023) More than grades: The importance of social and emotional learning in girls' education*
[26] *gec_learning_brief_girls_clubs_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*.
[27] *lc-kenya_endline-report-web.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*.
[28] *lc-kenya_endline-report-web.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*.

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

8

Focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

Although self-awareness around sexuality evolves in early childhood, it is during adolescence and puberty when physical, cognitive and emotional changes combine to increase interest in sex and relationships significantly.[29] The needs increase dramatically for accurate, comprehensive, rights-based information, practical items, and services such as menstrual hygiene products and contraception. However, only a small proportion of the world's adolescent girls receive the quality of comprehensive sexual education and adolescent-friendly SRHR services that they need.

Violations of SRHR are most often due to beliefs and social norms based on patriarchal concepts of a woman's role and value as primarily reproductive. Concepts such as sexual desire, sexual preference, bodily autonomy and reproductive choice are coloured by the backdrop of the gendered structures of the community where the girl lives (and the educational space in which she studies).

Most GEC projects operated within contexts where adolescent-friendly provision of contraception is not just subject to all the other barriers to healthcare that are present within poorly resourced contexts (such as prohibitive costs) but actively discouraged or banned because it is perceived to 'encourage' teenage sex. Power inequality between women and men also severely constrains girls' ability to make contraceptive decisions, regardless of how much extra knowledge or individual attitudinal change they have experienced.

This points to the importance of quality Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) to help adolescent girls think critically about gender, power, sexuality, culture and norms. It also points to the importance of including broader work aimed at shifting social norms around gender and power and engaging with the most influential people within a girl's ecosystem (such as her partner or parents-in-law).

As illustrated in *Figure 4*, the GEC approach to SRHR is multi-faceted and has access to quality CSE at its core. Closely linked to this is providing those delivering CSE sessions with continuous professional development support and other support as needed. Other key elements are providing girls with the knowledge and resources to manage menstrual hygiene, working at the community level to shift gender norms, and ensuring access to adolescent-friendly family planning services and resources.

Figure 4: The core elements of GEC SRHR interventions

1 Access to quality Comprehensive Sexuality Education…

…that aligns with the international guidance on sexual education helps ensure girls have agency in decision-making, can make healthy choices and have safe and positive relationships.

Content	Technical criteria for CSE
1. Relationships	Learner centred
2. Values, rights, culture and sexuality	Information on all approaches for preventing pregnancy/STIs
	Beyond reproduction, risk and disease (e.g. pleasure)
3. Understanding gender	Able to develop life skills
	Transformative
4. Violence and staying safe	Culturally relevant and contextually appropriate
5. Skills for health and well-being	Based on gender equality
	Based on human-rights approach
6. The human body and development	Comprehensive
	Curiculum based
7. Sexuality and sexual behaviour	Age and developmentally appropriate
	Incremental
8. Sexual and reproductive health	Scientifically accurate

2 Menstrual hygiene management

3 Working with community members, men and boys to shift negative norms

4 Comprehensive professional development and support mechanims to those delivering CSE sessions

5 Access to family planning resources and services

OUTCOMES FOR GIRLS

Improved menstrual hygiene management

Improved SRHR knowledge and skills

More agency in relation to SRH decision making

[29]*Understanding normal development of adolescent sexuality: A bumpy ride – PMC (nih.gov)*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

9

Adolescent-responsive pedagogy

Adolescence is an intense time for intellectual development. As higher-order cognitive skills develop, adolescents think more critically, systematically evaluate problems and develop more abstract thinking skills.[30] They are becoming more curious about the world around them and developing more interests. They are moving from concrete and logical thinking to gaining capabilities around testing hypotheses, analysing evidence, engaging with more complex concepts, and thinking reflectively. These changes in intellectual development require specific teaching and learning approaches.

While many GEC projects taught foundational skills to adolescent girls, the approach needed to be different from teaching younger learners: approaches that work with younger learners are ineffective with older adolescents. Also, the age group from 10 to 19 is not uniform: many younger learners in this bracket benefit from a mix of direct instruction and approaches that are more 'adult-like'.[31]

It is particularly important to consider how to motivate an adolescent girl, make the content relevant to her everyday life, and value her lived experience. Some important considerations when teaching adolescents basic skills are:

- **Base knowledge:** Young learners enter school with little or no knowledge. Conversely, regardless of exposure to formal learning, adolescents have developed skills and background knowledge through everyday life experiences. This knowledge and experience should be leveraged.

- **Motivation:** A young child attends school to learn new things, socialise with her friends, and hopefully earn her diploma and higher studies; an out-of-school adolescent girl is likely to attend if the programme provides tangible benefits to her daily life, including economic, self-confidence, self-efficacy, improved health/nutrition for her child and family, building connections with peers and adult mentors.

- **Pedagogy:** The classroom experience needs to be age-appropriate. For example, a young child uses many teaching and learning materials to introduce new concepts in maths. For an adolescent girl, the concepts are more easily brought to life through dialogue, reflection, discussion and peer work. Adolescents are motivated by expressing their thinking and engaging with peers. A real-world approach that uses everyday situations the girls encounter is more appropriate for adolescents.

- **Focusing on mindsets:** Yeager (2017) argues that focusing on mindsets is important for older adolescents, particularly when building social and emotional skills. To motivate learners, it is important that they feel valued and feel they have agency. At this age, they are concerned with status, respect and how their peers view them. Therefore, they need to be provided with opportunities to discuss and develop opinions alongside their peers. Developing opinions and behaviours alongside peers is more effective in building positive mindsets (as opposed to being told by adults).

- **Teaching at the right level:** Many GEC girls had little or no exposure to formal schools, so their foundational skills needed to be built. They also had different levels of exposure, so they were at different starting points. Therefore, every project needed a coherent approach to assessing girls' learning levels and placing them in a group that matched this level. The curriculum content needed to be at the level of each girl, and most projects ensured that the curriculum was not overloaded and focused on the skills most relevant to girls. This helped ensure that girls were not overwhelmed, and having content that is not too difficult but is still challenging, helps build girls' confidence. It is also important to remember that adolescent girls will progress quicker than younger learners, so the pace may be quicker.

© CAMFED International

[30]Brinegar, K. & Casjey, M. (2022) Developmental Characteristics of young Adolescents
[31]Yeager, D. (2017) Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Adolescents

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

10

The role of fear on readiness to learn

Children cannot learn well when fearful.[32] Fear can lead to decreased cognitive function and memory retention, making it difficult for students to learn and retain information. During adolescence, the connections that help to manage fear are in flux, increasing the likelihood that learners feel greater stress, anxiety and fear.[33] GEC midline evaluations have shown that as girls get older, safety concerns increase, particularly around sexual harassment and abuse. Girls who have experienced violence are often distressed, more likely to be anxious or depressed, may struggle to concentrate and learn, and are more likely to drop out of school. A key learning from the GEC is that creating a safe space is integral to achieving learning gains. Education projects are more successful if violence prevention and response activities are considered from the outset.[34]

GEC projects worked with girls, teachers and community members to overcome the context of uncertainty and fear. In Zimbabwe, IGATE found that they could achieve breakthroughs in shifting a culture of silence around gender-based violence when girls had a more direct voice in the structures mandated to protect them and a trusted network or channel to them to report. The three main approaches projects took to ending violence in schools were:

1. **Strengthening reporting, referral and response systems:** This includes establishing reporting mechanisms at school and district levels; identifying focal points and survivor-centred referral pathways within schools, communities and districts; and training and sensitising staff, school management committees and students about these initiatives.

2. **Safer environment strategies:** This includes developing zero-tolerance policies and codes of conduct for all school actors; providing nonviolent classroom management tools for teachers; and shifting norms and attitudes (particularly with community members, families, men and boys) through advocacy work and discussions aiming to prompt critical self-reflection.

3. **Supporting girls' awareness of violence:** This includes supporting girls' articulation and awareness of different types and degrees of violence; making girls aware of their rights and any relevant laws or policies (or lack thereof); and supporting awareness and use of any new or established reporting mechanisms.[35]

© Link Education International

---

[32] M. J. Elias, Academic and social-emotional learning. International Academy of Education, France: SADAG, 2003; Blaya, C. & Debarbieux, E. (2008). Expel violence! A systematic review of interventions to prevent corporal punishment, sexual violence and bullying in schools. Bordeaux: International Observatory on Violence in Schools.
[33] *Neurocognitive Development of Motivated Behavior: Dynamic Changes across Childhood and Adolescence | Journal of Neuroscience (jneurosci.org)*
[34] *learning_without_fear_-_gec_thematic_review_july_2020_full.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[35] *GEC (2022) Ending violence in schools learning brief*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

11

Fit for purpose? Challenges in providing adolescent-responsive education

GEC programming aimed to align and work with existing systems, often at the level of government schools (almost always a Ministry of Education-mandated government school) and other facets of the education system, such as teachers, quality assurance bodies, local management structures and government apparatus. As such, GEC projects often found themselves cognisant of some of the ways in which the system is not fit for purpose for adolescents and identified the gaps in education systems.

The most marginalised are invisible and not catered for

This is particularly true for out-of-school girls who often fall outside the system. This exclusion manifests as a lack of tracking, monitoring, funding and support for these girls.[36] It is common for there to be very little resourcing, provision and attention given to out-of-school children. Thus, out-of-school adolescent girls who drop out early or do not have basic skills are not catered for by education systems. These girls are often overage for formal education and no suitable second chance education programmes are available.

Siloed working

Adolescent wellbeing spans across health and education sectors, with different domains of wellbeing influencing one another. However, the political reality tends towards a tendency for thinking and planning in these areas to be split up and siloed, perhaps due to a combination of the segregation of donor priorities, lack of evidence of what works across domains, and other socio-political factors. In some instances, there were positive relationships between the health and education actors who encounter adolescent girls, but this was not the norm.

A rigid school structure that is not adolescent-responsive

One of the ways that a school day may be difficult for adolescents is that circadian rhythms change during adolescence and make morning performance problematic.[37] Other factors for the most disadvantaged learners make attending a full school day difficult.

For many GEC girls, attending a full day of formal school was difficult due to domestic responsibilities, caring for children or pressures to earn income. Flexible timetabling, based on their working day, worked better for them. In addition, formal schools may require girls to wear skirts as part of their uniform. Skirts may make girls feel more self-conscious during menstruation, feel more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault, as well as unconsciously limit girls' movement and involvement in play and sport. In addition, many schools do not have water and sanitation facilities that are important for girls during menstruation or do not have enough (or any) single-sex bathrooms, meaning girls do not have any privacy.

Pedagogical approaches that are not adolescent-responsive

As previously outlined, teaching and learning approaches need to be responsive to the needs of adolescents, but all too often in the formal systems, direct instruction is the preferred approach with little scope for approaches that are more 'adult-like' and allow learners autonomy, to build agency, allow for questioning and provide opportunities to explore issues and develop opinions with their peers. In addition, teachers often deploy disciplinary approaches based on models of adults as power-holders and the learners as powerless and to be instructed. This can be ineffective and frustrating for older learners.

The content is not responsive to the needs of adolescents or at an appropriate level

As outlined, there is a need for comprehensive sexuality education for this age group, but this is often absent in the curriculum. There is also a strong need to focus on mental health, well-being and social-emotional skills, which is often absent again. For learners who have dropped out and have missed out on key skills, there needs to be a comprehensive approach to catching them up and ensuring that they are being taught at the right level. Again, this is not always a clear approach to this a the national or school level.

---

[36] *fla_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[37] *Circadian Rhythms and School Start Times: The Indivisible Link Between Medicine and Education | SpringerLink*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

12

The GAGE Conceptual Framework: a model for adolescent-responsive education

Addressing the gaps in the system and making education programming more adolescent-responsive is complex, and the GEC had no fixed model for attending to these complexities. Each project responded in its own way. However, several models unpack what supports girls' (and boys') development and empowerment needs during and after adolescence. This section examines one such model – the GAGE Conceptual Framework, which focuses on adolescent capabilities.[38] This section uses this framework to explore how education programming can go further to respond to adolescent girls' needs holistically.

The GAGE Conceptual Framework

Figure 5: The GAGE Conceptual Framework
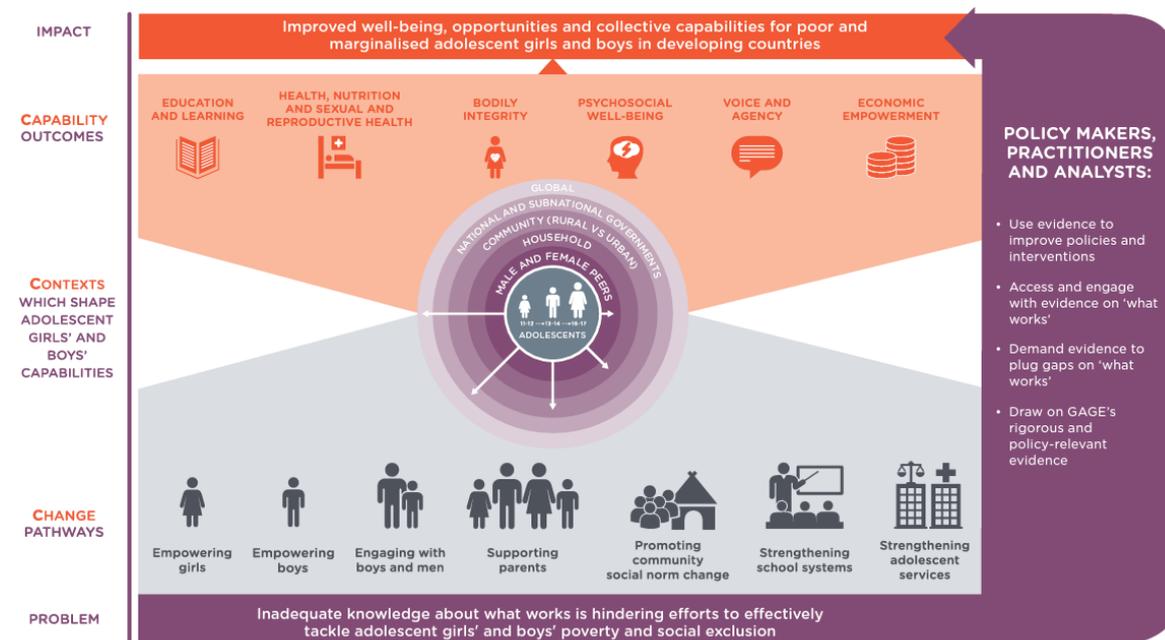
Emerging from the evidence base around adolescent well-being, the GAGE Conceptual Framework circles around the interconnectedness of the '3 Cs': capabilities, change strategies and contexts, to understand what works to support adolescent girls' development and empowerment.[39] The Framework examines how adolescent transitions are shaped by gender, age, disability status, nationality, and the multitude of intersecting characteristics that can determine an adolescent's capabilities and her lived reality.

Much of the thinking described within the Framework is aligned with that of the GEC, especially that which draws upon the importance of the ecosystems in which girls live. Like the GEC, the Framework equates success with expanding girls' freedom to be and do the things that they value.[40]

The GAGE Conceptual Framework also sees the six capability domains as interconnected, reflecting that adolescent girls (whether in school or out of school) do not live single-issue lives. As illustrated, the adolescent girl is at this Framework's centre. The contexts around her shape her capabilities and the change strategies used to support her. The GEC also took this girl-centred approach, which prioritised a focus on the level of a specific girl (rather than targeting schools, communities or geographies in the way that other education programmes might). GEC projects were committed to maintaining this attention throughout adolescence – adapting strategies as her constraints and opportunities changed.

The *Table* overleaf considers what adolescent-responsive programming might look like within an education programme for each capability outcome proposed by the GAGE Conceptual Framework. Using the extended guidance accompanying the conceptual framework and GAGE research priorities, the *Table* considers what GEC programmes have done within this domain. It outlines ideas (emanating from the GAGE framework) on what could further strengthen work in this area. Although education and learning are an outcome in and of themselves, we attend to all six capability outcomes because of their equal importance to girls and because GEC projects directly or indirectly impacted all these domains.[41]

[38] *Conceptual framework | GAGE (odi.org)*
[39] *Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)*
[40] These concepts emerge from the Capability Approach as the defining theoretical framework that sits behind both the GAGE conceptual framework and the GEC's Theory of Change. Sen, A.K. (2004) 'Capabilities, lists, and public reason: Continuing the conversation', Feminist Economics 10(3): 77–80
[41] GEC learning briefs explore impact in these areas in more depth. Particularly relevant here are: *girlseducationchallenge.org/media/nqkbm2nk/gec_learning_brief_sel_final.pdf*; *gec_learning_brief_srgbv_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*; *gec_learning_brief_girls_clubs_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*; and *gec_learning_brief_srh_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

13

Using the GAGE Conceptual Framework to support adolescent education within and outside of school[42]

Capability Outcome and Description	GEC work within this domain and further ideas for strengthened practice
Education and learning The services and support adolescents have to acquire the cognitive skills and knowledge they need to engage with and make good decisions in a rapidly changing world.	**Adolescent-responsive programming on the GEC** The GEC targeted the most marginalised at-risk and out-of-school adolescent girls through multidimensional approaches and second-chance education. In addition to academic outcomes, it focused on well-being, gender equality, life skills, self-confidence and bodily integrity. It also focused on girls' transition from school (to further education, employment, etc.), which helped ensure girls were on track towards their aspirations. The GEC addressed key barriers to girls' learning and supported educators and systems to deliver more age-appropriate and quality gender-responsive education.[43]
	Considerations for going further: 1. It is important to ensure data systems capture the age of targeted children better to reflect their needs at that stage of life. Interventions at the school level should consider age. 2. Extensive research exists on the adolescent brain and how it best learns, but it is rarely used to inform the design of school systems or teacher training. Create explicit opportunities to bring this research into design and policymaking. 3. Teachers rarely have the opportunity to learn more about adolescent brain development and health. Content on this could be integrated into pre-and in-service training to help teachers better understand the adolescent experience. 4. It is important to holistically address adolescent girls' exclusion from science, technology, engineering and mathematics. 5. Greater attention is needed on the gendered risks faced by adolescent boys, including late school entry, repeated grades, and early exit from school; poor learning outcomes, particularly in reading skills; underachievement driven by a lack of role models often combined with poverty; and masculine norms around contributing to household income.[44]
Health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health Adolescent knowledge and awareness about their bodies and how to keep healthy. This includes knowledge of SRHR.	**Adolescent-responsive programming on the GEC** The GEC improved menstrual practices and management and tackled the taboos that often preclude knowledge and practice in this area. Projects also provided sexual and reproductive health information to girls in line with girls' needs while also discussing with community members the need for comprehensive sexuality education and working with them to shift negative cultural norms. Many projects also improved girls' access to family planning resources and services.
	Considerations for going further: 1. WASH facilities within schools, learning centres or other places frequented by adolescents should assume that some users will be menstruating and provide the facilities, provisions and supplies they need. Social norms should explore and address the shame and fear associated with menstruation. 2. Projects and implementors should consider whether SRHR meets adolescent girls' needs by asking them what information or linkages they require and then providing it in a safe, quality, and respectful way. Gaps in SRHR provision should be identified and filled as a priority.[45] 3. Family and community engagement work that supports girls' equitable access to nutritious food and quality health care when they need it should be prioritised. A lack of access to nutrient-dense foods, especially iron-rich foods after menstruation, with particular attention on adolescent girls who are pregnant, should be addressed. 4. It is important to focus on improving adolescent girls' access to maternity-related care. 5. Put greater focus on the gendered risks faced by adolescent boys in this area, such as engaging in risky behaviours with poor health outcomes; limited access to SRHR information and services; higher rates of alcohol, tobacco and drug use; higher obesity rates than girls alongside being affected by body image concerns and harmful eating disorders.[46]

---

[42]All content within this Table heavily draws upon the conceptualisation, examples, and language used within GAGE's conceptual framework version 2. _Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)_
[43]_gec_qtf_december_2020.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)_
[44]_Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)_
[45]_gec_learning_brief_srh_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)_
[46]_Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)_

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

14

Bodily integrity	Adolescent-responsive programming on the GEC
Adolescent girls' freedom and protection from gender-based violence, including child marriage, harmful traditional practices, and other forms of coercion.	The GEC had a three-pronged approach to ensuring girls were protected. They had bodily integrity, which centred on strengthening reporting and response systems, ensuring safe learning environments and communities, and supporting girls' knowledge and agency. Projects also supported girls to have the knowledge, skills, resources, and support to resist child and forced marriage and harmful traditional practices carried out on girls' bodies. Many projects also used Girls' Clubs as a space to discuss issues connected with bodily integrity.

Considerations for going further:

1. Implementors can increase their understanding by hearing what adolescent girls say and recognising that personal autonomy, self-ownership and self-determination over their bodies become more important as adolescents age.

2. Violations such as FGM and sexual abuse become more prevalent during adolescence, and appropriate expertise is needed to work with potential perpetrators and young people. Implementors should bring local partners with deep contextual knowledge into their processes to ensure they comprehensively tackle violence issues.

3. Ensure older girls have the tools to protect themselves within sexual relationships.

4. Connect economic vulnerability and risky decision-making (e.g., on transactional sex) and use available social protection mechanisms to prevent poverty from playing a role in these decisions.

5 Place greater focus on the gendered risks faced by adolescent boys in this area, including higher risk of corporal punishment, bullying and physical violence from peers than girls; higher risk of dying from road accidents and homicide; issues around adherence to masculine norms of toughness and aggression; and vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation in parallel with little research within this area.[47]

Psychosocial well-being	Adolescent-responsive programming on the GEC
Adolescents' sense of self and ability to set their own goals and demonstrate resilience in the face of setbacks. It recognises the importance of both internal emotional capacity and external social support.	GEC projects have a complementary and dual focus on strengthening girls' internal emotional capacity and external social support networks.[48] Many projects focus on growing girls' social and emotional competencies and providing a safe space (often via girls' club activities) to explore their interests and identities with peers and expand their social networks. Many projects integrated mentoring support and psychosocial counselling to help girls with mental health needs, as well as psychosocial support at various levels.[49] Projects focused on emotional support to develop self-confidence and feel valued at home, school, and peer groups. As outlined, the GEC had a strong approach to addressing SRGBV[50] and ensuring survivor-centred responses and care.

Considerations for going further:

1. Projects and education actors can consider the important role of friends and peers in adolescent life. This role can often supersede that of parents, supporting young people's ability to spend enough time with their friends.

2. Implementors should be prepared for an upsurge in mental health issues as children age and see psychosocial support as a core element of responsive programming rather than a complementary add-on activity.

3. Address domestic and caring burdens and parental restrictions on girls' movement that limit girls' opportunities for peer socialisation and just time 'to be'.

4. Map out whether girls have someone to whom they can turn, including confidants outside the family sphere, and ensure that those individuals have the right skills and support.

5. Support adolescent girls to navigate exposure to digital environments, including social media.

6. Ensure greater attention to the gendered risks faced by adolescent boys in this area, including a higher likelihood of developing behavioural disorders and dying of suicide; being socialised to hide feelings and avoid seeking support; shouldering adult responsibilities or facing violence, displacement and stress.[51]

[47] Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)
[48] gec_learning_brief_sel_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)
[49] gec_learning_brief_sel_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)
[50] girlseducationchallenge.org/media/d4dgt5tr/gec_learning_brief_srgbv_final.pdf
[51] Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

15

Voice and agency Adolescent girls' ability to meaningfully participate in household, school and community life is key to developing the skills required for political participation in adulthood.	**Adolescent-responsive programming on the GEC:** Projects exposed girls to local role models who demonstrated alternative pathways for adolescent girls. Girls were also supported to negotiate with parents and other family members on outcomes affecting them, including equitable division of labour and input into broader household decisions. Through life skills programmes, girls were encouraged to build their confidence and become active participants in the classroom. Projects built girls' assertiveness and communication skills, provided them with opportunities to build their leadership skills and express their opinions and provided girls with age-appropriate information on various topics, including SRHR.[52]
	Considerations for going further: 1. Protect and expand girls' access to physical spaces as concerns about girls' safety and 'chastity' grow, especially if girls are not in school or are married. Ensuring girls' clubs that are meaningfully accessible to these groups can be important.[53] 2. Challenge the socialisation of girls into docility and subservience as demonstrations of being 'good girls'.[54] 3. Help girls develop a sense of themselves as members of a community, not just of a family. 4. Encourage families to create space for older girls to make more decisions within the household. 5. Strategise and collaborate with economic empowerment programming and interventions to correct imbalances in women's representation in public life, such as political spaces and the teaching profession. 6. Ensure greater attention to the gendered risks faced by adolescent boys in this area, including but not limited to needing to comply with parental decisions and respect traditional generational hierarchies, facing a prolonged period of 'waithood' before progressing into social adulthood, and vulnerability to engaging in political violence.[55]
Economic empowerment Whether adolescents can choose decent employment, access and maintain credit, and control their own incomes in an age-appropriate manner.	**Adolescent-responsive programming on the GEC** GEC projects supported girls and their ecosystems in thinking about options outside the agricultural or informal labour sector – particularly domestic work – based on their market opportunities. Projects helped girls gain the required skills to set up their own businesses, trade, or gain employment. Many projects also provided girls with financial literacy skills, training and orientation on microfinance institutions, and functional literacy and numeracy skills. Attention was also given to girls securing the resource endowments, savings, and credit needed to set up businesses. Setting up Village Savings and Loan Associations or helping girls access existing groups was a key intervention in many projects. This was all alongside working to shift negative gender norms around girls' traditional roles and mobility outside their community.
	Considerations for going further: 1. Unblock parental aspirations centred on marriage and motherhood rather than education and employment. Many GEC projects engaged with parents to change attitudes towards girls' education, but few tackled fundamental questions around the role of girls and women within families and societies. 2. Interrogate the dynamics of job markets that offer girls more limited opportunities than boys and then address these systemically in partnership with economic reform programmes. 3. More comprehensive attention should be paid to how assets, land, and capital block entrepreneurship. Focus on adolescent girls' access to land as a key asset for economic security, even for those not wishing to pursue agriculture, especially within the context of increasing climate vulnerability.[56] 4. Assess available vocational training opportunities to ensure they are matched to local environments and avoid pigeon-holding girls in gendered positions. Then, conduct system-strengthening work within the vocational education space to transform this within individual institutions and at scale. 5. Implement monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems that follow girls for a long time, allowing visibility of whether the options open to them in adolescence ultimately helped them obtain decent and safe work that pays a living wage. Some GEC projects have done this, but it could be a more common practice.[57] 6. Attention to the gendered risks faced by adolescent boys in this area, including but not limited to issues around unemployment/underemployment and masculine ideals around being a provider and higher engagement within child labour and hazardous labour than for girls – especially within contexts of crisis and conflict.[58]

[52] *gec_learning_brief_girls_clubs_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[53] *gec_learning_brief_girls_clubs_final.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[54] *Full article: Silence and silencing in the classroom: Rwandan girls' epistemic exclusion in English medium basic education (tandfonline.com)*
[55] *Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)*
[56] Example of research in this area from Zimbabwe: *ECFP_Report_Manase.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)*
[57] *rrlf_somgep_study_final_dec2022.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)*
[58] *Conceptual-Framework-2nd-Edition_WEB.pdf (odi.org)*

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

16

Conclusions and next steps

This Think Piece has outlined the clear necessity for a strong focus on adolescents and a holistic approach to education programming that works across sectors. Working with marginalised adolescent girls is intrinsically different from all other age groups. As outlined, there are challenges – be it gender-based violence, drop-out or low literacy – that manifest throughout adolescence and require us to challenge our current thinking. As education practitioners or policymakers, we need to interrogate the extent to which our responses in these areas are fit for purpose. We need to examine how and with whom we work and acknowledge that this may entail ways of thinking. Indeed, this learning is not just for those who work in the education sphere but for all actors who work with adolescent girls.

While the GEC has implemented elements of adolescent-responsive programming, exploring the GAGE Conceptual Framework reveals that education programming can be pushed further to respond to the needs of the most marginalised adolescent girls. This does not necessarily mean interventions must be expensive or arduous, as some low-cost adaptations and partnerships can make systems more adolescent-responsive. For example, partnering with health visitors to talk to adolescent girls about Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). Furthermore, capitalising on existing structures, for example equipping existing school staff who are responsible for counselling and psychosocial support with the skills to deal with the issues facing adolescent girls. The first step is placing adolescent girls and their needs at the centre of everything we do. For example, when we invite adolescent girls to participate through panels and forums we find that they want to be involved in decisions around their own lives.

Ministries of Education, development partners, organisations, and researchers who want to ensure that their commitment to supporting adolescent girls allows them to thrive in and beyond education should consider the following recommendations.

1. **Put adolescent girls at the centre** – This will necessitate a change in basic approaches for some and a shift in what we think we know about engaging with adolescents. Currently, many education programmes engage with adolescent girls, but we do not necessarily programme and develop policies based on what we hear, and we work with adolescents' ideas, decisions and goals even less. Working centre adolescent girls' needs, goals, values and aspirations in all programming is important.

2. **Do not work in silos** – The education, health and social protection practitioners are often siloed and do not signpost each other's services or work together effectively. We need to develop better ways of working across sectors. We know that GEC projects which brought together these services were better able to support girls in their households, communities and school life. For example, COVID-19 taught us that bringing community health workers and community-based structures into education positively impacts adolescent girls' outcomes. This also includes recognising that the responsibility for adolescent girls may fall in several ministries.

3. **Examine the gendered risks faced by adolescent boys** – An education programming that aims to level the playing field for adolescent girls does not mean we do not engage with boys. As outlined, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the risks faced by adolescent boys and how these play out for adolescent girls. Working with boys and men to build positive masculinities and more egalitarian gender attitudes and behaviours is beneficial for both adolescent girls and boys.

Reaching and teaching adolescent girls: How do we make an education system 'fit for purpose'?

17

Education

4. **Ensure adolescent-responsive options for those who have fallen behind or fallen out of the system. The first step is tracking and targeting those at risk of drop-out and out-of-school girls.** This requires focusing on any blind spots in education systems and the cracks the most disadvantaged may have fallen through. The next step is to ensure that flexible options respond to girls' needs. This may be a non-formal centre in her community which provides flexible sessions that build up basic skills, it may be an accelerated education programme that prepares her to return to formal school, or it may be a non-formal approach that focuses more on entrepreneurial skills. This may also require a commitment from the formal education system to see non-formal approaches as an important delivery mechanism to reach the most marginalised.

5. **Go further to ensure pedagogical approaches and content are adolescent-responsive responsive.** What works for young learners does not generally work for adolescents, though it is also important not to treat adolescents as a uniform group. As girls get older, teaching and learning approaches should be more 'adult-like', allowing them to build autonomy, agency, and critical thinking skills with opportunities to explore issues and develop opinions with their peers. Adolescent-responsive teaching and learning should be integral to teacher professional development, with consideration given to the most up-to-date research and thinking. There should also be 'catch-up' approaches to ensure that those who have fallen behind can catch up and learn at their learning level.

Economic empowerment

6. **Develop meaningful pathways that adolescent girls can access and transition into.** Governments need to consider the points at which adolescent girls drop out or become disengaged and how they can come back into the system – be it formal or non-formal. For example, in some countries adolescents cannot transition into skills or TVET provision unless they have graduated secondary school. For those who drop out and are overage, any non-formal provision is unlikely to allow them to transition into TVET, and the lack of places at secondary school, even if they do achieve equivalency, effectively restricts their opportunities to transition. This requires a re-consideration of current pathways.

Health, nutrition and SRHR/bodily integrity

7. **Include SEL and PSS support as key components of formal, non-formal learning and vocational training for adolescents.** As many of the most disadvantaged adolescents will not progress through the formal system, SEL and PSS must also be integrated into other alternatives. This is particularly important given that the most disadvantaged are generally the most in need of this support. Evidence shows that SEL will contribute to economic development and adolescent learning outcomes.

8. **Ensure comprehensive sexuality education for both adolescent boys and girls.** Much like SEL, it is often those who need CSE that are not receiving it, and thus, it should not only be a focus of formal education curriculum but also of non-formal. The UNESCO technical paper on CSE guides what should be included in a CSE curriculum and the approaches that should be taken to ensure it is considered comprehensive. As outlined in the GEC Learning brief on SRHR, a wide variety of education and community stakeholders must be conducted when developing CSE curricula to avoid backlash, particularly on topics deemed sensitive.

Voice and agency

9. **Ensure girls have a safe space and support to build their agency and voice.** Girls need to be encouraged to be active participants in decisions that affect them, and this can be done through mentorship, working with families to allow for the space for her to make decisions, and building her confidence and assertiveness skills. This requires a safe space where she can build these skills alongside peers and with support from adults she trusts. Access to these spaces is particularly important for the most disadvantaged and marginalised, and protecting these spaces becomes more important as she grows older and her mobility becomes more restricted.

By actioning these recommendations, alongside the points in the Table above that can push us to go further, we can build on the current momentum of adolescent-responsive programming while significantly increasing its benefits. Only after such an effort can we ensure that attempts to expand educational freedoms for adolescent girls and boys are grounded in what adolescents themselves require in terms of dynamic and evolving support.