

Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

Supporting the Education of Marginalised Girls in Kailali district project (STEM)

NEPAL

APRIL 2017 – MARCH 2021

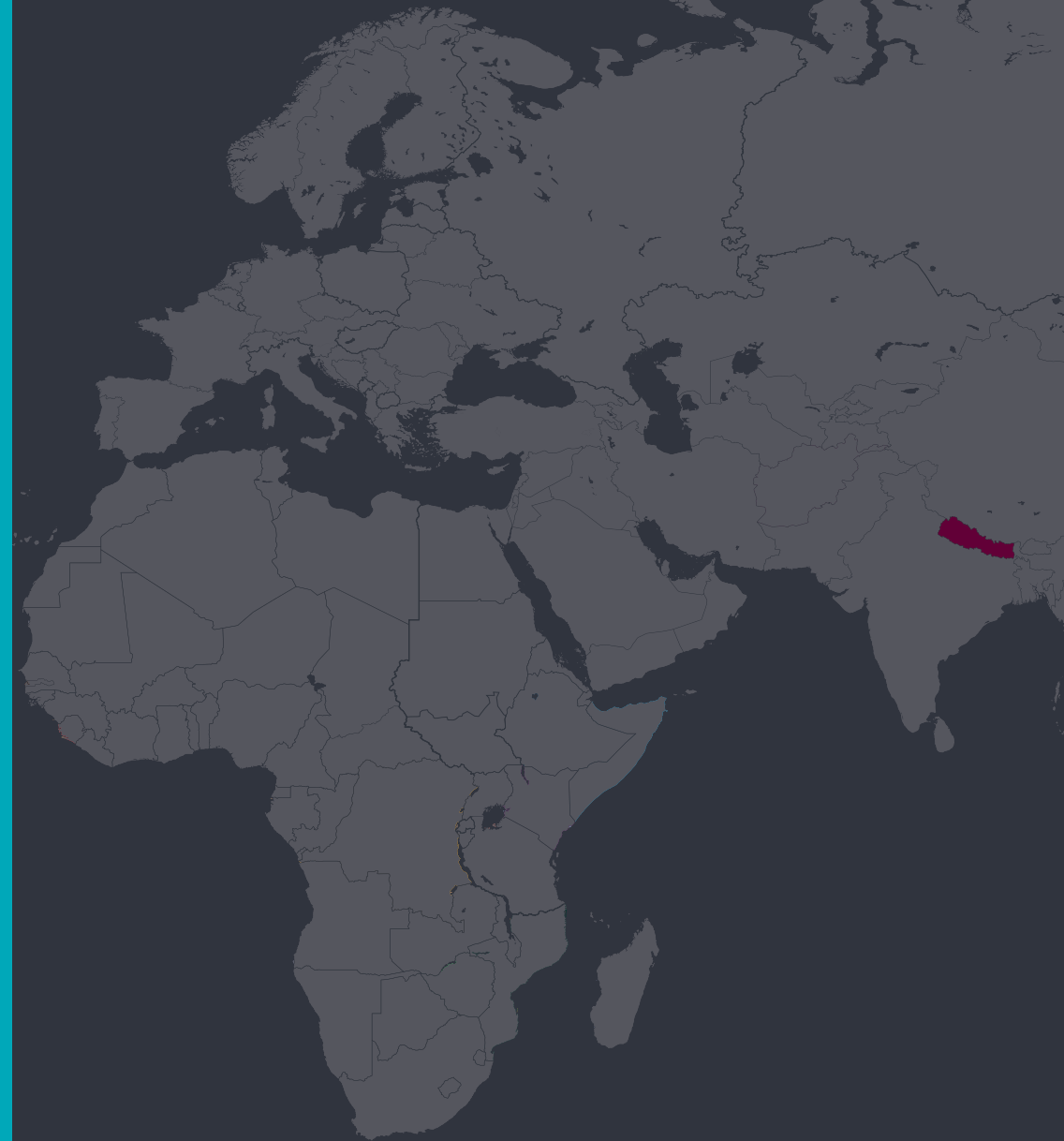


Girls'
Education
Challenge



“I highly appreciate STEM’s effort in continuously feeding us with data and information, so that we could have evidence-based plans and strategies for the development of education sector as a whole. There are certain aspects related to the continuation of remedial classes and the inclusion of safeguarding and protection strategies in our education plan, among many others, that we learned from this project.”

Local government education officer



● Nepal

What did the STEM project do?

The Supporting the Education of Marginalised Girls in Kailali district project (STEM II) built on the achievements of the first phase of the project (STEM I) to refine a holistic model that enabled girls to access formal and non-formal quality education.

One of the main assumptions of STEM's theory of change was that if girls are supported to make safe, healthy and successful transitions through secondary school and/or into secure livelihoods, then they will have increased individual and community resilience. To achieve this, STEM focused on improving girls' educational outcomes, increasing their access to income-generating activities, and cultivating an enabling environment for sustainable changes for girls' empowerment. The STEM model focused on various intervention areas impacting on girls' learning and transition outcomes, such as teaching practices, safeguarding, self-confidence, gender sensitivity and sustainability.

STEM primarily worked with in-school girls who were in Grades 8 to 10 (aged 14 to 16), out-of-school girls who had dropped out of school (aged 12 to 16) and also girls who had graduated from school but not enrolled in formal or higher education. The project reached a total of 4,768 in-school girls, 1,397 out-of-school girls and 881 school graduates through direct interventions, and indirectly 14,591 girls and boys across the 30 schools.

The project rolled out interventions to support the lives of marginalised in-school and out-of-school girls. Interventions targeted to in-school girls aimed to improve their literacy and numeracy skills as well as the school infrastructure, such as computer labs and libraries. Interventions targeted to out-of-school and graduate girls were about providing financial literacy, business skills development training and vocational training, including tailoring, mobile repairing, pig farming and cooking.

STEM also supported the girls' transition to income generation via the Girls Transition Fund (GTF), which provided low-interest loans for girls to start or expand their new businesses. Along with direct interventions for girls, STEM also provided training for teachers on student-centred teaching methodologies and for school management on effective school governance. Parents were involved through awareness campaigns on the importance of girls' education and through the 'parents for quality education' initiative, aimed to create an enabling learning environment for girls, reducing their household chores and increasing their access to education. Finally, girls were also supported through girls' clubs, which would give girls an opportunity to learn and catch-up on academic subjects (such as English, mathematics and science) and non-academic subjects, such as life skills, self-defence, and adolescent sexual and reproductive health.

In order to increase parental engagement and change attitudes and behaviours towards girls' education, STEM implemented an intervention called 'Family dialogue'. Parents and guardians of girls who had recently dropped out of school or had poor attendance were invited to participate in the training, which focused on gender equality, equal division of household chores and household decision-making. The training included practical tasks, such as tracking household expenses, and was followed by door-to-door follow-up meetings by social mobilisers with parents and guardians.



How did the STEM project adapt during COVID-19?

As COVID-19 hit Nepal in March 2020, STEM conducted a series of assessments which initially focused on ensuring girls were safe and healthy.

A total of 1,254 girls were interviewed from rural, semi-urban and urban areas. The assessments suggested that access to basic needs, such as food, security, health and safeguarding services, was limited for many girls. Findings also highlighted that girls' psychological wellbeing was negatively impacted by the lockdown and the lack of social interaction. STEM adapted its approach and introduced new activities, such as airing four public service announcements on COVID-19 preventive measures and safeguarding through nine local radio stations in three local languages. STEM also distributed hygiene kits and leaflets with key information on how to address safeguarding issues to 30,000 households in coordination with the local governments through their relief distribution programmes.

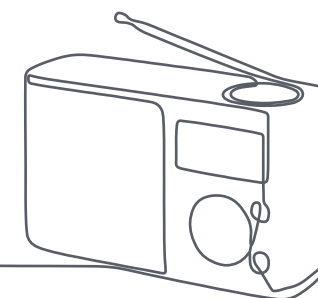
STEM also supported girls in continuing their education during the pandemic. In response to the findings from the assessments which identified the uncertainty around the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) as the main factor contributing to stress for girls, STEM accelerated its efforts to provide SEE revision classes. A rapid assessment was conducted to identify ways to support girls with staying on track with their SEE studies. The rapid assessment found that most marginalised girls lacked access to the internet and did not have access to laptops, smartphones and televisions. The revision classes were therefore disseminated through local FM stations. Meanwhile, as many of the small businesses run by young women supported by STEM through the GTF and vocational training

programmes were affected by the lockdown, the project worked to decrease the financial burden on their businesses. It worked with six local partners to provide exemptions on late-payment fees and to reduce the loan interest from 8 percent to 5 percent during the lockdown period.

As the crisis escalated to new heights and Nepal saw an exponential increase of COVID-19 cases in May 2020, it became more evident that coordinating efforts among actors working across the education sector, including local government bodies and the private sector, was needed in order to reach and support the most marginalised girls during the pandemic. In responding to the worsening pandemic, STEM worked through the government systems by contributing to the development of provincial and district-level education clusters, a network of government and development actors working in the education sector. Also, at federal level, STEM engaged with education clusters in framing education policies and guidelines on re-opening schools safely, safety measures and child protection. These collaborations resulted in plans to integrate some of STEM's interventions, such as the Sakshyam Chhori (Empowered Daughters) self-defence initiative, home schooling and distance learning, in the education plans of the local governments once the immediate challenges brought about by COVID-19 are addressed.

“Our remedial classes, which STEM worked with us to introduce, will not only help improve our students' learning performance, but we will also be able to cover the curriculum that has been badly affected due to COVID-19 and the lockdown. We have also been lobbying the local government to support this effort in our school and replicate it in other schools as well.”

Head teacher



What did the STEM project achieve?

Improved learning outcomes. By [midline in 2019](#), STEM had already achieved its project lifetime targets for literacy by 115 percent and for numeracy by 266 percent. At [endline](#) the learning outcome indicator was revised due to the impossibility of carrying out learning assessments with the girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus shifted from literacy and numeracy scores to the change in girls' perceptions of education. At endline, 86 percent of the girls self-reported that their learning performance improved against 75 percent in the control group. Some examples of improved learning performance highlighted by the girls were 'increased interest in learning', 'increased engagement in classroom activities', 'improved understanding of lessons in the classroom' and 'improvement in examination scores'.

The endline evaluation reported that more than 65 percent of the girls agreed that the girls' club classes had helped them improve their learning. Most of the girls said girls' club classes provided them with a friendly learning environment, where they felt comfortable to ask questions with teachers. The girls' club classes also acted as a lesson revision platform, where the girls got the opportunity to go over what they learned in school and understand the subject better. As the project provided this extra class opportunity exclusively to the girls, the size of the girls' club classroom was relatively small in comparison to the regular school classes. This ensured that the girls could interact with each other and participate in group work in a more comfortable environment.

The [endline](#) evaluation shows also that the project's continuous engagement with parents at the household level resulted in a shift in parents' attitudes towards girls' education – mainly in the form of girls' reduced engagement in household chores and increased time spent doing home studying, attending girls' club classes and engaging in other out-of-school activities with friends. The endline evaluation reports how girls' engagement in household chores reduced from over 75 percent of the girls involved in household chores for more than three hours every day at baseline to less than 10 percent at endline.

Improved transition and employment opportunities. At [midline](#), an overall transition rate of over 95 percent was observed among the in-school girls, meaning that less than 5% were repeating classes or dropping out of school. The transition rate for out-of-school and graduate girls significantly increased from about 30 percent at baseline to nearly 50 percent at midline. The [endline](#) shows that the combination of youth financial literacy training, business skills development training, vocational training and GTF loan led to increases in girls' confidence, access to livelihood opportunities, decision-making ability in the household, self-efficacy and agency. In particular, girls who received GTF loans were found to be confidently running their business while also supporting their families financially. These girls also reported having a stronger outlook towards the future and plans to further improve their lives by exploring more opportunities to engage in better employment, expand their existing business or start a new business. Finally, as an unintended positive consequence, STEM observed that some girls who graduated from the vocational training and were running their business started training and consequently employed other out-of-school girls in their communities to help them run their own businesses.

Ensured sustainability at school, local and provincial levels. As part of the [endline evaluation](#), sustainability outcomes were measured at school, local and provincial levels. Schools were found to be maintaining the infrastructure provided by STEM and replicating girls' club classes in the form of remedial classes. Qualitative evidence showed that knowledge and skills acquired through STEM teacher training were being transferred from trained to non-trained teachers, mainly through subject committees including teachers of subjects such as science, mathematics and English. Schools also reported addressing gender-sensitive issues by maintaining gender-friendly infrastructure and providing sanitary pads and sports equipment for girls. At local and provincial government levels, STEM was heavily engaged

“The school improvement plan used to be a formality that we all found burdensome. After our experience with STEM, we understood how a proper school improvement plan can make a difference, not just in terms of support from government and other institutions, but also in prioritising the areas of improvement at school level. After the project completes, we will maintain our practice of taking school improvement plans seriously and incorporating the needs and voices of students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders.”

School Management
Committee chair

with local and provincial governments in a recently established federal political structure in Nepal. The cooperation was both for implementing and monitoring the project activities, such as conducting enrolment campaigns, celebrating international days and developing strategic education and child protection development plans and policies. This provided a great opportunity to exert influence at the system level by institutionalising some of the key learnings and good practices from the project, while enhancing local government capacity in terms of framing local policies and plans. For example, local governments started to place a primary focus on constructing girls' toilets in schools, while some of the local governments committed to continue operating girls' clubs in all the schools of their jurisdiction. Other STEM interventions which have been embedded into government systems have been the use of suggestion boxes in schools and the continuation of the GTF by the local government.

Increased awareness of safeguarding risks and referral mechanisms. The [endline evaluation](#) assessed girls' awareness of different safeguarding risks and the referral mechanisms in place. More than 70 percent of the girls demonstrated good understanding of harassment, abuse, gender-based violence and bullying. Girls were also aware of the different referral mechanisms, including talking to their peers or parents and reporting through the complaint handling mechanism at school and government-based referral services. Increasing media reports about gender-based violence and safeguarding issues by media and development partners such as BBC Media Action were also found to have contributed to girls' awareness of safeguarding threats and referral mechanisms throughout the country. The [endline evaluation](#) reported that more than 95 percent of the girls demonstrated increased confidence in dealing with safeguarding threats because of the in-school and out-of-school support received by STEM, which included self-defence training, sensitisation about adolescent sexual and reproductive health and community-level activities, such as household dialogue and street drama.

Increased awareness of gender barriers by teachers and parents. In the [endline evaluation](#), girls reported that teachers encouraged them to participate in classroom activities and school competitions. The percentage of girls perceiving that teachers treated boys and girls differently in the classroom halved from 25 percent at the midline to 13 percent at the endline. Some of the common child-friendly methods adopted by the teachers included more group-work and classroom presentations, use of technology (computers, projectors etc.), use of library resources in regular learning and extra-curricular activities. The girls also identified 'lesser punishment' as a child-friendly teaching practice that the teachers now use regularly in classrooms. Schools were found to have WASH facilities, separate toilets for girls and boys, free sanitary pads for girls and sports equipment for girls. This is a significant improvement since baseline when schools were found to be lacking clean toilets and sanitary pad disposal facilities. At the household level, girls reported that they had been relieved of excessive engagement in household chores, which increased their studying and leisure time. Parents were found to be supportive, as most of them said they will allow their daughters to study up to any level she wishes.

// RAJANI'S STORY



Rajani stands tall wearing her traditional Tharu attire speaking confidently at a seminar on girls' education attended by government officials and donor agencies. It is difficult to believe she was working as a Kamlari (bonded laborer) not long ago in Kailali. Rajani was born in a poor family with five sisters and a brother. As well as working for another family in her community, her daily household chores and work

on their small piece of land put her education in the backseat. Despite being released from her duties as a Kamlari, she was unable to graduate from school.

Young marginalised girls who fail to graduate have few options but to marry at an early age or consider working as a Kamlari. Luckily, Rajani was able to enrol in the STEM vocational training programme. After her training she started working as an apprentice in a tailoring shop for about a year. With these skills and experience, she opened her own small tailoring shop in her village. After paying off the small loan she had taken from her neighbour to acquire a sewing machine, she started planning to expand her business to make a decent earning rather than just making ends meet.

To do so, Rajani received a loan from a local cooperative as part of STEM Girls' Transition Fund. The fund provided girls who dropped out of school with access to finance resources needed to start their businesses. Rajani used the loan to buy five additional machines and shift to a bigger location revamping her once tiny, one-sewing-machine shop.

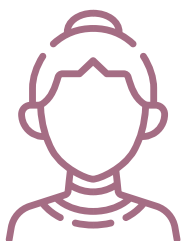
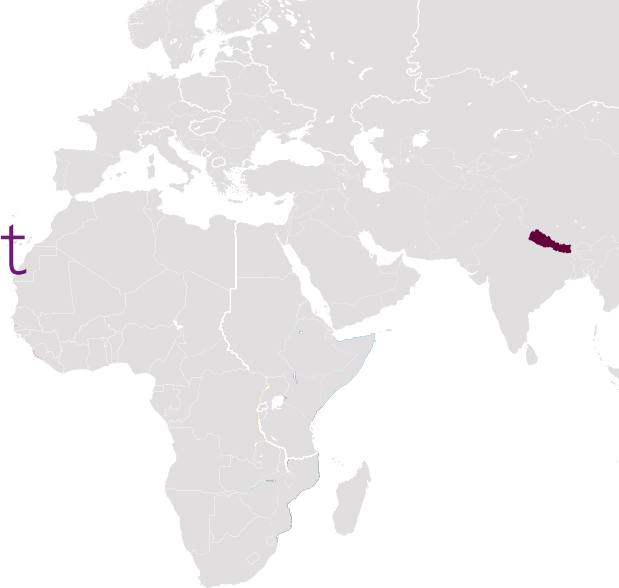
She now earns a regular income and also trains young girls for a small fee. "I am where I am now because of the loan STEM provided girls with without collateral. I am very motivated and inspired and I wish to become a role model for young girls who want to do something for themselves" says Rajani. Nowadays, you can see her working happily in her shop with her trainees and assistants, or advocating passionately for girls' rights and education, not only as a former Kamlari turned entrepreneur, but also as an emerging girl champion and a voice for marginalised girls in the southern rural communities of Nepal.



“A lot of things changed in my school from when I was in Grade 8 until I passed the Secondary Education Examination. In the last year, sanitary pads were regularly available in the school, and the girls’ toilet and hand-washing facility have had running water. Before that, whenever we had periods, as there was no water in the toilet, we had to go home.”

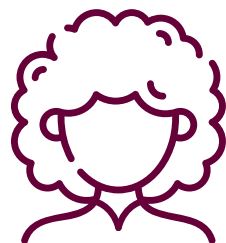
In-school girl

The STEM project in numbers



Number of in-school
girls reached

4,768



Number of out-of-school
girls reached

1,397

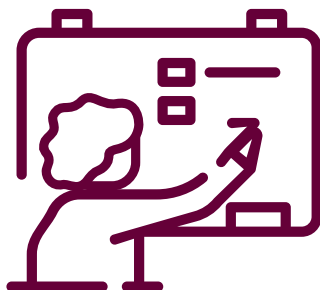


Number of
school graduate
girls reached

926

Number of
teachers
trained

550



Number of
schools reached

30

Number of in-school girls trained in
self-defence: **4,514**

Number of out-of-school or graduate girls
received youth financial literacy training: **1,069**

Number of out-of-school or graduate girls received
business skills development training: **1,033**

Number of out-of-school or graduate girls who
received vocational training: **560**

Number of out-of-school or graduate girls who
started or expanded their business through girls'
transition fund loans: **459**

Number of girls and boys who joined campaigns
around girls' education:

GIRLS: 5,681 BOYS: 3,267

Number of parents who took part in activities
around girls' education: **7,483**

What did the STEM project learn?

Running effective girls' clubs. In order for girls' clubs to be effective, it is important to continuously engage at the household and community levels to make sure that an enabling learning environment is maintained outside school as well. Also, evidence from the STEM endline evaluation suggests that girls' clubs can be used effectively as remedial classes for core and non-core subjects (such as adolescent sexual and reproductive health and life skills) to increase girls' learning outcomes. This evidence can be used in other contexts to encourage schools themselves or local governments to fund and implement them.

Ensuring and sustaining transition to employment for girls. A combination of training on various skills (such as business skills, financial literacy, adult sexual and reproductive health, and vocational training) is more effective than only focusing on vocational training to improve livelihood opportunities for girls. Also, it is important to follow up regularly with the girls after the completion of vocational training to identify any other training needs they may have and verify whether they managed to ensure their placement in the job market or set up their own enterprises. In order to ensure employment opportunities are available for girls, it is helpful to work with networks of entrepreneurs and government bodies on creating a platform for publicising them.

Working closely with government, non-government actors and programme participants. Girls' education programming needs to be integrated and mainstreamed in collaboration with government and non-governmental actors, such as national associations, teachers' associations, networks of youth organisations, and universities. During implementation, there are likely to be a number of opportunities to integrate project activities to create cumulative effects. Such opportunities need to be seized and utilised to ensure there is a

shared understanding of the constraints girls are facing and project interventions are aligned and build on existing work delivered by other stakeholders on the ground. Programmes focusing on girls' education should engage government systems at all phases of the project cycle, from beginning to end, so that it creates a good understanding with stakeholders and contributes to the sustainability of the project outcomes. In addition, the project should engage the programme participants in the project activities and key decision gates, working with them to adapt, refine and improve project interventions through regular consultations and assessments.

Contextualising teacher training and assessing teachers' professional development. The teacher training delivered by governments can often be uniform across the country, as is the case for Nepal. However, a uniform teacher training that does not consider contextual differences within a country, such as differences around language of use and issues around social caste systems, is often not as useful and effective as contextualised teacher training. In fact, teacher training should be designed after collecting and analysing the needs of the trainees themselves for better outcomes. Also, it is important for programmes to have a mechanism to assess teachers' professional development continuously. By the same token, girls' learning needs should be continuously assessed and then interventions should be designed and implemented accordingly. In this way, it can be possible to achieve the agreed project targets in terms of learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy. Equally, when working closely with governments on teacher training, it is important to remind them about the importance of having a system to monitor the teacher training process and its impact, to ensure teachers implement the skills and knowledge they gained through the training.

“STEM’s vocational training provided us with skills that actually translate into an income. My husband works as a driver and during the COVID-19 pandemic he lost his job. As we ran out of a regular source of income, I used my savings from my job at an embroidery shop. If I had not had those savings, my family would have faced a lot of difficulties at the time of crisis. Now that my job has already resumed, we have started saving again.”

Out-of-school girl

Using data to inform adaptations and measure impact. The successful implementation of girls' education programmes needs a strong monitoring and evaluation system to track programme participants' data. There should also be a robust data management system to understand the impact of project interventions and how interventions should be adapted to meet the project targets in the changing contexts. By doing this, project interventions can be tailored to achieve the outputs and outcomes, including achieving value for money. It is also important to encourage local governments to set up and maintain a robust data management system to collect data on marginalised groups such as gender, disability, minorities and ethnic groups, and the data needs to be taken into account in making and implementing education plans and policies. Among the priorities of the local government should be on reaching out to vulnerable groups and hard to reach children to ensure that the education system is more inclusive, participatory, accountable and transparent.

Drawing on local capacity and resources. It is important to draw on local capacity and work with local teachers, programme graduates, female community health volunteers and cooperatives to build their skills and confidence in implementing and sustaining the programme interventions. Local actors have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the local context, culture, systems and institutions, enabling them to deliver activities effectively and efficiently. Using local resources to produce sanitary pads for girls and create teaching materials can be more sustainable and can be done at a lower cost.

Including boys in girls' education programmes. The [endline evaluation](#) reports that, although girls were able to reduce their involvement in household chores, the responsibility of household chores shifted towards other female members of the family, mostly overburdening the mother with extra work. It also highlights how stakeholders, including girls themselves, thought most of the crucial decisions about personal life, such as on marriage or further studies, were still mostly taken by girls' parents, mostly the father. Also, according to the endline evaluation, boys did not recognise the different roles of men and women in a family as a problem that affects their lives. It is important to recognise that traditional gender roles are ingrained and followed by both men and women in the communities reached through girls' education programmes. The empowerment of girls alone is not sufficient to bring about positive changes and equality. It is of utmost importance for girls' education programmes to work with governments, schools and communities towards narrowing the gap of understanding and knowledge between girls and boys.

// SARMILA'S STORY



Armed with a spray, hand sanitiser and a mask, Sarmila opened her small clothing shop after three months going without business during the COVID-19 lockdown. She makes sure her customers are wearing masks and sanitise their hands before they enter the shop.

The sub-metropolis of Dhangadhi, in the far west region of Nepal, has slowly come back to life after three months of lockdown. But it

is small businesses like Sarmila's that bore the brunt of the lockdown and its economic impact. Sarmila opened her small business with the support provided by STEM. The project supported access to finance with collateral-free loans for girls who were interested in opening small businesses and enterprises through the Girls' Transition Fund, a revolving fund operated by local cooperatives.

Sarmila took a loan to start her small business when suddenly the nationwide lockdown and travel restrictions came into effect on in March 2020. Sarmila had no option but to close her business. "At the beginning, we did not know the lockdown would continue for so long. But as it kept on getting extended, I started to worry about my business and the loan payments I had to make."

As the days passed by, Sarmila not only lost her regular income but was also facing the challenge of paying back her loan. To help, STEM worked to decrease the repayment burdens on these entrepreneurs. In coordination with the six local partner cooperatives, exemptions were made on late payment fees and the loan interest rate was reduced from 8% to 5%. The reduction of interest and fees helped entrepreneurs like Sarmila stay positive for a little while longer. "The reduction in loan amount was very helpful for me. It really helped to balance the loss I experienced during the lockdown."

Sarmila, is now eager to expand her business. "I want to add new products and the latest designs. This will attract more customers and help my business grow," adds Sarmila smiling.



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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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