

Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

Excelling Against the Odds, ChildHope UK and CHADET

ETHIOPIA

APRIL 2017 – MARCH 2021



Girls'
Education
Challenge



ChildHope



“[The project] established 73 Girls’ Clubs... covering topics relating to safeguarding, leadership, self-confidence, self-esteem, sexual and reproductive health, belonging and other skills. An estimated 8,884 girls are members of Girls’ Clubs. In addition, 97.3% of girls feel the club facilitator acts on what they say.”



● Ethiopia

What did Excelling Against the Odds project do?

Excelling Against the Odds (EAO) was implemented by ChildHope UK in partnership with the Organisation for Child Development and Transformation (CHADET) in Ethiopia (South Wollo, South Gondar and Arsi) between 2017 and 2021.

The project aimed to enable 16,480 marginalised girls aged between seven and 18 in remote areas of Ethiopia to learn in school and successfully transition from primary to secondary education and vocational training, university or employment. To achieve this, EAO addressed critical barriers to girls' education in Ethiopia. This included the challenges of early marriage, risky migration and heavy domestic work. EAO was funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC). The project focused on the following activities:

1. Providing safe and stimulating learning spaces for girls in 74 schools. EAO encouraged girls to regularly attend primary and secondary school by creating appropriate classrooms, setting up reading corners, establishing homework tutorial clubs, focusing on learning and maintaining robust safeguarding reporting mechanisms.
2. Contributing to school fees and providing learning materials for 1,250 girls from the most marginalised homes. This enabled girls to transition to the next appropriate stage of education.
3. Establishing weekly homework tutorial clubs to support girls that needed extra help, consolidating learning and enabling transition. As a result, 7,400 girls attended homework tutorial clubs in 74 schools.
4. Ensuring well-trained and supported teachers who are confident in adapting more effective mathematics and literacy lessons in remote contexts. EAO provided 484 teachers with training, mentoring and coaching to develop more effective teaching approaches tailored to girls' specific needs.
5. Establishing 109 Communities of Practice to promote collaborative and reflective working to support teacher professional development.
6. Creating space in schools for Girls' Clubs, in which 6,875 girls participated. The work of Girls' Clubs challenged gender norms and supported girls to be more confident, empowering them by offering life skills training and raising their aspirations. The life skills lessons were an in-school 'stand-alone' provision for the girls, and the focus of these lessons was to develop an understanding of how social norms affect a girl's life and time in school and how to challenge those norms.
7. Influencing broader social change around issues of gender in Ethiopian society through instigating a 'Girls' Movement'. This movement was led by young female leaders of all age groups, who lead local campaigns promoting the value of girls' education.
8. Targeting sexual and reproductive health (SRH) barriers relevant to girls as they enter adolescence, including early marriage and access to sanitary wear. EAO Set up 74 sanitary corners in schools and provided sanitary pads to girls.
9. Reviving Good Brothers' Clubs in schools, in which 3,803 boys participated. The clubs developed boys' understanding of the social norms and barriers that affect girls accessing and staying in education and life in general.
10. Developing employability skills for girls who choose vocational education or independent adulthood. This was accomplished by providing an entrepreneurship and employability skills development service to support girls who choose vocational education or enter the workplace. In addition, the project worked to develop meaningful employment opportunities in partnership with technical, vocational education and training agencies, and the private sector.



How did the Excelling Against the Odds project adapt during COVID-19?

The COVID-19 outbreak substantially disrupted education for girls, with schools in Ethiopia closing in mid-March 2020. In addition, the implementation of project activities was significantly disrupted as a result. Nonetheless, the close working relationship between ChildHope and CHADET meant that the project could respond flexibly and timely.

In March 2020, EAO made several adaptations in response to the school closures.

1. The project provided distance learning materials to support girls to continue learning at home. Over 91% of girls in project areas received and completed literacy and numeracy worksheets, supporting their home learning.
2. It offered psychosocial counselling support to girls who needed wellbeing support, delivered through girls' club facilitators and tutors. Of the 35.9% of girls who received counselling from an adult over the last few months since returning to school, 100% found it helpful.
3. It disseminated information, soap (37,616 bars) and hygiene materials (13,000 leaflets) to limit the spread of COVID-19. The [endline evaluation](#) found that of the 88% of girls who received a leaflet, 98.7% found it helped increase their understanding of COVID-19.

The first of these adaptations – the provision of learning materials – was very successful. Before any decisions were taken concerning the support for girls' learning throughout school closure, EAO undertook a rapid assessment survey of the availability of technology to project girls. In this rapid assessment, 100% of the project girls were contacted. In addition, project staff, local community workers and local community volunteers undertook socially distanced door-step surveys of all girls and their families to learn which girls had access to a phone, radio, and television. The project's rapid assessment showed that most girls did not have access to such technologies, which were being introduced nationally to support learning. Hence, EAO decided to reach girls through printed distance learning worksheets. 12,454 girls received three worksheets (maths, English and local language) appropriate to their age, grade level and region. Over 74,000 worksheets were printed and distributed. Due to the distance, local topography and inherent difficulties in reaching many rural areas, worksheets were developed that contained sufficient activities for several weeks of work. Girls were encouraged to work at their own pace. Two sets of worksheets were created:

“As [the worksheet] was given immediately after school closure due to COVID-19, it has given me hope in my learning and I didn't forget to try and do the questions.”



1. The first set was revision based, following the subject curriculum. A mark sheet was developed for each subject, where each question was worked through, showing method and result. These were distributed for girls to assess their work and identify and correct their own mistakes and identify areas for further revision.
2. The second set of worksheets was developed incorporating new learning and revision. Subject topics and objectives were explained, followed by a worked example. This was followed by individual student work. Where possible, worksheets deepened understanding. Model exam papers were distributed to girls in Grade 8 and Grade 12 preparing for examinations during the school closures.

The learning from the second set of worksheets was assessed on the schools' reopening and incorporated into the government's revision package. There were many benefits of engaging project teachers to develop the worksheets rather than creating them centrally in a 'top-down' process. These benefits included:

1. Teachers had a close connection with the girls for whom they were developing the worksheets.
2. Teachers understood the level at which the girls were working and at what level they should be working.
3. Teachers understood the curriculum requirements.
4. Teachers remained engaged with the project during extended school closures. In addition, developing the worksheets supported the continued professional development of the teachers.

A secondary benefit was the level of psychosocial support teachers could also provide. Teachers maintained a focus and connection with their work, thus maintaining purpose and hope. In addition, they maintained contact with the project and, by extension, with the girls, keeping them fully abreast of the situation and ongoing changes.

Keeping in close contact with girls was paramount during this period and EAO used the community-based Letter Link boxes to ensure they could respond to challenges the girls were facing. Girls reported a spike in early marriages, especially in South Gonder, following school closures in March 2020, when girls and families faced the economic and social uncertainties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Project staff reacted swiftly to engage the local Women and Children's Department and the Amhara television news to highlight the issue and bring the spike under control. Unfortunately, 12 girls were married before the project's intervention. However, 8 of the girls were able to continue their education following negotiation with their families. As a result, early marriages decreased from 1.9% of the cohort to 0.6% during the project implementation period.



What did the Excelling Against the Odds project achieve?

Creating safe spaces for girls

The lack of safe spaces and inability to feel safe were significant concerns of girls and their families. EAO worked hard to change this, resulting in 96% of girls reporting feeling safe in school in the [endline evaluation](#). Safe space is a critical part of girls' development and growth. Where there is limited trust and safety, learning and development are impeded. Provision of safer and stimulating learning spaces has been a core component of the project, achieved through a comprehensive set of activities that created a safe and stimulating learning environment. This included Letter Link boxes for anonymised safeguarding reporting, sanitary corners and Girls' Clubs. The key to success was providing reassurance and visibility to the girls about the safety measures in place in schools, the continuous monitoring of safe spaces, and safeguarding reporting and response mechanisms, which provided extra reassurance that the systems and processes were working. During the 8-month school closure in 2020, community volunteers were the principal means of contacting the girls. They lived in the same community and could quickly meet the girls to assess their needs and respond to safety concerns.

Establishing Girls' Clubs

The setting up of Girls' Clubs has significantly contributed to project outcomes around safe spaces and academic achievement in school:

- The 2020 [midline evaluation](#) demonstrated that members of Girls' Clubs significantly improved their academic self-efficacy, with 99% of club members transitioning through their school grades. Principals confirmed that girls supported by the project are in the top rank in class. During the final project monitoring visit to a primary school in March 2021, it was reported that of the 139 girls and boys that sat the Grade 8 examination, the 8 top scorers were GEC girls. All 30 GEC girls transitioned to Grade 9, the first year of secondary school.

- The 2021 [endline evaluation](#) found that participating in a Girls' Club was one of the most effective interventions at supporting school belonging, supporting girls' self-esteem levels and supporting girls to attend school more often.

All girls were eligible to participate in a Girls' Club. Each club had a girl leader democratically elected by the members and subsequently managed the club agenda and activities over the academic year, guided by the school's Focal Teacher.

Girls from school-based Girls' Clubs have reached influential people. For example, some of the Girls' Clubs have been sharing their views with the Parent Teachers and Students Associations as a strategy to reach the wider community. Girls' Club peer leaders are trained as peer educators to train other girls in life skills. Girls have erected billboards with their messages to address the wider community and have published flyers with powerful messages in the local languages to reach families in their villages.

The regional education bureau in Amhara and Oromia have acknowledged the strengths of the project's Girls' Clubs and Good Brother's Clubs and have committed to strengthening the same clubs in other schools. In addition, the project has given regional education bureau staff soft and hard copies of all the life skills training modules and guidelines on how to run clubs democratically so they can scale them up.

“While others say, “You cannot do it”, I say, “I can do it”

A Girls' Club member



EAO believes this initiative creates spaces for girls' voices to be heard. It lays the foundation for more extensive transformations in the longer term as the girls continue in education and social interactions. Evidence from the external evaluation supports this belief, with 58.4% of girls supported by the project reporting that Girls' Clubs improved their self-esteem and 55.7% of girls reporting an improved sense of school belonging by participating in Girls' Clubs. Furthermore, beyond the academic benefits, engaging in the clubs has created the opportunity for the girls to make friends and establish a social network of young girls who understand the intricacies of gender and disability-related norms and possible ways of retaliating against the negative impact of those norms at an individual level.

Providing life skills lessons

The life skills lessons were an in-school, 'stand-alone' provision for the girls, facilitated by project trained 'Focal Teachers', and were separate from other interventions. The focus of these lessons was to develop an understanding of how social norms affect a girl's life and time in school and how to challenge those norms. It looked at how to recognise and avoid dangers, negotiate, and, where necessary, report on specific issues such as early marriage. The lessons were the main intervention focusing on the development of the girls' self-esteem. The [endline evaluation](#) identified that being a member of a Girls' Club raised girls' self-efficacy levels, sense of school belonging and other areas associated with personal development. Furthermore, it showed that girls supported by the project had significantly higher life skills than girls in the control groups at midline and found that project-supported girls exhibited the most significant improvements in their sense of school belonging by [endline](#), improving by almost 20%.

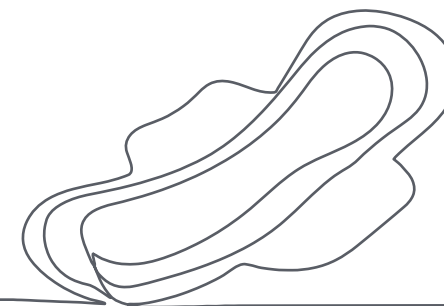
“Life skills improvements are likely to be sustained by emerging support at the community level. Similarly, at the community level, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of these life skills for girls, particularly through outreach activities in family hubs.” (taken from the endline evaluation)

Creating sanitary corners

Sanitary corners provide a safe and hygienic space for girls during menstruation and give access to sanitary pads, so they no longer need to go home or stay away from school during their period. Sanitary corners also have vital messages and information on the walls about access to SRH services. The [endline evaluation](#) found that during 2020-21, 83.1% of girls supported by the project found it easier to access sanitary wear, compared to 53.1% of girls in non-project areas. The 47 sanitary corners in primary schools and 27 in secondary schools will continue to function. However, rather than supply packets of sanitary pads, girls will be using reusable sanitary pads following training in how to use reusable pads.

At the Project Closure Workshop in Oromia, a Focal Teacher from a primary school spoke about the critical role sanitary corners play in girls' learning. She said that *“before the project, girls were usually absent for 2-5 days a month due to mensuration.”* That would account for between 16 and 40 days off over the academic year. She added that by having a sanitary corner, *“This has improved girls' attendance and reduced unwanted dropout... the knowledge of making reusable sanitary pad is also extremely promising.”* The positive impact of the sanitary corners was also highlighted on Amhara television by one of the doctors who provide SRH training to Girls' Clubs.

“Outreach activities are successful in supporting parents to improve their attitudes towards girls' education. Family hubs which were reinstated at the request of [the] girls, have provided a space where girls can raise and discuss issues with parents and community leaders such as early marriage and domestic labour which may create barriers to attending school.”



Establishing Letter Link boxes

Letter Link boxes are one of the means to safeguarding girls in school. There are 104 Letter Link boxes in 47 primary schools since 2012, 27 secondary schools and 30 in local communities (Kebeles). The boxes have allowed girls and boys to anonymously report safeguarding and protection issues, such as early marriage, abduction, bullying, corporal punishment in the home and school, and school management issues such as poor teacher attendance and standards of teaching.

A total of 2,544 issues were reported through Letter Link boxes, with 91.2 % of cases directly managed and resolved in schools, while the remaining cases were referred to child services bodies, for example, early marriages or abduction. For instance, in many cases, a suspected early marriage was halted through the intervention of the school Focal Teacher or a project staff member. Similarly, project staff addressed and resolved the home's heavy domestic chore burden or corporal punishment through negotiation with families.

At the Project Closure Workshop in Amhara, participants highlighted the advantages of Letter Link boxes, which increased girls' confidence to report issues and helped to raise awareness about the prevalence of negative social norms. However, in some areas, the positive impact of trusted relationships in communities meant that girls began to report safeguarding issues directly to Focal Teachers and Community Workers and Volunteers, bypassing the Letter Link boxes.

Raising girls' voices

Girls supported by the project speak about the impact of the Girls' Clubs, the sanitary corners and the Letter Link boxes in the Impact film <https://www.childhope.org.uk/our-work/projects/gec> and the Talking Head short films <https://vimeo.com/showcase/7332711>

// BERTHADI'S STORY



Berhati is 21 and in Grade 12 at Secondary School in the Arsi region. She has a visual impairment. She lives with her 70-year-old mother in a rural community and the all-female household depends on agriculture for their livelihood.

Berhati moved 25km away from her village to continue her education in secondary school from Grade 9. She said, "My mother was not willing for me to go to the town and continue in my education because there isn't anyone who can assist me economically as well as on the way to and from school." However, Berhati managed to convince her mother and has joined Grade 9. The school's Vice Principal, Ms Firehiwot, has supported her and "After I joined the project, I received different support such as school materials, assistive aids and medical support and 300 Birr cash support on a monthly basis for accommodation and living."

Assistive devices have supported Berhati to access education and include a stick, Braille kit, and Grade 10, 11 and 12 Braille textbooks. During the school closures in 2020, Berhati also received distance learning worksheets, health and hygiene information leaflets in Braille and bars of soap.

She says, "All the support is very important for me, but the Braille support I have received starting from Grade 10 has helped me to study more and, as a result, I have gained high results in Grade 10 tests and been promoted to Grade 11. The cash support I am receiving monthly has also helped me pay for my house rent."



“Girls in Girls’ Clubs, project Community Workers and Community Volunteers are all involved in identifying girls at risk of drop out and girls who are missing school, so that these girls can be immediately counselled and an intervention with their family organised.”

// GENET'S STORY

“My vision of my future has changed. I now have a slogan for myself: I can be great, with great success in many aspects of my life.”

Seventeen-year-old Genet is from a small rural village in the South Gondar region. She is a Grade 12 student at Secondary School and has ambitions to go to university to study to be a doctor. Since primary school, she has been supported by the project and has transitioned to secondary school.

Attending primary school was not easy for Genet. “The remoteness of my home from the school meant I lost much of my study time while I travelled to and from school every day. The journey was long and we feared abduction around the forest. The only solution was walking in a group but waiting for my friends to finish their classes also killed my study time.”

The project provided extra tutorials during the school day for girls who do not have time to study at home, either because of long journeys or other commitments such as household chores. Through these tutorials, Genet improved her grades year on year, saying, “I feel happy in my day-to-day improvements.” These extra classes can make all the difference in whether girls achieve the grades they need to progress to secondary education.

Other things that contribute to performance include school materials and clubs that focus on non-academic skills. “Before the support of CHADET, I used to make exercise books from sheets taken out of my sister’s exercise books from the previous years. Taking part in life skill training and other school clubs helped me develop my decision-making skills and gave me the confidence to stand up to peer pressure.”

Transition to high school was not always easy. “It took time to adapt from a rural environment to the new urban one”. However, support from the project continued with providing financial assistance, schoolbooks, uniforms and moral support. Now Genet is entering the final grade and she is capitalising on her confidence in her life skills classes.

“I have a good relationship with my teachers and my parents. I support my little sisters in their education and have become a role model for them. I have become popular in the school compound and even in my community, and I have the opportunity to lead different clubs and exercise leadership. I use my new self-confidence to tackle negative attitudes and challenges based on my gender. My vision of my future has changed. I now have a slogan for myself: I can be great with great success in many aspects of my life.”



The Excelling Against the Odds project in numbers



Number of marginalised girls were supported

16,481



Number of girls who graduated school and entered university, college or vocational training

669

Number of girls who participated in Girls' Clubs, in which they received life skills training.

6,875



Number of teachers trained in gender-sensitive literacy and numeracy pedagogy

484

Attendance rates rose to over **90%**

133 school Principals and Vice Principals received leadership training

109 Communities of Practice were set up for teachers to work collaboratively

7,400 girls attended Homework Tutorial Clubs in 74 schools

3,803 boys participated in Good Brothers' Clubs, in which they learned about ways to support girls' education.

During the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **492** teachers were trained in effective revision practices, supporting girls with disabilities and psychosocial support
- **12,454** girls received a local language literacy, mathematics and English worksheet
- **13,000** information leaflets on effective handwashing and keeping safe were distributed
- **37,000** bars of soap were distributed

What did the Excelling Against the Odds project learn?

Teacher-led Communities of Practice (CoPs) lead to a culture of change for improvement

One of the most successful elements of the project was the introduction of the CoPs to ensure teachers received ongoing support and mentoring. By the end of the project, 109 CoPs had been established, and the [endline evaluation](#) showed that 93% of teachers stated that being a member of a CoP allowed them to reflect on and improve their teaching practices. Most importantly, when teachers lead CoPs, they engage positively, demonstrating it can enhance the quality of the teachers in Ethiopian schools. Teachers had not appreciated the benefit of lesson observations in the past, perceiving them as a 'top-down' management tool for management inspections. The teacher-led element ensured that the teachers worked towards finding solutions to problems rather than imposed solutions, enabling them to become problem solvers.

The CoPs created a culture of change for improvement. Where project monitoring had previously identified that teachers were not engaged in conversations about the process of teaching or education, the CoPs created a space where this became the norm. The CoPs also built agency within the teachers around the very notion of change and developed a culture of reciprocity where teachers valued and embraced each other's work. As a result, principals and teachers have embraced the CoP model as a 'teacher-friendly, safe space for dialogue. The teachers' weekly and monthly meetings and records showed teachers' high attendance at CoPs.

It may not be possible to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to every school, but the learning from the EAO approach offers areas for consideration. For example, interventions requiring a shift in behaviour require more than just training and educating people about the new behaviour. Projects may need to consider developing strong leadership models to create a culture of change and consider behaviour change theories.

Teacher training is effective when reflective and is embedded in everyday activities

While teacher training reaches all project teachers, it does not always have the desired impact on learning. Teacher training needs to focus on pedagogy as a mechanism to enhance learning. Training also needs to ensure engagement with or discussions about the quality of teaching at the school level. When teacher training is embedded into everyday teacher activities with ongoing support and mentoring and by applying behaviour change theories, impact on learning is observed. Furthermore, to ensure sufficient improvements in pedagogic delivery and the girls' learning training needs to address the following challenges explicitly:

1. The need for teachers to consider the relationship between pedagogy and learning.
2. The need to empower teachers to problem solve and be adaptive in the classroom.
3. The need to develop school leadership to support teaching.

Project monitoring demonstrated through observations that teachers were trained correctly, had acquired the knowledge and effectively applied it to classroom activities. Central to the training and observations was the reflective conversations on what else is needed, which identified the need for additional training and ongoing support and mentoring.

“CoP is [essential] for peer-to-peer improvement of teaching in school ... If someone tells your weakness, it is not easy to accept rather you develop resistance. But when your peer comments, you know the objective that simply gives you the energy to go the next step on the ladder” CoP member.”

CoP member

Strong leadership helps teachers teach

To improve teaching practices and speed up the process of improving teachers' pedagogy, principals and teachers need support. School leaders need to align themselves with project interventions and support their teachers towards achieving those interventions. For teacher training to not occur in a vacuum, it needs to be supported by strong leadership. In addition, school principals did not always sufficiently support their teachers to improve, assuming that the project was responsible for all improvement activities. A focus on leadership installs an understanding of how leadership (rather than management) can motivate teachers.

Girl-led community dialogue is effective in understanding and challenging cultural norms

Projects need to increase the active participation of girls to successfully confront barriers entrenched in cultural norms which dictate attitudes and behaviours. Working directly with girls builds their self-esteem, resilience and aspirations. Working with local communities identifies and challenges social norms and traditional harmful practices such as early marriages. When girls are actively included and feel safe to participate, they can challenge beliefs around inequitable gender norms, develop new shared beliefs among themselves, the school and the wider community, and cultivate their agency.

Including boys in girls' education programming supports transformation change

Empowerment of girls alone is not sufficient to bring about transformational change in the lives of girls. The project saw that more work was needed to address the gap of understanding and knowledge between girls and boys. Listening to girls was crucial in developing responsive, adaptive programming. Girls in the project stated that boys needed to understand the circumstances affecting girls and learn about gendered social norms. So, Good Brothers' Clubs were revived in schools after being dormant for some time. As a result, boys understood the social norms and barriers that affect girls accessing and staying in education and life in general. As a direct result of the work carried out through the clubs, boys took household chores from the girls to study. They reported greater respect and understanding of girls' educational journeys and worked more closely with them in classroom activities.

Inclusive and open access to homework tutorials raises self-esteem

The [endline evaluation](#) revealed that homework tutorials were a statistically significant predictor of increased levels of self-esteem. However, this was not only for those girls most in need of further academic support. For homework tutorials to be effective, attendance should be open to all. Initially, the project included girls below a certain threshold, so they attended tutorial classes for one semester. This led to a lack of motivation from girls to attend homework tutorials as they had a negative image. Therefore, the project changed the format and discovered that when all girls had the opportunity to attend, the more advanced girls benefited from additional learning support and supported less advanced girls in tutorial lessons. By supporting and teaching the less advanced girls, the advanced girls consolidated and deepened their understanding of a subject, thereby increasing their knowledge and understanding.





Find out more: www.childhope.org.uk | www.girlseducationchallenge.org

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