

Study Brief #6  
Independent Evaluation



Value for Money of Educating the Most Marginalised GEC Girls



# Value for Money of Educating the Most Marginalised GEC Girls

This study examines the value for money (VfM) of interventions reaching the most marginalised girls in the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) component of the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) Phase II programme. The findings are specific to in-depth case studies of three out of a total 14 projects. These case studies were found to be broadly representative of the overall LNGB portfolio.

## Summary of findings

- **Benefits greatly exceeded costs for all three case study projects.** In Ethiopia and Nepal, measurable benefits were valued at between 4.0 and 5.4 times costs, and in Malawi benefits were worth twice the costs. The value of the benefits derived mostly from achieved gains in literacy, numeracy as well as projections of the extra years of schooling that will be completed by those girls who transitioned into further education.
- **The projects raised literacy and numeracy levels substantially.** Girls in Malawi and Nepal showed increases of 20 to 22 percentage points in literacy and numeracy tests, equivalent to girls having achieved five additional years of formal schooling. Gains in Ethiopia were lower, particularly for numeracy, but still equivalent to completing an additional two to three years of formal schooling. Of all project benefits, literacy and numeracy were by far the most highly valued by girls themselves.
- **Most girls (76%) successfully transitioned into further education or work** following project completion. The greatest impact was on younger girls, who predominantly transitioned into formal schools. Having been out-of-school prior to their enrolment on the project, this has already achieved a transformational impact on their lives.
- **Many other health and social benefits were also found**, including improved health knowledge and outcomes; improved self-confidence, self-efficacy, social networks, and well-being; changes in social norms and reductions in gender-based violence; and positive spill-over effects in local communities.
- **Case study project costs ranged from £179 (in Ethiopia) to £731 (in Malawi) per girl per year.** These are 2.5 to 10 times higher than the cost of educating girls in regular government schools. The higher costs reflect both the more marginalised nature of the beneficiaries and the greater breadth and intensity of support provided. All girls were from particularly disadvantaged communities and were out-of-school; many had never been to school, were young mothers, had disabilities and came from illiterate households. More than half of costs were for activities involving support beyond literacy and numeracy, including life-skills education, support for transitioning to further education or work, working with communities and local governments, and safeguarding.

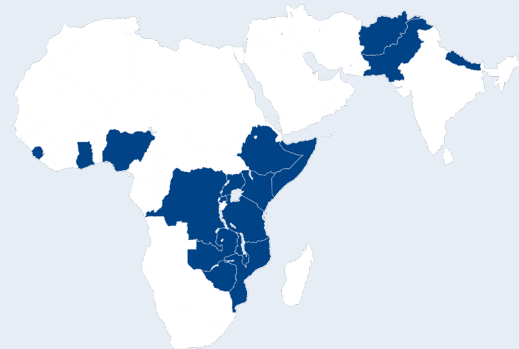


Image Front Cover: Courtesy of the People in Need/ Aasaman Nepal

Image: Female student while having class at a rural school in Mzuzu, Malawi.

## Background


The Girls' Education Challenge Phase II is an eight-year (2017-2025), £500m programme supported by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that aims to improve the learning opportunities and outcomes of over 1.6 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 examined three of the 14 LNGB projects as in-depth case studies:


- PiN Ethiopia's "CHANGE: Improving Access to Education in Ethiopia for Most Marginalised Girls" project, which included Alternative Basic Education (ABE) classes for girls aged 10-14 years and Integrated Functional Adult Literacy (IFAL) training for girls aged 15-19 years;
- Link Malawi's "Transformational Empowerment for Adolescent Marginalised Girls in Malawi" project; and
- PiN Nepal's "Accelerating Life Skills, Literacy and Numeracy of Married Adolescent Girls" project.

## Recommendations


 **Further investment into interventions that support the education of particularly marginalised, out-of-school girls should be prioritised.** There is a strong value-for-money rationale for investing in projects that target marginalised, out-of-school girls to develop their literacy and numeracy skills and transition back into formal schools.

### VfM drivers

 **Gains in literacy, numeracy, and rates of transition (to further education and work) should be a core focus of future projects.** Girls themselves value these gains far more highly than anything else and they provide the most compelling overall VfM justification of further investment. A broad set of interventions, nonetheless, may be necessary to achieve learning and transition gains in such disadvantaged communities. Other benefits achieved through these broader interventions can also have an important value.

 **Girls' direct and indirect costs from participating in the project (as well as from transitioning into continued education) should be mitigated as far as possible – cash transfers could be a particularly cost-effective intervention**

**to achieve this.** While small relative to the overall costs of the project, direct and indirect costs to girls for participating can have majorly negative impacts on their continued attendance and ultimate achievements. These costs can be minimised or avoided through project design choices (e.g. smaller learning centres closer to where the learners are located) and direct interventions such as cash transfers. Interventions to mitigate the direct and indirect costs of girls sustaining their transition in further study should also be prioritised.

 **Girls should be supported beyond their completion of learning centre activities to improve VfM through both increasing and sustaining their transitions.** High and sustained transition to further study and work are key drivers of overall benefits. Projects need sufficient time and resources to support this transition, including potential continued interventions to ensure transitions are sustained. Representative samples of girls should be tracked both up to the point of transition and also at regular intervals after this to understand where further interventions might be necessary and effective.

## Project design and monitoring



**Design phase should assess opportunities for targeting other benefits relative to the marginal costs of doing so (e.g. specific health outcomes).** The value of achieving specific non-education benefits such as better health knowledge and practices, can be large. The marginal cost of achieving these gains might be low, for example, if they are incorporated into already planned content at learning centres. It is recommended that future projects assess opportunities for improving health outcomes which are directly determined by girls' knowledge and practices (e.g. analysing where baseline levels of knowledge for girls in targeted communities differ most from secondary data such as DHS). Once identified, such indicators should then be part of the core monitoring framework.



**Markers of marginalisation should be robustly defined and tracked throughout implementation.** Projects should have flexibility to define the nature of marginalisation within their specific contexts, but they then need to monitor those characteristics once defined. These data should be used to understand the characteristics of girls who drop out, learn less, and fail to transition, so informing tailored responses. To understand the cost-effectiveness of more substantial interventions to support specific sub-groups of marginalised girls, the costs of such activities should be disaggregated within budgets where possible.



**Benefits should be systematically defined, targeted, monitored and maximised throughout implementation.**

Projects need to define who is being supported, what benefits are being targeted and what has been achieved in order to know how to maximise their VfM. Focus should be on the benefits which are most important – i.e. most probably learning, completion and transition rates. A monitoring system that focusses only on a small number of priority indicators would be easier to manage, particularly in the very challenging contexts which this kind of project will usually be operating in. There should also be an emphasis on having robust data quickly enough to inform ongoing implementation, rather than only for the purposes of ex-post accountability and learning. For example, where transition rates are low, urgent adaptations to interventions would be required.



**Project design should be responsive to external context, including flexibility in implementation and assuring labour market relevance of vocational training.**

Projects should be given flexibility to adapt to changes in their context (which all three case study projects did well). Beyond this, vocational training provision, as well as the specialisations within formal sector TVET that girls might transition into, need to be linked to expected opportunities within the local economy.



## Findings

### What were the benefits of supporting the most marginalised girls?

**Literacy and numeracy levels improved substantially in most of the projects.** Girls in Malawi and Nepal showed increases of 20 to 22 percentage points in literacy and numeracy tests. In Ethiopia girls showed gains of 17 to 21 points in literacy, but much lower for numeracy. These gains are equivalent to completing an additional five years of schooling in the Malawi and Nepal projects, or two to three years of schooling in Ethiopia. Of all project benefits, literacy and numeracy were by far the most highly valued by girls themselves.

**Most girls (76%) transitioned into further education or work after completing the projects,** with the greatest impacts being achieved among the younger (10-14-year-old) girls. For girls who were out of school prior to enrolling in their projects, this has been especially transformational. Girls who are now working are not yet earning more than before the project, but more are now working in jobs with higher earnings potential, and there was a small reduction in the proportion of girls working in hazardous conditions.

**Improved health** outcomes included increased rates of vaccinating their children (9% to 22% above national averages) and increased rates of contraceptive use (1.6 to 3.3 times national averages).

**Improved self-confidence, self-efficacy, social networks, and well-being.** Girls reported that the education and vocational skills they attained made them feel more confident, including being better able to speak up and solve problems. In Ethiopia and Nepal, girls reported larger and stronger social networks and leaving their house more often. Across all three countries, girls participating in the project reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with their lives than national averages. There is some evidence that girls were more likely to delay marriage and to want a smaller family, although there was not yet any measurable change in actual pregnancies.

*“Self-confidence is seen among the girls who can stand on their own after being taught the skills. They are not depending on the support from parents or those who are married they are not depending much on their husbands”*

(Male community discussion, Malawi).

**Changes in social norms and reductions in gender-based violence towards participants.** Attitudes towards girls’ education among parents and others in project communities became more positive. Educators involved in the projects reported being better able to deal with safeguarding, early marriage, pregnancy and female genital mutilation. Most girls in Malawi and Nepal (55% and 65%, respectively), and 41% of girls in Ethiopia reported reductions in violence, abuse, or harassment towards them.

**Spill-over effects in local communities.** Girls were reported to pass on knowledge to siblings or peers, including literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge around sexual health. Girls in one community made sanitary towels for their community, and girls in another raised funds for a school building. People in one community reported that the project had helped address ignorance around hygiene, cleanliness, and litter.

*“The project has opened up the minds of family members, they now know that every child has the capabilities of making it in life. It has really helped us in this community”*

(LNGB Educator, Malawi)

## What are the costs of supporting the most marginalised girls?

**The total cost of supporting girls varied substantially**, from £271 per girl per year for the Ethiopia IFAL course to £779 per girl per year in Malawi. FCDO funding covered the majority of

costs (88% overall), with other costs contributed by girls and their families, communities, government and implementing partners.

### Total costs per girl supported

	Ethiopia		Malawi	Nepal
	ABE	IFAL		
FCDO costs	£5.2m	£2.6m	£7.7m	£5.8m
Total costs	£6.1m	£3.9m	£8.2m	£5.6m
Total reported beneficiaries	10,646	14,322	5,250	9,497
Typical duration of learning centre activities (academic years)	2	1	2	1
FCDO cost per beneficiary per year	£245	£179	£731	£615
<b>Total cost per beneficiary per year</b>	<b>£287</b>	<b>£271</b>	<b>£779</b>	<b>£592</b>



**The main cost burden for girls was from transport fees, although these differed significantly between projects.** Girls' own cost burden was highest in Ethiopia, with low population density contributing to high transport fees. Foregone income from participating in the project, particularly for older girls, was also estimated to be higher in Ethiopia. In Nepal, by contrast, the cost burden on girls was much lower and ultimately exceeded by the value of the cash transfers girls received.

**Direct costs of LNGB support are 2.5 to 10 times higher than regular government schools.** The higher costs reflect both the more marginalised nature of the beneficiaries and the

greater breadth and intensity of support provided. Costs are higher in all areas reflecting the more challenging nature of the locations worked in and the greater socio-cultural, economic and other challenges to be overcome in supporting the most marginalised girls. Additional steps are also required both to identify and then ensure the sustained participation of the girls, including through greater engagement with local communities. More than half of project spending was for support beyond literacy and numeracy, including life-skills education, support for transitioning to further education or work, working with communities and local governments, and safeguarding.

### Why do benefits and costs vary between projects?

External factors beyond the control of the projects contributed to some differences in costs and benefits. In Ethiopia, armed conflict, drought, and flooding increased costs for some cohorts of girls and made benefits harder to achieve. In Malawi, drought and high levels of poverty were major challenges, and the project supported families with food. In Nepal, projects gave girls blankets in winter and bore the cost of supporting families with food following a storm in one district. Poverty and limited job opportunities (notably in Malawi and Ethiopia) made it more difficult for girls to transition into further study or employment and weakened perceptions of the benefits of education.

Several internal project factors also contributed to differences in costs and outcomes:

- Management and logistical challenges as well as demotivated teachers were particular challenges in Malawi.
- Cross-project learning from other GEC projects may have particularly benefited the Nepal project.
- More follow-up support to girls after completing their studies was associated with higher rates of transition to further study or work.
- Keeping the direct costs paid by girls low corresponded with greater achievements.
- Better quality monitoring and reporting on key indicators may have improved benefits without driving up costs.
- Matching vocational training to labour market opportunities helps improve transition rates.

### Does the value of the benefits justify the cost of supporting the most marginalised girls?

**Estimated benefits greatly exceed costs for all projects.** In Ethiopia and Nepal, measurable benefits were valued at four to five times project costs, while in Malawi (where the costs were greater) benefits were double the costs. The value of the benefits derives mostly from the already achieved gains in literacy, numeracy as well as projections of the extra years of schooling that will be completed by those girls who transitioned into further education. Smaller values were estimated for some of the health benefits which could be quantified by the study. The value of other benefits which could not be quantified might increase these ratios further driving up costs.



## Estimated net present values of benefits (£ millions)

Benefits	Ethiopia		Malawi	Nepal
	ABE	IFAL		
Learning	£16.6m	£12.2m	£13.0m	£21.8m
Transition to further study	£7.8m	£7.1m	£3.5m	£8.0m
Health (child vaccinations, contraception use, and reduced fear of gender-based violence)	£0.3m	£0.8m	£0.1m	£0.7m
Sum of net present value of benefits	£24.7m	£20.1m	£16.7m	£30.6m
Cost	£6.1m	£3.9m	£8.2m	£5.6m
Benefit / cost ratio	4.0	5.1	2.0	5.4

**Benefits from learning gains were reduced by low completion rates.** All three projects suffered from high drop-out rates. In Ethiopia and Malawi only half of reported beneficiaries are estimated to have completed their enrolment (Nepal had a slightly

higher 64% completion rate). No evidence of learning gains for those girls who dropped out is available, so the high rates of drop-out substantially reduce the overall estimation of benefits.

### How do benefits and costs vary for different types of marginalised girls?

**There were additional costs for supporting girls with all identifiable markers of marginalisation.** Case study projects largely provided similar interventions for all girls. The main exception was for girls with disabilities, where specific adaptations were made in both materials and approaches (with costs estimated as 58% to 108% higher than for supporting other girls). The case study projects also incurred additional costs to ensure the enrolment and subsequent retention of girls with other marginalisation characteristics, such as being young mothers, belonging to a household whose head is illiterate or being from a minority

ethnic group, although these costs could not be estimated from available data.

**Girls with disabilities and other markers of marginalisation all achieved benefits similar to other girls, despite facing substantially greater challenges.** In Nepal there was particularly impressive success in terms of support to girls from the Dalit caste. These girls were found to transition into formal education at the same rate as other girls, despite usually facing much higher barriers (in national data Dalit girls achieve only 3.6 years of education compared to 7 for non-Dalit girls).

## Methodology

For the three case studies, this evaluation draws on semi-structured interviews with a wide range of project participants and stakeholders using the Qualitative Impact Protocol (QUIP) (158 respondents); a survey of girls participating in the projects (2,769 respondents); and analysis of project monitoring data and reports. Primary data collection took place in October to December 2023. Data collection and analysis procedures were adapted to cope with gaps in completeness and quality of data for some indicators, including identifying and describing beneficiaries and some difficulties eliciting information from participating girls during interviews. In Ethiopia, data collection was only possible in the

SNNP region, so may not be fully representative of the other three project regions which faced greater conflict and climactic shocks during implementation. Six economic models were used to quantify the long-term benefits of the projects focusing on learning, transition to education, transition to work, and the acquisition of life skills. The quantification of the benefits was based on survey information of the extent of the benefits and proportion of girls receiving them, which was then extrapolated to the total girls in the project from all cohorts. Calculations of the monetary values were based on a combination of government data and external data available in published literature.

# Conclusions

1. Supporting particularly marginalised out-of-school girls is found to have achieved high ratios of quantifiable benefits to costs, primarily because of strong learning gains and high rates of transition into formal schooling.
2. Girls themselves (and all other local stakeholders) value gains from literacy, numeracy and transition to formal schooling as, by far, the project's most important benefits.
3. There is compelling evidence of other substantial benefits including community spillover effects, improved health and sexual health outcomes and reduced perceptions of GBV.
4. The better projects defined and monitored their key benefits, the stronger their overall achievements relative to costs. Opportunities to improve VfM were missed due to a lack of tracking of core benefits such as transition rates.
5. Qualitative and quantitative reporting by projects on markers of marginalisation was limited, restricting an understanding of the relative benefits and costs for girls with different characteristics.
6. Drop-out rates were high, with girls' direct and indirect costs from participation potentially an important contributor. Cash transfers were an effective intervention to mitigate these.
7. Support to girls after completing the education programme was effective in improving the quantity and quality of transition – both of which determine the extent of overall benefits.
8. Both internal and external factors drive the relative benefits and costs each project achieves (e.g. limited economic opportunities in Malawi compounded by provision of vocational training with limited relevance to labour market demand).

## For more information

This research was carried out by the Independent Evaluation Team of the Girls' Education Challenge Fund Programme. The Independent Evaluation Team is a consortium of partners led by Tetra Tech International Development together with the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge and Fab Inc.

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This policy brief is a summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the complete evaluation report which is available at: [gec-ii-ie\\_study-6-report\\_final.pdf](#) (girlseducationchallenge).