

# Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

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## Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB+)

AFGHANISTAN

OCTOBER 2019 – OCTOBER 2023



Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



**“We learned about how to treat a child and how to help those who are facing or experiencing violence in the community or at home. We learned about the importance of not punishing students in class. I have learned about how to motivate students in the class so that we can support them in doing proper learning in the class.”**

**Teacher**



● Afghanistan

# What did the Leave No Girl Behind project do?

Following the abrupt exit of the US occupation forces in Afghanistan and take over by the Taliban in 2021, the situation in Afghanistan rapidly deteriorated. Under the rule of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan, there were considerable changes to the education environment in Afghanistan. As of September 2023, many girls remained out of secondary learning for around 1,237 days.

While the barrier on secondary education for girls affected education opportunities for girls across the country, the young women who participated in the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB+) project were not immediately affected by the ban. In addition to the ban, there were ongoing challenges and barriers that kept millions of girls out of learning across the country. Structural, cultural, and geographic barriers – such as extremist interpretations of Islam, limited employment opportunities and geographical accessibility to schools – also continually inhibited girls from accessing and participating in equitable and quality education at both primary and secondary levels.

The LNGB+ project work on increasing education opportunities particularly for marginalised girls and was a supplementary project to a previous project also funded through the Girls' Education Challenge called Steps Towards Afghan Girls' Education Success (STAGES I and II). The project was designed to support the provision of quality education opportunities for marginalised and out-of-school girls who were too old to enter the public education system at grade 1. Girls, whose ages ranged from 10 to 15 years old (at the baseline), participated in an Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP), which saw them complete two academic years within one calendar year. Classes were established at the community level, as part of a broader national

education initiative known as Community Based Education (CBE). The CBE model allowed international and national NGOs to establish community-based classes for students who would otherwise be unable or unwilling to access government or private schools. The CBE model, in which ALP operates, is specifically focused on supporting vulnerable and marginalised children and young people who may lack the resources, access, and support from their community and caregivers to enter quality education and transition across grade levels. The project established a series of classes that were based within communities, and either took place in the houses of community members, tents allocated by consortium partners, or alternative spaces provided by the local community, such as mosques.

Over the 4-year period of the project, LNGB+ worked on increasing adolescent girls' school attendance, improving the quality of teaching and learning, improving perceptions and attitudes towards girls' education and young women's role in society and strengthening local systems in support of ALP and girls' education. An additional focus for LNGB+ was on young girls/women with disabilities.

**“My daughter is much better now. She is capable of reading and writing. I have seen her read and write. I don't know what she does exactly in school, but I can see she has learnt a lot. I feel very good about it.”**

**Mother**



# How did the project adapt during COVID-19 and other emergencies?

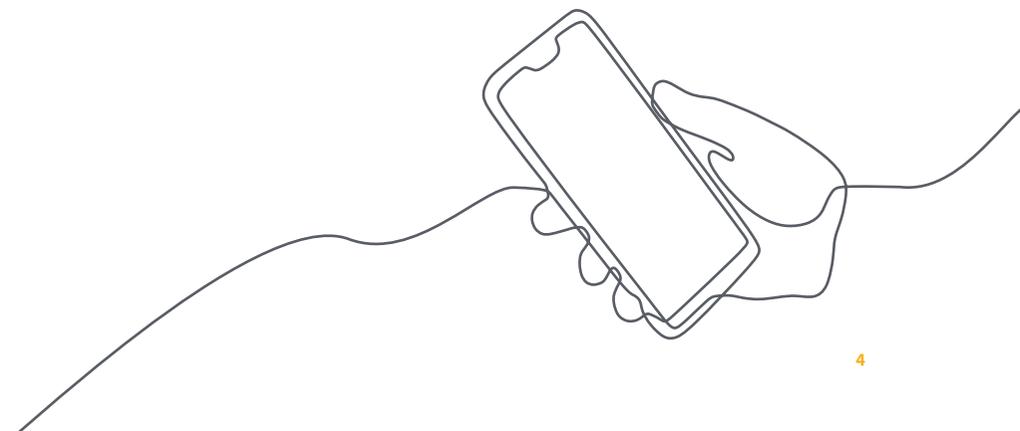
**Responding to COVID-19.** In response to the growing transmission of COVID-19, the Ministry of Education (MoE) instructed the closure of all schools from March 2020 to August 2020. The project designed home-based learning packets for students and remote instruction manuals for teachers to provide remote support. After receiving feedback related to the difficulties using the home-based learning packets from students, and difficulty providing remote support to students from teachers, learning packets were revised to adjust the level of difficulty and teachers were provided top-up cards to regularly access technical support and resources from the staff. The learning packets also included safeguarding and feedback mechanism related posters to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the students during this difficult time. Similarly, teachers and School Management Shura (SMS) members also received regular check-in calls from program staff to guide the learning process at home. Teachers and shura members were provided top-up phone credits to conduct these activities over the phone. Remote training via [Viamo](#) on safeguarding, positive discipline and creating a child-friendly atmosphere at home were also provided for teachers to guide parents and shura. The project and Shura members conducted remote monitoring of the classes and teachers using the tools developed to be filled via phone calls.

**Responding to the takeover of the de-facto authorities.** Following the takeover of the de-facto authorities in Afghanistan in August 2021, the project was paused while modalities were being put in place to ensure safe implementation with adequate risk mitigation plans in place. During this phase, partners moved back into remote modalities. Once remobilisation was approved, partners resumed classes, starting with a learning assessment, and moving to a further Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) with remedial classes to support students to catch up on lost learning.

**Responding to economic crisis and drought.** In the wake of the withdrawal of the US occupation forces in 2021 and the new regime that came into place, there was an economic crisis exacerbated by unprecedented drought. In response, the project added a component of providing humanitarian cash/food to 98.5% of the supported households. According to findings from the project monitoring activities, households shared that the assistance improved student engagement in learning activities, with the majority asserting that the students had more energy to participate in learning activities as families were able to afford enough food. More than 82% of those surveyed shared that the assistance was used to procure food for the family. As families faced a worsening humanitarian crisis that included a widespread food insecurity, loss of income, rising costs, and exhausted coping strategies, partners replicated similar interventions in other education programming.

**“I think group work is the best activity because it helps us to discuss issues with each other and we feel more positive when we work together.”**

Girl





**“I learned how to read and write, I have learned about how to treat and respect my parents, which is important. I can use reading and writing to read marriage cards and address many other issues. I think all of the subjects have been very helpful and I enjoyed them all very much.”**

**Girl**

# What did Leave No Girl Behind achieve?

**Improved learning outcomes, despite the challenges.** LNGB+ had mixed learning outcomes at the endline. Girls proved to have the most improvement in literacy outcomes, with their most vital skills noted in reading and recognising words. While there were some noted improvements in literacy outcomes, girls appeared to struggle with numeracy skills. Girls with disabilities were more likely to have lower learning outcomes compared to girls without disabilities, with statistically lower scores in both numeracy and literacy tasks. Married girls also faced challenges maintaining literacy and numeracy outcomes when compared to non-married students. While learning outcomes may not appear particularly high, or have shown some regression, the learning outcomes should be considered a success. Considering the challenges girls faced, including school closures, change in regime, COVID-19, increased anxiety and mental health concerns, they were still able to produce learning outcomes in line with girls who successfully completed the previous GEC-funded project, STAGES II.

**Improved teaching quality.** Over the course of the project, the quality of teachers was reported to have increased, with caregivers and students suggesting that teachers became more adaptable, introduced more diverse activities in their classrooms, and were focused on supporting girls through psycho-social support and building their confidence for the future. The teachers self-reported capabilities score increased from 75.2% at the baseline to 84% at the endline. Teachers reported consistent improvements in terms of pedagogical practices, classroom methods, subject knowledge, remote learning support, and classroom management. Teachers noted that their capability improvement was connected to the training opportunities they were offered throughout the project implementation. They demonstrated strong gender transformative practices, which were stronger than noted at the baseline.

**Improved transition.** Overall, transition outcomes were positive. From the cohort tracked from the baseline, a total of 80.6% of girls successfully transitioned from grade 1 to grade 6. Girls and caregivers noted few opportunities available to girls after project closure and suggested that in most instances, they had to wait and hope that secondary schools would reopen so that they could continue learning through hub schools or NGO-supported education. The project's Endline Evaluation found that there were still notable barriers to transition to secondary education, which were both supply-side and demand-side. In the instance that schools might reopen at a secondary level, girls would still have to overcome a series of systemic and geographic barriers that made accessing school challenging.

**Improved girls' life and leadership skills.** Life and leadership skills proved instrumental in building girls' confidence and sense of autonomy. Given the context, with the widespread restrictions placed on girls, focusing on life and leadership skills provided girls and their families with beneficial skill sets that could improve household livelihoods around health and financial management, reducing power hierarchies and contributing to addressed issues of gender-based violence, with girls being able to negotiate and voice their needs. Based on the leadership and life skill indices, girls demonstrated improvement due to LNGB+. Leadership scores improved from 70.4% to 74.5% at the endline, and life skills improved from 81.25% to 85.1%. At endline caregivers cited new levels of respect for their daughters and a greater willingness to allow them to make future decisions because they saw increased confidence, respect, organisation skills, literacy and numeracy skills, and networking capacity. Girls reported that they felt better positioned to navigate their future pathways.



**Built advocacy for girls' education.** When looking at school governance, the roles, and responsibilities of School Management Shura (SMS) members remained largely consistent from the baseline, with a significant improvement when it comes to advocating for girls' education at the secondary level. Also, it was noted that Shura members earned the respect and trust of students and teachers. This emphasises their key role in managing ALP programmes and in promoting girls' education within the community. Their acceptance as trusted local figures was due to their close ties with the community and the trust which they built among girls, teachers, and caregivers.

**Sustained results at community level.** Sustainability outcomes were limited because of the changes in context over the course of the project. After the end of the twenty yearlong US occupation and takeover of the Taliban, many of the planned sustainability interventions fell through, with a disconnect between the international development sector and the new authorities. To that end, while attempts around sustainability could be made, many have not come to fruition. However, a sustainable success of LNGB+ was the commitment that communities and caregivers showed to supporting girls' education. While advocacy efforts could not occur with local authorities or at an institutional level, communities continued to advocate within their own families and classrooms. They engaged with households who wanted to take their daughters out of learning, advocated for quality learning in the classroom and shared their commitment to continuing to send their daughters to school once schools at a secondary level reopened.

## To what extent did the project deliver value for money?

According to the assessment done by the GEC Fund Manager, the LNGB+ project offered average value for money in a highly unpredictable and fragile context. Project activities – especially the accelerated community-based education programme – were very relevant and targeting the most marginalised with some good learning results.



# What did Leave No Girl Behind learn?

**Innovating, testing and adapting in challenging contexts.** The LNGB+ model was designed as a high impact, low-cost intervention, hinging on the success of the STAGES II project. However, to find spaces to engage meaningfully with girls in Afghanistan, organisations and donors have to be flexible, test out potential pathways and have the flexibility to change interventions based on any shifts in the context. Budget flexibility is key as well as time flexibility as it enables partners to make appropriate adaptations that respond to the context and to take time to assess risks and needs of girls. It is also important to consider moving away from short-term funding (less than 3 years), given the current circumstances in the country regarding the increasing restrictions on girls/women's participation in education and Ministry of Education (MoE) restrictions on field work for new projects. The given context is extremely difficult for attaining sustainability of programme outcomes, especially without the security of long-term funding. It is also recommended to take a wider view and make available diversified funds to cover all interconnected components of country programmes, including education, health, nutrition, and vocational training. It is important for frameworks to allow flexibility and innovation. Also, as per the MoE's new directive permitting only local NGOs to directly implement education projects, international NGOs will need to focus more on capacity building and closely monitoring local NGO staff and implementation. This includes having local NGOs absorb highly qualified and experienced field staff from the international NGOs. Monitoring should be carried out at the field level, where international NGO staff should be available to mentor local NGO staff.

**Engaging with girls through multisectoral approaches.** With the wide range of exemptions facing civil society and bans around women and girls' participation in social spaces, there are only two pathways available for education providers to continue supporting girls. Firstly, establishing education related work that can cross over health, offering a space to keep engaging with women. Identifying or creating health and wellbeing-related space for girls, will allow aid providers to piggyback onto approved spaces for girls. Such spaces will provide opportunities to reframe life/leadership and health/wellbeing activities and ensure a safe and available space to girls. An additional space available is technical training in permitted education areas. These include entrepreneurship training for young women who are studying in primary years, building in life and leadership training into multi-sectoral activities or early childhood development training. While opportunities for formal learning remain restricted for girls in Afghanistan, interventions that continue to provide life and leadership skills outside of the formal learning space remain valuable for their current conditions. These skills contribute to improved respect in the household, better negotiation skills, more opportunities to contribute to decision making, and a greater awareness of basic hard skills around hygiene, rights, and protection.

## **Changing attitudes through demonstrating the returns of education.**

In remote and marginalised communities, especially in ones where education has been inaccessible for decades, girls are often the first in their family to attend schools and become literate. The project found that parents were often supportive of delaying marriages until graduations, ensuring the girls could complete their education. Girls shared that families were more open to taking their opinion into account and supporting the continuation of their educational activities, pausing any marriage related discussion until their graduation.



**Providing and prioritising mental health support for adolescent girls.** The project Endline Evaluation found that girls were struggling with mental health concerns. This included experiences of anxiety and depression. Providing adolescent girls with emotion regulation support could help them better manage their own wellbeing under the current conditions. The LNGB+ project responded to these needs by running a remote emotional management programme for girls, delivered through mobile phones, on a weekly basis. Practices such as this can offer girls necessary support.

**Providing remote learning and training.** During the COVID-19 school closure period, remote training via [Viamo](#) was developed to minimise large gatherings and provide support to teachers. Partners created a 12-week training curriculum for teachers covering topics, such as drop-out, child-friendly classrooms, safeguarding, at-home learning, and inclusive education. Monitoring results showed high engagement rates especially in communities with strong network coverage. This intervention was being used by the project for continued Socio Emotional Learning (SEL) messaging.

**Prioritising the recruitment of the female teachers.** Prioritising the recruitment of the female teachers was pivotal in ensuring that girls received mentorship and had access to a safe space to discuss gender related concerns. Most of the ALP teachers started with limited educational background and teaching experience, yet with capacity building training and in-classroom support adapted to their needs, they became effective primary teachers. These women who were trained and acquired years of experience through teaching ALP classes in rural and remote areas of the country created a potential pool of qualified teachers for the future of Afghanistan. These teachers have the knowledge required to be accredited teachers and can easily pass the national competency tests to work as formal teachers when there is an opportunity for them. As gender restrictive education policies emerged, students relied heavily on female teachers for support and for inspiration. While the ban on secondary education remains in place, many students continue to share their aspirations of becoming a teacher one day just like theirs.

**Including female shura to ensure girls are supported.** The ALP approach was designed for adolescent girls, who by the second and the third year of programming, were 15 years old or older. Due to cultural expectations, older girls were pulled into supporting household responsibilities, with an escalation of daily chores and acceptance of early marriage leaving them more vulnerable to absenteeism. Thus, female shuras became a closer monitoring system to ensure girls continued access to education. The project leveraged female shura as the key reporting mechanism, communicating any significant absence and marriage-related dropout to partners in a timely manner. The onus fell heavily on female shura together with partners to devise strategies to convince families to permit girls to return to classrooms.

**Community engagement even more critical in conservative contexts.** Afghanistan is a conservative society with a large rural and illiterate population. Religious leaders and community elders have influence on people and are trusted within the society. Involving religious leaders in important issues such as refraining from child marriage and general child safeguarding/protection, community mobilization for in-kind contributions, awareness raising during project pause and remobilisation, made communities understand the objectives of the project during project implementation. The LNGB+ project involved religious leaders and community elders as leads or members of the School Management Committees (SMCs). The Endline Evaluation found that community buy-in was critical to the success of the project. Activities which focus on establishing parent engagement (such as teacher-parent days) and asking communities to take oversight over classes through School Management Shuras (SMS) proved to be positive contributors to the achievements of LNGB+, particularly in light of the restrictions around girls and education.

**“I learned how to read and write, and I learned Dari, English, and the Arts. All of these subjects and issues are going to help me a lot. I am going to be a good teacher when I grow up.”**

Girl



