

Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

Aarambha, People In Need

NEPAL

NOVEMBER 2018 – MARCH 2024



Girls'
Education
Challenge



“My parents have changed their behaviour lately. Previously, they favoured my brother and gave him more money. However, now they treat us equally. Earlier, I had to do all the household chores, but now my parents help me with them. These changes happened after they took part in Aarambha.”

Girl



● Nepal

What did the Aarambha project do?

Aarambha worked on improving the life chances of targeted marginalised girls by providing basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills sessions in non-formal education settings specifically through accessible community learning centres (CLCs). Implemented by People in Need (PIN) Nepal and in collaboration with partners Asaman Nepal and the Social Organization District Coordination Committee (SODCC), the project reached 9,497 girls. The project worked on improving learning outcomes for 10-19 years-old out-of-school adolescent girls and on increasing transition into formal education, vocational training, and safe employment according to the girls' life plans, mitigating the risk of early marriage and helping girls lead healthy, safe, and educated lives.

The Aarambha project was implemented across 22 palikas in the Rautahat and Bara districts of Madhesh province, which has the highest illiteracy rate in Nepal¹. According to the 2018 Equity Index, Rautahat and Bara districts are ranked at the bottom as two of the least-performing districts within the Madhesh province in terms of development indicators, especially the ones relating to girls' education and life outcomes². Cultural norms and traditions underpin community structures in the Mahesh province. Young girls are burdened with heavy household responsibilities from a young age and there is a lack of acceptance for them going outside, earning income, or engaging in income-generating work. Traditional thinking, and unwillingness to change have contributed to the perpetuation of these harmful social norms. Early marriage rates are high ranging from 58% to 83% for girls and 12% to 40% for boys (2022)³.

Through the Aarambha project girls, after attending accelerated learning courses at the community learning centres (CLCs) over a period of 9-10 months, were either able to transition into formal schooling in grades 1 to 9 or get upskilled through market-oriented technical/vocational skills with the necessary equipment. At the CLCs girls were taught about numeracy and literacy as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights, life/social skills, basic financial management and business planning, and leadership skills. The CLCs were also about helping girls prepare their life plans or choose a suitable transition pathway. CLCs were established in secure and environment-friendly surroundings with access to safe drinking water and toilets. CLCs were run by trained female facilitators, who were responsible for overseeing teaching, tracking attendance, continuous assessments and monitoring performance. The project also tracked learning progress of girls through assessments in both formal education and technical/vocational pathways. Beyond education, the project actively promoted gender-equitable attitudes and practices among communities, schools, and local authorities, including parental education workshops, which were intended for the parents of girls attending CLCs.

“I did not know how to read and write before, but now I do. I even teach my brother at home, and my parents are pleased to see this.

Girl



¹ National Population and Housing Census (2021)

² Foundation for Development Management (2022). Girls' Education Challenge. Project Evaluation Report. <https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/m5jb3cu3/aarambha-IngB-endline-evaluation-cohort1.pdf>

³ Breakthrough ACTION and Breakthrough RESEARCH (2022)

To empower girls to keep pursuing their life plans (e.g., continuing learning in schools or starting their businesses), and to create sensitised and gender-friendly schools and communities, the project delivered Gender Transformative Workshops (GTWs) in schools and in communities. The GTWs focused on tackling gender-based violence (GBV) and socially harmful practices, such as child marriage, the dowry system, and other restrictive social barriers to a girl's education. The workshops targeted both in-school girls and boys and out-of-school adolescent girls and included health, safety and security, equality, social and gender norms, social and financial skills.

Research conducted by the project showed positive gains in learning due to the GTWs – 85% girls and boys gained new knowledge, more than 70% showed positive behavioral changes and 75% put their knowledge to practice. To ensure continuity of GTW learning, peer leaders selected amongst the participants of the workshops were tasked with preparing sessions and delivering weekly extracurricular classes. An impact survey conducted by the project showed that 83% of peer leaders cascaded learning across 47 schools in Bara and Rautahat districts and that 91% have seen skill improvement in communication and conversation with 80% continuing teaching and learning.

The Aarambha project also strengthened and expanded the work of the Girls and Inclusive Education Network (GIEN) at schools and local levels in Bara and Rautahat districts. GIEN is a network advocating for the rights of women, girls, children with disabilities and marginalised groups, including the right to equitable learning opportunities across all tiers of Nepal's education system. It seeks to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships, including those between government and private sectors. The GIEN was formed under the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) and is implemented as a collaborative effort by PIN Nepal, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) Nepal and Street Child with the leadership of the Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD), Government of Nepal. The network is closely aligned with the policies and priorities of the Government of Nepal, outlined in the 10-year School Education Sector Plan (2021–2030). Through GIEN the project conducted training sessions under its Gender Transformative Approach (GTA) at various levels, including schools (reaching teachers and students), communities (reaching change champions) and municipalities and strengthened safeguarding mechanisms at school and community level to foster enabling environment for girls to continue their education.

// ABITA'S STORY

Abita Kumari, a 14-year-old girl, attended a Gender Transformative Workshop (GTW) that proved to be transformative in many ways. Before the workshop Abita felt ashamed and uncomfortable discussing menstruation. However, the workshop provided her with a newfound understanding, helping her recognise that menstruation is a natural process every girl goes through. Now, Abita no longer feels ashamed and is more open about discussing this aspect of her life. Beyond menstruation, the workshop delivered sessions on the harmful practices, such as child marriage. Abita learned about the negative impacts and health issues arising from early childbirth and the interruption of education due to early marriage.

One notable aspect Abita highlighted was her newfound knowledge about family planning. This was an essential topic that was not covered in her school curriculum when she was in class 7. The workshop broadened her understanding of personal safety encouraging her not to remain silent when experiencing or witnessing physical or mental harm. A turning point in Abita's journey after attending the workshop was when her classmate was about to get married at an early age. Abita stepped in, drawing on the knowledge gained from the workshop. She spoke to her friend about the negative consequences of child marriage, telling her friend about the underdeveloped uterus, potential disruption of education, and adverse health impacts on both the child and the mother. Abita's efforts were successful, and her friend was able to convince her parents to reconsider their decision, ultimately preventing the marriage.



How did the Aarambha project adapt during COVID-19?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the Government of Nepal declared a nation-wide lockdown in March 2020 and the CLCs activities were suspended. To ensure that out-of-school adolescent girls continued learning, initially the Aarambha project piloted a distance teaching learning (DTL) approach using mobile phones and group learning.

The project conducted an assessment of the needs of the girls which indicated that mobile phones were the only feasible and accessible low-tech DTL approach that could be used due to low/no internet penetration in the community. The assessment also revealed mobile access issues with 60 percent of girls being reached through their family members' phone, most of whom were owned by husbands. Seven percent of girls were reached through their neighbour's phone and 35 percent of girls were reached by a phone they owned themselves.

Consent was secured from partners, parents and caregivers prior to beginning DTL, as the sessions involved directly contacting girls for learning support through mobile phones. Brief orientations were conducted over the phone and the DTL schedule discussed and agreed with the girl and her guardian. This helped ensure her regular household chores were not interrupted. Initial findings showed that some parents became interested in what the girls were learning and this in turn created increased trust between girls and their family members.

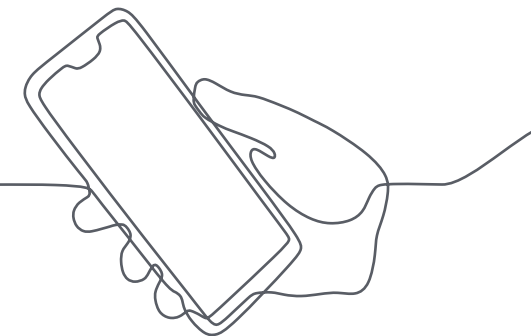
The project found that learning through mobile phones was not effective or possible for a minority of girls. Some had experienced network issues, low or irregular access to electricity and some girls found learning difficult but did not find guidance or support from others at home. For these girls, small group, face-to-face sessions were started using the safety measures. This modality gradually expanded as restrictions were eased and learning spaces reopened.

Some key challenges with the approach were ensuring that remote monitoring mechanisms, safeguarding and protection measures and skills gaps of facilitators. These challenges were addressed by developing a thorough capacity building plan most appropriate to the facilitators, for instance using applications like Skype and messenger for online training, orientation and refresher training. The project conducted periodic online safeguarding and Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) trainings for project staff before the DTL began and at intervals thereafter.

While the curriculum was based on and aligned with the government non-formal education (NFE) curriculum, the project updated the seasonal calendar and developed a 'micro lesson and session plan' which helped facilitators with planning but also facilitated a flexible approach to teaching and learning. As the curriculum was in Nepali, facilitators considered the local language when creating/adapting the content so that it was more effective and could be easily understood.

“Thanks to the project, I learned about calculations and accounting. I can keep track of expenses as well as profits. With the profit, I have added more products to the store. I am proud to be an entrepreneur now.”

Girl



The duration of each sessions varied, depending on participants availability and session objectives for the day, from a minimum of eight minutes to 20 minutes. On average, the girls spent 29 minutes per week on the DTL. This time duration did not include additional time the girls may have spent for home assignments. The purpose of the calls was to provide instructions and guidance in how to complete exercises described in the workbook (and completed in the notebook or worksheet provided). However, this was also an opportunity to check on the mental health/wellbeing and any issues or challenges the girls were experiencing with their learning and also helped ensure their retention in school.

Weekly assessments were completed over the phone to monitor girls' engagement, learning and homework exercises which helped determine girls' learning progress and needs. Over the months the small group learning sessions were introduced for groups of three to six girls. Based on micro-session plans, the facilitators provide 'monthly learning progress assessments' as per the lesson objectives. The facilitators also compared and contrasted each girl during "normal" classes at CLC and the phone calls to see if there was a difference.

Based on the learning assessments, the girls who performed lower than their counterparts were given additional support to accommodate their learning needs. These girls were also prioritised and supported to participate in small, face-to-face learning groups. However, due to the remote nature of DTL, facilitators found it challenging to adapt pedagogies remotely and Education Officers provided further support and supervision to the facilitators for effective learning delivery. The project mobilised Change Champions and CLC Management Committee members, who were locally based, to conduct door-to-door campaigns aimed at checking the wellbeing of girls, monitoring their learning progress, and guiding them in completing assignments.

Designed for facilitators, monthly assessment was key in tracking girls' learning progress and wellbeing. Clear guidelines were drawn up outlining the purpose and the process of conducting assessments. Each facilitator was trained in how to use the tool. Technology such as Skype was used to conduct virtual sessions with facilitators, and text messages/Skype messaging was used for formative and summative assessments to help build facilitators capacity.

One key take away from the DTL implementation was understanding the capacity of local facilitators. Since Aarambha was implemented in the most marginalised communities, it was challenging to find very qualified facilitators, who could teach using mobile technology. Training them remotely was difficult due to technological issues. These aspects were considered in the DTL approach at the very beginning and support was put in place with local educators as well as delivering training through Skype.

The project engaged with the Education cluster and sub-cluster meetings (where the province and local government were active) to share lessons from the pilot. The rapid evaluation proved useful in helping governments and other stakeholders think about key considerations to reach some of the most marginalised populations. Additionally, learning also contributed to international evidence base on COVID-19 educational interventions. For example, a DTL case story was presented by INEE (Technical Note on Measurement for Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic) and USAID (global review report – "A Roadmap for Measuring Distance Learning: A Review of Evidence and Emerging Best Practices).



What did the Aarambha project achieve?

Improved learning and perceptions towards girls' education. Data from the Impact Survey conducted by PIN Nepal in twenty municipalities revealed a significant positive impact on the learning outcomes and perceptions towards girls' education at community level following the project implementation. The CLCs had a positive impact on communities, particularly in transforming their perspectives on education. CLC classes equipped girls with cognitive abilities and other life skills, leading to financial independence. While a majority of the parents mentioned the project's positive impact, a few parents revealed girls' challenges in formalising skills acquired after the CLC classes into businesses due to inadequate training and societal pressures. However, even under such circumstances, the parents were supporting the girls. The results of the perception survey conducted among parents of girls enrolled in the CLCs reveal a significant 78% positive shift in attitudes and perceptions towards girls' education, impacting male and female family and community members, educators, boys, and government officials alike.

Improved learning outcomes. According to the project endline report girls exhibited significant improvements in Nepali subjects, followed by Math and English. Cohort 3 had the highest number of proficient learners, whereas Cohort 4 had the highest number of non-learners. The scores from Cohort 1 were not compared due to the differences in the tools used. In Cohort 4, Nepali literacy skills improved, and the percentage of non-learners decreased from 49.3% to 35.9%. Emergent learners decreased from 48% to 23.8%, emergent learners increased from 2% to 16.3%, and proficient learners increased from 0.8% to 24%. English literacy improved slightly, with 75% of girls considered non-learners at baseline, dropping to 70.3% at endline. Emergent learners decreased from 24.5% to 18.3%, but established learners increased from 0.5% to 2.7%. At endline 8.7% of girls were deemed proficient in English.

Improved parents' perceptions towards girls' education. Project data show that 77.9% of parents developed a positive attitude towards ensuring their girls keep learning. They provided emotional support, encouragement, and a favorable environment at home, helping with household chores and providing girls with pocket money to buy educational materials. Mothers-in-law and husbands also took on some domestic chores. Parents also noted a remarkable increase in school attendance, which was also reflected in the thematic assessment conducted by the project. Parents also noted a decrease in child marriages after girls attended CLL classes. The project thematic assessment also highlighted that 92% of parents were actively encouraging their daughters to pursue higher education and 68% of parents showed improved knowledge and attitudes in safeguarding their daughters from harmful practices, such as early marriages. The Endline Evaluation confirmed that there was a shift in parents' attitudes toward early marriage and girls' education. Findings indicated that the CLC classes impacted girls' understanding and confidence and influenced the broader family dynamics including livelihood and household decision-making.

Improved transition. Project data show that of the 9,497 girls enrolled in the CLCs, 8,122 graduated and made life plans to reach their goals and embrace change. Among the enrolled girls, 4,986 girls transitioned to school to continue their studies, and 2,347 chose technical and vocational education and training to start their own business. Parents interviewed in the Impact Survey claimed that girls transitioned to schools and expressed a desire for them to continue their education, achieve financial independence, and pursue jobs of their interest. The final project cycle evaluation revealed that 71.5% of girls opted for formal education, while 28.5% chose to pursue vocational skills. Data highlighted that more Muslim girls (77.3%) than non-Muslim girls (64.7%) opted for formal education and that 51.6% of girls aged

“The project really helped me, the girls in the CLC and the community understand that menstruation is not a problem, poor menstrual hygiene is.”

Facilitator



15 and above chose vocational training, with more non-Muslim girls (35.3%) than Muslim girls (22.7%) opting for it. An analysis of a subset of transitioning girls reveals that a majority of Muslim girls, 54.1%, chose to pursue learning, while 43.1% opted for vocational skills. In comparison, 41.6% of non-Muslim girls chose learning, while 56.9% opted for vocational skills. Among the unmarried girls, 70.8% chose to learn, while 11.2% opted for vocational skills. Surprisingly, only 0.7% of married girls chose learning, with 61.2% preferring vocational skills.

Improved girls' confidence and self-esteem. According to the PIN Nepal Perception Survey, 83% of the girls reported noticeable improvements in self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence, and sense of agency. The social skill survey tool used by the project gauged girls' belief to successfully navigate a difficult situation and make good decisions. Parents from some of the municipalities highlighted a transformative impact on the confidence and intellectual capabilities of girls and a shift in terms of their decision-making capacity. The Endline Evaluation reported a decline in cases of early marriages and an increase in girls' confidence to express their views and discuss issues related to family planning, personal hygiene, menstrual health and gender-based violence. Parents reported an increase in girls' confidence when initiating conversations with strangers or going outside the community. Girls were also confident to conduct banking transactions independently. The most cited benefit of attending CLC classes for the girls was that they learned to read and write, which allowed them to dial phone numbers, read notices/directions in public places, like hospitals or local government offices, and go to the bank to withdraw money.

Challenged early marriages and harmful social norms. The Perception Survey further indicated that since joining the CLC classes 97% of girls increased their knowledge about the impacts of early marriage and harmful social norms. The survey also reported that 89% of the girls felt confident in reporting any form of violence to the relevant authorities in their homes or communities and that 89% of girls viewed menstruation as a natural process of becoming a woman. Gender transformative curriculum delivered through CLCs proved effective in challenging traditional gender norms and promoting gender equality. The girls demonstrated an increased awareness of gender issues and a willingness to challenge harmful stereotypes and practices. Results from the project's thematic assessment on gender transformative curriculum in 2023 reported that over 85% of girls expressed a more positive attitude towards gender equality, with many indicating a shift in their perceptions of traditional gender roles.

// SHAIRUNG'S STORY



Shairung, a 20-year-old young woman, and her husband run their tailoring business from their home for quite some time now. “This is the busiest time of the year. We are preparing uniforms for over a hundred students of a nearby school.” A team of six individuals is diligently at work, with

Shairung's husband sporting an inch tape on his shoulder, and Shairung's fingers dusted with chalk as she draws the shapes to cut. The business keeps the couple busy while also providing them with a decent living. The start was, however, slow, and sluggish. As they put all the efforts to provide the customers with the best service in the village, their reputation grew leaps and bounds. With a stronger word-of-mouth, the shop became the ultimate choice for most villagers. Soon enough they started getting bulk orders. “Even though we faced challenges, we are passionate at our work. It has brought financial stability to our lives”, said Shairung.

Shairung was born and raised in a community where child marriages were prevalent. She faced difficulties pursuing her education and was married off when she was 13 years old. Through her husband's work Shairung got into the tailoring business. Together they discovered one of the Community Learning Center (CLC) run by PIN Nepal. Shairung was 18 years old when she decided to enroll. Her husband encouraged her decision. Shairung learned basics of the Nepali and English languages, numerology and calculations. She also improved her life skills and learned about how to be an entrepreneur. When she decided to pursue tailoring as a vocation, the CLC supported her to establish a home-bound tailoring shop. This venture was a natural extension of what her husband was already doing.

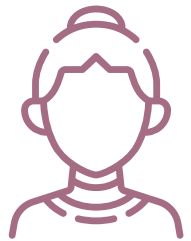
The couple worked together day and night to expand their business. They worked hard and decided to reinvest savings into their business. They soon became capable of hiring four other team members. They also started getting orders from nearby villages and dream of receiving orders from the nearby cities as well. “We want to expand our business. The demand for work is increasing every day and we are understaffed. We want to add more people to our team and take our venture out of our premise to a more suitable place” Shairung said.



“In our society, we were not used to send girls to school. Girls were used to marry at early age. But when we involved in this project, we understood that we must send daughters to school.”

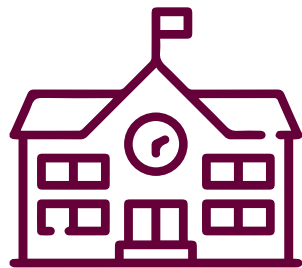
Parent

The Aarambha project in numbers



9,497

out-of-school girls
reached and enrolled
into CLCs



4,986

girls transitioned to
school



2,347

girls transitioned to
technical/vocational
education and training



252

girls with
disabilities
enrolled in
CLC

462

CLCs created



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

According to the assessment done by the GEC Fund Manager, this project offered very good value for money. The project interventions were highly relevant, adaptive and cost-effective, targeting very marginalised out-of-school girls. The project targeted a neglected segment of married and unmarried out-of-school girls that face restrictive social barriers with no education background in the rural regions of Bara and Rautahat that have the lowest literacy rate. The main relevant activities were CLCs, financial bursaries and life skills training. The project had good results in relation to girls' learning, attendance and empowerment. The project interventions were delivered efficiently with strong sustainability at government level with the GIEN.

“I have supported my daughter to run her business after the training and I have also helped her to run business.”

Parent



What did the Aarambha project learn?

Tackling social norms. Project data revealed that although girls are now financially active and independent the final financial decision remains with male members. This demonstrated that deep-rooted gender norms still affected the decision-making processes at household and community level. Sustained efforts are imperative to challenge deep-rooted gender norms and foster genuine financial autonomy and decision-making parity within households. The traditional gender roles and expectations continue to influence the division of labour within households and underscore the importance of societal changes towards a fairer distribution of household responsibilities irrespective of gender. Poverty-stricken parents are still lured initially by the monetary prospect of marrying off their daughters in secrecy. Girls are not allowed to travel to other cities or counties to engage in economic activities after completing their education, which is something boys can do. The glass ceiling for girls is set so low that their only option seems to be getting married and engaging in minor activities based on the decisions made for them by the male members of the family.

Ensuring sustainability through engaging with local stakeholders.

Engaging with community leaders, teachers, and parents, in the curriculum implementation was key. Their support and involvement not only enhanced the credibility of the project but also contributed to its sustainability. These collaborations ensured that the curriculum offered by the project was aligned with community needs and perceived as a valuable resource. At endline it was noted that some officials at the palika level did not fully understand the importance of implementing GIEN due to frequent staff turnover. Whenever a new government official takes over it is important to invest time in engaging and building a relationship trust through regular monitoring visits and training sessions. Municipalities often struggle with a heavy workload and limited resources, causing the GIEN to be sidelined. It was also important to engage GIEN members when implementing GTW to ensure sustainability at school level.

Involving community and religious leaders and men. Broadcasting public service announcements regarding the importance of the girls' education and harmful social norms against girls was key to reach some parents and girls. These public service announcements were broadcasted in religious places like mosques and temples. Engaging with the religious and community leaders as change champions was also key. It is also important to note that involving men and boys in the process is crucial to achieve meaningful and sustainable gender equality.



Girls'
Education
Challenge



Find out more: www.peopleinneed.net | www.girlseducationchallenge.org

The Girls' Education Challenge is a project funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office ("FCDO"), formerly the Department for International Development ("DFID"), and is led and administered by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and Mott MacDonald (trading as Cambridge Education), working with organisations including Nathan Associates London Ltd. and Social Development Direct Ltd. This publication has been prepared for general guidance on matters of interest only and does not constitute professional advice. You should not act upon the information contained in this publication without obtaining specific professional advice. No representation or warranty (express or implied) is given as to the accuracy or completeness of the information contained in this publication, and, to the extent permitted by law, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and the other entities managing the Girls' Education Challenge (as listed above) do not accept or assume any liability, responsibility or duty of care for any consequences of you or anyone else acting, or refraining to act, in reliance on the information contained in this publication or for any decision based on it.

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