

Practice and Impact Brief: Learning during COVID-19 school closures

Girl -Led Community Dialogue

This is one of a series of Practice and Impact briefs drawn from Childhope’s experience implementing Excelling Against the Odds (EAO), partnering with CHADET in Ethiopia with support from UK Aid through the [Girls’ Education Challenge](#). EAO was implemented from 2014 to 2021 by Childhope and CHADET in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. The aim was to improve the quality of primary and secondary education for over 16,400 girls in Arsi, South Gonder and South Wollo. This Practice and Impact brief captures the learning around a major focus of the project which has been working directly with the girls to build their self-esteem, resilience and aspirations, and working with local communities to identify and challenge social norms and traditional harmful practices such as early marriages.

1. Background

ChildHope-CHADET have implemented two stages of a UK-Aid funded Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) project in Ethiopia for approximately eight years. The current stage of the project relating to girls’ ‘transition’ through education (GEC-T), named Excelling Against the Odds, has been operating since 2017, across three zones in two regions: South Wollo and South Gonder in Amhara and Arsi in Oromia. The project focused on transitioning girls through critical stages of their education to completion and into universities, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and ‘fairly paid’ work.



Girls’ Club leader and member activity planning

The project has worked directly with teachers to enhance their pedagogic skills and understand gender-sensitive teaching practices through various interventions. In addition, it has worked with school principals and government education officers to develop and improve their leadership and management skills. Finally, a significant focus of the project has been working directly with the girls to build their self-esteem, resilience, and aspirations and working with local communities to identify and challenge social norms and traditional harmful practices such as early marriages.

2. Gender-based social norms

[Social norms are often constructed from childhood](#) and can become an influential factor to [limit children’s aspirations](#). Often girls and boys are expected to meet the set social norms as they grow in their communities. Societal expectations vary across age, gender and social class. Girls face social norms and unique challenges from boys, which negatively affect their access to, and achievement in, education. Many social norms and expectations reinforce inequalities and place girls in a more disadvantaged position. Girls are more likely to find themselves in a situation where they lack

control over their choices. However, some of the challenges can be changed. Some in a short time while others may take longer.

Girls in the target communities where the project has been implementing face multiple exclusions that act as barriers to their enrollment in schools. Those who do enrol face continued obstacles to their effective participation.

Barriers that prevent girls from enrolling include prevailing negative attitudes to girls’ education, such as ‘boy-preference’ to the enrolment of children. This is especially relevant in families with lower incomes.

Barriers that affect both girls’ enrollment and those enrolled include the distance from school, shortage of educational materials or money to purchase, lack of sufficient hygiene facilities, insufficient or no personal hygiene products, abuse, gender-based violence, and early marriage abduction and rape. Girls face further barriers to education because of poverty, heavy household chores, migration and disability. Most of the challenges which girls face are entrenched in culture and the norms of the communities in which they live.

3. Girl led activities

In the ChildHope-CHADET Girls’ Education Challenge project, implemented in the Amhara and Oromia Regional States of Ethiopia, increasing the direct participation of girls has been one of the key strategies used to understand and address the challenges girls face. Consequently, the project included innovative girl-led activities. An important girls’ engagement structure was the Girls’ Clubs and Girls’ Forums.

“[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 and 97.3% of girls feel the club facilitator acts on what they say.”

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School-based Girls’ Clubs were organised voluntarily. Girls’ Clubs were established in all the 47 primary schools during the first stage of the GEC, with an additional 23 clubs formed in secondary schools during the GEC-T stage. Both phases of the project included school-based safeguarding reporting mechanisms, called Letter-Link Boxes (LLB). These are two small boxes kept at every school so that girls and boys can report, anonymously if preferred, any safeguarding concerns or threats of traditional harmful practice. Threats or concerns reported through the Letter Link Box mechanism are treated confidentially and seriously. Cases reported through the LLBs underwent a review and investigation by school management representatives and a community volunteer from the project. Members of the girls’ clubs had the opportunity to discuss the types of safeguarding issues reported through the LLBs with school managers.

“The girls’ clubs [use] advocacy and communication activities [to] support girls in managing negative parent, caregiver, and community member attitudes and behaviours towards girls’ education.”

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Additionally, the roles and contributions of girls were further enhanced. Girls’ Forums were established in all schools to create safe spaces for the girls. They discuss the challenges of inequitable gender norms and develop new shared beliefs among themselves, the school and the wider community.

The forum meetings were organised by the girls themselves where they discussed a common agenda. Activities are determined by the members’ interests and what is deemed necessary. The Girls’ Forums run activities, such as life skills sessions based on a robust life skills curriculum. They use peer education methodologies including school-wide discussion forums that challenge social norms of significant importance to the girls, such as early marriage. Selected club members become peer leaders who share their knowledge and experience about the impact of negative social norms and how girls can challenge them. Discussion issues can be academic-related or cultural norms and beliefs.

The girls use creative arts such as literature in poetry, prose, story, songs and short drama as dialogue, raising awareness of social norms around gender and disability, and passing messages to the community. Boys can participate in any creative activity. However, the activity is always led by the girls. Creatively, girls challenge social norms that undermine girls’ education and their role and contribution to society and challenge prevailing attitudes within society towards disability.

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.

4. Benefits and successes

As implementers of a GEC project, ChildHope-CHADET believes initiatives that create spaces for girls’ voices to be heard lay the foundation for more considerable transformations in the longer term as girls continue in education and social interactions. This assumption is supported by the midline report findings released in 2020. For example, it found that participation in Girls’ Clubs was reported to have increased girls’ class participation.

“58.4% of girls supported by the project improved their self-esteem by participating in Girls’ Clubs.”

“55.7% of girls supported by the project improved their sense of school belonging by participating in Girls’ Clubs.”

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Benefit 1: Participation and self-esteem

The girls in the clubs have also demonstrated high self-esteem and self-efficacy. For example, during an interview, a girl from Dera High School in the Amhara region put the concept of self-esteem and self-efficacy in simple words when she said, **“While others say, you cannot do it, I say, I can do it.”** She refers to the surrounding social norm of ‘girls cannot do certain activities meant for boys’ among the reference group to which she refers as ‘they’. Her statement shows she has a high self-

perception of her capabilities, which is a high *self-efficacy*. It is also assertive as she refers to the undesirable attitude in a positive and self-assured manner.

Beyond the academic benefits, engaging in the clubs has created the opportunity for the girls to make friends and establish a social network of sensitised 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.

Benefit 2: Agency

The girls are, in a way, constructing a new norm that empowers each to develop her agency, the capacity to negotiate and make important life decisions on her own, and to her benefit.

The project has witnessed many examples of girls who have successfully reversed family decisions of arranged marriages. One example was of a girl in the South Wollo Zone in the Amhara Region, who went directly to her family and ‘would-be-husband’. She engaged him in persuasive dialogue and convinced both family and ‘would-be-husband’ not to proceed with the marriage arrangement, a clear example of ‘agency’ in practice.



Girl’s club/forum meeting

Further examples of girls developing greater self-esteem and agency can be seen in the use of the Letter Link Boxes to report incidents. Where the number of incidents reported through the Letter Link Boxes dropped, further investigation identified that the girls had become more confident. Their greater personal agency and increased feelings of empowerment had led them to directly engage with school managers to address issues that would have previously been reported through the Letter Link Box reporting system.

Benefit 3: Engaging parents and communities

The school-based Girls’ Forums were also instrumental in igniting community dialogues on gender and disability-related norms. Girls have set agendas for family hubs¹ and positively deviant parents, who the girls invited to share their views to the community. We have seen a father who saved his

“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/”

“Outreach activities are successful in supporting parents to improve their attitudes towards girls’ education. Family hubs in particular 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

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¹ Family Hubs are a project intervention that brings together girls, their parents, and members of the local community to discuss issues, barriers, and social norms that affect girls’ participation in school.

little income and planted trees as a source of income for future investment in his daughter’s education.

Benefit 4: Sustainability

“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.”

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The opportunities for continued, positive, girl-led community dialogue are high if schools and community leaders adopt a mechanism to understand the barriers to girls’ education. The girls in the groups largely determine the intervention and dialogue. Many girls from higher school grades have also been involved in peer mentoring and coaching of girls, often from lower grade levels, many of whom join the forums and Girls’ Clubs. Therefore, Girls’ Forums and

Clubs maintain a constant cycle of new and active membership of girls, eager to bring about equitable change. This continuous cycle makes the initiative sustainable long after the project phase-out, as it is prominently student led.

Benefit 5: Value for money

Girl-led community dialogue is an almost zero-cost activity, relying on active membership and strong school leadership. The ongoing costs associated with a Girls’ club of Forum comprise mainly stationery expenses subsumed into the overall school budget. Therefore, this activity represents good value for money when considering the benefits and outcomes of girl-led community dialogue.



Girl’s club/forum meeting

5. Conclusion

Girls in most societies, including those in the target communities of the Girls’ Education Challenge, are confronted with several barriers which are entrenched in cultural norms that dictate attitudes and behaviours. Those norms are often robust and hard to change in a short time. Yet, the experience of the GEC-T project implemented in the Amhara and Oromia regional states of Ethiopia shows there can be potential for changing some aspects of social norms through the creation of safe spaces that allow the active participation of girls. For example, in small voluntary groups where girls are safe to discuss, analyse and challenge those social norms. The Girls’ Clubs and Girls’ Forums have provided safe spaces for members to question traditionally held beliefs, form newly shared social norms and cultivate their agency. The girl-led nature of these spaces allowed the girls to decide on the most appropriate communication mechanism.

Interestingly, the girls used creative arts to pass important messages that address social norms to the community. This strategy can be seen as a sensible way of challenging ‘unchallengeable’ social realities as creative arts are seen as enjoyable pursuits and very much align with the principle of ‘Do No Harm’ – an essential safeguarding maxim in any development work.