Education Pathways for Marginalised Adolescent Girls Beyond Formal Schooling

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This study examines how the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) component of the Girls' Education Challenge II programme supported marginalised adolescent girls to transition into formal schooling, skills training, or work-related activities.

Summary of findings

- Girls' numeracy and literacy levels improved substantially (by 25 to 28 percentage points respectively on standardised tests) across the 10 LNGB projects.

- Girls also identified improvements in their socio-emotional skills.

- Transition pathways were often determined by age: younger adolescent girls were more likely to pursue formal schooling due to labour laws and national policies, while older adolescent girls mainly engaged in skills or work-related opportunities.

- Adolescent girls in skills training and work-related pathways tended to concentrate in a limited range of vocations, typically those traditionally associated with women.

- About one third of adolescent girls reported improvements in their ability to participate in day-to-day household decisions. However, they were often still constrained in making longer-term, fundamental decisions due to entrenched gender social norms.


Image Front Cover: Female tuk tuk driver, VSO Nepal

Image: Female tailor smiling while working with her sewing machine, Nigeria

Background

The Girls' Education Challenge Phase II is an eight-year (2017-2025) programme supported by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that aims to improve the learning opportunities and outcomes of over one million girls around the world. The programme spans 17 countries and includes 41 projects through two funding windows: the Girls' Education Challenge – Transition (GEC-T) Window with 27 projects, and the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) Window with 14 projects targeting the most marginalised out-of-school girls.

This evaluation focuses on the 14 LNGB projects, which aimed to reach 230,000 out-of-school adolescent girls across 10 countries, such as girls with disabilities, those who are already married, and those who have children. It draws on findings from across the 14 LNGB projects with more in-depth insights from case studies in Ghana, Kenya and Nepal.
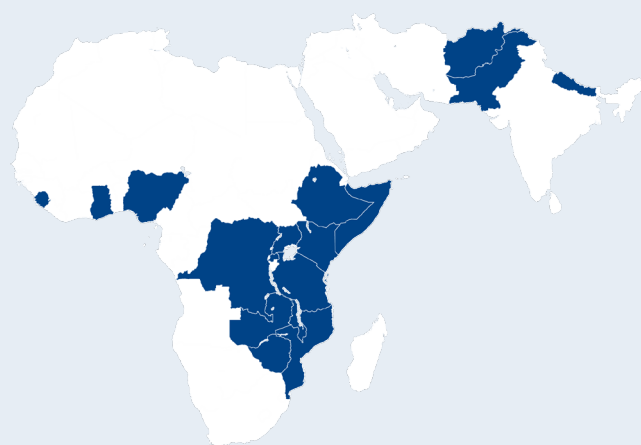
Recommendations

Targeting the most marginalised adolescent girls

In order to identify the most marginalised girls for specific contexts, there is a need for accurate data on different population subgroups. Certain groups, such as children with disabilities, children who have never enrolled in school, and pregnant girls, can be more difficult to identify and it is important that they do not fall through the gaps due to inaccurate or unavailable data.

Engaging with national and local stakeholders is important for effective targeting. Engagement with national government stakeholders is needed to identify locations where the most marginalised girls reside. Collaboration with sub-national and community stakeholders is needed to effectively target marginalised girls given their in-depth knowledge of the locality. Engaging with national and local stakeholders is also important to know areas where other similar programmes are operating to avoid duplication.

Designing projects to support the most marginalised adolescent girls

Projects should design activities tailored to meet the specific needs and characteristics of marginalised adolescent girls, such as their age, disability status, whether they are married or have children, and whether they are first-generation learners. For example, this could involve designing activities that differ for younger and older adolescents, providing child-care facilities for girls with children, and providing psycho-social support to girls who may have faced trauma.

Financial support is needed to address economic barriers girls face in participating in education. Financial support can help overcome direct costs and opportunity costs (e.g. caring for siblings, household chores, participation in family businesses) faced by adolescent girls in attending education.

The provision of material support, such as hygiene and dignity kits, together with training on hygiene, is important for helping adolescent girls navigate challenges associated with puberty.

Longer-term material and financial support is also needed for adolescent girls to set up businesses and meet ongoing work-related costs. For example, adolescent girls can be linked to micro finance institutions, community savings and loan facilities, and avenues to access low-interest loans in order to help them set up businesses and meet the ongoing running costs.

Successful design of programmes requires a cross-sectoral approach. This includes across Ministries of Education and Labour as well as joining up with other livelihoods, employment, and economic growth initiatives to ensure girls continue to receive support (including after the project concludes).

The length of projects should be sufficient to allow girls to adequately master literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills. Recognising the low levels of literacy and numeracy of the most marginalised adolescent girls, the length of projects needs to be sufficient to allow them to gain these skills and not fall behind once project support ends. They also need sufficient time to gain vocational skills to enable them to access productive work.

Promoting adolescent girls' agency

Co-designing programme activities with adolescent girls themselves helps to ensure their needs are being met. Participatory data collection approaches such as those used in this report can support this co-design, by capturing marginalised girls' needs, voices, and experiences both in education as well as in skills and work-related training.

Teaching life skills to girls, which encompasses training on communication skills and financial literacy, is important for their empowerment. These skills can vastly improve girls' self-confidence, ability to express their opinions, input into decisions, awareness of issues relating to delaying pregnancy and marriage. Providing girls with the tools and knowledge to recognise, know what to do, and know whom to contact if they witness or experience gender-based violence is important.

Facilitating adolescent girls' transitions

Older adolescent girls should be offered the choice and further support to transition into continued education opportunities. For those returning to formal schooling, this may require addressing social stigma that over-age adolescent girls can face when entering formal education.

The provision of bridging or after-school classes to girls transitioning to formal school can better prepare them for the formal school environment. These classes can help to mitigate the challenges girls face when adjusting to the formal schooling curriculum.

Providing girls with career guidance is needed to help them make viable choices about work-related pathways. Providing detailed information based on market assessments of work opportunities including market demand, start-up costs and profitability of businesses can help girls decide on their training and avoid local job market saturation.

Community sensitisation campaigns and girls acting as role models can help encourage girls to engage in work, including in vocations which are not traditionally available to women. These can help change attitudes of girls, their families, and communities to take up different opportunities.

Once girls have started on their transition pathway, home visits and ongoing engagement by programme educators and mentors is important to encourage and motivate girls and their families. This will help to maintain attendance and retention.

Sustaining projects into the future

The policy and regulatory environment needs to demonstrate a political commitment to programmes supporting out of school adolescent girls back into education and their transition into work. This requires an explicit budgetary allocation from governments to such programmes. Projects need to engage with governments throughout their lifecycle to help foster such political commitment.

Projects need to be designed to ensure the sustainability of community engagement to shift gender social norms. Embedding 'change champions' such as religious leaders and village heads within communities and providing training to groups such as school management committees and mothers' groups can ensure the benefits of projects in changing harmful practices (e.g. those associated with early marriage, early pregnancy, and gender-based violence) are sustained. In addition, this will help counter gender social norms and facilitate girls' choices to engage in non-traditional work

Image: Market woman selling vegatables, Ghana

Findings

LNGB projects targeted the most marginalised adolescent girls

Overall, projects were successful in targeting marginalised adolescent girls who were out of school. Most projects (11 out of 14) targeted married girls (including those waiting to enter a union), girls with disabilities (10 projects), and young mothers (including girls who are pregnant) (8 projects). Consultation with national and sub-national government stakeholders was important for identifying locations in which the projects would be implemented. Community members were especially important in identifying specific girls within the locality.

Insufficient and inaccurate data were a challenge faced by projects in identifying most vulnerable groups of adolescent girls. Intended enrolment targets were sometimes not met for particular groups, such as married girls, due to family unwillingness to enrol girls into the project.

## LNGB projects improved academic and non-academic outcomes adolescent girls

Girls' numeracy and literacy levels improved substantially (by 25 to 28 percentage points respectively on standardised tests) across the 10 LNGB projects, on average. Improvements were greater for girls who had never attended school prior to participating in the LNGB project compared with those who had dropped out of school. However, these increases were from an already low baseline of learning. Literacy and numeracy of girls who could not initially answer a single question correctly improved, with a reduction in the proportion of girls who scored zero by eight percentage points in early grade reading and five percentage points in early grade maths. This suggests that projects were successfully supporting the most marginalised.

Girls in the three case study projects also identified improvements in socio-emotional skills, particularly in their levels of confidence. One-third of the girls interviewed mentioned that life skills training had increased their self-confidence and self-esteem, and had equipped them with practical skills for their daily lives.

> *"Right now, I am confident enough to face anything, I feel like I can also give guidance to those that need it"*
>
> **21-year-old participant on the entrepreneurship track, EfL project, Kilifi, Kenya**

Learning improvements for girls who did and did not have previous schooling prior to joining the LNGB project: numbers show percentage correct scores on standardised tests

● Baseline ● Follow-up
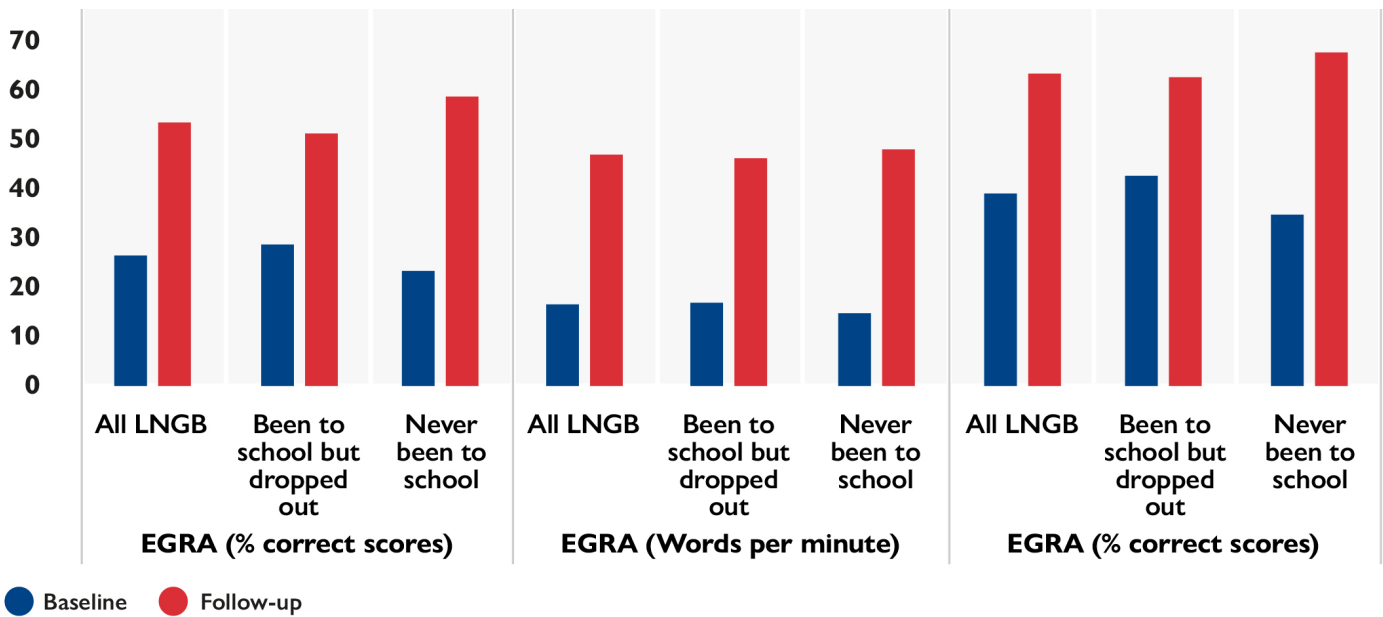
LNGB projects helped mitigate barriers to education, but some persisted

Girls experienced systemic barriers to their education, some of which persisted. These included financial constraints, household chores, and negative community attitudes towards their education.

LNGB projects used a wide range of approaches to mitigate these barriers such as community and government sensitisation activities, psycho-social support and creating safe spaces, and material and financial support for girls and households.

> "The Change Champions [e.g. religious leaders and village heads] used to have dialogue with parents and representatives about different agendas, such as child marriage and dowry customs…. slowly they understood the importance of education."
>
> **Downstream partner, Bara district, Nepal**

The barriers that girls face in participating in education vary considerably between younger and older adolescents. Economic constraints negatively affected all girls. Barriers relating to travel to school (transport and distance) were more likely to affect younger adolescents, while cultural practices (e.g., marriage and motherhood) were more likely to affect older adolescents.

Material and financial support offered by LNGB projects reduced the proportion of girls identifying economic costs as barriers to participation

in education by more than half. Prior to the programme, 50% of girls in the three case study projects identified financial constraints as barriers to education; this fell to 18% among girls involved in the projects.

Provision of hygiene and dignity kits alongside menstrual hygiene management information during life-skills sessions were identified as particularly important in mitigating barriers to attending learning centres.

> "Some [girls] use[d] to absent themselves from school when they are menstruating…. but ever since STAGE provided them with sanitary pads it has addressed one of their biggest challenges"
>
> **Community member, Upper West region, Ghana**

Engaging with community members was important to help shift gender social norms including sensitisation on issues such as early marriage and early pregnancy.

To address wider structural barriers, LNGB projects engaged closely with governments. This ensured projects were aligned with national policies and initiatives. However, low levels of budgetary support were a constraint for sustainability.

Image: Woman giving numeracy books on International Literacy Day, Mozambique

LNGB projects supported adolescent girls' transition pathways to formal schooling, skills or work-related opportunities

Girls' choices of transition pathways were often constrained by their age. Younger adolescents could often only be offered formal schooling, due to national labour laws. In contrast, older girls were often only offered skills or work-related opportunities.

Girls on skills or work-related pathways tended to concentrate in a narrow range of sectors, often those traditionally associated with women, such as hairdressing and tailoring. Factors contributing to this included gender social norms which channelled girls into certain vocations and the availability of materials and master artisans needed to support girls' training. This led to some girls attempting to launch businesses in an already saturated market.

> *"We had majority of the girls doing hair dressing in that community… so, when we finished, we had about 23 of the girls doing hair braiding in that community."*
> **Downstream partner, Upper East region, Ghana**

Girls who transitioned into formal schooling were provided with material and financial support to aid their success in following this pathway. However, barriers such as school-related costs, adapting to the new learning environment, distance to school and household chores persisted.

> *"I bought school-uniform, books and a backpack with the money ActionAid sent me."*
> **13-year-old participant on the formal schooling track, EfL project, Kilifi County, Kenya**

Girls transitioning to skills and work-related opportunities were also provided financial support to set up and run their businesses. For some this included connecting them with micro-credit institutions, giving them training in loan applications and connecting them with others in the community with similar vocations for group loans. Even so, some girls continued to face constraints due to insufficient funds to viably run their businesses.

The length of the skill training was identified as being too short to fully master work-related skills which was seen to negatively affect girls' success.

LNGB projects improved the most marginalised adolescent girls' decision-making and aspirations

Girls identified that their engagement in decision-making had enhanced due to greater confidence related to improvements in literacy, numeracy and life skills. Girls who were unmarried, without children, or did not report a disability were more likely to feel that their decision-making capabilities had increased, especially among older girls.

> *"I was told that I will be married to a husband, but I declined. I told them that I want to work for myself and I am not ready for marriage. My family sent the man to talk to me and I told him the truth that I am not ready for marriage and that I just started my business so I told him to leave me alone."*
> **21-year-old participant on the entrepreneurship track, Garissa County, Kenya**

Girls were more likely to make decisions about their day-to-day lives, such as household expenditures or visiting the market, health clinic or friends. A smaller proportion were able to make longer-term, more fundamental decisions about education, marriage, and income-generating activities with husbands or other family members retaining decision-making powers.

Girls also reported being more ambitious in their aspirations. Being part of the project allowed them to nurture higher aspirations for the future that they previously did not have.

> *"I have thought of studying before coming to the learning centre. But after coming to the learning centre, I have thought of doing something utilising my learning."*
> **12-year-old participant on the formal school track, Aarambha project, Bara district, Nepal**

Methodology

Documentation and secondary quantitative data from project evaluations covering all 14 LNGB projects were analysed to identify how education pathways beyond formal schooling have supported the most marginalised girls. This was complemented by key informant interviews across all 14 implementing partners and primary qualitative data from a range of stakeholders from three selected LNGB projects.

A key objective of this study was to capture the perspectives of adolescent girls and, therefore, a particular focus was given to collecting data from girls themselves on their education and livelihood journeys using the River of Life participatory method. Primary qualitative data were collected between January and March 2023. All names have been changed to protect identities.
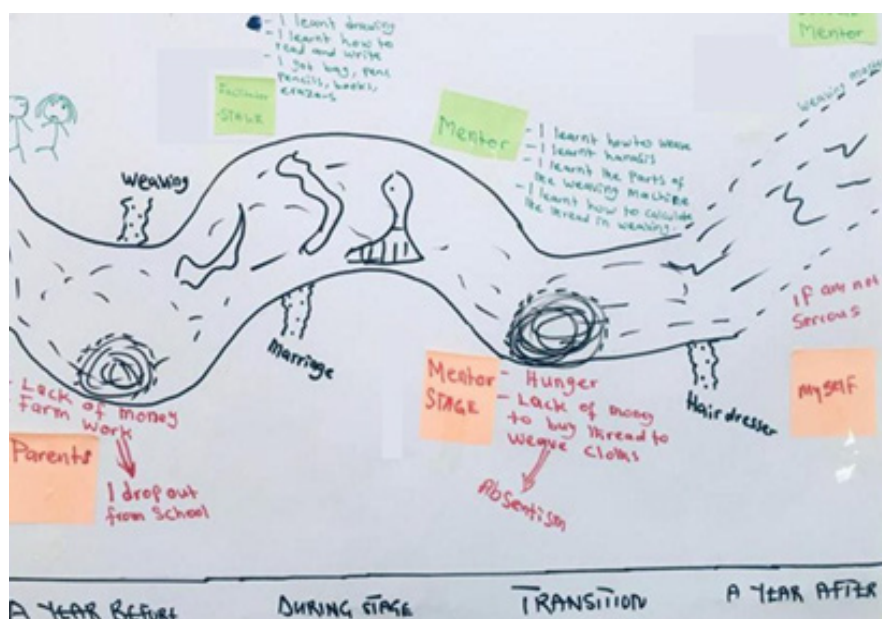
The 'River of Life' is a participatory method which allows adolescents to map out and provide critical insights into their lives using the metaphor of a river. Participants are asked to capture critical moments in their lives, peer and family influences, barriers and negative experiences, and enablers and empowering experiences.

This example was drawn by an 18-year-old on an entrepreneurship track in the STAGE project in Ghana.