# Final reflections
Achievements and lessons learned

Steps Towards Advancing Girls' Education Success (STAGES) II

**AFGHANISTAN**
APRIL 2017 – JUNE 2021

Girls' Education Challenge

UKaid
from the British people

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Afghanistan

# What did STAGES II do?

The Steps Towards Afghan Girls' Education Success (STAGES) project was funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development (FCDO) through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC). The project provided education for girls and boys through community-based education (CBE) classes in 1,078 communities across 16 provinces of Afghanistan: Badakshan, Baghlan, Bamyan, Daikundi, Faryab, Ghazni, Ghor, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Kapisa, Khost, Kunduz, Paktiya, Parwan and Takhar.

The project established primary and lower secondary CBE classes and accelerated learning programme classes in remote communities. CBE classes were complemented by additional activities including teacher training and school management councils (school shuras), renovation of schools and classrooms, as well as the provision of school equipment, facilities, learning resources and remedial support for struggling students.

The second phase of the project, which ran from 2017 to 2022, built on the lessons learned from phase one which took place from 2014 to 2017. STAGES II targeted out-of-school girls who were unable to access government schools, including girls who lived in remote areas, girls with disabilities and girls who did not speak the language of instruction. The project provided opportunities to access education opportunities through a CBE model. The project also focused on transition for girls to ensure they completed secondary education through government provided education.

Activities implemented under STAGES II include:

1. Provision of CBE, accelerated learning and life skills programmes for girls in remote and marginalised communities.

2. Provision of facilities and resources for CBE classrooms, including latrines, drinking water, ventilation, stationary, books, learning materials and hygiene kits.

3. Recruitment and training of teachers in inclusive, student-centred and gender-equitable teaching methods.

4. Provision of peer groups aimed to build girls' confidence and awareness of social norms through competitions, debates and discussions.

5. Provision of radio listening circles and mobile theatre for awareness raising on various social issues affecting girls' education.

6. Provision of English classes as an after-school activity.

7. Engagement with communities, particularly with parents, local leaders and community elders through community support groups known as "school shura".

8. Strengthening of relationships and capacity among national, provincial and district-level education providers.

9. Establishment of School Management Councils (SMCs) to support CBE classes and work with families to help girls find pathways to continue their education.

10. Working with the Ministry of Education's Provincial Education Department (PED) and District Education Department (DED) on policy-level promotion of CBE best practices.

**"The project provided education for girls and boys through community-based education classes in 1,078 communities across 16 provinces of Afghanistan."**

# How did STAGES II adapt during COVID-19?

**As a result of the rapid spread of COVID-19 throughout Afghanistan, the Ministry of Education (MoE) closed schools across the country for six months, between March and October 2020.**

STAGES II developed a remote learning curriculum for students in CBE classes, to encourage continued at-home learning and small group learning while classes were closed. The remote learning model included activities such as teaching directed through mobile learning, and the provision of learning materials for home study to students and small peer study groups.

Upon re-opening of classes, the project provided basic PPE and maintained social distancing in the classes, coupled with staggered class times to ensure limited class sizes. STAGES II also conducted phone interviews with parents, shura members and teachers to monitor results from remote learning as well as to check on students' general wellbeing. STAGES II also conducted remote teacher training activities through interactive voice recordings and a 12-module course, which included psychological first aid, positive discipline and inclusive education.

According to the Endline Evaluation, a total 46% of girls reported that they participated in some form of home-based or remote learning. Notable challenges with remote learning included the ability to access mobile phones for learning and being able to engage readily with the learning materials provided without face-to-face contact.

> **"STAGES II developed a remote learning curriculum for students in CBE classes, to encourage continued at-home learning and small group learning while classes were closed."**
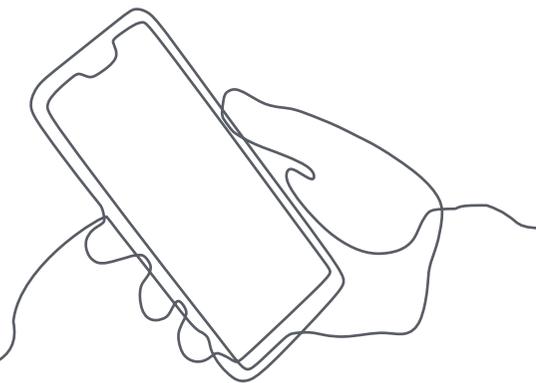
# What did STAGES II achieve?

**Improved learning outcomes.** Girls' numeracy *and* literacy skills improved considerably throughout the lifetime of the project. This was apparent for both girls who attended CBE and government schools. Literacy scores increased from 33.4 (CBE) and 33.8 (government schools) to 61.3 (CBE) and 61.6 (government schools). For numeracy, scores increased from 38.7 (CBE) and 40 (governments schools) at the baseline to 57.7 (CBE) and 58.5 (government schools) at the endline.

As part of the girls' survey conducted at endline, girls were asked to rank the extent to which they thought the CBE programme had helped to improve their learning. The factors girls felt supported their learning were the use of child-centred teaching approaches in the classroom, quality of teaching, family engagement, improved life skills, and the provision of facilities and resources in classrooms. The factors which appeared to limit girls' learning were the use of teacher-directed methods in more challenging subjects, limited resources in some classes (like laboratories and computers), and small and cramped classroom space.

**Improved transition.** According to the endline results, a total of 201 CBE girls were still in their CBE classes, representing a successful transition rate of 76.13%. Among government school students, a total of 89% of girls were continuing their studies. Among handover girls (those whose class transitioned pre-February 2020), 65.2% of girls successfully transitioned to government schools once their CBE class had closed. However, 34.8% did not transition. Overall, 74.2% successfully transitioned onto their next suitable pathway, compared to 16% whose transition was unsuccessful. Among those girls who had dropped out of school or were considered as having an unsuccessful transition outcome, the most cited reason was 'could not access another school' (32.4%). The next most common reasons given were 'poor security in the community or around school' (13.4%) and being married (9.7%).

**Trained female teachers.** Some of the most valuable contributions include the number of female teachers who were trained and monitored throughout the project and are now established and experienced, and integrated into the MoE system. These women, who were located in some of the most remote locations of the country, are now available to fill the existing gap in female teachers and continue to ensure marginalised and vulnerable girls can receive quality education. STAGES partners played a considerable role in preparing these teachers, through the provision of continuous training, preparation of their portfolio and support to build networks with local government officials. However, challenges remain in the availability of positions for these female teachers due to limited funds through MoE. To that end, the sustainability and long-term impact of female teachers is in the hands of the MoE and its allocation of funding and willingness to employ these teachers.

**Changed attitudes towards education.** According to the Endline Evaluation, community attitudes towards girls' education have improved throughout the lifetime of the project. These improvements were largely associated with additional education opportunities for children, suggesting that the project played an influential role in building the commitment and awareness of families about the value of girls' education. Gaps were still noted in the extent to which men supported the engagement of women in the public sphere and in decision-making roles, such as in School Management Committees (SMCs). Parents attributed their increased recognition of the value of girls' education to outreach and awareness-raising activities carried out by STAGES II and particularly to the role played by SMCs, religious leaders and tribal elders. Information sessions, carried out by implementing partners in communities, built trust that daughters were safe and that barriers or security risks could be openly discussed and addressed by SMCs.

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**Improved girls' life skills.** Throughout the lifetime of the project, girls demonstrated an improvement in their key life skills and leadership skills. At endline, girls reflected on the differences they noted in themselves since they started attending classes, such as improved confidence, communication skills, and capacity to work effectively in groups and share their opinions. Girls noted that peer support groups were important because these required girls to take on leadership roles within their class. Furthermore, the introduction of life skill sessions within the groups were also recognised as particularly beneficial for building their awareness about individual rights, WASH practices, and building their overall awareness of gender inequality in their community and country. Para-professional training was also an important experience for many girls. Girls who participated in the para-professional training (sewing/tailoring/starting and managing a business) noted that participation in the sessions showed them alternative pathways, rather than simply transitioning into government schools. It also positioned girls to take on employment opportunities to make additional income and contribute to their families.

**Established and supported functional SMCs.** SMCs played a key role in supporting the transition of girls into government schools, through advocating with families and encouraging them to send girls to government schools. SMCs also played valuable roles in holding classes accountable to higher child protection standards (including not using corporal punishment in classrooms) and encouraging consistent attendance. In some communities, they also played key roles engaging with government officials to advocate for the continuation of CBE classes or support to identify other relevant schools for students. The capacity of SMCs improved over the life of the project, with SMCs scoring 90.2% (government schools) and 88.2% (CBE), which represents an improvement from 82.7% (government schools) and 85.3% (CBE) at the baseline. According to the Endline Evaluation, in some communities there was equitable participation among men and women but, in others, women continued to take on tokenistic roles. This was associated with the low literacy levels of women and socio-cultural norms which often rejected women taking on decision-making positions. Women were often side-lined and leadership positions were assigned to male SMC members.

**Expanded education access in remote and rural communities through school shura.** STAGES II worked on building relations in targeted communities among parents, local leaders and community elders through forming community support groups known as "school shura." These shura were responsible for community mobilisation, including children's enrolment, advocating to government officials for continued education and ensuring classroom environments were conducive to learning and providing a child-friendly atmosphere. As parents experienced the benefits of their children's education (e.g. students could help their parents read important documents/announcements) parents' support for, and engagement with, the school shura grew. This reinforced the shura role and ownership of the community's educational resources (teachers, local libraries etc). This support for education was particularly remarkable when:

**1.** Schools were being handed over (i.e., brought under the authority of government schools) and community members continued to track students' attendance and progress in school.

**2.** Restrictions related to COVID-19 forced schools to close and community members facilitated continued learning through individual and small group activities.

**3.** Taliban forces captured project locations and community members advocated for their schools to remain open and succeeded in securing the continuation of their children's education. Even when partners were unable to access these areas, shura shared updates with project staff on student activities and progress in the schools.

**Tackled socio-cultural barriers inhibiting girls' education.**
Sociocultural norms, along with local conservative interpretations of Islam have widely affected the extent to which communities and caregivers are willing to send their daughters to school. A key aim of STAGES II was to address these attitudes and bring about more supportive environment for girls' education. STAGES II addressed many of the concerns and misconceptions around education for girls by engaging closely with local communities and community leaders. Key activities included the establishment of SMCs to act as a bridge between implementing partners and community members. The SMCs were established not only to support CBE classes but to also engage with caregivers and promote the value of education for girls. In addition, STAGES II also engaged with communities through community dialogue sessions on themes of children's rights, WASH and the value of education for girls. Religious leaders were also engaged and asked to promote education through an Islamic lens, as a means of influencing local norms and practices.

**Worked with the government to sustain CBE.** The project's robust outcomes in delivering education through CBE provided strong evidence for the continued importance of CBE in Afghanistan. In late 2018, the MoE revised the CBE policy to include multi-grade ALP which was piloted with STAGES II and is now recognised as part of the formal education system. This policy recognition was significant because students who successfully completed CBE classes in their villages were eligible to attend government schools. Notably, local government officials also agreed to support CBE classes after the project close, thus ensuring the sustainability of education in these remote communities. School shura were instrumental in following-up with the commitments made by the local government officials.

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# STAGES II
# in numbers
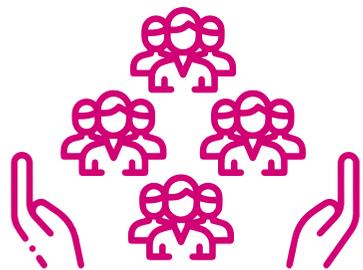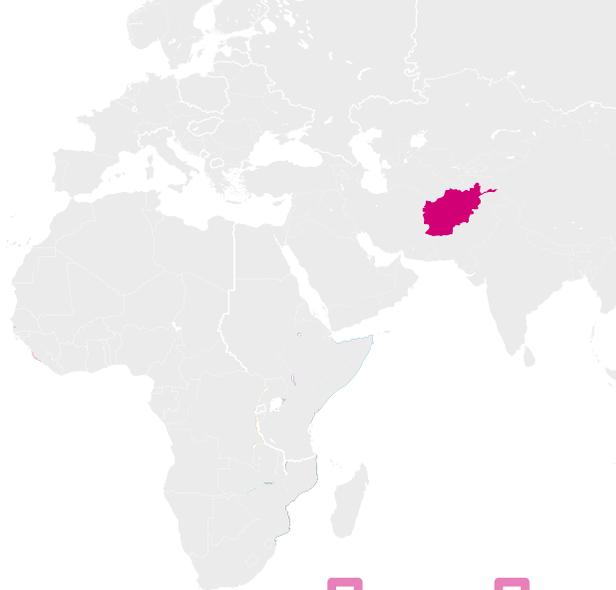
**Communities supported**

**994**

**Number of teachers
trained and supported**
*(1,102 female and 1,188 male)*
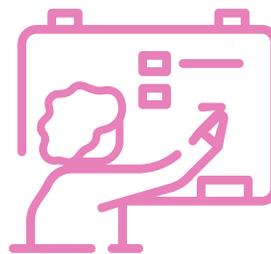
**2,290**
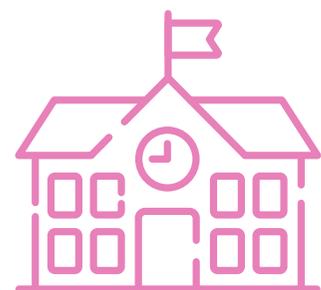
**555**
**government
schools
supported**

**1,578**
**community-based
education classes
established**

**Number of children
enrolled in remote
and marginalised areas**

**35,618**
*(25,510 girls and 10,108 boys)*

# To what extent STAGES II deliver value for money?

**The sudden onset of COVID-19 prompted greater efficiency in project implementation.**

With restrictions on in-person activities, STAGES swiftly pivoted to remote support by providing teachers and shura members with means to conduct activities over the phone, including monitoring of students' progress, assessing teacher engagement (during remote learning), and sensitising parents and shura members on topics such as the importance of education, safeguarding and remote learning. During this period, it was found that shura members engaged with their communities in a deeper way. Members followed up with girls to see how they were progressing. They also met with parents to understand the challenges of at-home learning and reported ideas back to implementing partners about how to improve remote learning. It was generally found that shura were eager to take on greater responsibility and were fully capable of assuming a more prominent role in disseminating key messages, following up with girls and regularly reporting successes and challenges back to the project.

Remote support not only empowered shura members to take on greater ownership but created greater value for money by maximising community-led initiatives while minimising costs associated with project-supported in-person activities. It is important to note, however, that this was due in large part to early investments and coaching with shura members at the project outset. COVID-19 merely provided the opportunity for each shura to demonstrate their capacity. Consequently, when in-person activities were possible again, the project reassessed which activities needed to be done in-person and which could be more efficiently (and even more effectively) remotely. While remote approaches cannot substitute the in-person support that the project provided to communities, the COVID-19 operating context challenged STAGES II to explore new and creative ways to continue engaging with

girls, shura, parents and teachers in a safe way. These new ways provided useful lessons on what could be done more efficiently using mobile phone technology in the future.

Central to the project's effectiveness was the operational presence and community relations it already had prior to project inception. In all target provinces and districts, STAGES II had a strong operational presence through years of implementing development and emergency programmes, including education. Prior to STAGES II, the implementing partners had already developed a close working relationship with local government officials, which enabled them to be much more effective in establishing new classes, managing the classes in coordination with them, and working with them to plan for transition. In many instances, this strong working relationship allowed implementing partners to negotiate further with local government officials to encourage them to take over more responsibilities and commit to ensuring that education continued for STAGES-supported students. On a community level, the close relationships with community leaders saved time in gaining acceptance of its presence and project.

Implementing partners ran many education projects by other donors in the same provinces as STAGES, therefore the salaries of managers, coordinators and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff were charged to multiple grants, thus reducing the amount charged to STAGES. Similarly, partners had many projects under several sectors, therefore the operation costs (office rent, office equipment, communications, maintenance, etc) and support staffs (procurement, admin, finance, IT, transport, security and safeguarding) costs were shared by different programme sectors and grants, again reducing the overall costs charged to FCDO.
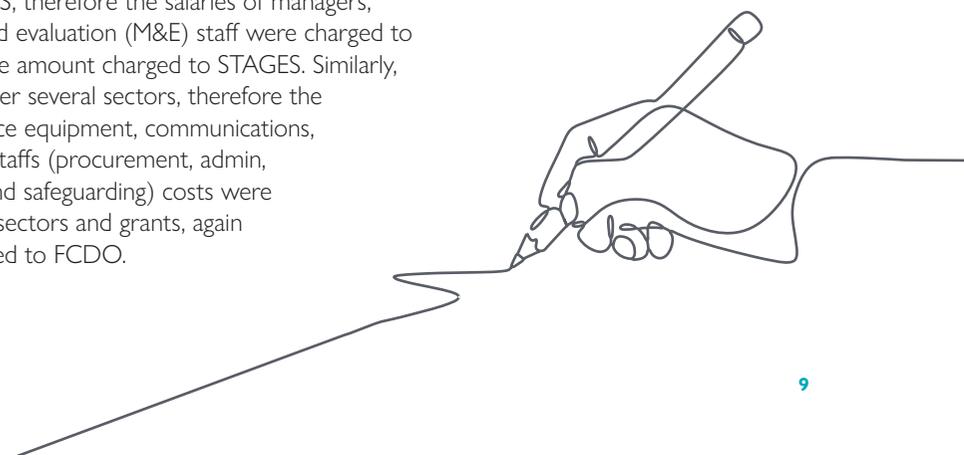
Most project staff were recruited locally, therefore there was minimal need for guest houses and accommodations while staff travelled to the field to implement and monitor the project. This was especially useful for communities that had limited accessibility (security/weather) as they were able to stay in the community to continue project activities as well as ensuring that those employed for their capacities and experience also had relevant contextual knowledge.

Throughout the project, there was a focus on sustainable inputs such as trainings (i.e. shura advocacy training, teacher training, DED and PED training), that imparted knowledge and skills to participants with sustained benefits. School improvement projects leveraged existing resources and built upon assets communities already possessed, instead of creating new constructions or initiatives that required repeated inputs. Projects included refurbishing existing classrooms, installing latrines and erecting tents for additional classes. Communities provided all the local inputs/materials (water, sand, gravel, wood, labour etc) while STAGES utilised flexible response funds/small grants approach that facilitated schools/communities to prioritise and deliver one-time purchases (tents, cement etc). The project minimised inputs that required repeat purchases such as school textbooks. By collecting and storing textbooks after each academic year, the project limited purchasing to replace those books that were lost or severely damaged.

With regards to equity, while the majority of targeted communities in STAGES I and II were in remote areas with correspondingly higher access costs, the project successfully delivered on VfM in the domain of equity in several important ways. STAGES targeted communities where girls were previously out of school. By establishing a class in the community, and simultaneously working with parents and school shura to advocate for their children's education – particularly girls – the project succeeded in lowering barriers and creating greater equity vis-à-vis access to education for girls who otherwise would have never attended school. The targeting strategy directly contributed to narrowing the gender gap in education.

By understanding the Afghan context and the distinct challenges girls face in school, the project required all SMCs and shuras to have female members and ensure that leadership roles included women's voices and insights for all services delivered, and that girls always had an advocate present that could represent their interests and perspectives. In addition, to ensure these committees were able to play a vital role in determining the future of their child's education at the community level, efforts were made to build the capacity of these committees, ensuring the

sustainability of investments to improve educational service delivery. Moreover, hygiene (menstruation) kits were distributed to all female ALP students to reduce female absenteeism. Providing kits allowed girls to go to school without interruption, resulting in attendance rates, and eventually completion rates, comparable to their male counterparts.

STAGES II intentionally targeted communities that are remote and at least 3km further from the nearest hub school, per the MoE CBE policy. This approach ensured that the investment made through STAGES genuinely reached those who are most often marginalised by the education system either because the government does not have capacity to reach and deliver or because it would not make economic sense for the government to establish a formal school. The project ensured that no educational services were already being provided in the selected communities by other partner organisations, so no duplication was taking place. Moreover, some targeted communities include significant populations of IDPs, resulting from many decades of conflict and are therefore extremely marginalised.

By following the CBE policy closely and utilising CBE as a tool for its intended purpose – reaching children who are not covered by the formal government schools – the project has promoted equity in education across the country, especially between rural and urban/peri-urban populations. The project targeted not only girls, but also boys, to have community buy-in and to engage their support for girls' education.

With regards to sustainability, CBE teachers trained by the project are now in place at the community level to facilitate continued provision of learning opportunities to children in those communities. The project's CBE model was designed and aligned with the MoE CBE policy. Government was involved at all stages, including in the community locations selection, teachers' recruitment, students' registration mid-year, end-year and final exams, school improvement project's planning, needs assessment and monitoring, community mobilisation and handover process. At the end of STAGES I there were still limitations to the human and financial capacity and commitment to CBE from national to local levels. STAGES II was able to strengthen planning, coordination, support and management of CBE at different government levels so that it was fully integrated within the education system. It enabled more time to build stronger institutional links between CBE and government schools and CBE shuras, thereby catalysing increased ownership and responsibility for CBE classes by local governance structures. In short, eight years of programming enabled the mainstreaming and institutionalisation of CBE for increased sustainability.

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# What did STAGES II learn?

**Improving learning outcomes and attendance.** Factors which most influenced the literacy and numeracy outcomes of girls included the extent to which households could meet their basic needs, the amount of time reading (the more time reading, the higher the literacy score), and whether or not a girl participated in peer support groups. Participation in peer support groups demonstrated higher learning outcomes. Key barriers which impacted learning outcomes included the availability of toilets for girls, lack of safety when travelling to school and household chores. Consistent attendance was attributed to both the attentiveness of school management councils and classroom teachers and to the commitment of girls to their learning. SMCs were widely reported to monitor attendance and work with teachers to identify absent girls. They took a leading role in following up with girls and caregivers to discuss attendance issues and encourage parents to support girls (for example, by adjusting household chore arrangements).

**Tackling persisting barriers to girls' education.** The environment in which the girls lived presented ongoing barriers. According to the Endline Evaluation, while families largely supported girls' education, their willingness to allow girls to engage in more public spaces was still somewhat limited. Girls continue to need support to advocate for greater decision-making opportunities, space in society where there is acceptance of and interest in hearing female opinions, and more role models who can motivate girls to push for change. As such, future efforts will be required to address these areas to make the gains from life skill and leadership interventions more meaningful. Despite reports that teachers and SMCs encouraged communities to accept that marriage and education are not mutually exclusive, communities which were convinced of the benefits of education were still not necessarily persuaded that marriage should be delayed for the sake of education, or that a girl is capable of fulfilling marital duties and attending school at the same time. Furthermore, parents expressed an inability to support the continuation of girls' attendance after marriage since decision-making on education and all aspects of a girl's life are transferred from fathers to husbands and in-laws upon marriage.

**Changing attitudes through engaging with communities and religious leaders.** Communities, while demonstrating an improvement in their attitudes towards schooling for girls, were – and are – limited in their willingness to allow women into the public sphere and be involved in decision-making activities. Further advocacy efforts will be needed to build on this area and create a space for women at a community level to engage and participate in decision-making efforts. Without demonstrating to men in communities the potential and contribution that women can make to decision-making, they will continue to reject the practice. This should tie in with the efforts regarding leadership and life skills, whereby supporting girls and potentially other females in the community to create a space where they can share the views and opinions of other women and support a more unified approach to community development and overall development for gender equity. Religious leaders play a highly influential role in all communities. They are trusted advisors, who are intended to guide families on the correct path of Islam. Their sentiments towards education for girls, however, were mixed. Some leaders supported education options, and some were directly opposed.

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**Sustaining results through working with communities, government schools and local government officials.** The project was able to cultivate long-term, trusting relations among communities and government entities, allowing effective planning and open conversations about the handover and transition of girls supported through CBE to government schools. Given the limits of institutional resources in Afghanistan, building an effective sustainability and exit strategy could not be achieved in a short period of time, and the eight years of STAGES allowed the project to make a successful handover to the government system.

**Engaging communities and schools through training and mentorship.** A key factor underpinning the achievements of the project was the high level of engagement of school shura in each community. STAGES II leveraged the roles and responsibilities of community shura and embarked on training and mentoring for sustainable management of CBE classes. Shura members played an important role in making sure that the CBE classes were running properly. Teachers were accountable to them and shura members were reaching out to field officers when there were concerns on teaching quality. This high level of remote monitoring was invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic and in times of security risks.

**Improving numeracy and critical thinking through teacher training.** Girls noted that they found maths and English to be among the most challenging classes. Girls performed slightly lower in numeracy compared to literacy and noted that they struggled with maths classes, which was often associated with how this subject was being taught in the classroom. Students highlighted that their teachers generally adopted teacher-directed methods, rather than employing activity-based work, through which students could work together to solve equations and maths-related problems. At primary levels, teachers at the baseline highlighted that they regularly adopted group work but as maths became more difficult, they shifted to teacher-directed approaches. Future interventions should provide secondary level teachers with a toolkit of activities which they can introduce to ensure maths is not only delivered through direct lecture-based approaches. Efforts should also seek to ensure that teachers who are teaching higher-level maths have the necessary knowledge and capacity to teach the necessary subject matter. Results from EGRA and SeGRA highlighted that girls at all grade levels struggled with more advanced literacy tasks, like essay writing and comprehension. Future efforts should support teachers to provide more critical thinking-based activities, such as more regular essay writing, comprehension and interpretation of literature. Introducing critical thinking skills should not only improve more advanced literacy skills but also contribute to the development of more self-reliant and independent learners outside the classroom.

**Improving transition through alternative pathways.** Identifying alternative, equally meaningful pathways for those unable to transition to local government schools should have been considered – and should be considered in the future. Efforts should be made at a community level to identify potential pathways and skillsets which can benefit girls in the future without having to continue to a government school. This can include, but is not limited to, a focus on the provision of vocational training and internship placements to improve life skills and employability skills (both formal and self employment – technological and non technological skills). This could involve liaising with other organisations or companies working nearby to place girls into volunteer positions which will build their skillset and capacity. A focus on the benefits of life and leadership skills and how they can contribute to more meaningful futures for girls should also be incorporated. This might involve simply supporting girls to understand how they can utilise such skills in their roles as caregivers and wives, but also how those skills can be applied in employment and as a member of the local community.

**Improving attendance through menstrual health management interventions.** According to the project's Endline Evaluation, the biggest contributor to poor attendance across the life of the project was illness. It was unclear at the endline whether illness referred to physical illnesses or to girls' menstruation, given that illness and menstruation are referred to with the same word in Dari and Pashto ("mareez"). Feedback from girls suggested that menstruation was a prominent reason why girls may miss class, despite the provision of hygiene kits. Further attention needs to be given to the issue of absences associated with menstruation to ensure it does not affect the learning of girls. Additional research is needed to understand exactly why girls are absent during their cycles. For example, different approaches would be needed if absences are associated with stigma, fear of leakage, pain, or lack of sanitary materials. Additional recommendations concerning menstruation could include the introduction of female teacher and student conferencing, so that safe spaces are introduced to discuss menstruation and any questions girls may have. Teachers will be able to accurately counsel girls on how to manage their cycles and support them not to miss classes. In instances when absence is associated with pain, teachers can support students with follow-up or prescribe them homework while they are absent.

**Upscaling peer support groups.** Peer support groups were highly valued by those who participated in them. They were also closely aligned with improved literacy and numeracy outcomes. Future efforts should upscale peer support groups to ensure as many girls as possible participate in them. These key activities are low cost and can also be easily integrated into the government school system. Leadership and life skills will also be closely aligned with social norms, particularly norms surrounding gender. To support the uptake and strengthening of leadership and life skills, implementing partners should engage local communities and caregivers in discussion on the definition of leadership and life skills, promoting their provision of space for girls to develop these skills and also build an awareness of how these skills can benefit their children in the future. Engagement with SMCs might be a positive step, given that SMCs already have rapport with families and can readily engage in discussion with households.

**Improving governance through working with female SMC members.** Female SMC members are key to the success of SMCs. They play a valuable role engaging with girls, teachers and female caregivers. They can effectively audit classes, talk with female students and follow up with female caregivers if a child is struggling at school. However, their participation is often limited. In many cases, it is tokenistic, with men dominating the efforts. Future interventions need to clearly consider the potential of females, and directly engage them in specific activities which are the responsibility only of women. This will ensure that men do not monopolise the efforts and shun the role of women. Furthermore, engagement from partners should also be with female SMC members. While in the field, most field staff (given that they are men) engage with male SMC members. A shift needs to occur, so that women are being held accountable for their contributions and also feel valuable for their contributions.

**Strengthening quality teaching practices through CPD.** Findings from the course of the project have highlighted that the continuous provision of training and capacity-building is key to building the skillset of teachers and ensuring that they can internalise learnings. Teachers noted that the use of refresher training, mentoring and Teacher Learning Circles supported them to refine the skills learned in initial training sessions and share any challenges and successes with others to validate or improve their teaching approaches. Any future intervention which builds the capacity of teachers should consider a continuous professional development model, whereby training is not provided on a one-off basis but is ongoing, so teachers are continually exposed to

new lessons, refresher sessions and technical support to refine their teaching methods. This is also true for internalising and normalising other components of teaching, including protection, leadership and life skills, and gender transformative discourse and practice.

**Confronting and countering gender-based norms.** Classroom teachers played a crucial role in either promoting or reinforcing gender norms. In the context of Afghanistan, where gender norms are the foundation of society and interaction, attempting to counter such roles or challenge existing narratives can be not just a difficult task but also dangerous. Classroom teachers, therefore, were well placed to start discussions on gender discourse. These discussions were a means of demonstrating to girls their potential inside and outside the classroom and to start exploring how they may be able to challenge the status quo. Classroom teachers were well positioned to highlight to girls the differences in gender, how gender is recognised and plays out religiously (according to Islam), and the potential girls have to counter these existing narratives through education and potential future employment. As demonstrated, girls felt these discussions built their confidence to the extent that it was possible for them to seek alternative future pathways, which included employment, and also increased their confidence to talk with and be around boys and men. Teachers are trusted members of the community and should be aware of how far they can appropriately push discussions on gender and gender differences without putting themselves and the education system at risk. While some communities may be more progressive and open to discussions on gender equality, there will always be other communities which are much more conservative in nature and poorly positioned to engage in such discussions. Implementing partners would be likely unable to recognise these differences at a community level and, therefore, teachers may be a much more appropriate pathway. Additional support and training should be provided to teachers to build their awareness of how to approach discussions on gender and gender equality, and how such discussions can be appropriately shared with students, if it is deemed safe to do so.
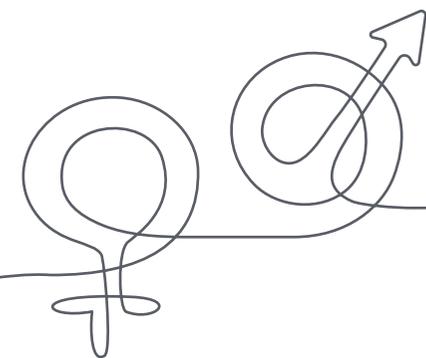
Both mothers and fathers (including caregivers) need to be targets of outreach and awareness-raising efforts. In some communities, one gender of parent tended to be more involved than the other. This appeared to be due to the gender of the teacher. For example, in Kandahar, where there was a male teacher, fathers were more involved whereas mothers were usually more involved in communities with female teachers since it was easier to meet. However, since fathers are the key decision-makers in girls' lives and mothers delegate household tasks, both need to be engaged to some degree in awareness-raising activities. SMCs can be useful in this regard if they have both female and male members, allowing both mothers/female caregivers and fathers/male caregivers to attend or be visited.

Without supporting a space for greater gender equality and participation, building the leadership and life skills of girls will only go so far. Girls demonstrated considerable improvement in their life skills throughout the project period. Caregivers also noted such improvements. The extent, however, to which the environment outside of the classroom was sensitive to including girls' voices more equally and supporting shifts in gender roles was much more limited. Therefore, the provision of any life and leadership skills within classrooms must also consider how such lessons can be translated into the local community and develop the awareness and acceptance of local communities to be more accepting of alternative pathways for women.

The provision of vocational training in addition to education offers girls alternative pathways in instances that they cannot continue to university or office-based employment. It is widely known that the conservative nature, low socio-economic status, and security status of the communities in which STAGES girls reside can limit the potential for girls to continue their learning and find employment. As highlighted in this evaluation, families are still hesitant about employment opportunities for girls and their future education options. Girls also recognised that decisions about their future pathways were largely in the hands of caregivers (either their parents or in-laws / husband). Despite their desires to continue learning and find employment, this was often outside their control. The provision of vocational training, which was identified as relevant and appropriate to the community in which girls lived, offered a culturally appropriate alternative to university and office-based employment. As such, the provision of vocational training and contextualised livelihood training approaches should be strongly considered as an alternative pathway for girls in future interventions.

**Girls'
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