Tetra Tech International Development

Independent Evaluation of the Girls' Education Challenge Phase II – Sustaining Changes in Community Attitudes and Norms to Improve Girls' Education Outcomes

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Independent Evaluation of the Girls' Education Challenge Phase II – Sustaining Changes in Community Attitudes and Norms to Improve Girls' Education Outcomes – Final Report

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Partners:

- Research and Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge
- Fab Inc

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Cover image: Jon Pilch/ CAMFED, 2018. A CAMFED Learner Guide sits outside a school in Hurungwe district, Zimbabwe, talking to two students.

March 2025

This document has been approved for submission by Tetra Tech International Development Project Director, based on a review of satisfactory adherence to our policies on:

- Quality management;
- HSSE and risk management;
- Financial management and Value for Money (VfM);
- Personnel recruitment and management;
- Performance Management and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

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Acknowledgements

Acronyms

CAMA	Campaign for Female Education Alumnae Association
CAMFED	Campaign for Female Education
COVID-19	Coronavirus
DCP	Data Collection Partner
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EDGE	English and Digital for Girls' Education
ESWG	Evaluation Studies Working Group
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FDM	Foundation for Development Management
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FM	Fund Manager
GEC	Girls' Education Challenge
GEC II	Girls' Education Challenge Phase II
GEC-T	Girls' Education Challenge – Transition
GESI	Gender, Equity and Social Inclusion
GIEN	Girls' and Inclusive Education Network
IE	Independent Evaluation
IP	Implementing Partner(s)
KII	Key Informant Interview
LNGB	Leave No Girl Behind
OOS	Out of School
OPERA	Oxford Partnership for Education Research and Analysis
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
PEAS	Promoting Equality in African Schools
PwC	Pricewaterhouse Coopers
REAL	Research and Equitable Access and Learning
RQ	Research Question

RRLF	Rapid Research and Learning Fund
SfS II	Sisters for Sisters' Education II
SIKAI	Strengthening Inclusive Education in Nepal (Sikai) Project
SMC	School Management Committee
TC	Teacher Champion
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VfM	Value for Money
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WUSC	World University Service of Canada

Project Acronyms

Acronym	Project name	Implementing Partner	Project location(s)
Discovery	Discovery Project	Impact(Ed) International	Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria
ENGINE	Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises	Mercy Corps	Nigeria
GEARR	GEARR-ing Up for Success After School	PEAS	Uganda
GEF	Girls' Education Finance: Empowerment for Girls' Education	Opportunity International UK	Uganda
IGATE	Improving Girls' Access through Transforming Education	World Vision UK	Zimbabwe
iMlango	iMlango	Avanti Communications Group	Kenya
KEEP	Kenya Equity in Education Project	WUSC	Kenya
MGCubed	Making Ghanaian Girls Great!	Plan International UK	Ghana
REALISE	Réussite et Épanouissement via l'Apprentissage et L'Insertion au Système Éducatif	Save the Children	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
SCHIP	Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh and 'SCHIP' in Strong, Creative, Holistic, Inclusive, Protective, Quality Education	Viva	Uganda
SfSE II	Sisters for Sisters' Education II	VSO	Nepal
SOMGEP	Somali Girls Education Promotion Programme	Care International Somalia	Somalia
STAGES	Steps Towards Afghan Girls' Education Success	Aga Khan Foundation	Afghanistan
STAR-G	Successful Transition and Advancement of Rights for Girls	Save the Children	Mozambique
STEM	Supporting the Education of Marginalised Girls in Kailali	Mercy Corps Europe	Nepal
UVC-GE	Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education	CAMFED	Zimbabwe

Executive Summary

Background and purpose of study

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) launched the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) in 2012, aiming to ensure that up to one million of the world's most marginalised girls completed a full cycle of primary or secondary education. Phase I (2012-17) of the programme targeted 1.4 million girls through 37 different projects. Phase II (2017-2025) funded 41 projects across two windows: (1) the GEC-Transitions (GEC-T) window, supporting 27 successful GEC Phase I projects across 14 countries to transition to the next stage of their education; and (2) the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) window, supporting 14 new projects in 10 countries to support highly marginalised adolescent girls who never attended or dropped out of school.

The Independent Evaluation of Phase II of the GEC was commissioned in 2020 and consisted of a series of studies examining different aspects of GEC II implementation and outcomes. This report is seventh in the series and focuses on the theme of sustainability.

For the purpose of this study, we explore sustainability at the community-level, recognising that changing community attitudes and norms contributes to establishing a foundation for sustained change. Sustainability for the GEC-T is referred to as "establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls" (Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC), 2022a). The continuation of projects from Phase I into GEC-T provides the opportunity for exploring the extent to which change has been embedded and sustained, and the pathways through which community activities have contributed to this.

The study focuses on the 27 GEC-T projects to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** How and to what extent did projects aim to change community attitudes and norms associated with girls' education?
- **RQ2:** To what extent have the project activities (including both interventions and project-related processes) associated with these aims been sustained, including beyond the lifecycle of the projects?
- **RQ3:** To what extent, and through which pathways, have these activities changed community attitudes and norms associated with girls' education?
- **RQ4:** How and in what ways have changes in community attitudes and norms (if any) contributed to establishing a foundation for longer term viability of girls' education outcomes?

Importantly, across all the research questions, we explore the ways in which beneficiary young women have been change-agents in influencing community attitudes and norms associated with girls' education.

Research design and methods

The study adopts a largely qualitative approach, drawing on both secondary project documentation and primary qualitative data. The secondary data analysis includes a portfolio-wide documentary review for all 27 GEC-T projects based on relevant documents and data that were available.

The primary data collection included key informant interviews (KIIs) with 20 GEC-T Implementing Partners (IPs) who were available to participate in the study. In addition, in-depth qualitative data collection was undertaken for two selected GEC-T case study projects. This involved workshops to identify community groups and influential community members and focus group discussions (FGDs), as well as key informant interviews with project beneficiaries, community members identified through the workshops, and government-level officials. The two case studies selected for the study include:

1) Sisters for Sisters' Education II in Nepal, implemented by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), and

2) Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education (UVC-GE) in Zimbabwe, implemented by the Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) International.

Data were collected over the period of June to July 2024 in Nepal, and September to October 2024 in Zimbabwe. The total sample size was 213 in Nepal and 181 in Zimbabwe.

Key findings

Sustainability under GEC II

- **The concept of sustainability evolved across the two phases of the GEC**. Under the first phase of the GEC, sustainability was expressed as 'ensuring a full cycle of education for GEC girls' and measured additionally through the securing of match funding' (FCDO, 2018). The sustainability framework for projects under GEC I categorised projects as Latent, Emerging, Becoming Established, or Established, based on their likelihood to sustain positive outcomes without external support. GEC I projects generally showed characteristics of latent or emerging sustainability (PwC, 2017) due to insufficient emphasis on sustainability in the early stages of implementation. The midline and endline evaluations of GEC I showed that projects '*took too long to embed sustainability*' with some projects only incorporating sustainability considerations in their activities at the end of project lifecycles (FCDO, 2018).

- **There was an increase in the focus on sustainability from GEC I to GEC II, with projects placing greater emphasis on planning for long-term impact.** The focus on sustainability became more explicit under the second phase of the GEC, in terms of "establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls" (PwC, 2022a). "Changing community attitudes and norms", together with "empowering girls" through improved girls' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence, were two of the seven intermediate outcomes likely to contribute to the overarching outcome on sustainability (PwC, 2022a). Sustainability, together with the other three GEC outcomes (enrolment, learning and transition), were anticipated to contribute to GEC's higher-level impact of achieving a better educated and empowered female population.

- **All 27 GEC-T projects included activities aimed at changing community attitudes and norms towards the needs and benefits of girls' education.** GEC-T projects engaged communities through a range of community-level activities. These included training of community stakeholders; community-based outreach; community-based clubs; community-based workshops; community-based education; community-based mentoring and community mobilisers. Some activities such as community-based clubs, community-based workshops and community mobilisers demonstrated higher continuity rates compared to others.

- **Some community-level activities continued between GEC I and GEC II and beyond.** The predominant enablers for continuation of project activities included strong-buy in from government- and community- level stakeholders as well as support and empowerment of young women themselves. In particular, engagement with national stakeholders and alignment with policies, coupled with capacity building at multiple levels, supported the continuation of activities. Longer-term funding and extended implementation periods of GEC-T projects also contributed to sustainability, as did deliberate incorporation of sustainability into project designs by IPs from the beginning. The barriers to continuation of activities included, conversely, the lack of buy-in from stakeholders as well as financial constraints, external shocks such as macroeconomic challenges, instability, conflict, and natural events like climate-related crises and COVID-19 that are likely to have stronger effects on girls from more marginalised communities. Harmful community attitudes and practices are also more difficult to shift and sustain for marginalised girls, such as girls from particular religious or caste groups or living in greater poverty.

Pathways to influence community attitudes and practice across GEC-T projects

- **Project activities across the GEC-T portfolio were able to influence harmful community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education through three key change pathways**: (1) communities actively engaging and transforming harmful attitudes and practices themselves, (2) young women being empowered as agents of change within their communities, and (3) up-take of project activities by local and national governments to embed and sustain positive change (see figure below). These pathways were both intentionally designed by the projects as part of their sustainability plans and organically developed as an outcome of the activities. Through the continuation of their activities as well as change pathways, projects were able to reduce harmful practices such as early marriage and shift attitudes to foster more equal gender roles within the communities. For instance, in Nepal, girls' and parents' attitudes towards girls' education became more positive and early marriage and isolation during menstruation decreased to some extent, although dowry and intimate partner violence were reported to have been more challenging to shift. In Zimbabwe, the project activities encouraged girls' education through reducing early marriage and early pregnancy, although to a varying extent, and there was evidence of project activities making positive shifts with respect to gender-based violence and sexual abuse.

Figure 1: Change pathways shifting harmful community attitudes and practices and improving girls' outcomes
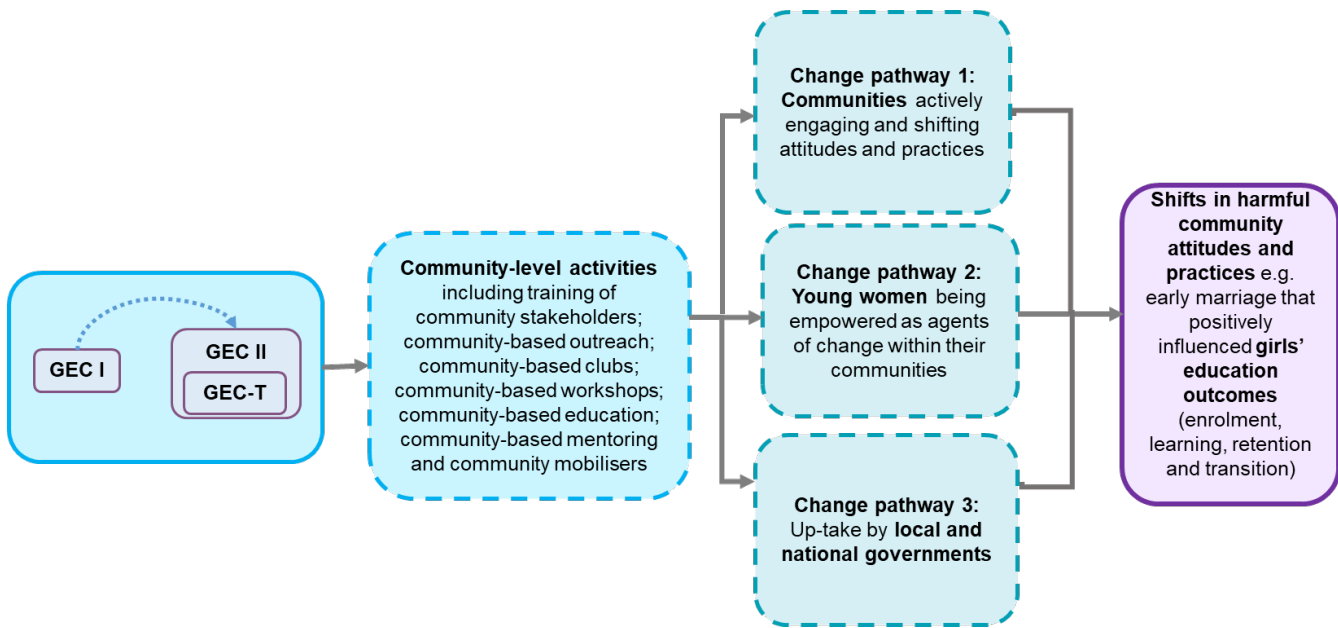
- **Changes in community attitudes and practices ultimately helped influence girls' education outcomes such as enrolment, learning, retention and transition positively.** GEC-T projects demonstrated evidence of changes in community attitudes and practices (such as reductions in early marriage and shifts in traditional gender role distributions within families) being associated with tangible improvements in girls' lives, including increase in girls' enrolment and retention in schools. In Nepal, for instance, project activities resulted in improved transition into further education and employment for girls. In Zimbabwe, project activities were reported to have improved girls' enrolment and retention, reduced dropout, and enhanced their leadership opportunities.

- **GEC-T projects have sustained activities at the community level that have increased the likelihood of lasting positive change in girls' education outcomes.** GEC-T projects mostly undertook sensitisation and awareness-raising community activities, as well as established community-based groups and clubs that mobilised support for young women and encouraged child protection and safeguarding. Evidence from the GEC-T portfolio shows that all types of community activities continued in at least one of the projects. The evidence from the two case-study projects in Nepal and Zimbabwe shows that all project activities at the community-level continued beyond projects lifecycles. These continued either formally by projects themselves, or informally by community groups. Young women/ peer mentors (Big Sister, Little Sisters, Learner Guides) continued to act as agents of change within their communities, and continued engagement via community group structures.

- **The continuation of project activities beyond their lifecycles has benefitted from community engagement and ownership.** Evidence across the GEC-T portfolio demonstrated that participatory approaches that involved engagement with a range of stakeholders, including at the community-level, fostered a sense of ownership within communities that helped community level activities and their influence on community attitudes and norms sustain. Engagement with local community members, including influential members and religious leaders, was also important and undertaken by all GEC-T projects. A higher degree of community ownership played a significant role in continuing project activities and sustaining positive change. Evidence from the two case-study project contexts further reinforced this.

- **Community structures, especially through their support for girls' education and empowerment, have helped to sustain positive change.** For instance, in Nepal, Parent-Teacher Associations and School Management Committees continued to take on requests beyond the project's lifecycle to provide in-kind support such as uniforms, stationery and hygiene items etc. to support girls in their education. Further, training and encouragement from local businesses played a role in empowering girls through employment opportunities, and community-level organisations and clubs also helped maintain the momentum for change in girls' education. In Zimbabwe, continued engagement with community group structures to enhance understanding of barriers and solutions to girls' education helped achieve positive change in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls. In particular, community groups such as Mother Support Groups ensured that the project gains reached the marginalised by considering different criteria for including more marginalised girls as beneficiaries in project schools. The continuation of community structures and processes that were put in place in the selected

communities for Zimbabwe under the project for reporting child abuse and early marriage also helped sustain change. Across eight of the projects in the portfolio, IPs also mentioned increased safety and protection for young women following project activities and changes in community norms.

- **Empowering young women as change agents is a key pathway of change, providing a virtuous cycle for sustainable change in girls' education outcomes.** Across the GEC-T portfolio, engaging young women as change agents played an important role in the continuation of project activities and processes. In Nepal and Zimbabwe, young women who were trained to lead change and serve as role models in their communities continued to inspire change within their communities out of their own initiative, beyond project lifecycles. These young women were intrinsically motivated to support other girls in school due to the effects of the project on their own empowerment having an impact beyond the lifecycle of the project. They played an important role in community awareness raising sessions, in classrooms, in girls' clubs, and wider community activities. Through successive awareness-raising activities, young women became pivotal figures in their communities, playing a central role in driving change and shaping new norms. Girls who benefited from their mentorship and leadership also felt inspired to give back to their communities, becoming change agents for subsequent cohorts of girls, and promoting a virtuous cycle. Visible improvements for project beneficiaries such as transition to higher education or employment opportunities encouraged community members who witnessed these benefits to continue to advocate for changes in attitudes and practices that promote girls' education. This created a virtuous cycle that is likely to improve girls' education outcomes and sustain other positive shifts in girls' lives.

- **Uptake of project activities by governments, either on their own or in collaboration with other organisations, was a pathway to long-term change.** Collaborative efforts between implementing partners, other organisations, and government-led initiatives enabled positive and lasting change. In Nepal, government authorities at different levels took on responsibility for some project activities, such as earmarked funds for sanitary napkins, provision of sports materials in schools, and running girls' clubs. In Zimbabwe, law enforcement targeting early marriage supported community activities discouraging early marriage, keeping up momentum in a virtuous cycle.

Recommendations

The recommendations aim to inform the FCDO, IPs, government and other stakeholders when designing and implementing new education projects or reform initiatives with the intention of achieving sustainability.

Planning for sustainability

- Incorporating plans for sustainability in the design and implementation of projects from the outset is key. This requires developing a shared understanding and buy-in of what sustainability entails in different contexts across stakeholders at the individual, community, government and funder level.

- Funders and projects should plan for sustainability, and funding needs to be available for a sufficiently long duration. This will ensure adequate time to shift deep-rooted norms, such as those underpinning early marriage and gender-based violence.

- Sustaining positive change requires prioritising marginalised girls. This includes identifying the unique markers for marginalisation, determining the ways in which the most marginalised can be effectively included in programmes, and ensuring their inclusion through project processes in ways that are sustainable.

- Programmes must take account of the wider political, economic and social environments in planning for sustainability. Programme design should consider how enablers in the wider context can be leveraged to continue gains made in girls' education outcomes as well as how inhibiting factors can pose risks to sustainability.

Sustaining positive change in girls' education outcomes through specific pathways

Engaging communities to shift attitudes and practices

- Advocacy, awareness-raising and other activities with influential community stakeholders are needed to improve girls' education outcomes and lay the foundations for sustaining positive change.

- Projects should leverage existing and new community groups to drive and sustain positive changes in girls' education outcomes. Such engagement on part of communities increases the likelihood of community members acting upon changed attitudes that encourage girls' education for future generations, as well as leading change.

- Participatory, community driven approaches, working in tandem with influential community groups and stakeholders, are needed to tackle deeply entrenched attitudes and norms, especially among more marginalised groups. Projects should aim to work both *with* communities as well as *through* communities.

Empowering young women as agents of change

- Peer-based mentoring approaches are needed for effective and sustained change in girls' education outcomes. The lasting relationships between mentors and mentees can continue to drive positive shifts in girls' education, and more broadly, their lives, even beyond the projects' lifecycles.

- Young women should be empowered to become change agents within their communities to maintain the momentum for positive change in girls' education. Where communities are able to witness the positive changes in young women's lives as role models, there is a greater likelihood of these changes being sustained.

Ensuring strong buy-in from government stakeholders

- Early, effective and continued engagement with government is key. This includes alignment with national policies and structures as well as integrated and collaborative efforts to address barriers to girls' education. Programmes should work with government staff at all levels – local, district, and national – to further facilitate continuation and eventual take-up of project activities by governments.

1.   Introduction

1.1.   Background to the study

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) was launched in 2012 with a commitment to ensure up to one million of the world's most marginalised girls completed a full cycle of either primary or secondary education. Phase I (2012-17) was funded with £355m and targeted 1.4 million marginalised girls and provided funding through 37 different projects.

Phase II of the programme (GEC II) is operating between 2017 and 2025. 41 projects are receiving £500 million to support their activities across two windows: (1) the GEC-Transitions (GEC-T) window, which is supporting 27 successful GEC Phase I projects across 14 countries to transition to the next stage of their education; and (2) the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) window, which supports 14 new projects in 10 countries to support up to 200,000 highly marginalised, adolescent girls who have never attended or have already dropped out of school with literacy, numeracy and life skills.[4] The programme is managed by the Fund Manager (FM) and projects are designed and delivered by Implementing Partners (IPs).

The Independent Evaluation (IE) of Phase II of the GEC was commissioned by the FCDO in February 2020. This evaluation is being conducted by a consortium of partners: Tetra Tech International Development; the Research and Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge; Fab Inc., and a number of academic and data collection partners. The IE takes the form of a series of evaluation studies on different aspects of GEC II implementation and outcomes to provide the FCDO and IPs with formative evidence and learning to inform improvements in the design and delivery of future projects. So far, a total of six studies have been completed as part of the Independent Evaluation, on access and learning, teachers and teaching, impact on learning/ transition outcomes in GEC-T, educating girls with disabilities, education pathways for marginalised girls beyond formal schooling, and value for money.

This report is **seventh** in this series,[5] and discussions between the IE team, FCDO and GEC II FM have led to the identification of "sustainability" as an important theme for this evaluation study.

1.2.   The focus on sustainability in this study

For the purpose of this study, we explore sustainability at the community-level, recognising that changing community attitudes and norms contribute to establishing a foundation for sustained change. The continuation of projects from Phase I into GEC-T provides the opportunity for exploring the extent to which change has been embedded and sustained, and the pathways through which community activities have contributed to this.

The focus on sustainability became more explicit under GEC II, being one of the expected outcomes in the GEC II programme Logframe. Sustainability for the GEC-T is referred to as "establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls" (PwC, 2022a). "Changing community attitudes and norms", together with "Empowering girls" through improved girls' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence, are two of the seven intermediate outcomes that are likely to contribute to the overarching outcome on sustainability (PwC, 2022a). Sustainability, along with the other three GEC outcomes (enrolment, learning and transition), is anticipated to contribute to GEC's higher-level impact of achieving a better educated and empowered female population.

According to the FM, "sustainability in the GEC is about delivering and enabling long lasting girls' empowerment through education, for current and future generations, by working with girls, families, communities, schools and systems. Sustainability can be built at the individual girl level, and also within the enabling environment for change, including at community, family, school and system levels" (PwC, 2022a).

As explained in the Terms of Reference (ToR) for this study (see *Annex A*), previous IE studies have considered sustainability primarily with respect to outcomes for beneficiary girls themselves. For instance, the longitudinal cohort study of women and girls who participated in the Somali Girls' Education Promotion Programme (SOMGEP-T) under the Rapid Research and Learning Fund (RRLF) has explored the links between their participation in SOMGEP and later-life outcomes. The IE's Value for Money (VfM) study (Study 6) focuses on LNGB projects and includes a focus

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[4] Altogether, GEC Phase II operates in the following 17 countries: Afghanistan; Democratic Republic of Congo; Ethiopia; Ghana; Kenya; Malawi; Mozambique; Nepal; Nigeria; Sierra Leone; Somalia; Pakistan; Rwanda; Tanzania; Uganda; Zambia; and Zimbabwe.
[5] The details of the series of reports published as part of the GEC IE can be found here.

on private income and non-income benefits to girls. The IE Portfolio Evaluations for GEC-T and LNGB examine sustainability at the national level (e.g. influence on national education policies and systems). In addition, the FM completed a replication study and a Learning Brief which discusses sustainability at the national-level (in relation to changes in national-level policies/ plans/ strategies).

Most GEC I projects have included components that aimed to address discriminatory gender norms. Previous FM thematic reviews of GEC I indicate how projects have included activities relating to community attitudes and behaviour to be more supportive of girls' education and build girls' self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence (PwC, 2018a; PwC, 2018b). Girls with greater self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence are also likely to demonstrate positive behaviours in their communities. This suggests that girls could act as agents of transformative change within their communities. However, the current FM evidence base is weighted towards how changes in norms or behaviour in education programming can encourage girls to enrol in or attend school but is less focused on the pathways through which community attitudes and norms change, including how beneficiary young women could be change agents themselves (PwC, 2018a). In this regard, this is an evaluation for learning, aiming to fill this evidence gap to help inform future FCDO programming and in-country girls' education programmes aiming to achieve lasting change.

To enable the assessment of longer-term sustainability, this study includes a review of the 27 GEC-T projects that have been part of both GEC I and GEC II as they have been running for at least 8 years, along with more in-depth case studies of two of these projects. The longer timescale of these GET-T projects is important given it takes time to embed and sustain change.

1.3.   Objective and scope of the study

The primary objective of this study is to explore the influence of projects on changing community attitudes and norms to contribute to establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls, whether or not project activities themselves have continued. These activities include specific interventions designed by projects as well as other project-related processes (such as their interactions with communities), which may have evolved throughout the project lifecycle and contributed to change.

Figure 2 summarises this focus including relevant aspects of the GEC II Logframe. We have focused in particular on the Intermediate Outcomes 1 and 6 based on the study's research objectives as well as review of wider evidence. We explore the ways in which shifts in community attitudes and norms (Intermediate Outcome 1) – including through the role of beneficiary young women in acting as change agents due to their improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence (Intermediate Outcome 6) – contribute to establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls (Outcome: Sustainability).

The study focuses on the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** How and to what extent did projects aim to change community attitudes and norms associated with girls' education?

- **RQ2:** To what extent have the project activities (including both interventions and project-related processes) associated with these aims been sustained, including beyond the lifecycle of the projects?

- **RQ3:** To what extent, and through which pathways, have these activities changed community attitudes and norms associated with girls' education?

- **RQ4:** How and in what ways have changes in community attitudes and norms (if any) contributed to establishing a foundation for longer term viability of girls' education outcomes?

Importantly, across all the research questions, we explore the ways in which beneficiary young women have been change-agents in influencing community attitudes and norms associated with girls' education.

The study's scope includes:

- A portfolio-wide analysis;

- Two case studies of selected projects, entailing in-depth qualitative research with community-level stakeholders including community groups and influential community members, as well as beneficiary young women who participated in the projects to identify their role as agents of change.

It also includes two cross-cutting themes relating to:

- **Political Economy Analysis (PEA)**: The political economy analysis explores barriers, enablers, and key stakeholders and structures with respect to shifting changing community attitudes and norms and is central to the analysis of sustainability, therefore cutting across the entire study. For the two case study projects, it identifies the wider political, economic and social context which continues to enable or inhibit projects in realising their desired change.

- **Gender, Equity & Social Inclusion (GESI)**: The study integrates a GESI lens throughout, with the aim of focusing on sustainability in communities where more marginalised girls live.

Figure 2: Framework summarising the study's focus on sustainability
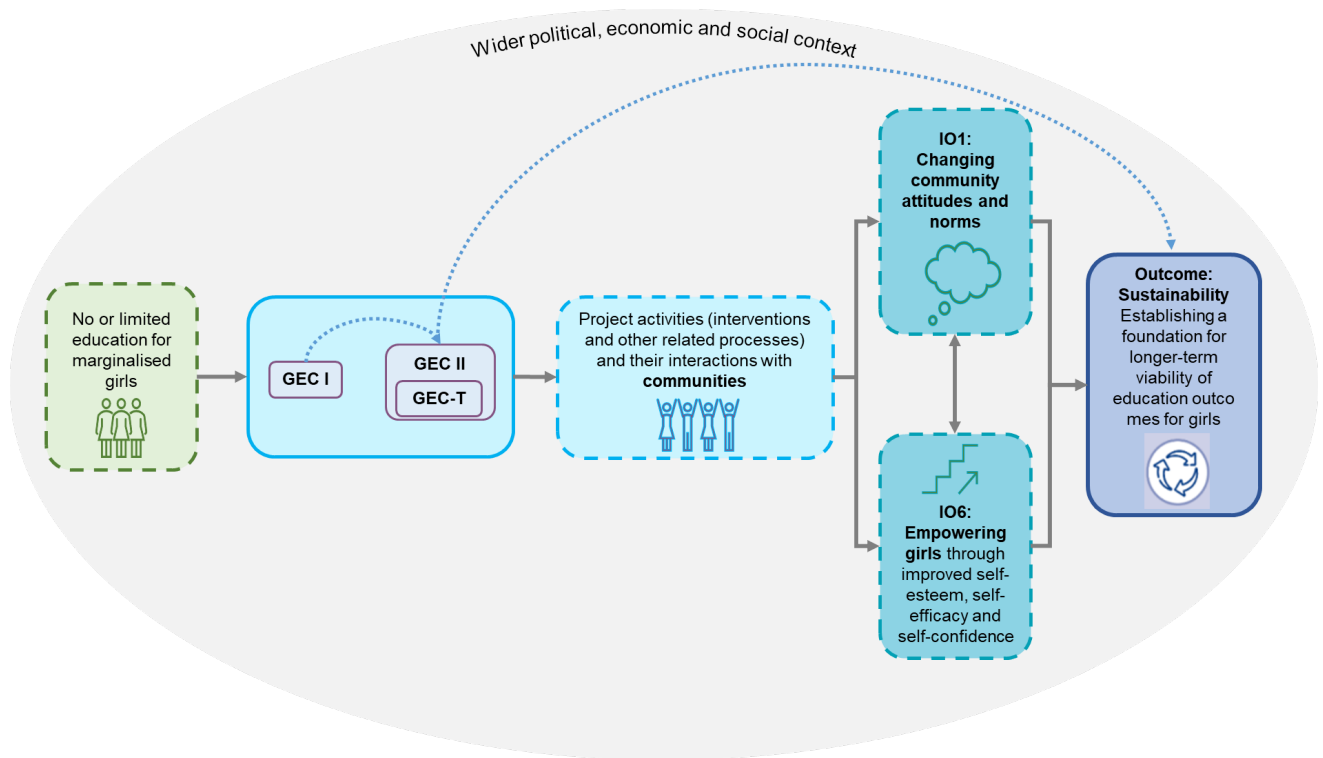
1.4. Report structure

The report is organised around the overarching research questions that guided this study, comprising the following sections:

- **Section 2** draws on background literature to provide an overview of key concepts and evidence in relation to sustainability that have informed this study.

- **Section 3** provides an overview of the research approach and methodology. Further detail on the methodology is provided in *Annex B*.

- **Section 4** details findings on sustainability across the GEC-T portfolio in relation to all the research questions (RQ1-RQ4).

- **Sections 5 and 6** present the findings from the two case study contexts in Nepal and Zimbabwe in relation to all the research questions (RQ1-RQ4) respectively.

- **Section 7** provides a synthesis of all the research findings, and

- **Section 8** presents recommendations based on the report findings for the FCDO, FM, IPs, and the wider academic and practitioner communities.

2. Review of existing evidence on sustainability

This section provides an overview of key evidence that informs this study. The review was conducted with a purposive search strategy (see *Annex B*) to identify global evidence from the last 10 years on relevant themes such as defining and assessing sustainability of education programmes; the influence of community attitudes and norms on the sustainability of educational interventions; the role of individuals and communities in shifting community attitudes and norms and sustaining positive education outcomes; and the gaps in existing literature on the pathways through which attitudinal and norm change may contribute to sustained change for girls' education.

2.1. Why defining and assessing sustainability of programmes is important

Although sustainability is often identified as an intended outcome in development interventions, the approaches to defining it, how to design for it, and how to assess the likelihood that the intended benefits of interventions will continue are less clearly identifiable. Given sustainability encompasses a range of dimensions (MacAuslan, 2018), there can be different approaches to defining, measuring and aiming to achieve it. The aspect of sustainability most relevant to this study relates to the durability or 'lifetimes' of development interventions and their continued benefits (Kim and Shin, 2023, p.453). This may include the extent to which the infrastructure created and approaches promoted by development projects are sustained beyond their life (Negi and Sohn, 2022), as well as the extent to which development outcomes are sustained. For instance, sustainability concerns: 'how long impacts last, including the duration of impacts experienced by people, places or things, the length of time over which an effort to create impact can be continued, and the period in which countervailing forces have yet to render an effort ineffective' (McLean and Gargani, 2019, p.53).

Literature on sustainability with respect to educational change mostly refers to *substantial changes over time* (Hubers, 2020). Sustainability is when 'improved outcomes become the norm' (Maher, Gustafson and Evans, 2010, p.6), 'holding the gains' (Maher, Gustafson and Evans, 2010, p.6) and creating 'lasting improvement' (López-Yáñez and Sánchez-Moreno, 2013, p.206), ensuring that programmes, interventions or implementation strategies continue to produce benefits for societies beyond defined periods of time (Moore et al., 2017).

Under the GEC Theory of Change, sustainability is similarly defined as establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls, so that subsequent cohorts of marginalised girls also experience meaningful participation, learning and transition (PwC, 2022a). In GEC I, sustainability was defined as achieving lasting change, leaving a legacy of better opportunities for future girls and boys (PwC, 2017). In part, the transition from GEC I to GEC II through the GEC-Transitions window provides a form of sustainability within GEC itself by allowing projects to continue supporting the education of the same girls, building on the successes of the previous phase, and with a stronger emphasis on creating lasting change (PwC, 2017). This is crucial as educational change can take several years to be fully implemented (Hubers, 2020; Tappel et al., 2022), and the benefits accruing to interventions may fizzle out or even reverse over time. Therefore, developing and using evidence about sustainability or what works in creating lasting change can help governments in making better reforms (FCDO, 2021) and drive the sustainable development agenda forward, including inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, especially girls and young women (FCDO, 2023). This is critical from an educational standpoint because not only is sustainable reform necessary for lasting improvements in educational outcomes, but also emerging perspectives and insights on sustainability can help facilitate further research on this important subject (Tappel et al., 2022).

The wider political, economic, and social contexts in which educational reforms or interventions are implemented harbour both drivers and barriers to sustainability. Contextual settings such as historical events, political climates, governance mandates, resource limitations, and community expectations (Schell et al., 2013) all have a bearing on sustainability. For instance, in exploring the enablers and barriers influencing sustained implementation of school-based nutrition programmes, Fathi et al. (2023) highlight a range of 'inner' contextual factors, such as organisational leadership /support and organisational resources, and 'outer' contextual factors, such as the socio-political context, the funding environment, external partnerships and values/priorities. March et al. (2022) identify similar drivers and barriers to sustainability for school-based mental health and well-being interventions, namely school leadership and support; school culture, values, and policies; allocation of resources; engagement with

staff, pupils, parents, and communities; specific characteristics of interventions such as content, design, and quality; and resources such as capacity and time, funding, and logistical and organisational effort. However, since projects cannot predict changes in the broader contexts in which they are operating (PwC, 2017), planning for and ensuring sustainability of interventions and their desired changes can be particularly challenging. For instance, over time, the initial purpose or form of interventions may no longer remain relevant to the same context. The importance of sustainability, and challenge in achieving it, creates an increasing demand for knowledge on how and why change is or is not sustained over time (Hubers, 2020).

2.2. How community attitudes and norms influence the sustainability of educational interventions

Prior learning from the GEC emphasises how the foundation for successful sustainability has been the ability to change attitudes and behaviours of girls and boys, schools, communities and education systems (FCDO, 2018). Sustainability or the foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls is one of the four outcomes anticipated to contribute to the overall impact of achieving a more educated and empowered female population globally. Under the GEC Theory of Change, sustainability depends on a range of intermediate outcomes pertaining to the role of families, communities, schools, and systems in supporting new generations of girls and boys to enter and progress through school and gain a good quality education in a safe and stimulating environment. These include changing community attitudes and norms, reducing financial barriers, improved teaching, effective management, safer learning environments, empowering girls, and continued attendance. In particular, previous independent evaluation studies of the GEC have indicated how girls' learning progress remains constrained by the context they live in, especially social norms, which become more pronounced as girls approach adolescence (Poli et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2023).

Community attitudes and norms are a key barrier limiting girls' and boys' enrolment, attendance, and progress in school. Studies in the past several years have found that social norms play a significant role in influencing educational opportunities and outcomes, especially for girls (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2016). Distinct from attitudes that are individually held, social norms are the implicit and informal rules that most people accept and follow – they are embedded in formal and informal institutions and produced and reproduced through social interactions (Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN), 2019). "A social norm exists when individuals practise a behaviour because they believe that others like them or in their community practise the behaviour (descriptive norms), or because they believe that those who matter to them approve of them practising the behaviour (injunctive norm)" (UNICEF, 2021, p.1). Social norms include the subset of gender norms, "the collective beliefs and expectations within a community or society, at a given point in time, about what behaviours are appropriate for women and men, and the relation and interactions between them" (UNICEF, 2021, p.3). For instance, because girls and women are primarily seen as caregivers, their marriage may often take priority over their education. Relatedly, practices such as child marriage which affect girls' educational opportunities and outcomes are also influenced by sociocultural factors, especially gender social norms (Malunga et al., 2023). For instance, a study on the drivers of child marriage in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia reveals that child marriage is a manifestation of social norms, intersecting with other factors such as poverty or economic constraints (Kok et al., 2023). Similarly, conservative cultural norms tend to restrict women and girls' schooling in several South Asian countries (Poteet, 2022). Attitudes, which refer to what an individual thinks and feels about a behaviour or practice, and whether they judge it favourably or unfavourably, may also become aligned with social norms, depending on the latter's strength (UNICEF, 2021).

Existing evidence on GEC projects indicates how addressing community attitudes and norms is crucial for ensuring an enabling environment for girls' education (PwC, 2018a), where the value attributed to girls and women within communities is increased, their rights are protected, they are able to make informed choices and control decisions affecting them, and political commitment to services and opportunities for girls and women is sustained. This requires effective action at various levels – for example, at the individual level to affect individual attitudes and beliefs, at the interpersonal level, targeting individuals' family/household and peers, at the community level, influencing social networks more broadly, and at the institutional level, working to address attitudes and norms through influencing policies and systems at all levels of government (PwC, 2018a). *Table 1* shows how prior studies and GEC thematic reviews on community-based attitudes and behaviours and girls' self-esteem have highlighted key attitudes and beliefs that may negatively influence girls' education and education outcomes. For instance, low parental expectations regarding girls' education, their success and what they are able to achieve with education can potentially influence their performance in school. A more recent study (ALIGN, 2019) on norm change relating to girls'

education under GEC projects shows how such attitudes and beliefs may give way to a set of at least ten harmful gender social norms classified as including:

1) Perceptions of girls' education as inappropriate or irrelevant
2) Early marriage[6] and pregnancy
3) Housework commitments
4) Working outside the home
5) Girls' lack of aspirations or motivation
6) Corporal punishment
7) Religious or traditional concerns
8) Gender-based violence and harassment
9) Teacher bias against girls
10) Rites of passage.

Most of these identified norms are also evidenced in the GEC thematic reviews, and prevalent in the two case study contexts selected under this study (see *Sections 5 and 6*).

Table 1: Overview of attitudes and norms associated with girls' education identified in GEC I projects

Title and source	Scope	Identified attitudes and norms
Learning about norm change in girls' education in low- and middle-income contexts: Lessons from the GEC Fund (ALIGN, 2019)	21 projects funded by GEC Phase I	**Gender norms:** • Perceptions of girls' education as inappropriate or irrelevant • Early marriage and pregnancy • Housework commitments • Working outside the home • Girls' lack of aspirations or motivation • Corporal punishment • Religious or traditional concerns • Gender-based violence and harassment • Teacher bias against girls • Rites of passage.
Thematic review: community-based awareness, attitudes, and behaviours (PwC, 2018a)	31 GEC Phase I projects	**Attitudes and behaviours:** • A tendency to prioritise boys' education due to the perceived low return on investing in girls' education (and the opportunity cost of sending girls to school as opposed to them marrying or working in the home). • Low aspirations for girls. • Traditional, cultural, or religious beliefs that deem girls' ineligible for education. • Exclusion of particular groups of girls, e.g., girls with disabilities. • Attitudes relating to: • Girls working or leaving the home, • Fear of girls being in mixed settings with boys, or their treatment in school, and • Notions that girls should play domestic roles. **Beliefs:**

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[6] Early (or child) marriage refers to the formal marriage or informal union of a child under 18 with an adult or another child (UNICEF, 2024).

Title and source	Scope	Identified attitudes and norms
		• That girls should perform domestic chores and should meet their domestic responsibilities. • That girls should get married at a young age. • That there is little point in educating girls as they are unlikely to achieve good results and if they do, they will not be able to do anything with the education they receive. • That girls are at greater risk of pregnancy if they go to school, and therefore that school is a risky environment.
Thematic review: Girls' self-esteem (PwC, 2018b)	Does not specify (but identifies 14 GEC Phase I projects implementing girls' self-esteem/ self-confidence related activities)	**Attitudes** • Need to nurture positive attitudes and raising aspirations of those closest to the girls, such as teachers, parents, religious leaders, and peers. • Need to nurture positive attitudes towards learning and participation in the classroom, for example, more girls putting their hands up to answer and participating in learning, taking on new roles & responsibilities. **Negative social norms** • Low parental expectations of girls' success in school seemed to have a negative impact on their performance. • Girls not having control over their own future.

Educating girls and boys can help create a virtuous cycle which leads to changes in social norms that contribute to improved learning outcomes (Marcus, 2018). Educating girls and boys marks a crucial step along the path of catalysing lasting change in the lives of women, their families, communities and the world (Souraya, 2018). Research suggests that education can help overcome social norms and attitudes that block equality in education itself (Unterhalter et al., 2014). Education can empower individuals, and enable them to challenge discriminatory gender and social norms in several ways – for instance, it can help develop skills and capabilities that lay the foundations for decent livelihoods and equitable relationships in adulthood; increase girls' self-confidence, agency, and ability to express their hopes and make decisions about their own lives, and develop gender-egalitarian attitudes among girls and boys (Marcus and Page, 2016).

Prior GEC evaluations and thematic reviews identify improving girls' self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy is linked with positive impacts on learning, attendance and retention. In addition, these are also associated with changes in attitudes, motivation to attend and succeed, ability to make decisions that affect one's education, and aspirations (PwC, 2018b). Emerging research indicates how such agency is often overlooked in efforts focused on expanding educational opportunities but is nonetheless important, sitting at the nexus of the individual and her community (O'Donoghue, Rosado-Viurques, and Hui, 2023). However, prevailing norms, attitudes and gender discriminatory practices in communities can undermine the potential of education to bring about change. Thus, it is pertinent to enquire the extent and mechanisms by which education-based programmes and interventions influence community attitudes and norms, including the potential roles of individuals and communities themselves, to more effectively improve girls' lives.

2.3. The role of individuals and communities in shifting community attitudes and norms to sustain positive education outcomes

There is growing evidence to support how educational interventions can contribute to lasting change not just *for,* but *through,* girls and young women. International organisations are increasingly focusing on girls and women as agents of positive change, empowering them to improve their own quality of life, their families' and communities', while also advancing sustainable development (UNICEF, 2023a; Brixi, Saavedra and Sosale, 2023; UNICEF, 2021). For instance, UNICEF is promoting girl-led skills building programmes that link adolescent girls - in and out of schools

- with adolescent girl and women mentors networks (UNICEF, 2023a). Similarly, Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) is an ongoing pan-African movement which supports girls to go to school, thrive and become influential leaders and changemakers in their communities by joining a growing body of women leaders providing social and economic support to the next generation of girls (CAMFED, 2022). Furthermore, initiatives that are girl-led can catalyse change at the community-level. For example, CARE's Tipping Point – an initiative focused on addressing the root causes of child, early and forced marriage by promoting the rights of adolescent girls through community level programming and evidence generation in Nepal and Bangladesh – suggests that girl-led social norms activities can lead to quick change at the community level (CARE, 2021). Underlying such change is often an empowering education or schooling which provides young women opportunities to develop leadership skills and confront harmful or unfair norms and practices (Marcus, 2019).

Meaningful participation of communities is essential to shift norms towards gender equality, and equitable and inclusive education (UNICEF, 2016). In a study comparing different models for programmes working to shift gender norms that constrain adolescent girls' lives in Nepal, Samuels, Ghimire and Maclure (2018) find that programmes that involve a greater degree of community ownership seem to be relatively more effective. Learning from GEC projects such as those implemented by CAMFED further demonstrate how families and communities play a central role in delivering positive lasting change (PwC, 2022b). This includes working both *with* communities by involving them in the method and process – for example, employing community-based structures that allow communities to be heard, participate in decision-making processes and take direct action on education issues (PwC, 2021a) – as well as *through* communities, for example, targeting gender-specific barriers to education by addressing norms and attitudes held by parents /guardians, family members and other community members which potentially influence girls' ability to access education. Previous GEC thematic reviews indicate how engagement with communities crucially underpins sustainability strategies, ensuring that progress made to encourage more positive community attitudes and behaviour barriers is maintained to benefit others in the future (PwC, 2018a). Such *social sustainability*, which allows people to feel part of the development process and believe that they and the next generation will benefit from it, creates a virtuous cycle: communities and societies that are more socially sustainable are more willing and able to work together to overcome challenges, deliver public goods, and allocate scarce resources in ways perceived to be legitimate and fair so that all people may thrive over time (Barron et al., 2023).

The pathways of change within communities often depend on the context. For instance, while *pathways,* such as role models in communities, the family, government policies and programmes, may work together to drive norm change, *inhibitors* such as economic pressures, limited exposure to other ways of doing things, people's experiences of the negative impact of changes etc. imply that norms may still remain sticky (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014). Norm change can be tricky and sometimes even invite backlash, for instance, in situations where communities view it as 'eroding tradition', encouraging disobedience, and resulting in confusion and tensions across generations and among the genders (Jones et al., 2018, p.57). Similarly, in contexts where they are more deep-rooted, shifts in attitudes and norms may also reverse over time. For instance, a longitudinal study exploring the influence of schooling on the stability of gender attitudes among adolescent girls in Zambia found that, although school attendance disrupted the tendency toward inequitable attitudes in rural areas, once girls left school, regardless of their educational attainment, the conservative context seemed to prevail (Chae et al., 2019).

2.4. Gaps in existing literature on the pathways through which attitudinal and norm change may contribute to sustained change for girls' education

A deeper understanding of the pathways through which community attitudes and norms are influenced is essential in planning for sustained change. Bandali et al. (2022, p.457) argue that 'programmes that have predetermined outcomes and define in advance how they can be achieved do not fit complex problems where the pathway to achieve results differs in each context and evolves constantly'. For instance, multiple factors at different levels in the ecological system – individual, relational, social, institutional, and structural – as well as their interactions are at play when social norms are being reinforced or disrupted (Chae et al., 2019). Thus, a 'deeper understanding of the change processes and the dynamic between interventions and resulting on-the-ground responses and actions' (Hubers, 2020, p.2) is important in determining whether and how programmes can achieve their desired change.

For GEC projects, the current evidence base is weighted towards how changes in norms or behaviour components of education programming encourage gender equality in education, but is less focused on the pathways through which such equality can go beyond individual empowerment to support broader social norm and behaviour change (PwC, 2018a). In part, this may be attributable to potential challenges in developing more specific measures of behaviours and attitudes that help establish clearer links between changes in community

attitudes and behaviours and girls' education outcomes (PwC, 2018a). Similarly norms and norm change can be more difficult to measure than community practices (Bernstein and Laurence, 2022). Such gaps further highlight the need for exploring the pathways through which shifts in community attitudes and norms or practices can help sustain positive development outcomes, such as under the current study.

In the absence of knowledge on how changes in attitudes and practices may occur to sustain positive change, governments and international organisations run the risk of directing funds to interventions that achieve short term results but fail to deliver long-term results. The loss of expected gains, invested resources, and stakeholder commitment due to poor sustainability of initiatives continues to remain a concern for researchers (Koh, Askell-Williams and Bar, 2023). Our study aims to help fill this gap and contribute to the existing literature by examining the pathways through which shifting community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education can contribute to sustainability.

3.   Research design and methods

This section presents an overview of the research design and methods for this study (see *Annex B* for further details). The study adopts a largely qualitative approach, drawing on both secondary project documentation and primary qualitative data. The secondary data analysis includes a portfolio-wide documentary review for all 27 GEC-T projects based on relevant documents and data that are available. The primary data collection included key informant interviews (KIIs) with 20 GEC-T IPs[7].

In addition, in-depth qualitative data collection was undertaken for two selected GEC-T case study projects. This involved workshops to identify community groups and influential community members and focus group discussions (FGDs), as well as key informant interviews with project beneficiaries, community members identified through the workshops, and government-level officials. The two case studies selected for this study are:

1) Sisters for Sisters' Education II in Nepal, implemented by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), and

2) Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education (UVC-GE) in Zimbabwe, implemented by the Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) International.

3.1.   Research methods

Table 2 illustrates how the secondary and primary data sources contribute to the study's key research questions.

Table 2: Synthesis across data sources, methods, and research questions

Source	Method	Scope	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	RQ4
Secondary	Documentary review and analysis	GEC-T portfolio (n=27)	✓	✓	✓	✓
	In-depth desk review	GEC-T case studies (n=2)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Primary	KIIs (IPs)	GEC-T portfolio (n=20)	✓	✓	✓	✓
	KIIs[8] (Beneficiary young women; and influential community members (complementing the focus group discussions))	GEC-T case studies (n=2)		✓	✓	✓
	KIIs (local- and national- level government officials)	GEC-T case studies (n=2)		✓	✓	✓
	Focus group discussions with community groups	GEC-T case studies (n=2)		✓	✓	✓

3.1.1.   Portfolio review

The portfolio-wide analysis responds to all four research questions, providing information on:

- Aims of all GEC-T projects regarding shifting community attitudes and practices, and their evolution over GEC I and GEC II;
- Whether and how girls are involved as agents of change within communities;
- The continuation (or otherwise) of project activities at the community-level, including beyond the lifecycle of projects and related enabling or constraining factors;

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[7] There were seven projects that did not participate in the KIIs (see Section 3.4). These include: Jielimishe (Educate Yourself) (Kenya); Expanding Inclusive Education Strategies for Girls with Disabilities (Kenya); Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises (ENGINE) (Nigeria); Excelling Against the Odds (Ethiopia); Rwandan Girls' Education and Advancement Programme 2 (REAP 2) (Rwanda) ; Girls' Access to Education (Sierra Leone); Relief International (Somalia). No response was obtained from six of the seven IPs who had implemented these projects. For one project, REAP-2 (Rwanda), the relevant staff who had helped implement or had knowledge of the GEC-T project could not be located. Most IPs for these projects may potentially have been unresponsive due to the time elapsed since the close of the project. For example, three of these projects closed in 2020 (March, July and September), and two in 2021 (March and July), i.e. almost 3-4 years ago.
[8] For beneficiary young women, this includes workshops to identify community groups and influential community members.

- The extent to which, and the pathways through which, changes in community attitudes and practices have been achieved; and
- How and in what ways may these changes be contributing to establishing a foundation for longer term viability of girls' education outcomes.

Research methods for the portfolio review

For the portfolio-wide analysis, the research methods adopted included:

- A comprehensive review of project documentation for the 27 projects that were part of both GEC I and GEC II, looking at projects' lifecycles across both phases. The main sources of project-level documentation that were included for the analysis in the report were the external evaluation reports, including baseline, midline and endline documentation; project sustainability plans; and other GEC documentation.
- Key informant interviews with available IPs for 20 projects which continued across GEC I and GEC II.

3.1.2. Case study methods

The two case studies provide insights on:
- Whether projects have influenced attitudes and practices associated with girls' education, and if so, through which pathways;
- The extent to which beneficiary young women are involved as change agents within their communities;
- How the changes in community attitudes and practices relate to girls' education outcomes, and
- Whether and how both the changes in community attitudes and practices as well as their influence on girls' education outcomes are likely to sustain the virtuous cycle of girls' education.

The case studies were selected based on consultation with the FM and FCDO considering the following criteria for selection of projects:

- Projects implemented in both GEC I and GEC II, to enable a longer-term assessment of sustainability;
- Projects found to have positive short-term outcomes (e.g., learning outcomes) in previous IE studies[9];
- Prioritisation of projects that had not been included as a case study in previous IE studies;
- Prioritisation of projects that had recently closed (e.g., in or after 2021) as these were likely to have a continued in-country presence;
- Inclusion of projects that are not in conflict-affected states;
- Additional considerations such as completion of activities (whereby certain projects were excluded due to organisational challenges that the respective IPs faced in continuing to implement activities); projects' engagement within communities, and geographical representation (ensuring representation from the two regions that GEC-T is implemented across, South Asia and Africa).

The selection criteria and process is further detailed in *Annex B.*

Research methods for the case studies

The research methods adopted for the case studies included:

- An in-depth documentary review and analysis of the two selected case studies enabling deeper contextual insights into the nature of project approaches and activities. For example, this included a more in-depth review of the prevalent attitudes and practices towards girls in the two contexts; the political, social and economic factors in the wider environment that may have influenced project implementation and thus shifts in attitudes and practices at the community-level, a comparison of the information in the project baseline, midline and endline evaluations.
- Qualitative data collection with community-level stakeholders including both community groups and influential community members as well as beneficiary young women who participated in the projects. The qualitative data collection methods included:

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[9] The IE study on GEC-T Transitions – Impact may be found here.

Stakeholder identification workshops

These were conducted with beneficiary young women in the two contexts to identify the community groups and influential community members who they engaged with.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted with the identified community groups to elicit participants' views on the attitudes and practices prevalent within their communities that relate with girls' education; whether and through which pathways have project activities shifted these attitudes and practices within their communities, whether and why they believe these changes (and ensuant change pathways) are likely to sustain, and whether and in what ways is their influence on girls' education outcomes likely to sustain.

Key informant interviews

Beneficiary young women

Following the stakeholder identification workshops, KIIs were conducted with the beneficiary young women to identify their understanding of, and involvement as change agents in, project activities at the community-level; whether these activities and their engagement have continued; whether and how, in their opinion, project activities – including through their own engagements as change agents – have influenced community attitudes and practices; and whether these changes are likely to sustain and contribute to girls' outcomes and opportunities within their communities in the future.

Community-level stakeholders

Complementing the focus group discussions, KIIs were conducted with selected members from the group discussions, as well as with other influential community members identified through the workshops.

Local and national-level government officials

In each country, the team conducted KIIs with local- and national-level government officials to obtain greater insights into whether and how some of the activities as well as their influences on community attitudes and practices and ultimately girls' education outcomes may have been sustained (e.g., through increased or scaled uptake at other or higher levels of government).

Further details on the portfolio- and case study- methods are provided under Sections 3 and 4 of *Annex B*.

3.2.   Sampling

3.2.1.   Site selection

For each of the two GEC-T projects, the IE team engaged with IPs to select districts based on the following criteria:

- Districts where activities had been implemented for the longest duration (including ones where activities were implemented across both GEC I and GEC II). This provided the potential for the activities to have been embedded and sustained.
- Districts with community characteristics indicative of the most marginalised young women (e.g., poverty levels).
- Districts with variations in attitudes and practices to identify the extent to which community-based activities could contribute to sustainability for population groups.

The selection of districts (and consequently, communities) for fieldwork was tailored to each case study project's unique context.

In the case of Sisters for Sisters' Education II in Nepal, the IE team, together with the IP (VSO), identified two districts – Parsa and Surkhet – for fieldwork out of the four where project activities have been implemented in Nepal. Additional contextual considerations for finalising these districts included accessible districts where data collection was possible (e.g., located in the plains that were accessible during extreme weather conditions, monsoons/rainy season). Districts were included where there was a continued presence of the local partner, given the challenge of identifying and reaching the beneficiary young women after the project had ended.

The fieldwork was conducted in three communities in each district (*Table 3*). For the selection of communities within the selected districts, the sampling criteria included:

- Communities based in rural locations.
- Communities with characteristics indicative of the most marginalised young women (e.g., poverty levels).
- Communities where primary data collection was possible.

Table 3: Selected districts and communities in Nepal

District	School supported by project	Community
Parsa	Janta Secondary Ma. Vi.	Badanihar
	Radha Krishna Chaurasiya Ma. Vi.	Bahuarwabhatta
	Ram Charitra Bhagat Ma. Vi	Pakaha Mainpur
Surkhet	Bheri Ma.vi Ranighat	Barahataal
	Janak Ma.vi Gomkhola	Lekbesi
	Ne. Ra. Ma vi Karaikhola	Birendranagar

Given the wider spread of implementation of the UVC-GE project across 24 districts in Zimbabwe, the IE team, together with the IP (CAMFED International), identified three districts – Binga, Buhera, and Hurungwe – for fieldwork. The fieldwork was planned in two communities in each district (*Table 4*).

Table 4: Selected districts and communities in Zimbabwe

District	School supported by project	Community
Binga	Siabuwa Secondary School	Siabuwa
	Kariyangwe High School	Kariyangwe
Buhera	Munyira Secondary School	Muniyra
	Muchuva Secondary School	Muchuva
Hurungwe	Karuru Secondary School	Karuru
	Mshowe Secondary School	Mshowe

Data were collected over the period of June to July 2024 in Nepal, and September to October 2024 in Zimbabwe. The total sample size was 213 in Nepal, and 181 in Zimbabwe. The overall sample achieved (versus the target sample) is shown in *Table 5* below.

Table 5: Overall qualitative sample (target versus achieved) in Nepal and Zimbabwe

Country	Method	Target	Achieved
Nepal	Stakeholder Identification Workshops	18	18
	Follow-up KII with young women	60	50
	Follow-up KII with Adult Champions	18	16
	FGD with Community Members	25	13
	KII with Community Members	134	111
	KII with Government Officials (District)	4	4
	KII with Government Official (National)	1	1
Total		260	**213**
Zimbabwe	Stakeholder Identification Workshops	6	6
	Follow-up KII with young women	60	54

Country	Method	Target	Achieved
	FGD with Community Members	15	10
	KII with Community Members	102	106
	KII with Government Officials (District)	6	4
	KII with Government Official (National)	1	1
Total		190	**181**

The details on the target versus achieved sample in both countries can be found in *Table 3* and *Table 4* of *Annex B.*

3.2.2.   Stakeholder selection for primary data collection

Beneficiary young women

Up to 10 beneficiary young women per community were selected. The criteria for their selection included those who:

- Had graduated from GEC-T projects and were over 18 years old.
- Had graduated at least four years ago, to ensure that they would have had sufficient time to influence change in their communities.
- Had been engaged specifically as agents of change (as Big Sisters or Learner Guides), as well as those who had not to understand how they may have nonetheless acted to shift community attitudes and practices.
- Were characterised as marginalised, as identified by the IP.

Community-level stakeholders

Up to eight focus groups were planned with community members in each selected community. For these focus group discussions:

- Each group discussion comprised a maximum of eight individuals including the group chair (e.g. chair of a parent support group or a community development committee) and longstanding members.
- Two follow-up interviews were conducted for each focus group discussion with the group chair and one longstanding member.
- For other influential members identified in each community, we conducted 1-2 interviews per community.

Local and national-level government officials

We aimed to conduct two interviews with district officials in each district, and one interview at the national level with government officials in each country. In Nepal, we conducted four district-level interviews and one national-level interview. In Zimbabwe, we conducted four interviews at the district-level and one interview at the national-level.

3.3.   Ethics and safeguarding

The study adhered to the GEC Independent Evaluation Ethical Research and Safeguarding Framework, which forms the overarching ethical framework for all research and data collection protocols for the GEC II IE.[10] These guidelines relate to the design, implementation and reporting of all activities conducted as part of the IE. The Ethical Research and Safeguarding Framework is compliant with the guiding concepts and principles set out in the FCDO's Evaluation Policy (2013) and FCDO's Research Ethics Guidance (2011); the FCDO Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (2019); and UK Data Protection Act (2018).

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[10] A universal framework has been prepared to cover all aspects of the IE's work and can be provided separately on request.

3.3.1. Research and ethical permissions

All necessary research permissions were obtained from relevant government departments prior to data collection taking place. In the context of Nepal, there are no general/ country-level permissions or ethical approvals required for educational research. However, at a broader level, the IE team had obtained research ethics approval from the University of Cambridge on 24 May 2024 for conducting fieldwork in Nepal.

In the context of Zimbabwe, ethical permission from the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe and the Research Council of Zimbabwe is required to undertake educational research. The IE study team therefore obtained the same before commencement of fieldwork in September 2024 with support from the FCDO, the local data collection partner (Q Partnership) and Affiliation Partner, the University of Zimbabwe.

3.3.2. Training in ethical research and safeguarding

The in-country training with local partners included training in sensitive interviewing methods, including how to speak to participants in ways that Do No Harm, the use of consent forms, and how to interview vulnerable adults. Training included detailed explanations of safeguarding, case scenarios of what could constitute a safeguarding incident as well as how to respond to safeguarding concerns observed, or reports made during primary data collection and reporting channels. In both countries, the IPs' Safeguarding Lead additionally provided a brief presentation about potential safeguarding incidents and referral services available in the selected districts.

3.3.3. Consent

As this study included respondents over the age of 18 years, the team developed plain language statements and consent forms to ensure meaningful consent.

The consent forms provided detailed information about the planned research, including information about the content and purpose of the interview, the anticipated uses of the data, how data was to be stored and kept secure, and details of how participants can leave/ remove their data at a later stage.

For interviews with IPs, consent included that their organisations may be named in the report, but the individuals would not be named including in direct quotes. To ensure anonymity, we have not provided any attributions to individuals or organisations in the portfolio-wide analysis in Section 4. For the findings presented from the case study contexts in Sections 5 and 6, the interviewees from the IP team reviewed and approved the inclusion of verbatim quotes from their respective interviews. These therefore include attributions to the project but not to the individuals.

In the case study contexts, consent forms were translated into local languages by our data collection partners (DCP) and read aloud to all participants in advance of the research taking place by our local DCPs. As some of the issues discussed may have been sensitive, the consent forms reiterated that respondents could stop and leave the interview or activity at any point in time and will not be penalised. Respondents were also assured that they were not required to answer all questions. Facilitators ensured to ask respondents whether they were okay and needed a break as well as to be mindful of signs of respondents' discomfort.

Prior to commencing any data collection, facilitators prefaced the consent forms by reconfirming respondents' age. In instances where respondents were found to be below the age of 18 years, they were not able to participate in the research but were invited to have refreshments and engage in informal conversations if they chose to.

3.3.4. Safeguarding and welfare incidents

In line with the safeguarding processes agreed with the Fund Manager Safeguarding Team, the IE reported safeguarding incidents as well as welfare concerns. Welfare concerns refer to those that are not typical 'safeguarding' incidents in that they are not connected to any activities or actions that are the responsibility of the IE, IPs, or FM. These include reports of historical and current abuse, observations of disturbing behaviour, and anecdotal/ third party reports of abuse to others. Further details about safeguarding and welfare incident reporting may be found in *Annex C.*

3.4. Challenges and limitations

The following limitations and mitigation strategies should be considered while interpreting the findings of this study:

3.4.1.   Secondary data analysis

- Many documents relating to projects during GEC I were not available, limiting the extent to which analysis of changes in projects' approaches to sustainability and interventions could be conducted between GEC I and GEC-T. Issues related to accessing GEC I documentation were also reported in the GEC Research Feasibility Study (Aslam et al., 2020).

- Documents relating to projects during GEC II were not available across all 27 GEC-T projects. For example, sustainability plans for six[11] out of the 27 GEC-T projects were not available.

3.4.2.   Primary data collection and analysis

- Seven of the 27 GEC T project IPs were either unresponsive to requests for an interview or were unable to locate or engage relevant staff from the time of project implementation (under GEC I and GEC II) to participate in the interview. Thus, the analysis presented in the study's report is based on the views of the available 20 IPs.[12]

- In four of the 20 interviews conducted with GEC-T IPs, respondents mentioned difficulties with recall as the projects had ended several years ago.

- The purposive selection strategy used for the two case studies means that findings are not necessarily generalisable across the selected countries, as well as other projects and countries in the entire GEC-T portfolio.

- During the in-depth qualitative data collection for the two case studies, community-level respondents were not always able to recall the GEC-T projects and their activities in full, limiting the level of detail or information on their continuation as well as at the time of implementation.

The team endeavoured to mitigate these challenges over the duration of the data collection and analysis where possible. For instance, to address the limitations regarding availability of documentation, the team ensured the key informant interviews with IPs included questions about changes in approaches to sustainability and changes in interventions between GEC I and II, as well as planning for sustainability. To mitigate challenges associated with tracing respondents in the case study contexts, the data collection partners worked closely with the local representatives of IPs to locate them and schedule interviews in advance. In addition, data collectors were trained extensively in interviewing techniques – particularly where issues of recall would have posed a challenge – such as probing without leading. These methodological limitations and mitigation approaches are further detailed in *Annex B.* Southern academic partners also played a key role in mitigating challenges faced as part of the research through their ongoing engagement.

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[11] These six projects include: STAR-G (Mozambique); DP2 (Multi-Country); STEM (Nepal); REAP 2 (Rwanda); EGEP-T (Somalia); GEF-EGE (Uganda).
[12] These seven projects include: Jielimishe (Educate Yourself) (Kenya); Expanding Inclusive Education Strategies for Girls with Disabilities (Kenya); Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises (ENGINE) (Nigeria); Excelling Against the Odds (Ethiopia); Rwandan Girls' Education and Advancement Programme 2 (REAP 2) (Rwanda) ; Girls' Access to Education (Sierra Leone); Relief International (Somalia). No response was obtained from six of the seven IPs who had implemented these projects. For one project, REAP-2 (Rwanda), the relevant staff who had helped implement or had knowledge of the GEC-T project could not be located. Most IPs for these projects may potentially have been unresponsive due to the time elapsed since the close of the project. For example, three of these projects closed in 2020 (March, July, and September), and two in 2021 (March and July), i.e., almost 3-4 years ago.

4. Sustainability across the GEC-T portfolio

This section reports findings on the four research questions through the portfolio-wide analysis of projects' aims and approaches for achieving sustainable changes in community attitudes and practices to establish a foundation for longer-term viability of outcomes for girls. It comprises a comprehensive review of project documentation for the 27 GEC-T projects and their lifecycles across both Phase I and Phase II, as well as key informant interviews with 20 available IPs who participated in both phases. The documentary review includes a review of key project documentation such as external evaluation reports (baseline, midline and endline) and project sustainability plans to provide information on how projects planned for sustainability.

Box 1: Key findings on sustainability across the GEC-T portfolio

- **There was an increase in the focus on sustainability from GEC I to GEC II,** with projects placing greater emphasis on planning for long-term impact.

- **All 27 GEC-T projects included activities aimed at changing community attitudes and norms towards the needs and benefits of girls' education.** Projects engaged communities through a range of community-level activities including training of community stakeholders, community-based outreach, community-based clubs, community-based workshops, community-based education, community-based mentoring, and community-based mobilisers.

- **Enablers to continuation of activities** included community ownership, active involvement of young women, government support, integration of technology, and longer funding cycles. In particular, engagement with national stakeholders and alignment with policies, coupled with capacity building at multiple levels, supported the continuation of activities. Longer-term funding and extended implementation periods of GEC-T projects also contributed to sustainability.

- **Barriers to the continuation of activities** included financial constraints, limited government engagement, instability and conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate-related disruptions.

- **Project activities contributed to three key pathways that influenced community attitudes and practices, ultimately impacting outcomes for girls:** (1) communities actively engaging and shifting attitudes and practices, (2) young women being empowered as agents of change within their communities, and (3) up-take of project activities by local and national governments to sustain these changes. These pathways were both intentionally designed by the projects as part of their sustainability plans and organically developed as an outcome of the activities.

- **Changes in community attitudes and practices were associated with tangible improvements in girls' lives, including increase in girls' enrolment and retention in schools.** The shifts in community practices also led to reductions in early marriage, improved safety for young women, and shifts in traditional gender role distributions within families.

4.1. Sustainability under GEC II

There was a relatively weak focus on sustainability under the first phase of the GEC, inviting a stronger and more deliberate focus under the second phase (PwC, 2017). Under GEC I, sustainability was expressed as 'ensuring a full cycle of education for GEC girls' and measured additionally through the securing of match funding (FCDO, 2018). The sustainability framework[13] for projects under GEC I categorised projects as Latent, Emerging, Becoming Established, or Established, based on their likelihood to sustain positive outcomes without external support. Sustainability was defined as the continued impact of interventions, maintained by local systems, communities, and institutions. Indicators used included institutionalisation of activities into policies, local ownership and leadership, capacity building, systemic embedding, cultural acceptance, financial viability, and evidence of sustained impact. Developed through project insights and stakeholder feedback, the continuum highlighted the transition from externally dependent activities to those fully owned by local stakeholders. According to an FM report, GEC I projects generally showed characteristics of latent or sustainability (FCDO, 2018) due to insufficient emphasis on sustainability in the early stages of implementation. The midline and endline evaluations of GEC I showed that projects '*took too long to embed sustainability*' with some projects only incorporating sustainability considerations in their activities at the end of project lifecycles (PwC, 2017). Lessons from the GEC endline evaluation also indicated risks that project activities would not continue beyond GEC I without additional funding and the business case for GEC II recognised the trade-off between sustainability and achieving short-term results (Griffiths et al., 2017). The continuation of GEC I projects to GEC-T under the second phase thus provided the opportunity for lessons to be learnt for change to be embedded

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[13] This framework was developed by the Fund Manager specifically for the purposes of GEC.

and sustained, with the FM emphasising a greater focus on sustainability from the inception of GEC II. As one IP explained:

> "[Sustainability is…] looking at the long term. Even when the project closes for the community or the beneficiaries to appreciate the benefits of the intervention and take them up, even without us" (KII, IP, Uganda).

Key informant interviews with GEC-T IPs – together with a review of sustainability plans – indicate a commitment by IPs to integrate sustainability into project lifecycles in GEC II. Sustainability plans for 21 of the 27 projects reviewed emphasised the integration of sustainability considerations in the design of activities as well as end of project life activities such as "Sustainability' or 'what next' planning workshops with key stakeholders/eager adopters" (Sustainability plan, Réussite et Épanouissement via l'Apprentissage et L'Insertion au Système Éducatif (REALISE), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), p. 17). The sustainability plan for REALISE measures progress across system-, school-, and community- levels using indicators such as Ministry of Education engagement in policy and programme integration, school implementation of Accelerated School Leadership Programme (ASLP), School Improvement Plans (SIPs), and community mobilisation through Community Education Committees (CECs), and Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs). Annual surveys track outcomes such as resource allocation, teacher training, and girls' retention. However, information on whether these target indicators were reached is limited. Key informant interviews conducted with the 20 available GEC-T IPs revealed how: (i) there was a deliberate focus on embedding sustainability in the design of projects from the beginning of GEC II, and (ii) their understanding of sustainability evolved to encompass longer-lasting change, even beyond the project lifecycles of GEC II. As some IPs described these changes:

> "I think the way we understood sustainability is that it is something you must think about even as you are designing the project. It is not a back-end activity, it is not a tail end activity to any programming, but it is an activity that you need to design for even as you are designing the whole project" (KII, IP, Discovery, Kenya).

> "From GEC I to GEC II, we were talking about the sustainability, we were planning for sustainability, even after the phase out of the project" (KII, IP, Nepal).

Lessons learnt on sustainability from GEC I indicated that the foundation for sustaining any kind of successful intervention related to girls' education is the ability to change attitudes and behaviours of girls (and boys), schools, communities and education systems (PwC, 2017). It was observed that projects that succeeded in achieving such behaviour change worked with girls, communities, and schools by engaging them as agents of change within their own communities. Examples showcasing best practices and exhibiting high potential for sustainability included those implemented by CAMFED International in Tanzania and Zimbabwe involving Learner Guides as agents of change in their communities. These Guides are young women previously supported by CAMFED and further trained to support the welfare and learning of marginalised children. Previous thematic reviews under GEC I also indicated how many projects included activities relating to community attitudes and behaviour to be more supportive of girls' education and build girls' self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence (PwC, 2018a; PwC, 2018b). Girls with greater self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence are likely to demonstrate positive behaviours in their communities, suggesting their potential role as agents of transformative change within their communities (PwC, 2018b).

Sustainability was expressed more explicitly in Phase II with respect to establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls. It was one of the four main outcomes of Phase II with the aim of contributing to achieving a more educated and empowered female population. Sustainability during the second phase has been emphasised as "delivering and enabling long lasting girls' empowerment through education, for current and future generations, by working with girls, families, communities, schools and systems. Sustainability can be built at the individual girl level, and within the enabling environment for change, including at community, family, school and system levels" (PwC, 2022, p.2). It depends on a range of intermediate outcomes pertaining to the role of families, communities, schools, and systems in supporting new generations of girls and boys to enter and progress through school and gain a quality education, including, changing community attitudes and practices and empowering girls. As a core outcome, all GEC II projects have been encouraged to plan for sustainability by developing project sustainability plans and, in the process, link them with monitoring and evaluation frameworks as well as the GEC Logframe (PwC, 2022).

Under GEC II, IPs planned for continuity by building on the foundations laid and lessons learnt under GEC I. Evidence from a review of the project sustainability plans was reaffirmed during the KIIs with five IPs, with respondents mentioning:

> *"After GEC I, we saw that girls were interested in generating income but many of them couldn't leave their community. After speaking with the girls and the community, and understanding the barriers, we changed the programming to reflect what they could realistically accomplish and what they were interested in and focused on professional trainings"* (KII, IP, Afghanistan).

> *"While GEC I was more focused on driving attendance and tracking retention, GEC II was more focused on ensuring that these children who were in school were transitioning from primary into secondary into colleges"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

Pressure from the Fund Manager also served as a reason for focusing on sustainability. As one IP noted:

> *"We did sustainability plans, I would say, as a box-ticking exercise to get around what the Fund Manager wanted us to do" (KII, IP, Uganda).*

However, this focus on sustainability also led to many projects setting realistic and achievable goals and targets:

> *"Our targets were very ambitious. So, we shifted a lot in terms of realistic-ness"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

A key strategy for sustainability planning was securing buy-in from a range of stakeholders. Sustainability plans for 21 of the projects emphasised a focus on consultations with key stakeholders such as government officials and community leaders as a means of ensuring sustainability. Interviews with IPs also revealed how planning for sustainability on the part of IPs included collaboration and engagement with a range of stakeholders, as well as their long-term interest in the continuation of project activities. These included local and national government partners such as the Ministries of Education, district level education authorities, community leaders such as chiefs and community groups, as well as the beneficiary young women themselves. As a respondent from one IP noted:

> *"I think sort of the biggest shift that I have mentioned is we thought a lot, and changed a lot, when it came to partnership, when we thought about sustainability - so who were we working with, who we were collaborating with - to have the greatest chance of some of these activities [continuing]"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

4.2.   GEC-T activities to influence community attitudes and practices

All 27 GEC-T projects included activities aimed at changing community attitudes and norms towards the needs and benefits of girls' education, as evidenced through project evaluation reports, sustainability plans and IP interviews. Although the activities varied in form, they predominantly focused on changing community attitudes and norms. We have divided these activities into seven distinct categories (based on our review of the project documentation). These categories are presented in *Table 6* along with the number of projects out of the 27 GEC-T projects that included these activities.

Table 6: Categories of GEC-T project activities aiming to influence community attitudes and norms

Activities	Description	Number of Projects (out of 27)
Training of community stakeholders	Provides gender sensitisation training for key community stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school staff, and government officials.	25
Community-based outreach	Utilises radio, billboard advertising, street dramas, and video content, to engage the community creatively.	23
Community-based clubs	Engages the community in gender sensitisation through girls' clubs, after-school programmes, and mother-daughter clubs.	19
Community-based workshops	Involves in-person campaigns and workshops aimed at raising awareness and promoting engagement within the community. This also includes establishment of community-based groups and committees to encourage dialogue on girls' education.	18
Community-based education	Includes community learning centres and community-based classes.	12
Community-based mentoring	Features female peer mentors to provide guidance and support to girls within the community.	6
Community mobilisers	Involves community members in conducting awareness-raising activities and supporting project activities.	3

Training of community-based stakeholders was a component of 25 of the projects. This includes parents, government officials and other community-based groups on the specific support needed by girls. For instance, the

Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh and SCHIP project in Uganda included training sessions for parents around the support needed for girls with disabilities ([VIVA EET Team, 2024](#)).

Activities related to community-based outreach were delivered through formats such as campaigns, radio, dramas, and billboard advertising. Eight of these projects particularly aimed to address the harmful effects of gender-based violence through community-based outreach activities. As an example, Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises (ENGINE) (Nigeria) utilised media campaigns, public service announcements and street dramas to sensitise communities about the detrimental impact of gender-based violence on the lives of young women ([Oxford Policy Management (OPM), 2020).](#) Such activities allowed projects to reach a larger target group and disseminate key messages more widely.

Community-based clubs were an important part of project interventions. For instance, the REALISE project in the DRC established Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) clubs for girls and boys, which helped foster open discussions about gender, health, and well-being in schools and communities ([Forcier, 2018](#)). The STAR-G project in Mozambique set up girls' clubs that provided academic support, mentorship, and life skills training to help girls stay in school and successfully transition to higher education ([NFER, 2021](#)).

Community-level activities also included establishing workshops, groups and committees, that mobilised support for young women and encouraged child protection and safeguarding. Improving Girls' Access through Transforming Education (IGATE-T) has worked with line ministries and local community care workers to improve reporting channels, conduct awareness campaigns, and provide victim support in rural communities. The endline evaluation showed that there was an increase in the reporting of abuse across many communities ([IGATE endline report, Limestone Analytics, 2021](#)).The Successful Transition and Advancement of Rights for Girls (STAR-G) project in Mozambique established child protection and safeguarding committees at the community level, which involved educating the community about the rights of girls and the importance of protecting them from gender-based violence ([NFER, 2021](#)). Community-based education was also seen as an important mechanism for mobilising community members and changing community practices in four projects,[14] being run by community members who ensured continuity in education for young women and changes in community norms.

Across six projects, mentorship programmes engaged young women as change agents themselves. Known by different names, these mentors assumed very similar roles across projects. For instance, under the Sisters for Sisters' Education project (Nepal), young local women known as 'Big Sisters' were responsible for mentoring and motivating 'Little Sisters' to obtain education and influence the community to help girls stay in school ([NEAT, 2018](#)). For the Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education project (Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe), these mentors were known as Learner Guides ([PMA & CAMFED, 2022](#)). Similarly, the 'Shero' campaign under the ENGINE II project (Nigeria) involved identification and training of young women as role models for sensitising the community on the importance of education for the most marginalised young women ([OPM, 2020](#)). This was initially defined as a broad campaign, and included activities such as the production of videos, and advocacy events led by young women to raise awareness of the importance of sexual and reproductive health.

Three projects used community mobilisers to support marginalised girls and young women. For instance, Community Mobilisers (CMs) in the Kenya Equity in Education Project (KEEP) have played a crucial role in shifting community attitudes towards girls' education by engaging in advocacy through radio, film, and community dialogues ([C.A.C International, 2022](#)).

4.3.   Continuation of GEC-T project activities: enablers and barriers

4.3.1.   Continuation of activities from GEC I to GEC-T and beyond

This section presents findings from the 20 GEC-T IP interviews, highlighting which activities were most likely to be conducted in GEC II and continue beyond GEC II (*Table 8*). Training of stakeholders was one of the most retained interventions, adopted by 14 projects in GEC I, expanding to 19 in GEC II, and continuing in 12 out of 19 projects post-GEC II. Similarly, community-based clubs, community-based outreach and community-based workshops were also likely to be continued beyond GEC II. This suggests that interventions involving local engagement and capacity-building were more likely to persist beyond donor funding cycles.

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[14] IGATE, Zimbabwe; Building Girls to Live, Laugh, learn and 'SCHIP', Uganda; Let Our Girls Succeed, Kenya, and iMlango, Kenya.

Some interventions were less widespread, such as community-based education, mentoring, and mobilisation. Each of these activities was continued by only four projects beyond GEC II. However, in the case of community mobilisers, all projects that conducted the activity in GEC II continued it forward.

The activities more likely to be continued beyond GEC II are highlighted in *Table 7* below. For example, community-based clubs, workshops and mobilisers were more likely to continue compared to community-based education and community-based mentoring. This could have to do with differences in community-based ownership of some activities and differences in the level of resources needed to conduct certain activities. However, data on why particular activities were continued by IPs and others were not available. The next subsection highlights the key enablers and barriers that influenced the continuation of activities.

Table 7: Continuation of activities beyond GEC-T (20 projects)

Activities	Number of projects conducting activities	Number of projects continuing activities	Continuation
Training of community stakeholders	19	12	Provides gender sensitisation training for key community stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school staff, and government officials.
Community-based outreach	16	10	Utilises radio, billboard advertising, street dramas, and video content, to engage the community creatively.
Community-based clubs	14	11	Engages the community in gender sensitisation through girls' clubs, after-school programmes, and mother-daughter clubs.
Community-based workshops	18	14	Involves in-person campaigns and workshops aimed at raising awareness and promoting engagement within the community. This also includes establishment of community-based groups and committees to encourage dialogue on girls' education.
Community-based education	8	4	Includes community learning centres and community-based classes.
Community-based mentoring	9	4	Features female peer mentors to provide guidance and support to girls within the community.
Community mobilisers	4	4	Involves community members in conducting awareness-raising activities and supporting project activities.

Table 8: Continuation of activities from GEC I to GEC II and beyond

Activities	Presence of Activties	KEEP	SfS	SCHIP	STAGES	SOMGEP	STAR-G	REALISE	MGCubed	GEF	Discovery	IGATE	Empowering girls with disabilities in Uganda	Girls Learn, Succeed and Lead	UVC-GE	CBEMG	iMlango	STAGES Afghanistan	Let our girls succeed	STEM	GEARR	Total Number of Projects
Training of stakeholders	GEC I	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	14
	GEC II	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	19
	Beyond GEC II	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	12
Community based outreach	GEC I	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	8
	GEC II	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	16
	Beyond GEC II	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	10
Community based clubs	GEC I	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	10
	GEC II	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	14
	Beyond GEC II	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	11
Commmunity based workshops	GEC I	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	16
	GEC II	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	18
	Beyond GEC II	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	14
Commmunity based education	GEC I	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	6
	GEC II	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	8
	Beyond GEC II	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	4
Community based mentoring	GEC I	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	8
	GEC II	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	9
	Beyond GEC II	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	4
Community mobilisers	GEC I	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	4
	GEC II	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	7
	Beyond GEC II	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	4

4.3.2. Enablers and barriers to continuation of activities from GEC I to GEC-T and beyond

Sustainability of activities: enablers

The most important enablers identified include stakeholder buy-in from communities, young women themselves, and the government. Importantly, the lack of stakeholder buy-in (e.g. from governments) can also serve as an effective barrier to project continuation, as identified in Section 4.3.2.2.

The continuation of project activities has benefited from ownership and buy-in from a range of stakeholders, including at the community level, according to interviews with IPs. Engagement with a range of stakeholders, including at the community-level, fostered a sense of ownership within communities and made the activities participatory. For instance, the STAR-G project (Mozambique) worked with parents' groups called *matronas (mothers' groups)* and *patronas (fathers' groups)* to transform gender norms (see *Box 2*).

Engaging with local community members, particularly influential community members such as religious leaders, was also considered important to ensure project activities were not seen as contradicting the local culture, customs and values in any way:

> *"At the community level, we always worked with community and religious leaders to ensure that the changes we wanted to implement were not seen as a challenge to their culture. These leaders are the guardians of the culture in the community, and they really want to understand what we are changing and why we are changing it. Once they understood this, the intervention could continue even when we were not there"* (KII, IP, Uganda).

Box 2: Matrons and Patrons influencing social norms in Mozambique

Successful Transition and Advancement of Rights for Girls (STAR-G) headed by Save the Children in Mozambique aimed to empower and improve the foundational learning skills of 15,430 of the most marginalised girls in inclusive and gender sensitive environments. An important aspect of the project included changing the long-term perceptions and norms surrounding girls' education through working with the Ministry of Education to address the barriers to education for girls, and working with community members, including young boys, to spread awareness on girls' sexual and reproductive rights.

The project instituted child protection community committees and district referral groups but importantly worked with influential community members, particularly Matronas and Patronas groups to foster a change in norms concerning child marriage and what should be the appropriate age for girls to marry and have children. This process was participatory and was built in a way that gave the community members particularly the Matronas and Patronas the skills and ability to sensitise families in gender norms that impact the education of girls. In addition to the involvement of communities, this intervention engaged with local government authorities who helped in monitoring as well as supporting the activities of the intervention and helped build capacity for girls, boys, parents/caregivers and community members to advocate for the rights of girls. Initiatives within this programme also focused on fostering hygiene for girls and building water, sanitation and hygiene facilities within schools.

Source: NFER, 2021

Engaging young women themselves played an important role in continuation of activities. 15 IPs emphasised the need to empower young women to serve as role models for other girls and young women in the community. The end line evaluation reports as well as insights from the IP interviews highlighted how beneficiary young women who were sensitised about their rights aspire to do the same for other young women. As one IP highlighted:

> *"There's something about the girl who has been rescued from early marriage, being able to go on in school and being able to make the hard decision concerning when and who to get married to and being able to talk to others about the dangers of early marriage, about the sheer benefit of staying longer in school and being able to choose when to get married or when to get children"* (KII, IP, Discovery, Ghana).

IGATE (Zimbabwe) focused on developing literacy, numeracy and vocational skills and leadership among girls who became active in community activities, transforming into role models for out-of-school girls and shifting community perceptions of them. Similarly, CAMFED (multi-country) integrated Learner Guide sessions into school timetables and involved young women in community-based study sessions. These initiatives aimed to build community-based role models who could continue to advocate for education and gender equality within their communities. IPs highlighted how beneficiary girls and young women were often encouraged to take up leadership roles in the community and hence influence community perceptions:

> "...*we often worked with them [the girls] on radio stations to hold these talk shows, to encourage others. We worked with their mothers, we worked with their community leaders, especially the role models, the female role models within the community to come alongside us during these talk shows to really give them courage and support*" (KII, IP, Uganda).

> "*The value of the Learner Guide, that young girl, in the community changes because now she got trained, she understands herself, she has confidence, she can stay in front of people, in front of parents and expect… and the same girl now standing in front of community explaining the importance of having education for girls. So, it makes a lot of our shift and we're proud of it*" (KII, IP, Tanzania).

Five of the IPs explained how the active engagement of girls and young women in the projects as leaders and advocates could be seen as positively influencing project sustainability. One IP explained:

> "*I was recently talking to one of the matrons for a certain Girls Secondary School and she was telling me that they still continue with the mentorship programme because the girls who left to the university still come back to talk to these other girls. So yes, girls are making efforts to continue and just making it sustainable*" (KII, IP, Kenya).

Another IP emphasised how these young women of their own accord supported other young women around them:

> "*Yes, they teach their sisters. They say our Big Sisters have taught us, made our future. Now it's your turn, you have to study… they teach not just sisters but to all the girls around their home*" (KII, IP, Nepal).

Engagement with national stakeholders and alignment with national structures and policies enabled continuation of activities. The sustainability plans for 10 projects emphasised alignment of activities with national structures. For example, STAR-G (Kenya) aligned its inclusive teacher training component with national education sector targets (NFER, 2021) while REALISE embedded its approach within the Ministry of Education's in-service teacher professional development policy (Forcier, 2021). STEM II supported the local governments to formulate and implement education and child safeguarding development plans which "*will help demonstrate their commitment to sustaining interventions*" (STEM II Sustainability Plan, Nepal). Additionally, respondents in IP interviews also highlighted the importance of government buy-in. For instance, one IP expressed:

> "*From the beginning, we thought about sustainability, even during GEC I. One of the approaches we used was ensuring government buy-in and involvement in most of the activities. Whether it was teachers' training or the establishment of distance learning centres, we worked in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education*" (KII, IP, Mozambique).

Engagement with government was often accompanied by capacity building by IPs at the national, district, and community level enabling sustaining the activities. Several projects focused on strengthening the capacity of local government officials, teachers, and community members. For example, STEM II organised trainings and workshops to build linkages between local governments and federal education authorities as well as with education specialists (FDM, 2021a), while CAMFED facilitated the creation of cross-functional district level committees drawing together education authorities, police, community development and social welfare officers, that have continued to operate effectively post GEC, including on aspects such as Child Protection (Paul Musker & Associates, 2022), further detailed in *Section 6*. Two IPs mentioned how the capacity building initiatives fostered a greater inclination by the government and community level stakeholders to help in sustaining the interventions. The aim was to build a self-sustaining system that would foster continuity. IPs also underscored the need to integrate schools in the sustainability plans:

> "*Our focus on sustainability was very much about giving the schools the tools, materials, and skills to take all of this on after three years of intense work so that they could continue on their own. At the school level, they had all the materials to develop school development plans, knew how to bring multiple stakeholders together to feed into planning, and could support good governance structures*" (KII, IP, Uganda).

The use of technology became an enabling factor for continuity in some projects. CAMFED's initiative to digitise curriculum content for TV and radio broadcast, especially during Coronavirus (COVID-19), is an example of how technology can extend the reach and continuity of educational interventions (Paul Musker & Associates, 2022). Making Ghanaian Girls Great! (MGCubed) aligned its sustainability plans with the government's ICT reform agenda, showing a forward-looking approach to leveraging technology for long-term impact (One South LLC, 2021).

Longer-term funding and hence longer implementation periods of GEC-T projects also encouraged sustainability. Three of the IPs noted how projects lose momentum if they are implemented for the shorter term and hence longer-term funding ensures more time for stakeholder buy-in and greater chance of influencing community norms. As one IP stressed:

> *"Because it was a longer-term fund, we were really able to build on the lessons learned from the previous projects. A lot of the funding that comes in is very short-term—it's either humanitarian, which is one year, or it's a three-year project. It's rare that we get a four-year or two-phase. This is something we have communicated to donors: when you extend the timeline a bit, that's when you can really get effective change and longer-term change"* (KII, IP, Afghanistan).

Sustainability of activities: barriers

Financial constraints were highlighted as an important internal barrier to the continuation of project activities by eight of the project IPs.

> *"I think sustainability is very difficult to achieve when you got money that runs out and a programme that ends"* (KII, IP, Ghana).

This was particularly the case for projects that designed educational technology (EdTech) programmes:

> **"***I think most communities probably couldn't afford it, and they would likely prioritise more teachers, more classrooms, or more textbooks over an expensive EdTech programme"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

Additionally, two IPs noted that the resources needed to assess project sustainability posed financial challenges:

> *"just trying to measure the shifts engrained in the cultural norms and just ensuring that these changes were sustained required an ongoing monitoring, which I want to say was or is resource intensive. I also want to talk about sustainability concerns"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

Financial constraints were exacerbated in contexts facing political and economic instability. In Ethiopia, economic instability played an important part in hindering the continuation of activities:

> *"there is inflation…government officials are not paid in time, teachers are not paid in time, and so this actually recently has created some school closure"* (KII, IP, Ethiopia).

Limited engagement with the government was a barrier to sustainability of project activities. Evaluation reports for six of the projects mentioned limitations in engagements with the government: *"The most influential in terms of sustainability… limitations in the availability of resources and MoE coordination, impacts immediately on the viability of girls' education, particularly at community levels"* ([School-to-School International, 2021](#)). Three of these IPs emphasised the need for policy change, and system-level action, to create meaningful and long-lasting change. As one IP noted:

> *"I think this is a problem with European and American aid organisations deciding to do something without really engaging with local governments because I think it was a real, real big miss with the government buy-in of [PROJECT]. I think [PROJECT] was great. When we told people from different governments all over Africa about it, they thought it was great. But I think we had a real miss here in government engagement and keeping them closer to us" (KII, IP, Kenya).*

In contexts where there were changes in government regimes, or in contexts affected by instability or conflict, IPs faced external challenges in continuing activities. This was the case for Somalia, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia. In Somalia, the escalation of the conflict in one of the project areas, resulted in several of the locations becoming inaccessible, which led to mass displacement. In Afghanistan, the change in political regime required the IP to rebuild the relationship and accordingly develop a programme that would be acceptable:

> *"With this current regime, they don't have a strategic plan, they don't really have any clear-cut policy. So, you have to be flexible and constantly adapt to who you're talking to, how you're talking to them, and what you're proposing. You have to be very, very flexible with them. Again, you have to explain everything to them. That's the result of, I would say, at least 150 to 200 meetings, phone calls, discussions, back and forth, back and forth with them. It took a lot of time and energy, but we're now finally getting to a good place with them"* (KII, IP, Afghanistan).

The COVID-19 pandemic inhibited the continuation of certain project activities. Largely, GEC-T projects were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed a challenge for the continuation of activities in terms of implementation and funding. As one IP noted:

> *"When COVID came in, of course it meant schools were closed and in Uganda, we had one of the longest closure of schools where learner stayed at home and of course the girls were much at risk during this period"* (KII, IP, Uganda).

Endline evaluation reports for 15 of the projects highlighted how COVID-19-related school closures impacted their project activities. As one IP representative mentioned:

> *"Some of this wasn't due to project oversight but rather the impact of COVID-19, which significantly limited what we could do. Much of the work that we would have done in the last 12 to 18 months, especially at the grassroots level, was disrupted"* (KII, IP, DRC).

COVID-19 related school closures also necessitated alternative arrangements by the projects. As one IP representative expressed:

> *"So, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the implementation of the project activities, that's for sure, particularly those that required in person interaction, such as school-based programme and community meetings. I think this led to a rapid shift to remote learning and other alternative engagement method which were not always effective"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

COVID-19 influenced various aspects of girls' outcomes, with IPs highlighting how these effects, in turn, shaped planning for project activities and sustainability:

> *"the context becomes even harder when COVID started… there were forced marriage, gender-based violence increase, sexual and reproductive health needs, unequal access of information and education outcome again was affected, loss of incomes, jobs, all those issues, and issue of isolation and anxiety were increased during that period. So, we had to really look at our project model and try to really adjust how we can respond to that"* (KII, IP, Nepal).

Climate-related crises have also affected projects' sustainability prospects, particularly due to increasing pressures on livelihoods and the education system.

> *"Our project worked with a population that's over 50% pastoralist. And pastoralism is essentially one of the casualties of the climate crisis. the climate crisis is affecting survival…"* (KII, IP, Somalia).

Climate issues in Kenya have affected livelihoods, negatively affecting girls' outcomes and the improvements that were brought about by the project:

> *"one of the greatest inhibitors that we have seen in the continuation and may have eroded some of the gains that we got within the programming, is prolonged drought… so where loss of livelihoods has meant reduced or depleted family resources in income to allow them to restock their livelihoods, you can then tell that they're the two are likely to take over, so it will either be bride price or rustling, and that that may erode the gains that we have really worked towards"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

4.4. Pathways to influence community attitudes and practice across GEC-T projects

Project activities led to three important pathways that influenced community attitudes and practices, ultimately influencing outcomes for girls: (1) communities actively engaging and shifting attitudes and practices, (2) young women being empowered as agents of change within their communities, and (3) up-take of project activities by local and national governments to sustain these changes. These pathways were both intentionally designed by the projects as part of their sustainability plans and organically developed as an outcome of the activities.

Active engagement by the community members served as an important pathway for long lasting change in attitudes and practices. An important mechanism for active community engagement was community-based groups such as parent groups. In STAGES Ethiopia, mother and father groups worked hard in tackling child trafficking, early marriages etc. In addition, they participated in girl's education advisory committees and supported the girls in menstruation management (which was considered a taboo topic before) (School-to-School International, 2021). Community members and leaders were also advocating for the rights of young women themselves:

> *"we had reports at one point that schools were pushing back a little on the child protection side because they didn't like that children knew all of their rights. However, the community leaders were saying, "No, this is great. This is what we want children to be aware of""* (KII, IP, Uganda).

Similarly, another IP mentioned:

> *"we invite high-profile community leaders often to talk about safeguarding to communities. So, this has been well received and we've seen the impact it has had especially… the way community members accept this knowledge"* (KII, IP, Uganda).

Community engagement led to long term changes in attitudes and norms as well as continuation of activities (such as training of communities) by members of the communities themselves, as shown in *Box 3*.

> **Box 3: KEEP Kenya's community engagement for changing attitudes and norms**
>
> The Kenya Education in Equity Project (KEEP) worked with a cohort of over 20,000 marginalised girls to support their progress into formal education. An important aspect of this project is that it engages with the community through film, radio, community dialogues to address such aspects as girl's domestic chore burden, early marriage and pregnancy and gender-based violence. To achieve change in community attitudes and norms, the project has utilised community mobilisers who have been actively participating in project activities since KEEP I (which was a part of GEC Phase I).
>
> Since the start of KEEP II, there has been a positive trend noted in community discourse around girls' education across all sub-groups and all project stakeholder categories as evidenced through the external evaluation reports. The Community Mobilisers also shared that they actively participate in supporting girls' education beyond the end of the project and at no cost.
>
> The sustainability plan of KEEP mentions that CMs from the KEEP project will continue to utilise their training and resources to benefit their communities. Many CMs have established their own community-based organisations focused on girls' education and are actively championing the cause beyond their official roles with KEEP. This includes leading community discussions on radio programmes about girls' education, identifying as well as working with available community referral mechanisms to support the most marginalized girls. Community advocacy on education issues is increasingly being driven by these mobilizers. The changes in community norms will be sustainable as the community mobilisers will continue to apply their monitoring and evaluation skills, and continue receiving trainings, and the use of available digital tools at zero cost (e.g. KoboCollect). They will use these skills and trainings to work directly with girls and their families in addressing barriers to their education.
>
> Source: KEEP Kenya Sustainability Plan

A predominant pathway to change community attitudes and practices was young women themselves becoming change agents in their communities. The sustainability plans for seven of the projects mentioned focusing on empowering young women who could then give back to their communities. 15 of the project IPs interviewed highlighted the effective role young women played in changing community attitudes and practices:

> *"the idea was that the knowledge they gained would create a snowball effect, spreading through their communities"* (KII, IP, Kenya).

Young women would sometimes raise awareness in classrooms, in girls' clubs or in wider community activities. For instance, REALISE invested in having young women represented in School Management Committees and Parent Teacher Associations, as well as encouraging teachers to help young women take on leadership roles (Forcier, 2021). Role modelling and mentorship was an especially pertinent aspect of the Learner Guide intervention by CAMFED and the Big Sisters intervention by VSO Nepal that resulted in positive changes in community attitudes (such as awareness on importance of education):

> *"These young women are having powerful conversations with traditional leaders about girls' education, child marriage, and early pregnancy"* (KII, IP, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania).

Young women played an important role in community awareness raising sessions. This was especially pertinent when young women who had completed their studies and were working raised awareness around the perils of early marriage, gender-based violence etc. For instance, one IP noted*:*

> *"we had girls speak in front of parents about their dreams, how they envision their future, and how violence and abuse affect them. This approach led to significant changes. It helped to shift the attitude that early marriage is the only path for girls, as the girls themselves were expressing their desire for something different"* (KII, IP, Mozambique).

Young women were inherently motivated to change community attitudes and practices, driven by their desire for empowerment and gender equality beyond the lifecycle of the project. Young women were also able to empower other young women through alumni networks:

> *"where former students could come back again and act as role models"* (KII, IP, Uganda).

Six of the IPs recounted how these young women would see themselves as leaders and agents of change within their communities. As one IP noted:

> *"the young women are conducting activities that are entirely unrelated to the projects but are spearheading social norms change in their own. And you see this happening, notably more at community level"* (KII, IP, Somalia).

Through successive awareness-raising activities, young women became pivotal figures in their communities, playing a central role in driving change and shaping new norms. This was particularly true for VSO Nepal's Big

Sisters programme in Nepal and CAMFED's Learner Guide programme in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Tanzania. As one respondent from CAMFED expressed:

> *"I remember a quote from a Guide in Zambia where initially she would be asked, "Who are you and where are you coming from?" and a few months later, it turned into, "Where is she? Why isn't she here?" This really highlights how girls' and young women's agency has been central to this, with CAMFED providing the platform and validity"* (KII, IP, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania).

These projects went beyond a focus on empowering young women; they actively trained them into their communities as effective mentors. By positioning women as pivotal figures, the model fosters a self-sustaining cycle of empowerment and community transformation.

Another pathway to long term change was up-take by the local governments. An example of this is the Quality Improvement System used by SCHIP in Uganda, which included capacity building training containing six modules - two related to child protection and the rest on governance, finance, planning, and society. This system was taken up by the government and, according to the external evaluation report and IP interview, is now being rolled out to all schools. It is expected that this will ultimately result in all schools in Uganda conducting baseline and annual monitoring of child protection policies and standards (VIVA EET Team, 2024).

4.5. Community attitudinal and norm change and changes in girls' outcomes

Changes in community attitudes and practices through the three pathways explained in Section 4.4 (active engagement by communities, young women becoming agents of change within their communities, and uptake of project activities by local and national governments) potentially paved the way for changes in girls' school enrolment and retention. The pathways also led to reduction in the incidents of early marriage and improved safety of the young women as well as changing distribution of traditional gender roles within families.

Community engagement was particularly instrumental in increasing girls' enrolment in schools, according to IP interviews. This approach was especially effective because the community members and leaders who were sensitised then became key change agents for leading negotiations, driving enrolment campaigns, identifying girls who had been married and facilitating their return to school. As one IP expressed:

> "*These leaders also played a crucial role in identifying children, particularly girls, who were at risk of being married off or dropping out of school and helped stay in schools*" (KII, IP, Kenya).

Community engagement was particularly helpful for changing attitudes towards girls with disabilities (as highlighted through the 'SCHIP' project in Uganda) and increasing their enrolment in schools (VIVA EET Team, 2024). In Afghanistan, the focus on girls' education was seen as influencing the perceptions of fathers and brothers:

> "*At the mid of the project, we found that the fathers are also very much interested and willingly support their girls (enrolment) and brothers also supported - these are the changes we have seen*" (KII, IP, Afghanistan).

Another activity that helped shift community attitudes and practices and in turn influence school enrolment was the My Better World curriculum by CAMFED in Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The endline evaluation reports also showed how the role of young women as mentors, in particular, was identified as influencing changes in girls' outcomes (such as increase in school attendance, retention, young women's socio-emotional outcomes) (FDM, 2021; CAMFED, 2024). The My Better World curriculum was also utilised by the Discovery project in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. A World Bank study on the curriculum revealed that after just a few screenings of its episodes, girls' enrolment increased by 43% (World Bank, 2022). When the study was revisited three years later, both enrolment and attendance levels had remained consistent.

The prioritisation of girls' education by the community also changed unequal distribution of traditional gender roles within families. As one IP mentioned, noting how it was previously believed that women should be prepared for marriage by doing most of the domestic tasks at home:

> "*However, this has changed. Now, there is a more equitable distribution of roles at home between girls and boys, allowing girls more time to do their school assignments*" (KII, IP, Mozambique).

Early marriages decreased largely due to increased community engagement and heightened awareness of the value of girls' education. Five out of the interviewed IPs expressed how their project resulted in an increase in community awareness around the importance of girls' education which, in their view, manifested in a decrease in early marriages:

> *"there has been a considerable reduction in early marriages. This is largely due to the establishment of a referral system within the community"* (KII, IP, Mozambique).

Further, the endline evaluation report for the UVC-GE project in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania highlighted how early pregnancy has reduced or stayed low in Tanzania and Zambia (evidenced by dropout rates below endline targets in both Tanzania and Zambia) and likely been mitigated in Zimbabwe, due to the financial, social and/or material support given to marginalised girls and young women (PMA & CAMFED, 2022).

The endline evaluation reports for eight of the projects mention increased safety and protection for young women following project activities and changes in community norms. Additionally, two of the IPs (SCHIP and STAR-G) mentioned how having community learning centres reduced gender-based violence, which many girls faced due to the long distances they had to travel to reach the school. These young women were often actively engaged in using advocacy as well as the knowledge and skills they had received from the project activities for supporting other young women in the communities:

> *"I know a case of one girl, also some girls that were being used as house girls, but they were also being sexually abused, she eventually helped the girls come out of that situation because of what we had trained her in. She was able to connect with her mentally and she was able to help that girl come out of the situation and join our creative learning centre"* (KII, IP, Uganda).

The *Saksham Chhori (Empowered Daughters)* activity, implemented by STEM II in Nepal, helped increase the safety and protection of girls and young women as highlighted in *Box 4* below.

Box 4: Community attitudes changing girls' outcomes: the case of Saksham Chhori (Empowered Daughters)

Supporting the Education of Marginalised Girls in Kailali (STEM) in Nepal implemented by Mercy Corps Europe aimed to empower and provide education to 4,460 Nepali girls and create positive community attitudes towards girls' education. The project utilised community support systems and fostered life skills training through the Saksham Chhori program which was developed in partnership with Girls Kick.

This three-day, peer-to-peer training program used participatory methods involving parents and other stakeholders to create a supportive environment for girls. It equipped them with psychological, verbal, and physical techniques to handle day-to-day challenges and reduce the risk of abuse and exploitation of marginalised girls. The program has reached over 3,000 in-school (IS) and 652 out-of-school (OOS) girls and has expanded to 70 additional schools, reaching 12,000 girls in Kailali and Kanchanpur with other funding sources. Local governments in Sudurpaschim province have supported and expanded this training beyond STEM II locations, training 784 girls from non-STEM II schools and communities. In the interview, the IP noted: *"Saksham Chori has been cited as one of the most effective interventions so far"* (KII, IP, STEM, Nepal).

The project trained self-defence instructors from major ethnic groups within STEM schools, enabling effective communication in local languages on sensitive topics. The self-defence training was sustainable as it developed the skills of instructors from within the community who could then use their skills to provide session at the school and community level. As one self-defence instructor detailed:

"As a shy young girl, the training helped me find myself. I was no longer the girl who couldn't speak up anymore. Now that I have provided training of self-defence to several schools, I have also received requests from different schools to conduct similar training sessions."
- Female Self–defence facilitator

Further details available here.

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5. Sustainability in the Sisters for Sisters' Education II project in Nepal

This section reports findings from the Sisters for Sisters' Education II (SfSE II) project in Nepal (2012-2021) on:

- The extent to which the project aimed to influence community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education (**RQ1),** and whether those activities have continued from GEC I into GEC II, and beyond (**RQ2**).
- The extent and the pathways through which project activities have influenced community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education (including the role of beneficiary young women, Big Sisters and Little Sisters, as agents of change) (**RQ3**).
- Whether and how changes in community attitudes and practices have contributed to establishing a foundation for longer term viability of girls' education outcomes (**RQ4**).

The lead IP for the project in Nepal was VSO, while the local partners included Aasaman Nepal (Parsa) and Global Action Nepal (Surkhet). The analysis presented combines evidence from the projects' in-depth documentary review as well as qualitative data collected between June-July 2024 with the project IP (VSO), government- and community-level stakeholders (including community groups and influential community members as well as beneficiary young women who participated in the project). The key findings are summarised in *Box 5.*

Box 5: Summary of findings from the SfSE II project implemented by VSO in Nepal

- **The SfSE II project aimed to influence harmful attitudes and practices associated with girls' education** including through activities designed to influence early marriage, abuse or violence.

- **This involved engagement with communities through peer mentors and community groups.** Local implementing partners, as well as community volunteers (known as Adult Champions) and Big Sisters (young women over the age of 18 who mentored 'Little Sisters') engaged with a range of stakeholders, including community groups (such as Parent-Teacher Associations, agricultural cooperatives) and influential community stakeholders (such as religious leaders, village leaders).

- **All community-level activities continued from GEC I into GEC II, and beyond.** These included the Big Sister-Little Sister mentoring programme, interactive street dramas, awareness-raising campaigns and supporting girls to participate in sports/ games. The continuation beyond the lifecycle of the project has occurred formally (through VSO programmes that are presently operational, incorporation into municipality budgets, government advocacy by ex-Big Sisters who transitioned into government leadership positions and by other organisations who adapted SfSE II activities for their programmes) or informally (by community volunteers, community groups and ex-Big Sisters and Little Sisters).

- **The project influenced community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education**. Overall, girls' and parents' attitudes towards girls' education became more positive. Early marriage and isolation during menstruation decreased to some extent, while dowry and intimate partner violence were reported to have been more challenging to shift. The project engaged with community members through interactive awareness-raising campaigns – notably, the street dramas – which involved influential stakeholders to drive changes in practices of early marriage, dowry and violence. Positive changes in the wider political context including laws against early marriage and more favourable education policies contributed to these positive changes as well.

- **Project activities have contributed to the sustainability of improvements in girls' education outcomes, including by empowering them through increased self-esteem, improvements in learning opportunities and increased employment opportunities.** The Big Sister-Little Sister mentoring programme which highlighted young women as role models contributed to increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as motivation to continue efforts for future generations of girls and young women. This has influenced community attitudes, perpetuating a 'virtuous cycle' that, as discussed by respondents in the study, is likely to sustain for future generations of girls' education.

- **However, barriers to sustained shifts in community attitudes and practices and longer-term viability of girls' education outcomes persist.** Poverty and deep-rooted norms associated with religion and custom inhibited positive, sustained shifts in attitudes and practices associated with girls' education. In addition, financial constraints hindered the ability of community-level organisations to implement these activities formally, and influence budget decisions at a government level.

5.1. Prevailing attitudes and practices associated with girls' education

Harmful attitudes and practices towards girls such as early marriage, gender-based violence, *Chhaupadi* (isolating girls during menstruation), dowry, and high chore burden for girls were common within the selected communities (NEAT, 2018; FDM, 2019; FDM, 2021). Interviews and group discussions with community

members, Big Sisters and Little Sisters under our study reinforced the presence of these harmful attitudes and practices prior to project implementation. The prevalence of these attitudes and practices varied across the project districts. For example, the traditional practice of *Chhaupadi* where girls would be required to stay outside their homes during their menstrual cycles was widespread in Surkhet.[15] As described by a social worker in Parsa:

> *"…as far as I know, in the past, when a girl had her first period, she had to leave the house. Because if she saw her brothers or father, it was considered a sin, so she had to stay far away. Even now, in the western part of Surkhet and some western regions, [this] Chhaupadi tradition still exists"* (KII, Social Worker, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Early marriage, gender-based violence, and dowry were more common in Parsa (NEAT, 2018). A Big Sister from Parsa mentioned the influence of dowry on girls' education:

> *"The belief was that if a girl was more educated, we would need to find a highly educated boy for her to marry, which would require giving more dowry and gifts. So, only basic education was provided [to girls]"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Poverty often results in parents' prioritising and supporting boys' education over and above girls (NEAT, 2018). Where they do send girls to schools, parents often discriminate in schooling choices, enrolling girls in community schools and boys in private schools (NEAT, 2018). The burden of household chores, the effects of the seasonal calendar on workloads, and the burden of responsibilities during festivals disproportionately affects girls. This results in their higher dropouts and grade-repetition rates (NEAT, 2018).

At the school-level, challenges related to girls' safety and the learning environment affected their attendance and learning (NEAT, 2018). Harassment and bullying in schools and on the way to schools, as well as the lack of separate toilets and WASH facilities for girls, inadequate number of female teachers and a gender-insensitive learning environment posed further challenges for girls (NEAT, 2018).

Individual characteristics of marginalisation further increased the girls' risk of exclusion from education. Caste (disproportionately affecting *Dalit* girls), religion (disproportionately affecting Muslim girls), mother tongue differing from the language of instruction, and disability also further increased risks of girls' exclusion from education (NEAT, 2018).

5.2. Overview of project activities aiming to shift attitudes and practices

The SfSE II project was implemented across four districts in Nepal with a focus on marginalised girls. The project was implemented in 47 community schools across the districts of Parsa, Surkhet, Dhading and Lamjung. The most marginalised in the project's context included girls with disability; girls from a Dalit family (both those whose mother tongue was not Nepali, and those whose mother tongue was Nepali), and girls from a Janajati family (both those whose mother tongue was not Nepali, and those whose mother tongue was Nepali) (NEAT, 2018).

The second phase of SfSE built on the foundations and lessons learnt from the first phase, supporting girls to transition into higher education or livelihood-related employment[16] (FDM, 2021b). The first phase of the SfSE II project focused on increasing girls' access to formal and non-formal education, supporting girls at the primary level of education (PwC, 2021b; FDM, 2021b). During the second phase, the project supported the same girls in secondary education, focusing on their ability to transition to higher education or employment opportunities. For example, addressing a question on the evolution of project activities between GEC I and GEC II, a respondent from the IP mentioned:

> *"[The] first phase was focusing on a full cycle of education from Grade 1 to Grade 8, including early years…but the second phase was focusing more on transitioning to education: lower secondary, secondary education, and higher education…Another [change] is entrepreneurship and vocational trainings...for skill-based training and entrepreneurship, they [girls] were transitioning to that"* (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

Building on lessons learnt from the first phase, the project recognised the need to continue addressing barriers to girls' education. Addressing harmful attitudes and practices, maintaining girls' agency over their own sexual and reproductive health rights, and improving the broader ecosystem to sustain changes was at the heart of the project under both phases. The project intended to shift attitudes and practices in the community, as well as girls' aspirations, through a range of activities, including mentorship and being exposed to 'successful' women (NEAT, 2018). Younger

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[15] Discussions with the IP highlighted that forms of isolation during menstruation vary within Nepal, including between the two districts of Parsa and Surkhet.
[16] Findings about transition pathways for girls supported by the GEC II Leave No Girls Behind Window are available in the IE's report on *Education Pathways for Marginalised Girls Beyond Formal Schooling (2023).*

girls, known as 'Little Sisters' were supported and mentored by older girls, 'Big Sisters', to boost their self-efficacy and academic learning (PwC, 2021b).

The project included activities at the community-, individual-, school-, and government- levels to address harmful attitudes and practices in support of girls' education. As illustrated in *Table 9,* the project involved several community-level activities such as the Big Sister-Little Sister mentoring scheme, interactive street dramas, community outreach including public awareness-raising campaigns and community dialogues, girls' clubs, and sports and games for challenging gender stereotype and gender perceived roles. All of these continued from the first phase of the project. At the individual level, the project involved support for out-of-school girls in the form of bridge classes to encourage their enrolment or re-enrolment in school, as well as low-interest start-up financing and financial literacy and skills promoting entrepreneurship. At the school-level, activities involved training on gender-sensitive and child-friendly approaches for teachers, and training on planning Adolescents Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (ASRH), Comprehensive Sexuality Education, and child protection for school management and governance bodies.

At the government-level, the project continued a network that was formed in the first phase (Sisters' Education Network), and further established it as a national Girls' and Inclusive Education Network. The network developed girls' education strategies and guidelines and the IP worked closely with the Inclusive Education Division, Center for Education and Human Resource Development, providing technical insights and policy assistance for promoting gender and inclusive education. There were also provincial- and municipal- level capacity building activities in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Center that strengthened the capacity of local government education stakeholders.

Some project activities aimed to address specific gender norms such as early marriage, abuse or violence (NEAT, 2018). For example, the interactive street dramas were particularly targeted at parents and girls to create awareness around child protection and children's rights (NEAT, 2018).

Table 9: Brief description of SfSE II activities

Level	Activity	Description	Continuation from GEC I into GEC II
Community	Big Sister – Little Sister mentoring scheme	Mentoring support scheme embedded in communities and schools and linked to system change by Big Sisters and Adult Champions[17] to support in-school Little Sisters and build their capacity and skills through training on civic education and life skills.	Yes
	Interactive Street dramas	Interactive Street dramas performed by Little Sisters, Big Sisters, and Adult Champions, to raise awareness on child protection, menstrual stigma, child marriage, gender based violence and Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health.	Yes
	Community outreach	Broadcast of public service announcements, community mobilisers,[18] and community dialogues through village-based structures (e.g. Village Development Committees) and school-based structures (e.g. School Management Committees, Parent Teacher Associations and Mothers' Groups) to increase awareness around actively supporting girls' learning, challenging discrimination at home and enabling attendance at school.	Yes
	Girls' clubs and Children's Clubs	Non formal girls' clubs including 'English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE)'[19] training, life skills training, Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health, career counselling for Grade 10-12, and visits by female role models. Children's Clubs included boys as well as girls.	Yes
	Sports and games	Sports activities for girls such as volleyball and football to challenge stereotypes and raise awareness against gendered notions of play.	Yes
Individual	Bridge Course	A nine-month Bridge Course to offer preparatory learning and school enrolment support to girls who had either dropped out or never been to school.	Yes
	Low-interest start up financing	Setting up of the Girls' Transition Fund to help marginalised out-of-school girls' access low-interest startup financing to establish an enterprise, as well as training in financial literacy and business skills.	No

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[17] The Adult Champions included Teacher Champions (TCs), Aunty Champion (ACs) and Big Brothers (BBs) who were volunteers from the same community. The Teacher Champion was selected as a focal person from the same school(s) where the Little Sisters and Big Sisters belonged, while the Aunty Champion and Big Brother were a young female and male member selected from the community. The Champions were responsible for meeting regularly and addressing challenges faced by girls in their education (e.g. absenteeism, bullying, and so on). The Teacher Champion was also responsible for overseeing provision of sanitary pads in school.

[18] The community mobilisers were responsible for overseeing that the activities envisaged under community-raising and mentoring take place per plan, as well as helped coordinate various activities with schools and local governments.

[19] EDGE was implemented by the British Council.

Level	Activity	Description	Continuation from GEC I into GEC II
School	Learning Support Classes	Remedial classes conducted on a one-to-one basis or in a group setting for in-school girls to improve their learning.	Yes
	Teacher training	Coaching for teachers on child-friendly, inclusive and gender-sensitive methodologies to improve participation of girls in learning, as well as subject specific capacity building in literacy and numeracy.	Yes
	Training for school management and governance bodies	Training for Headteachers, Education Officers,[20] School Management Committees and Parent Teacher Associations on child protection and safeguarding, School Improvement Plan (SIP) and implementing mechanisms for reporting abuse within communities through the Parent Teacher Associations and Village Child Protection Committees.	Yes[21]
	Girls' Inclusive Education Network	A network initially developed to train girls (and boys) on mentoring younger students and supporting the development of school improvement plans.	Yes
Government	Coaching for government staff	Coaching and mentoring for staff in the Department and Ministry of Education with a focus on gender equality.	Yes

Source: [NEAT, 2018](); [FDM, 2021;]() KII with project IP (VSO).

The community-level activities engaged a wide range of stakeholders including Big Sisters and Adult Champions to address harmful attitudes and practices. For example, in addition to providing mentoring and support to their school-going Little Sisters, Big Sisters were responsible for participating in community awareness-raising activities, such as interactive street dramas discouraging practices like early marriage. They also liaised with grooms' families to help married girls return to school and improved knowledge about Sexual and Reproductive Health within the community to prevent early pregnancy ([NEAT, 2018]()), as detailed in *Box 1.* Similarly, community mobilisers and Adult Champions, together with the Big Sisters, were responsible for working with parents to support their daughters' learning in and outside of school, setting up 'learning corners' at home and liaising with families at times when girls seemed at risk of dropping out (e.g. to get married, or due to non-attendance during menstruation). Community dialogues and interactive street dramas also required initiating dialogue with other community stakeholders including Rural Municipalities (Village Development Committees), School Management Committees and Parent Teacher Associations. Outreach included engaging with existing Mothers' Groups to enable mothers who were voluntarily members of these groups as champions of girls' education. In addition, the implementing partners engaged with influential community members, such as religious and other local leaders. Teachers, Headteachers and local government officers were involved, especially in school- and government- level activities.

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[20] The training was first provided to District Education Officers under Phase I of the project. After federalisation in 2015, the training was provided to Municipality Education Officers during Phase II.
[21] This training was further continued in the form of a Complaint Response Mechanism (CRM) during Phase II.

Box 6: Big Sisters as agents of change in shifting harmful community attitudes and practices towards girls

The mentoring approach adopted by the project, which involved 'Big Sisters' supporting 'Little Sisters' in their education and championing project activities, was an important way to challenge harmful attitudes and practices. Our study found that as part of the mentoring scheme, Big Sisters, local women with training in life skills and education, were responsible for mentoring, motivating and inspiring their Little Sisters to go to school and continue learning. This involved following up on school attendance by conducting home visits to check on Little Sisters who were frequently absent from school and speaking with parents to encourage their regular attendance. As one respondent in a focus group discussion with teachers in Parsa mentioned:

> *"They [Big Sisters] did not allow the girls to be absent from school and checked the register every week to see how many days each girl was absent. They collected data and visited the homes of the students who were frequently absent to talk to their guardians. We explained that the girls should attend school. Initially, we faced many difficulties, as people believed that girls should stay at home and do household chores"* (FGD, Teachers Group, Parsa, Nepal).

The Big Sisters participated in interactive street dramas as actors and championed community-raising activities such as campaigns in public spaces and door-to-door visits. Activities such as street dramas or community dialogues where Big Sisters played a central role helped bring people from the community together and create a platform for addressing early marriage, menstrual stigma, and other harmful practices. A Big Sister from Surkhet stated:

> *"We Big Sisters played interactive street dramas where a girl gets married and has a kid at a small age. She does not get proper care and nutritious food and gets sick or has uterus-related disease. We dressed up and played the role of both boys and girls by ourselves. Someone used to play the role of parents, someone became boy or girl and we performed interactive street dramas in various places"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

The Big Sisters mentored Little Sisters to prevent early marriage and improve their knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and rights. Mentoring by Big Sisters included training in life skills, sexual and reproductive health and rights, child protection, and given issues of menstrual stigma, making sanitary pads and communicating their proper use. Where an instance of early marriage arose in the community, the Big Sisters intervened to prevent the marriage. The relationship between the Big Sisters and Little Sisters was driven primarily by their shared experiences, adding a deeper sense of care towards Little Sisters which created a safe and comfortable environment for them. A religious leader from Surkhet mentioned:

> *"Those older sisters (Thuli Didi) educated their younger sisters (Sani Bahini) by saying that we are also like your sisters, we also had to endure at home; there were problems, so we had to express our feelings. There were such things. From what we observe from the outside, this has brought about change"* (KII, religious leader, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

The Big Sisters served as advocates and agents of change, working with *all* levels of stakeholders – including parents, potential husbands' families and government officials. A government official mentioned:

> *"[The] Big Sister used to fully take care of [her] Little Sister, used to look after sisters even if it's taking them to school or leaving home. Their duties were to look after their Little Sisters and watch them, if they had any problems they used to tell us and solve it, whether by informing parents or taking necessary action. In meetings, they used to inform us about problems and how they solved them out in the field"* (KII, Government Official, M, Parsa, Nepal).

The interactive street dramas were designed to be a key community awareness-raising activity, inviting participation from a wide range of community stakeholders. The interactive dramas were held in settings such as the school grounds or '*chowk*' (community square) and all members of the community were invited to watch. Community-level respondents noted that these interactive dramas involved engaging influential community stakeholders, such as local-level policymakers, religious leaders and young people (including those attending school). For example, one representative from an IP for the project mentioned:

> *"We did what we call in the VSO language 'interactive theatre', which are dramas where we invited the policy people at the local level to be part of the process, part of the interactive theatre and drama, so that the change that is needed and the people who need to make the change, they are all part of the process and can commit to making a change. There was also awareness-raising on Sexual and Reproductive Health needs of girls, menstrual hygiene and management, and also challenging harmful social norms and stigma associated with different issues"* (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

The topics presented aimed to challenge harmful attitudes and norms such as menstrual stigma, early marriage, dowry and the low value of girls' education, as described in *Box 7*. While other participants would be acting, a participant would also be standing to the side and explaining the topics enacted.

Box 7: Interactive street dramas as a community-awareness activity under the project

The project employed street dramas or interactive theatre as a key awareness-raising activity at the community level to shift harmful attitudes and practices towards girls, such as the low value associated with girls' education, menstrual stigma and early marriage. The dramas also aimed to increase community awareness regarding young women's sexual and reproductive health, as well as issues of child protection. The interactive dramas also influenced the service providers and policy makers to take necessary actions when they encounter such issues in the areas of their work. As an example, a social worker in Parsa described the topics covered:

"The programmes were related to child marriage, violence against women, and occasionally, "Disha Mukt Khula (Open Defecation Free)" related programme was also conducted two times as well" (KII, Social Worker, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Similarly, other community respondents in Parsa described that the dramas intended to showcase the detrimental consequences of early marriage, including but not limited to early pregnancy:

"In the drama, we depicted child marriage and its consequences. We showed that early marriage leads to childbirth at a young age, which harms the body as it hasn't fully developed. This results in diseases and sometimes death" (KII, Housewife, Parsa, Nepal).

"We showed a story about child marriage. We showed a girl who was married at an early age and then subjected to harm by her in-laws, ultimately leading to her death. The drama highlighted the severe torture she endured, and how she could not take care of herself" (KII, Adult Champion, F, Parsa, Nepal).

These dramas conveyed profound messages which actors and participants could resonate with as they were presenting real-life situations. This was particularly the case when young women (including Big Sisters) depicted stories related to early marriage, dowry and violence against women. As a social activist in Surkhet mentioned:

"...100% sisters who had experienced early marriage cried a lot. Sisters [including those in the audience] also cried, as it was a real-life incident. Married at the age of 15, 16, 17, husband has no job, walks drunk, looking at other girls outside, beats wife at home. Such things [were] included [in] deeply touching dramas, songs, and poems..." (KII, Social Activist, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Community awareness-raising was undertaken through campaigns in public spaces and door to door visits by Adult Champions, Big Sisters and Little Sisters. The door-to-door visits involved meeting with families and encouraging them to send girls to school as well as prioritise their learning at home (e.g. through spaces like 'reading rooms' to study) (NEAT, 2018). The campaigns primarily focused on preventing early marriage and the importance of educating girls. As one Little Sister from Parsa mentioned:

"We also conducted rallies about early marriage and the "Educate Daughters, Save Daughters" campaign. We carried posters and marched around" (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

In a few instances, other community members such as teachers would get involved too. For example, a Big Sister from Surkhet mentioned:

"To bring about these changes, I met with the Little Sisters and with their parents...I used to say, "Why are you keeping these small girls at home? Why aren't you sending them to school? You need to send them to study. You should not discriminate between boys and girls. There is no work for a person who has not studied. The sons and daughters should be sent to study..." …We raised all this awareness through door-to-door programmes. We included the teachers in the door-to-door programmes too. We met their [Little Sisters'] parents too. We brought light to things like how the reading room of the daughters should be managed too" (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Additionally, activities such as sports and games were also introduced to challenge gendered notions of play and enhance girls' confidence and self-esteem. As noted in the endline evaluation for the first phase of the project, this exposed girls to new opportunities they may not have had access to previously, encouraged their aspirations, motivated their attendance at school, and improved their self-esteem (Sharma, 2017).

Similarly, a respondent from the IP mentioned:

"One of the important activities we did was games to challenge gender stereotypes. There are different games associated with different genders and we initiated games where girls started playing football, volleyball in the community. There used to be stereotypes regarding male and female games, and we tried to break that barrier through games" (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

Girls' clubs had an explicit focus on promoting education for girls from marginalised communities. As noted in the project's baseline report, marginalised girls were those facing the greatest vulnerability to factors putting them

at risk of dropping out or not attending school, such as girls with disabilities or girls belonging to Dalit and Janajati families[22] (NEAT, 2018). Girls' clubs aimed to support marginalised girls in and out of school to gain appropriate life skills (NEAT, 2018). They included 'English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE)' training and life skills training, alongside career counselling and visits by female role models (see *Table 9* above). This was explained by the IP team:

> *"We call it EDGE. It was English, digital, and social skill components. So, basically, it was a peer mentoring approach where peer group leaders were from the same marginalised community. We have good practices; if you go to Surkhet, you can see…a few of the peer groups, who were previously Big Sisters and were promoted as a peer group leader, worked through these non-formal girls' clubs, capacitating and empowering those [marginalised] girls"* (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

A Big Brother from Parsa mentioned how community awareness-raising activities were especially tailored for girls from marginalised communities, creating awareness among their parents regarding the importance of education and encouraging them to send their daughters to school:

> *"Our society had little encouragement for girls' education, so we designed and implemented the programmes to educate them. We worked on how to bring girls from marginalised communities, like the Musahar, Chamar [Dalit communities in the Terai region], and Dalit communities, who are not going to school. For this, we needed to raise awareness among their parents about education. We conducted awareness programmes about the importance of education so parents would understand and send their children to school"* (KII, Big Brother, M, Parsa, Nepal).

5.3. Changes in community attitudes and practices associated with project activities

Project activities were reported to have had a positive influence on parental attitudes towards girls' education overall, as identified through the project evaluation reports. For instance, the project's midline evaluation noted parents valuing the importance of their daughters regularly attending school, resulting in a better attendance rate for girls (NEAT, 2018). Similarly, the midline evaluation found that girls spent less time engaged in household chores, and the endline evaluation, lesser still. The difference between the midline and endline was found to be statistically significant (from 1.8 hours per day to 1.7 hours per day on average), implying that girls had more time available to dedicate to their studies (NEAT, 2018; FDM, 2021b). Interviews and group discussions with community members under our study reinforced this positive influence on parental attitudes towards girls' education. As a government official from Surkhet mentioned:

> *"There was discrimination between sons and daughters [before the project]. The daughters were not allowed to go outside the house…After the Sisters for Sisters' Education project came, it helped in society transformation. On the thoughts of the parents, and on the awareness of the adolescent girls themselves, it has brought change"* (KII, Government Official, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Once parents noticed a considerable increase in the confidence and potential of their girls, they felt motivated to continue to send them to school (FDM, 2021b). Interviews with Big Sisters, Little Sisters and community members supported these findings on shifts in parental attitudes. For instance, a Big Sister from Parsa mentioned:

> *"Now, there is the attitude that 'my daughter will also do something'. Our Little Sister, [NAME], she really wanted to join the police, but her father did not allow it...Now, she has only one written exam left. After seeing his daughter's motivation, her father sold the laptop and sent her to the classes"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Project activities resulted in a heightened interest in education by girls themselves, as reflected in the examples below**:**

> *"The children who didn't go to school before are now attending, as they have been taught the importance of education. If the organisation [Aasaman Nepal] hadn't provided this guidance, they might not have gone to school. It's the education itself that has changed their mindset"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

> *"In the Little Sisters' families, they are now being listened to and allowed to study whatever they are interested in. Those Little Sisters who are studying are doing because of their own interest. Perhaps, it comes from*

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[22] As defined in the baseline report, Dalits are caste-based minority groups who face caste-based discrimination including untouchability. The Janajatis are ethnic groups who are considered indigenous to the country.

> *within them…Perhaps, through discussions and attending various programmes, they reflected on these matters. Especially since mothers also attended, they may have remembered their own experiences and desired better for their daughters. Many mothers are now fearless in advocating for their daughters' well-being"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

These findings reinforce qualitative evidence from the endline evaluation which noted girls' increased interest to learn (FDM, 2021b). It is possible that these changes in attitudes and practices contributed to improved learning outcomes for girls. The midline evaluation found statistically significant gains in girls' numeracy and literacy: 11.56 percentage points, and 4.70 percentage points, over and above the comparison group respectively (FDM, 2021b). In the endline evaluation, 78.7% of the girls expressed confidence towards their improved learning performance since midline, reinforcing the learning outcome achievements recorded at the midline (FDM, 2021b).[23]

The positive shifts in girls' own and parental attitudes towards education, together with other positive influences such as the Learning Support Classes[24] and a conducive learning environment at school, translated into improved learning outcomes for girls. These improvements in learning could be, in part, due to the increased awareness raised amongst parents about the importance of regular learning (for example, through regular attendance), brought about by the project's ongoing monitoring of girls' attendance and discussions with families through home visits. As mentioned by a teacher from Parsa:

> *"They [SfSE II] did not allow the girls to be absent from school and checked the register every week to see how many days each girl was absent. They collected data and visited the homes of the students who were frequently absent to talk to their guardians. We explained that the girls should attend school. Initially, we faced many difficulties, as people believed that girls should stay at home and do household chores. However, now the guardians make sure their children receive education and insist on mandatory schooling for them, including girls"* (FGD, Teacher, M, Parsa, Nepal).

The project also contributed to improved learning outcomes by increasing girls' confidence. The project endline evaluation report noted improvements in girls' confidence to ask questions and participate more actively in class, contributing to improved learning outcomes (FDM, 2021b). The Little Sisters and others in their class attributed such changes particularly to the support of Big Sisters and the EDGE classes (FDM, 2021b). Additionally, a community member and a teacher from Surkhet mentioned how activities under the project supported girls in feeling more confident in attending school when menstruating, thus helping improve their attendance:

> *"[Before the project] …there was an environment where they [girls] would not come to school at the time of their menstruation, they have been free from it now. Especially through the Big Sisters' learning and from the organisation [Aasaman Nepal] they learned... After learning, there were more changes which is a positive sign. There has been an increase in passion, vigilance and courage among girls"* (KII, Teacher, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

> *"Earlier, when girls were on their periods, they could not enter the school. There was a facility to give them sanitary pads and because of that, they opened up. Earlier, they were not able to speak to us, they were ashamed. After this programme happened, they talked through Big Sisters. Later, they used to say "Sir, I need a pad" easily. This is a very nice thing"* (KII, Teacher, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

The project improved attendance for girls due to support from the communities. For example, a Big Brother, from Parsa mentioned:

> *"Before the start of the Sister for Sisters' Education project, society's thinking was different. However, about a year after the project began, there was a noticeable shift, and it gradually gained support from the community. The goal of the project was to encourage regular school attendance among girls, many of whom had previously dropped out. With the project's support, girls started attending school regularly. Over time, this initiative led to significant improvements"* (KII, Big Brother, M, Parsa, Nepal).

The benefit of increased enrolment of girls also accrued to more marginalised communities. For example, when discussing the changes that the project influenced over time, a Little Sister from Parsa mentioned how the Majhi community (an indigenous people of Nepal) began sending their children to school for the first time:

> *"There have been a lot of changes. People started sending their daughters to study. The Majhi community who did not use to send their children for study, started to send their children for study…because of Aasaman Nepal, they started sending the children for study. [Big] Sisters would go to [their] houses and convince [their] father and mother"* (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

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[23] Note: Due to COVID-19 related challenges, the focus shifted from literacy and numeracy in the midline evaluation to girls' perceptions of their learning in the endline evaluation.
[24] As mentioned in Table 9, the Learning Support Classes refer to a school-level activity conducted on a one-to-one basis or in a group setting for in-school girls to improve their learning.

Activities such as the mentoring scheme and girls' clubs had a positive influence on community attitudes and practices such as early marriage and menstrual stigma, but to a varying extent. The project's midline and endline evaluation noted a significant reduction in early marriages for girls, due to interventions from change agents such as the Big Sisters and Adult Champions (FDM, 2019; FDM, 2021b). Parents' awareness regarding the risks associated with early marriage were also found to be higher during the endline evaluation, compared with the midline (FDM, 2021b). Furthermore, community members and beneficiary young women interviewed under our study also reported positive influences of project activities such as girls' clubs on early marriage. For example, one community member from a girls' club in Parsa highlighted the role of girls' clubs in creating awareness around delaying marriage till girls reached an appropriate age:

> *"When the club was not active, girls used to be married off at a young age. Since we started attending the club, we have become more aware. Now, girls are married only after they turn 20 years old. I have a daughter who has turned 20. Now, I am planning to get her married next year"* (KII, Girls' Club Member, F, Parsa, Nepal).

However, the extent to which change has been achieved seems to vary. For instance, the project's midline and endline evaluation noted the persistence of early marriage (despite a reduction in occurrence) as a key reason for school dropout still, and hence an impediment to successful transition (FDM, 2019; FDM, 2021b). The endline evaluation also noted increased occurrences of girls' self-initiated marriages amidst a decrease in parent-led marriages (FDM, 2021b). Interviews with community members suggest that early marriages may have continued 'secretly', where even after a girl child is married off and lives with her husband, parents do not conduct the wedding rituals and ceremonies until both the girl and boy are of appropriate age. For example, a housewife from Surkhet mentioned:

> *"We are in our own village and we know they [children] are small in age. But there is going and bringing the bride between the girls and boys. If rituals are done and if you go and participate in the party, then you will be caught by the law [if the children are below the legal age of marriage]. Through law, there was stopping. Even if they go and bring the bride, only after reaching the right age the ritual was done"* (KII, Housewife, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Similarly, regarding menstrual stigma, several community respondents noted a positive change in that girls and young women were no longer asked to leave the house to stay in cowsheds when menstruating. However, as noted by one of the Big Sisters from Surkhet, girls and young women were still isolated within the house:

> *"Before, we had to stay in a shed or separate house made for that [menstruation]. But now, separate rooms are provided in the same house. Like, if I have my period, I will stay in that room. I will have separate clothes and food. I cannot come here"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Similarly, a community member from Surkhet mentioned:

> *"Before, we did not use to let them in and made them sleep outside. When girls have periods, they are made to sleep in the cow shed or caves during the period of the menstruation cycle [Chhaupadi]. Now, we let them sleep inside"* (KII, Community Member, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

The deep-rooted norm associated with isolating girls during menstruation is partly due to young women's own fears of the consequences of 'breaking the custom', as well as families' similar fears, including how they would be perceived within the community (Rai, 2022).

The encouragement for girls to participate in sports under the project's community-raising activities gave them confidence and contributed to their self-esteem. As a child club advisor from Parsa and another community member involved with cultural events from Surkhet noted:

> *""She's not a boy, and she's going to play games!", that was the thought. And after that, I brought back two medals: one for third place and one for second place…It was being talked about [by the community], but I didn't pay much attention to it. And to my mother, I had already said: "No matter how much they discuss [me], your daughter will not go away, you please trust me, okay? And don't pay attention to anything else. Just say, no matter what, she is my daughter.""* (KII, Student and Child Club Advisor, F, Parsa, Nepal).

> *"Now, it's about doing what you can and showing your abilities. Just last year, we had a small sports event, and we took the students there. We didn't limit participation to just one person or a specific caste; it was about showing capability. At that event, the individuals were recognised, their families were recognised, and the community felt proud. That's why those who have the capability must participate"* (KII, Chairperson, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Other practices such as dowry and gender-based violence have been more difficult to change. More community members from Parsa than Surkhet mentioned the prevalence of practices such as dowry and gender-based violence. The incidence of such practices was also reported to be higher in Parsa according to the project baseline report (see subsection 5.1 and 5.2). A majority of the community members mentioned the practice of dowry continued, highlighting its deep-rootedness and complexity that is likely to be beyond the scope of education programmes alone to shift. As demonstrated by the comments from a Big Sister and a community member in Parsa:

> *"The dowry system is still prevailing in our community; it hasn't been eradicated till date"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

> *"The issue is complex. Even with education, there are improvements, but dowry practices continue. I believe that people often speak against dowry but do not act accordingly. While various programmes are conducted in schools to promote the elimination of dowry, these efforts are not effectively implemented in society. Despite efforts from influential people to stop it, dowry practices persist and even increase"* (KII, Community Member, F, Parsa, Nepal).

One reason mentioned for the continuation of dowry was fear of retaliation and violence towards girls, signalling the reinforcement between various attitudes and norms. As a female teacher from Parsa mentioned:

> *"If the dowry is not given from the daughter's side, the daughters will have to face torture. They do face it. We hear such kind of things. Such issues and tortures still exist. In Bara district, there was a girl. She was my niece's friend. She was murdered. It happened in Parwanipur due to the dowry system"* (KII, Teacher, F, Parsa, Nepal).

The wider political and social context may partly explain why there has been more limited change in practices like dowry and gender-based violence. For example, a social mobiliser from Parsa mentioned how issues like domestic violence demand dedicated attention and increased advocacy, including through other organisations and programmes, to shift attitudes and practices:[25]

> *"The perception that has not changed is domestic violence. While organisations are working on education, early marriage, child abuse, and child protection, domestic violence and violence against women are often considered extra work. This means these organisations may or may not address domestic violence. Just as we conduct programmes related to education, similar programmes targeting domestic violence could lead to improvements"* (KII, Social Mobiliser, F, Parsa, Nepal).

The factors discussed in this section make it challenging for a project to make sustained changes in what is still a relatively short time frame. This is detailed further in subsection 5.6 (on barriers to sustained change).

5.4.   Extent to which activities influencing community attitudes and practices are being sustained

The project contributed to sustainability through the continuation of its activities beyond its lifecycle, as well as continuation of the shifts in harmful attitudes and practices associated with girls' education, irrespective of whether project activities continued or not.

Project activities were largely reported to have continued beyond the project's lifecycle.[26] As shown in *Table 10* and elaborated further below, all activities were reported by the IP to have continued beyond the project's life in various ways. Community respondents also reported knowledge of the continuation of most of the project's activities: the Big Sister – Little Sister mentoring scheme, girls' clubs (which included life skills programmes, digital literacy and financial literacy), training of school management and governance bodies, and community awareness-raising activities. Some of the activities that have reportedly continued but were not mentioned by community respondents are likely to be ones that community respondents were less likely to have knowledge about, such as teacher training.

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[25] It should be noted that the province in which Parsa is located has the highest number of projects targeting domestic violence, which have been funded by international donors including the FCDO.
[26] As noted in *Annex B* (see Table 1 within the annex), the project closed in 2021. Data were collected in June-July 2024.

Table 10: Continuation of SfSE II activities beyond GEC II

| Level | Activity | Source mentioning continuation of activities: | | Way in which activity has continued: |
		IP	Community respondents	
Community	Big Sister – Little Sister mentoring scheme	Yes	Yes	Other programmes by the IP and previous Sisters within communities.
	Interactive street dramas	Yes	Yes	Programmes by other organisations.
	Community outreach	Yes	Yes	Other programmes by the IP.
	Girls' clubs	Yes	Yes	Government support, and other programmes by the IP.
	Sports and games	Yes	Yes	Local government and School Management Committees (SMCs) (e.g. through provision of sports materials in schools).
Individual	Bridge Courses for out-of-school girls	Yes	Not reported.	Continued by government.
School	Learning Support Classes	Yes	Not reported.	Other programmes by the IP.
	Teacher training	Yes	Yes	Government support.
	Training for school management and governance bodies	Yes	Yes	Government support.
	Girls' Education Network	Yes	Not reported.	Government support, as well as support from the IP through FCDO-supported and other education projects.
Government	Coaching for government staff	Yes	Not reported.	Not reported.

Note: These activities were taken from the Girls' Education Challenge website and validated during our interviews with the IP. These activities were also referred to during our data collection in the selected case study contexts.

Positive shifts in parental attitudes have continued beyond the end of the project. Big Sisters, Little Sisters, and community members reinforced these findings, discussing positive shifts. For example, an Aunty Champion from Parsa mentioned how household chores or responsibilities previously took time away from girls' learning but have now lessened, given increased support from parents and families:

> *"Earlier girls would often leave their studies, but now they are studying up to the 11th and 12th grades. Even those who weren't inclined to study are now continuing their education. Initially, those [Little] Sisters who used to come here wouldn't come to school because they had to do household chores like collecting grass and firewood, grazing goats, and such. But now, they are studying up to the 12th grade and standing on their own feet. Their thinking and behaviour have changed"* (KII, Aunty Champion, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Interviews and group discussions with community members further suggested changes in community attitudes that 'allowed' girls to study and pursue educational opportunities. These increases in awareness reportedly led to positive shifts in girls' enrolment in school that have continued till present times. For example, one student from Parsa mentioned during a focus group discussion:

> *"Girls were not allowed to study before and now girls are studying more and they are also going outside and getting to study as well… This is all because of Aasaman Nepal"* (FGD, Student, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Community-level activities have continued within selected communities under other initiatives implemented by the government. The project endline report noted that 'local governments across all project districts appeared optimistic about continuing the project activities, especially the Big Sister- Little Sister mentoring scheme' (FDM, 2021b). Interviews and group discussions with community members also provided some examples where efforts from local municipalities have continued activities. As an example, in Surkhet, girls' clubs were noted to have been continued through the support of the local ward, which provides funding to continue the clubs' community awareness-raising activities (KII, Adult Champion, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Local governments have also taken on board some of the initiatives. In Parsa, the Madhesh provincial government spearheaded the *Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao* (Educate the Girl, Save the Girl) programme, which has been further implemented by local governments. While the programme recently discontinued due to procurement irregularities, there is push for better planning and implementation given the socially transformative nature of the programme that had 'begun addressing some deep-rooted traditional practices to end discrimination between boys

and girls in the Madhesh Province' (INSEC, 2025, p. 125). Municipalities have also initiated efforts to promote girls' education through budget schemes or provision of in-kind support. For example, a Big Brother from Parsa noted:

> "…the local government is discussing initiatives to educate similar types of girls. They have proposed giving bicycles [to ease mobility]. To address early marriage, the vice chairperson has introduced a scheme called 'Kanyadaan' where girls who marry after 20 years of age and live in the municipality receive a gift of 45,000 rupees"
> and
> "programmes related to nutrition and children's rights for children under five were initiated by the organisation [Aasaman Nepal], and similar programmes are being conducted by our local government. However, these programmes are now running in accordance with the new laws that have come into effect" (KII, Big Brother, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Local municipalities have also incorporated some of these initiatives within their budgets, supporting sustainability of the activities. For example, one Big Sister in Surkhet described how, following the initiatives undertaken under the project for menstrual hygiene such as the provision of sanitary napkins, the local municipality earmarked funds for their provision in schools each year:

> "The management of adolescent girls, safe menstruation, and things about sanitary pads - we started that at that time, and now, as it was started at that time, after that, the municipality has also kept the budget in it every year. From the activity of that time, there are plenty of pads in the school and the disposal box for those pads are also ready" (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Similarly, a Big Brother in Parsa mentioned how initiatives undertaken by other organisations helped prioritise reproductive health and family planning as well as create awareness around child protection and children's rights, which have enabled regular attendance at schools:

> "…Here is an organisation called Nepal Reproductive Health Centre which also runs family planning programmes. Life Nepal is another organisation running programmes, and there is also UNDP involved. Life Nepal is currently running programmes related to health, child protection and children's rights" (KII, Big Brother, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Similarly, the Government of Nepal initiated a programme in 2020 to allocate a proportion of its budget towards the purchase and distribution of free sanitary pads to approximately 29,000 government-funded community schools, which reduced barriers associated with menstrual hygiene management and enabled girls' regular attendance at school (Maskey, 2021).

Parent-Teacher Associations and School Management Committees took on requests for in-kind support such as uniforms, stationery and hygiene items as mentioned by a respondent from Surkhet:

> "they are providing uniforms and stationery for the marginalised children. They are also helping by providing the stationery materials for conducting extra activities in the school. They are also helping with distribution of sanitary pads, and in maintenance work like if there is no furniture or if there are no materials related to science or if students need to learn computers or materials related to sports, then the School Management Committee will decide about it and request for it. And when that is done then they seem to be providing some help" (KII, School Management Committee Member, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Big Sisters developed their social capital through participation in the project enabling some of them to engage with government for continued support to girls' education. For example, a Big Sister from Surkhet mentioned how through her role with the government she is endeavouring to strengthen some of the ways in which the government continues to support girls' education, such as through various campaigns at the school-level:

> "…the municipality also has brought a campaign, 'Save the Girls programme' ... It is done by the municipality for the girls, in the school…The project is only for 2 years, 3 years or 5 years only, but the government adopted those things and included in the policy that it can sustain for a long time, so it has gone that way. And myself, now I am a member of the executive. I am planning by including it in the policy program we should take it [girls' education] forward. As I myself have worked on this [Sisters for Sisters] programme, I always put this issue on the priority list. So, that is also a good part from my side" (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

The IP, VSO, described how certain community-level activities such as the Big Sister – Little Sister mentoring scheme were adapted and scaled under other VSO projects. For example, the Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls with Education (ENGAGE) project in Nepal aimed to address socio-cultural norms that hinder girls' education, employing the Big Sister – Little Sister mentoring scheme at its heart to provide peer support to girls through the power of positive female role models. Likewise, the SAHAYTRA (together in Nepali) project implemented the Big Sister – Little Sister mentoring scheme to address complex socio-cultural barriers and improve equitable

quality education and transform gender roles and norms. Similarly, Strengthening Inclusive Education in Nepal (Sikai) Project (SIKAI means learning in Nepali), an inclusive education project that addressed the socio-cultural and political barriers faced by marginalised children in accessing basic education, also borrowed from the community-raising activities under the project, and in one district, has implemented the mentoring programme too. As a respondent in the interview with the IP mentioned:

> *"In SIKAI, we have adopted these community awareness-raising programmes. SIKAI is one of the methodologies of parental engagement, and to increase their engagement as well. So, we have almost two sets of different activities where parents are reached. We do in the district level, where parents come talk in a group at the district level, and in the community level, there are masses of people, those communities, everyone, almost everybody comes together, and they do horizontal learnings, what they have been doing, and what they should not be doing, after this orientation"* (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

Other organisations also adapted similar community-level activities to those implemented under this project. For example, a government official in Surkhet described how the street dramas were being continued by organisations other than VSO:

> *"…The interactive street drama is issue-based and different organisations are doing awareness related street drama. In society, there are Big Sisters and Little Sisters, they are also involved in what they can do, and how to do it"* (KII, Government Official, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Similarly, respondents from the IP mentioned how other organisations are being encouraged to adopt initiatives such as the Girls' and Inclusive Education Network (GIEN) developed under the project to help keep up the momentum for change:

> *"The government has adopted and developed one Girls' Inclusive Education Network strategy this year in the month of March…they have also developed a proper procedure and plan. And now, they have circulated to all international organisations to form the Girls' Inclusive Education Network in each and every municipality. And, at the same time, they have also allocated budget to train girls and Inclusive Education Network members"* (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

Further, community-level organisations and clubs have helped maintain the momentum for change in girls' education. For instance, children's clubs, which were set up by the project in supported schools, were noted to have continued in both districts. These children's clubs were reported to be led by an appointed schoolteacher and have received monetary support from the ward or municipality to continue. In Parsa, these clubs were described to be and conducting meetings, creating awareness amongst children (about education) and teaching them digital literacy (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal), whereas in Surkhet, these were noted to be focusing on raising awareness in communities (KII, Adult Champion, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

These sustained activities have been supplemented by informal efforts by individuals including teachers, Big Sisters and Little Sisters, Adult Champions and other community members. As an example, a Little Sister from Surkhet commented on how, despite the project activities coming to an end, community members such as teachers and Big Sisters have helped support girls' education through the provision of in-kind support:

> *"[The SfSE II] activities are not directly [running] but we have been helping students with a low financial background who desire to go to school by buying them all the necessary stationery items. Teachers are also helping students who work hard in school by providing them with stationary items and dresses for free. Little Sister during the project are grown up now and they also encourage children to go to school and Big Sister still contributes"* (KII, Little Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Big Sisters and Little Sisters who completed the programme have also informally continued their role as mentors (detailed further below) which, in a small number of instances, was requested by girls' families as well, and as advocates against early marriage. As one Big Sister from Surkhet described:

> *"In mentoring, we visited their house and talked to them [the families] as if they were our own family. Some of them even called us just like their daughter and asked us to visit their home even after the programme came to an end as they were getting to learn many useful things. We told them not to get involved in early marriage, to send them [girls] to school regularly and to give them proper time for study. So, they requested that we visit more, not just to me, but to the whole team..."* (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Some project activities have faced challenges due to limited support including funding as compared to when the project was active. For example, a member from a School Management Committee in Parsa stated:

> "*The way and the number in which it [the project] was running before had some impacts but is not running currently in the same way. And the way in which the organisation was running before, there is no such interest at present*" (KII, School Management Committee Member, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Similarly, although municipalities have taken up responsibilities for certain activities to some extent, respondents noted a difference between the management by municipalities in comparison with organisations like Aasaman Nepal and VSO. For instance, a Big Brother from Parsa spoke about the difference between the IP and the municipality with respect to reporting mechanisms:

> "*Reporting to the Nepal government is still happening, but the organisation [Aasaman Nepal] was more persistent. It was attracting people's attention and frequently organising meetings. In contrast, the municipality's reporting to the government seems to show less concern. However, the municipality continues to manage it*" (KII, M, Big Brother, Parsa, Nepal).

5.5. Factors enabling sustained changes in community attitudes and practices

The Big Sisters mentorship scheme was a key pathway for shifting harmful attitudes and practices. Most community members, Little Sisters, as well as Big Sisters described the latter's positive influence in shifting harmful community attitudes and practices towards girls, especially early marriage and the lack of importance associated with girls' education. These shifts in parents' and wider community members' attitudes and practices continued through ongoing engagement of the Big Sisters with Little Sisters and community members beyond the project's lifetime. For example, a Big Sister from Parsa noted how she continues to mentor her Little Sisters and encourages them to take a stand for their education before their parents:

> "*I meet them [Little Sisters] and ask how they are doing, and if they are studying or not…Then, I also tell them, "If you don't want to study anymore, then why would you sit idly at home? You should do sewing and cutting. If you do sewing and cutting in the future, then you will get 250 to 300 rupees for sewing one pair of clothes. That is a skill too so you should learn it too. If you want to study, then you can go and tell your mother and father that you want to study that specific subject and convince them. Prove them by being a better [version of] yourself. When you prove it to your parents, they will help you anyway. They are not like before, so they won't force you to do anything. They have changed a lot now".*" (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Improved self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem of Big Sisters enabled them to be change-makers within their communities (see *Box 8*). The Big Sisters have promoted positive change by experiencing change themselves and acting as role models**.** Community respondents and Big Sisters acknowledged the positive changes that participation in project activities brought to their own lives, making them more empowered, self-reliant, and respected members of society, all of which drove their contributions to communities, including gender role transformation and teaching roles. For example, one Big Sister from Parsa mentioned how, over time, they have gained recognition and respect in the community:

> "*Before, no one recognised us in the community…But now, when we go to the community, we are respected so much. We didn't get respect before and weren't even asked to sit down. Now, when we go, they say, "Sit down, go after drinking water only. Sit down, go after having lunch only. How is your programme doing?", and things like that…We are in the good books of the community*" (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

A Headteacher from a school in Surkhet acknowledged how the project not only helped empower Little Sisters but Big Sisters themselves through recognition of their work at the highest level, increasing social capital and career prospects:

> "*She [a Big Sister] got a national award. Those Big Sisters before, at that time, and who did work with the organisation [VSO/ Aasaman Nepal], also empowered themselves. They not only empowered the Little Sisters but, in the process of doing so, also empowered themselves. It seems to me that they are now involved in other organisations as well*" (KII, Headteacher, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Box 8: Project activities influencing Big Sisters' self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem

The personal experiences of two Big Sisters from Surkhet highlight how participation in the project not only enhanced their own confidence and ability to achieve, but also other young women around them such as their siblings and Little Sisters:

> "*Aasaman Nepal helped me to speak in public. I can go anywhere now due to Aasaman Nepal. I can go to all seven provinces and come back alone. I don't need to rely on my parents anymore. It has built my confidence to do anything because they say, "Wherever you go, go safely and return safely". I am capable - no one is 100% capable but I [still] feel I can do anything. I can also help others to study. If there's a programme, I can do it and conduct it as well. My sister is also*

> *engaged in a project with Aasaman Nepal related to gender violence and women's empowerment. She came with 16 days of training in Janakpur. She was afraid to go to the training. I said, "Don't feel scared. I was also scared at first but now I have moved forward and am able to speak". And she has taken the training in full confidence"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).
>
> *"SfS started in 2013 and at that time, I was pregnant. When I was a kid, I was interested in education and above that, in the children's sector [education]. I had a mentality that I should work with children, I had recently completed Grade 12…With the motivation that they [Aasaman Nepal] gave me, as I was already capable of doing something, I continued in that sector... At that time, I had four Little Sisters. I went to the family of those Little Sisters and discussed and shared my experiences. The biggest thing is giving motivation to study to adolescent girls as I told them to study a lot, and when I looked back at myself, I had completed Grade 12 at that time and had not joined B.Ed. as I also had family problems. When I told them to study, I thought that I also needed to study so I joined B.Ed. after 4 years of completing Grade 12. By seeing that, I was described as a role model: "even after struggling so much with the family also, if she [self] has studied, then we can also do it!". By looking at my life learning also, they have studied by being even more active. Those Little Sisters have studied properly, some are employed, and if some have gone outside by marrying, then also they have been doing good"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

The extent to which leadership and career opportunities opened up for Big Sisters and Adult Champions was not anticipated by the IPs. For example, an IP from the project mentioned:

> *"We had not really anticipated the changes…but after working in the first phase, we realised that there was a huge change with the Big Sisters and Adult Champions: they became role models, they were able to attend different jobs available locally, and also, they passed through different tests and got teaching jobs. Some of the Big Sisters even became representatives: they won the election, ward-level and palika-level, municipality-level election. They had also improved their learning and as they learned, they also had different skills, and they also had better opportunities and better options for their life. So that was the shift we had"* (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

Training and encouragement from local businesses played a role in empowering girls through employment opportunities. For example, a Headteacher from Parsa mentioned how local support (such as in sewing and tailoring) as well as municipality-provided training (such as beautification training courses), aid the cause of young women's employment:

> *"...there is a person named [NAME] who is a tailor in our village. He teaches tailoring. Not only that, additionally, the municipality has provided training in beauty parlours... through technical education. In that also, they [girls] have been given education. They have trained women for three months, making them self-reliant. Some have opened beauty parlours, and others have started tailoring businesses"* (KII, Headteacher, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Government provisions, such as policies and procedures encouraging greater women's participation and employment in administrative positions have also helped improve employment outcomes. As one teacher from Parsa noted in his interview:

> *"There are lots of opportunities these days. The Government of Nepal has provided provisions [for women's leadership positions] in the constitution. In every rural municipality, there are vacancies, and there is a policy to give priority to women for these vacancies"* (KII, Teacher, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Additionally, community respondents in Surkhet spoke about the reservation for 33% of municipality positions to be filled by women, encouraging more equal rights with their male colleagues.

Little Sisters who have been educated through the programme have also become a pathway for change. The project endline evaluation reported the several positive changes it brought to Little Sisters' lives, including improved learning and confidence, and a heightened interest in studies (FDM, 2021b). Interviews with Little Sisters reinforced these findings where they not only acknowledged the project's positive contribution to their own lives but also how they tried to support other girls' education and bring positive changes in their communities, thus creating a virtuous cycle. For example, one Little Sister from Surkhet stated:

> *"Yes, it [the positive change] was due to the project and I also somehow helped to bring about change by spreading awareness among my friends and family. I also taught things that I learned during programmes to my family, and it has also brought positive changes in me and provided me with new ways to view life"* (KII, Little Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Another Little Sister from Parsa mentioned how, working with her Big Sister, she was able to stop early marriages in her community:

"We have opposed three early marriages in the village. I met Big Sister, [NAME]. She [the girl who was about to get married] was our junior when I was in 9th grade; she was in 7th, and she was getting married. We went to her house to convince them [family], but they were like, "If she eloped, will you be responsible?" But we convinced them saying, "We can't take responsibility, but don't you know your daughter?" Her marriage was postponed till class 10" (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

The project inspired Big Sisters and Little Sisters to continue to drive positive change through their own initiative. For instance, the project endline evaluation noted that the Big Sisters were willing to continue in their roles even when provided minimum remuneration (FDM, 2021b). For example, one Big Sister from Surkhet mentioned:

"We are still doing the related work in the community, even though we have already left the project. Still, now, we are working in the field of early marriage. If girls drop out now also, we visit them and do the counselling. Another good thing is that during that time, the Little Sisters whom we had used to be a Big Sister to, now they are being used as a middle sister…they have restarted to mentor other Little Sisters. [They say] Like, "Oh, this used to be done to us by our Big Sister; now we should do it." They themselves have become conscious at some places" (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Community ownership during the design and implementation phase of the project encouraged sustained changes in attitudes and practices. For example, one of the respondents in the interview with the IP team mentioned how communities' needs and ownership were prioritised during the design phase, as well as the downstream or local IP's connections with communities for implementation:

"…this project was designed after six-month thorough analysis and research in education to develop an innovative project. Even girls were asked to provide input. When we had had a discussion with the girls, we had asked some girls to write, some girls to draw. When they had drawn the pictures, they drew beautiful picture of the bigger, elder sister. And we felt, "Oh, they need more support for promoting their self-esteem and empowerment" …And next was the project structure, support mechanism for partner and partner's connection with the community. They were also very strong, lot of experience mobilising the community" (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

The 'brand' Sisters for Sisters' Education helped keep the momentum for change, as noted by the IP.

"Another enabler is the project design: the brand, Sisters for Sisters, that project branding was owned by everyone. They [people] forgot so many things, but they still remember Sisters for Sisters" (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

Involving community members in sensitisation on harmful attitudes and practices towards girls enabled them to continue to play a role in shifting them. For example, a ward committee member from Surkhet noted how she had been working with other programmes and organisations against harmful practices such as early marriage:

"I played a very important role in the matter of early marriage…I have been working actively to reduce it and encouraged programmes to raise awareness among people against it. Next, I always say to every organisation that it should be a group effort to work against early marriage. This campaign of mine is going on today and will be continued in the future as well because early marriage is the foremost deformity of our community" (KII, Ward Committee Member, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

A religious leader in Surkhet showed confidence in the continuation of such efforts and their positive influences in the future:

"Those who have played a vital role in society will surely play a progressive role in the future. The transformation they have done for children and for education through different organisations, in the coming future, the opportunities they [children] will get, [these changes] will surely do [last]" (KII, religious leader, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Collaboration between VSO, other organisations and government-led initiatives enabled the momentum of positive change. For example, during the interview with the VSO team, respondents mentioned how they tried to 'connect the dots' between other campaigns for girls within the education sector as well as across sectors to enhance impact:

"We were trying to really use connecting different dots. So local, provincial, and national bodies, everyone is connected to the project. The national campaign for education and the international organisations working in education, they are also connected. VSO sit in the technical working group of health, VSO was also leading education, also, VSO was leading the national campaign for education, it was also leading those movements, those campaigns. And we were also working with the government for the policy. So, it was really trying to connect different dots, and that was another enabler" (KII, IP, SfSE II, Nepal).

Factors in the wider political context, such as laws against early marriage and those encouraging female representation, were also enablers of sustained change, as cited by community respondents. For example, one ward committee member from Surkhet mentioned:

> *"There was a concept that men should be involved in work outside the house, be it representation; they felt girls would not be able to do anything and boys should be provided opportunities. But now, even the Government of Nepal has brought such provisions that required participation of women in representation as well. So, now the people feel the women will be able to do something through representation as well."* (KII, Ward Committee Member, F, Surkhet, Nepal)

5.6. Barriers to sustained changes in community attitudes and practices

Even where project activities encouraged changes in community attitudes and practices, poverty remained a key barrier. As described by a Big Brother from Parsa:

> *"Poverty remains a significant barrier. Even with the desire to educate their children, many parents face challenges due to unstable financial conditions. It would be beneficial if programmes that support financial stability for parents were also introduced, as this would help overcome one of the main obstacles to [girls'] education"* (KII, Big Brother, M, Parsa, Nepal).

A religious leader in Surkhet also described how poverty compounds disadvantage for people belonging to marginalised communities:

> *"Being Dalit is one of the reasons, and another is because of the economic condition, they are unable to move forward"* (KII, religious leader, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Poverty was a barrier where initiatives did not aim to reduce the economic burden of education. Community members, Big Sisters, and Little Sisters highlighted how issues of poverty and socioeconomic status have inhibited positive sustained shifts, especially in reducing early marriages and the lack of value associated with girls' education. As one Little Sister in Parsa explained:

> *"In many households and communities, it is still the same because girls are married off at a very young age. The programme was used to ensure that at least girls were educated up to the tenth grade. Now, when they are studying in the fourth or fifth grade, they are married off by ten years. Parents are not interested in educating them. Due to that [SfSE II] programme, children were compelled to study. If parents were unable to afford education, the organisation would bear the cost of their education. Because that programme no longer exists, adolescents and children are deprived of education"* (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Deep-rooted norms associated with religion and custom are further identified as barriers to sustained change. Focus group discussions and interviews conducted with community members provided examples of how certain harmful attitudes and practices towards girls such as traditional beliefs regarding menstruation and menstrual stigma have persisted in the selected communities. A community group member from Surkhet noted:

> *"I will talk about my sister-in-law. Day before yesterday, her daughter was menstruating. The same daughter gave water to her mother but God didn't accept it. Immediately, an apology was made to the god by stating what had happened was done by a child unknowingly. Just after the apology, the god's spirit left her. She was completely shaking…God says do not sleep inside the house, build a hut outside and sleep there, and do not touch me until the seven days of menstruation are over. If touched, you will have god's spirit within yourself. So, I apologised to the god saying, "God, forgive her for whatever she has done". Then, I sprinkled cow's urine and gold washed water and placed it there. She was fine in that exact moment – it did not even take five minutes! After the mistake was accepted and an apology was made, the god's spirit left her. She couldn't do it as her body was shaking. So, I apologised by saying, "A mistake has happened, but forgive us, we'll not repeat it. We'll follow our traditions and rituals"* (KII, Farming Group Member, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

A Little Sister from Parsa also spoke about dowry being deeply entrenched in certain communities and thus acting as inhibitors to sustained changes:

> *"In our caste, in Madhesi, dowry is never going to end. In Nepali [caste], dowry is not taken and in our Madhesi community, dowry never ends. It has not ended now, and it is not going to end in the future too. The main thing that needs to change is people's thinking and it's going to end only after that…everything is heard from one ear and thrown out from the other ear"* (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Similarly, a government official in Parsa noted how community attitudes towards the 'benefits' of marrying earlier, particularly amongst certain provincial communities, prevent families from waiting until girls attain the legal age to get married:

> "*While people are aware of the law requiring marriage only after the age of 20, few can wait until then. In Madesh, the older a girl is at marriage, the higher the dowry. Older daughters are less likely to marry, and significant dowries are required for them. The community still holds the mindset that marrying a girl off young means she remains 'untouched' by others…While Chhetri and Brahmin communities in Madesh do not follow this practice, the indigenous castes of Madesh still retain this culture*" (KII, Government Official, M, Parsa, Nepal).

The duration of projects was identified as being insufficient to shift deep-rooted norms. A social worker from Parsa added that had the project run for a few more years, awareness on issues such as early marriage would have been better:

> "*There are still secret child marriages (by hiding). Sometimes violence against women still happens. If these programmes continue for two to four more years in the village, people would understand better…I think that project should be run for a long time. In Madhesi culture, to change a generation, it takes a minimum of 10 to 15 years. So, the project should be strengthened and extended*" (KII, Social Worker, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Older community members and government officials sometimes perpetuate deep-rooted practices related to discrimination on the basis of caste inhibiting sustained changed. For example, some Dalit community respondents felt little or no change in community attitudes and practices relating to caste-based discrimination. A Dalit community member from Surkhet shared her perspective about the unlikelihood of caste-based discrimination changing:

> "*I think this untouchability won't change at all. But it should change. Because I feel different, like I feel that I am separated so much. They eat the same thing and I eat the same thing too. It's all the same. If we go to the marriage and puja [prayer] together, then you go inside and eat while I stay outside and eat outside. I feel very different at heart because of that. I am a Dalit and if my son is getting married, then I have to give a separate kitchen to upper-caste people. It is my son's marriage, but I can't go and touch anything in that kitchen. It feels different when that happens; if that were made the same for everyone, then it would be nice. When and how will it be? I feel very awkward about it*" (KII, Community Member, F, Parsa, Nepal).

She further added that in spite of legal support for Dalit communities that penalises practicing 'untouchability', the resistance to change is perpetuated by communities and government officials:

> "*It is against the law to practice untouchability, and those who do so will face legal penalties. There's a lot of rules like that, but the change doesn't happen from the people. It doesn't change from the people… The people who are in government, like ward chairpersons and ward committees, are the ones who are to do these kinds of things [caste-based discrimination]. But they say, "We don't do it. The old people are the ones who do it. We sit anywhere and eat anywhere too. We don't practice untouchability. The old people do it. What can we do about it? It is something that has been practiced for a long time. And they don't stop following it. What can we do?" So, because of that, we also stay marginalised*" (KII, Community Member, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Financial constraints potentially hindered the longer-term viability of girls' education outcomes, particularly given lack of external funding or municipality support. As described by a staff member of an international organisation in Surkhet:

> "*If that level of resources can be generated, it will continue but if those resources cannot be managed and generated, then the community cannot voluntarily take ownership and move ahead*" (KII, Staff Member, International Organisation, M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Similarly, a shareholder at the Multi-Purpose Cooperative Limited from Surkhet added:

> "*The day their project duration ends or when their project budget finishes, the project also ends and they won't be able to do it even if they say they will do it. And if they want to do it, then they will have to fund themselves and that is going to be difficult…When the project was there, it used to be loud and effective, but when the project ended, it all vanished as well…*" (KII, Shareholder (Multi-Purpose Cooperative Limited), M, Surkhet, Nepal).

In some cases, insufficient uptake by local-level officials as well as insufficient resources hindered the continuation of activities. As described by a student in Parsa:

> "*The rural municipalities have to take responsibility for these tasks. The rural municipality chairs and community leaders need to ensure that these programmes [project activities] are maintained. For example, there are 14 Plus Two [11th and 12th grade-equivalent] colleges in the municipality, and seven of them are in the village. Girls or women who cannot go to Birgunj [district capital] for education can study at these free Plus Two colleges*" (KII, Student, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Similarly, a teacher from Parsa mentioned:

> "*It would be easier if the concern was handled through education-related channels like the ward office or municipality rather than through the community. In the community, the situation is such that if my child is not attending school, it doesn't matter much to me or to others. Some people don't care, and there are calls to change the school and improve the results*" (KII, Teacher, M, Parsa, Nepal)

Municipality efforts were largely focused on developing infrastructure rather than improving teachers' capacity or investing in quality education. As described by a government official:

> "*The municipality has the budget but there is no focus on human development… There is still a strong focus on infrastructure. As a result, human development is lacking*" (KII, Government Official, M, Parsa, Nepal).

This was further supported by the staff member of the international organisation in Surkhet who stated that:

> "*…School is in trouble itself. Why? There is a problem at school that there aren't enough posts. In school, the state hasn't provided that level of resources. Municipality, they don't have income, Municipality, they are focused only on infrastructure, they don't keep education as a priority. To work on education there is only one person, and that one person: how many places will s/he work? And they are also trying to find development sources and if you wish us to continue this work in the school, then again comes back to resources. Whoever has resources, they can do this kind of awareness programme…*" (KII, Staff Member (International Organisation), M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Weak law enforcement was a hindrance to shifting community attitudes and practices. While government laws against certain harmful practices such early marriage were appreciated by community respondents, weak law enforcement was considered an inhibitor of change for certain others by some individuals. For example, when discussing gender-based violence, a Big Sister in Surkhet described how little action by the police in a reported incident worsened the victim's situation:

> "*There are many examples but in one case that I saw, she [the girl] used to be beaten frequently so she filed a case. When taken to the police station, he [the husband] committed to never doing it [beating] but repeated the same thing after coming back. She filed a case 2-3 times, but the same thing repeated itself time and again. Now, they do not have a good relationship and the husband does not treat her well, saying, "You filed a case against me". She says she is facing many difficulties*" (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Women's limited participation in civic activities as well as lack of access to and ownership of financial resources posed a challenge to positive shifts in community attitudes and practices. A staff member representing an international organisation in Surkhet mentioned:

> "*And today, too, those challenges that we faced at the beginning have not been eliminated…And the reason for that is the area, culture, and tradition, and this does not only hold for Karnali Province or Surkhet District, it is for everywhere. It includes all the women as it comes down to women's access to land, access to resources, access to the economy, and their own rights. All these things matter*" (KII, Staff Member (International Organisation), M, Surkhet, Nepal).

Where Big Sisters and Little Sisters' move away from their communities, this hampered sustainability. For example, a Big Sister from Surkhet mentioned:

> "*There are Big Sisters right now, and they follow up. It's been done like that so far. It's not sure that all the Big Sisters will always be here, as many Big Sisters are unmarried too. When they get married and go, then the area where they are working will be empty. So, there's no guarantee about a long time, but so far, it has been good. I think it may continue for a long time, but it won't be as good as it is now*" (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Similarly, another Big Sister from Surkhet mentioned:

> "*Now Little Sisters aren't here but [their] other small sisters are…If those Little Sisters had seen other small sisters, now instead of us being Big Sisters, they would be the Big Sisters as they have understood many things. Little Sisters aren't here. [Only] some Little Sisters are here in the village – since they could gather and*

those Little Sisters would look after other small sisters and make them aware, which would have been better" (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Even where Big Sisters and Little Sisters remain present within communities and make efforts to shift harmful norms such as early marriage, parental beliefs can continue to inhibit positive change. For example, some Big Sisters and Little Sisters recounted experiences of being confronted or shouted at for trying to influence attitudes towards early marriage:

"We go and tell them [parents] to stop doing these things [early marriages] and tell them to educate their daughters up to Grade 12, like we study. But they shout at us and tell us, "You are clever and be clever, but our daughter will not read, she will be as she is". Then we stop ourselves from saying anything further. We feel bad, that's why we don't say anything further" (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

"They [parents] did not support us when we went there. As I said earlier, at first they used to say they were against early marriage, but once it was actually happening in their own house, they did not support us in stopping it. The family of the girl used to call and threaten us" (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

In Surkhet, a member from a Mothers' Group perceived that despite the project's efforts to educate girls against early marriage, elopement seemed to have increased after the project's implementation:

"girls are getting married quickly, even the ones from school. Global Action Nepal taught them well, but they [the girls] took it the wrong way. Global Action Nepal taught them not to marry, child marriage should be controlled. But they marry even faster and faster, since staying at Global Action Nepal ... 13–14-year-olds are getting married. Some 12-year-olds are getting married. Is this the age to get married? The boy is 14-15 years old and the girl is 13 years old, just got married recently... child marriage happens. After child marriage, they take away their daughters in this way and bring them back by telling them not to do this anymore. But she goes away again. And then what can be done? There are many cases like these" (KII, Mother's Group Member, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

A small number of girls demonstrated a preference to pursue employment rather than continuing their education. For example, in Parsa, community members as well as a Little Sister spoke about the lack of interest in education by young girls themselves as they demonstrated a preference to start working earlier where they would eventually have to work (later), and earn income:

"*But girls in my village do not study. I don't see them going to school. Whenever I go to school, I see them at home. They are small in age. They all go to work in tobacco...Because they say that what will they do by studying? They have to blow the stove. Therefore, better not to study. Why not blow the stove from the very beginning?...This is the perspective of girls. Their perspective is very bad. They don't want to study..."* (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

The momentum for sustained implementation was inhibited due to the lack of presence of local organisations to continue the activities. As mentioned by a Big Brother in Parsa:

"It would be beneficial if local representatives or organisations like Aasaman Nepal continue to manage these initiatives. Alternatively, other NGOs could also run programmes related to education, early marriage, child rights, girls' education, and nutrition within the community" (KII, Big Brother, M, Parsa, Nepal).

A former female Adult Champion from Surkhet and Little Sister from Parsa also spoke about how the absence of organisations to continue the activities had led to less frequent community meetings:

"When the projects were in operation, we had discussions monthly and talked about problems and their solutions. Now, we don't do monthly meetings, and we don't meet anymore…Everyone is busy with their own work, life and everything. When we see each other briefly now and then, everyone might feel that these things need to be done, but they have not been done so far" (KII, Adult Champion, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

"…when Aasaman Nepal told the Big Sisters to do some work, then all those works were being done on time as the Big Sisters were doing it. And now, Big Sisters haven't come so often either. So, I think that work has stopped there. If the Big Sisters [regularly] come again, then all those works would be regular too" (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Not all communities had the same level of interest and participation in sustaining positive change as noted by a teacher from Parsa:

> *"There are different types of people, and some may show interest. What we see is that in the community, there are very few, only 2-4 people, who appear to be somewhat positive, while the majority of our children are not there, and it seems like people come with a "What does it matter to us?" attitude. People who have done hard work, invested some money in the school, they have thought for the school"* (KII, Teacher, M, Parsa, Nepal).

5.7. Shifts in community attitudes and practices contributing to longer-term viability of girls' outcomes

This section identifies the extent to which sustained changes in community attitudes and practices have the viability of positively influencing longer-term outcomes for girls' education. Identifying the extent to which changes in outcomes have sustained requires a longer time frame beyond the scope of this study. In addition, there are limitations in attributing changes to specific project activities, or the project itself, due to the holistic package of activities offered, as well as the presence of other organisations working in the districts, and government reform. As a government official stated:

> *"Sometimes, when I reflect critically, I feel that the changes aren't solely due to GEC. I wouldn't attribute all the changes to it, and I can't say it's the only factor. They [VSO] have done a great job by incorporating the Big Sister programme and organising ceremonies during the project phase. Their efforts to improve leadership, raise community awareness, and prevent early marriage have been commendable. However, while GEC has contributed significantly, we can't attribute all the credit to them alone, support from various sources is crucial. For instance, in the context of menstrual health and hygiene, the government also plays a role"* (KII, Government Official, F, Nepal).

The section explores how shifts in community attitudes and practices resulting from project activities have contributed to longer-term viability for education and life outcomes for future generations, including through the empowerment of beneficiary girls.

Participation in project activities contributed to Little Sisters' self-esteem and self-efficacy. The endline evaluation described positive influences in girls' ability to decide on continuing school in subsequent years, age of choice to get married, the decision to work after completing studies, and the type of work to opt for after completing studies (FDM, 2021b). These changes have aided their agency, education and employment as well as everyday life, as noted by a Little Sister from Parsa:

> *"When I go to teach in boarding school on foot, villagers ask where she goes on foot. I don't ride a bicycle. I don't know how to ride a bicycle; therefore, I go on foot. When I go to teach, some boys standing at a nearby shop laugh at me and say something. I don't say anything to them. I think they are none of my concern, but I [myself] am. I go to teach and come home"* (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Project activities resulted in improved transition into further education and employment. According to the project endline evaluation, 94% of the girls supported by the project were found to have successfully transitioned to either the next stage of education or employment (FDM, 2021b). Interviews and group discussions with community members, Big Sisters, and Little Sisters reinforced these findings. As an example, one female community member from Parsa mentioned a higher number of girls progressing to secondary schooling as a result of the project:

> *"Everything [after the project] changed; they became sharp in studying; everything improved in studies; now they are studying; some are doing Grade 12, most of them are studying; only a few are not studying. Some are studying in government schools if they don't have money. Some go by bus to Birgunj to study. They go to Hari Khetan [College Name], Thakuram [College Name], some go to Ram Nagari to do Grade 11/12"* (KII, Community Member, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Similarly, Big Sisters from Parsa mentioned how girls and boys are continuing their education till Grade 12, or in pursuit of tertiary education, even if needing to travel to other towns or districts:

> *"[Now] a significant number of boys and girls continue their studies up to the 12th grade. Even those who have completed 12th grade have not married off early, and many continue their education"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

> *"…when we started working in Aasaman Nepal, nobody's daughter was studying in Birgunj. We know whose daughter is studying, and then we have started the tradition of sending the daughter to study outside the village. After that, people used to send their daughters wherever they wanted to go for training… the daughters got freedom after that"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

The project helped empower girls by aiding their transition into vocational training or other specialised fields in preparation for employment opportunities. As an Aunty Champion from Surkhet described:

> *"…some of the Little Sisters went to study pharmacy; some other Little Sisters are doing some kind of training; and some are studying and preparing to go to Japan. Some are preparing to join the army or police. A lot of them are in the process of getting employed. They have developed a feeling of, "We must do something!""* (KII, Aunty Champion, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

The project noted positive changes in girls' employment outcomes in both districts which supported their empowerment. For instance, the endline evaluation reported that 94% of enrolled girls on a transitional pathway to education and employment successfully transitioned (FDM, 2021b). [27] Community respondents, Big Sisters and Little Sisters reported diverse employment prospects to include 'office-jobs' including those in teaching or engineering, joining the police or army, as well as young women taking on political leadership positions within the municipality. They also noted a small number of instances of young women moving to district capitals, Kathmandu, and even abroad. As one Big Sister from Parsa described in her interview:

> *"Some of them did parlour training and some are making pads and using them, and some do sewing and cutting, and a lot of them have not stopped studying. Some are studying in Birgunj and that is because they are now able to speak up and are courageous. Some have passed the police exams, and some are working in hotels. Some people didn't allow their daughters to work like that, but now they feel secure and safe and know that they can speak up for themselves, so they are going to hotels and working there. These are the changes that are taking place. Some have become nurses, and some have gone to Japan. These are the changes in them"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

These positive changes in employment outcomes also empowered young women and people from marginalised communities,[28] such as the Madheshi community in Parsa**.** For example, a staff member from the organisation implementing the project locally in Parsa mentioned:

> *"For instance, if you look at the municipality, ten years ago, women from the community or the Madhesi community were not employed, and there were only one or two jobs available here and there. But now, if you look at the municipality, there are at least four or five women from our Madhesi community working in every municipality. There are now staff nurses, procurement clerks, and other positions filled by them in every municipality...Women from our Madhesi community who worked with us are now working in the army and police...There are many such examples"* (KII, Staff member (Aasaman Nepal), M, Parsa, Nepal).

Girls from poorer families were also reported to have improved employment opportunities. One Big Sister from Surkhet stated:

> *"I cannot say 100 percent [of] Little Sisters but some percent who were extremely poor at that time... are now employed. They have been able to study till bachelors. Which is a good practice and a positive impact that is created by this programme"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Surkhet, Nepal).

Shifts in attitudes were reported to contribute to positive changes in employment outcomes, particularly those regarding the importance of education and reduced restrictions on mobility outside the home. This was noted to be an achievement in the endline evaluation report, wherein girls' increased decision-making power and parental support contributed to a higher number of girls deciding their prospects regarding the pursuit of higher education and employment (FDM, 2021b). A Little Sister from Parsa described the changes in parental support towards employment:

> *"Before, I used to say I want to be in Nepal Police, and they used to say the daughter should not do it. They used to say there will be bad thinking and in the future you will not get married. Our Big Sister went and made them understand that this will not happen and let your daughter go there. Now my mother and father are very good at thinking. People learn from looking at others. They were made to understand. And they also learnt from looking at the daughters of neighbours and all. They say "you can become [a police officer] and there is nothing". Before, whatever thought was there, it was there. Now, they have good thoughts, and we are also educated. And that "nothing will happen, you should move ahead, and you can become that [police officer]"."* (KII, Little Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

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[27] These pathways are linked with the re-enrolment in formal or non-formal education, including vocational training or involvement in technical training, safe employment, and self-employment (FDM, 2021b, p.68).

[28] In the ENGAGE project which is implemented by VSO as part of the LNGB Window under GEC II, young women with disabilities are supported through livelihoods training.

Similarly, some community respondents described how, since the project was introduced, daughters-in-law were no longer confined to homes and were instead free to pursue education or employment. One Social Mobiliser at Aasaman Nepal from Parsa mentioned:

> *"Society used to be very strict with daughters-in-law. People didn't allow them to go outside the home for fear that others in society would see them and make judgments. Daughters-in-law were expected to stay inside and cover themselves with a veil...Now, people allow their daughters-in-law to study as much as they want and pursue the jobs they desire"* (KII, Social Mobiliser (Aasaman Nepal), F, Parsa, Nepal).

By improving girls' education and empowerment, the project has created a virtuous cycle perpetuating positive shifts in community attitudes and practices, as noted by Big Sisters, Little Sisters, and community respondents. For example, commenting on the continuity of positive changes such as a reduction in early marriages and prioritisation of girls' sexual and reproductive health, a Big Sister from Parsa noted:

> *"It is as if we have given continuity to everything that we have set as the main goal. Now, Little Sisters have to encourage all the children to get an education including those who were not admitted to the school. It seems that all the things related to health that we have trained have been implemented"* (KII, Big Sister, F, Parsa, Nepal).

Most community respondents mentioned how positive changes in girls' education increased the likelihood of positive shifts in attitudes and practices across generations. For example, a teacher from Parsa noted how the project had helped create awareness around educating girls that is not only likely to continue but it is now an important consideration in marriage proposals, as opposed to forcing girls to drop out of school and marry early to lower the dowry burden as noted previously:

> *"Whether the project continues or not, it has already provided support. Even without it, this progress will continue. Everyone has understood that without education, nothing is possible. Education is essential. Because now people are [also] looking for 12ᵗʰ pass at the time of marriage. "Is the daughter studying in 12ᵗʰ grade? Yes!, then it's ok. She hasn't studied. Leave it. There's no other option"."* (KII, Teacher, M, Parsa, Nepal).

Once the benefits of education are recognised, this awareness can seldom be 'undone'. This was noted by some respondents as a key factor in lending continuity to positive changes. A teacher from Parsa stated in his interview:

> *"[The community] It won't go backward. Won't go backward…Once people have moved forward and grabbed education, they can't think of going backward and not educating their children. It might progress slowly, if projects come along, the speed can increase, and progress can happen more quickly. Even if it is slow, it will continue to move forward but won't go backward"* (KII, Teacher, M, Parsa, Nepal).

6.   Sustainability in the Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education Project in Zimbabwe

This section reports findings from the second case study project, the Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education project, in Zimbabwe (April 2017 – January 2022) on Research Questions 1, 2, 3 and 4. The project, implemented by CAMFED International, was implemented in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania as a multi-country initiative. For the purposes of the second case study, data collection (between September-October 2024) and analysis focused on Zimbabwe.

The section explores:

- The extent to which the project aimed to influence community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education (**RQ1),** and the extent to which project activities continued from GEC I into GEC II, and beyond **(RQ2)**;

- The extent and the pathways through which project activities have influenced community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education. This includes the role of young women named Learner Guides who mentored the girls enrolled in the CAMFED project as agents of change **(RQ3)**; and

- Whether and how changes in community attitudes and practices have contributed to establishing a foundation for longer term viability of girls' education outcomes **(RQ4)**.

The key findings from the analysis are summarised in *Box 9*:

Box 9: Summary of findings from the UVC-GE project implemented by CAMFED International in Zimbabwe

- **All project activities at the community-level continued from the first phase of GEC into the second, and beyond.** These community-level activities included the Learner Guide and Transition Guide programmes whereby young women mentored girls enrolled in the CAMFED project; community awareness-raising and capacity strengthening to promote girls' education and address harmful practices like early marriage through Community Development Committees, Parent and Mother Support Groups, School Management Committees, Male Champions and engagement with influential local stakeholders; the CAMFED Alumnae Association (CAMA) alumnae network; and, support to community members to set up businesses.

- **Overall, the project activities were reported to have had a positive influence in shifting harmful attitudes and practices associated with girls' education.** Learner Guides and Transition Guides (part of the broader CAMA network) were particularly key to helping create awareness regarding harmful practices against girls and supporting girls in school or on their pathways to transition out of school. Community groups such as Mother Support Groups and Teacher Mentors also played a facilitative role. The project activities were reported to have encouraged girls' education through reducing early marriage and early pregnancy, although to a varying extent. There was also some reported evidence of project activities making positive shifts with respect to gender-based violence and sexual abuse.

- **Several enablers allowed the positive changes in community attitudes and practices to sustain.** These included, among others, the Learner Guides serving as agents of change within their communities, continued engagement via community group structures and members such as community chiefs and traditional leaders, alignment between project activities and government policy to re-enrol girls in school after early pregnancy, law enforcement against early marriage, CAMFED's reputation and trust within communities, deliberate efforts by CAMFED to incorporate sustainability into the project design, and the role of government departments and other organisations in enabling positive change.

- **The shifts in community attitudes and practices resulting from project activities have contributed to sustained improvements in education and life outcomes for future generations, including through the empowerment of beneficiary girls.** Being inspired by beneficiary young women as role models in their respective communities, future generations are likely to benefit by sending their daughters to school, and continuing to act against harmful attitudes and practices, creating a virtuous cycle.

- **Barriers to sustained changes in community attitudes and practices include** household poverty, continued sexual exploitation of girls and traditional views towards women (including the practice of their early marriage), and natural disasters such as droughts and pandemics. The deep rootedness of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours can require more time to change.

6.1.   Prevailing attitudes and practices associated with girls' education

Early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and attitudes viewing girls' education as irrelevant or inappropriate, given stereotypical gender roles, were common in the selected communities. The project baseline and midline

evaluations described how discriminatory gender and social norms, including expectations of early marriage, posed a barrier to girls' education in Zimbabwe, particularly during transition from one stage of education to the next and from school into adulthood (CIDT, 2018; CIDT, 2020).[29] As a specific example, religious or traditional beliefs such as those among the Apostolic sect[30] encouraged early marriages of young girls with older men and hindered girls' education, as described by community members and Learner Guides:

> *"Religious beliefs, for example, the church doctrine from the Johane Marange church [Apostolic sect], blocked girls' and young women's educational opportunities because girls who were supposed to be attending school were given to marriage to old men in the church resulting in an increase in school dropouts, early marriages and early pregnancies"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Parents tended to prioritise boys' education over girls', viewing them as ultimate breadwinners. They associated low returns with girls' education as they would eventually get married and become part of another family. Young girls were stereotypically viewed in domestic roles rather than work or leadership and expected to stay at home. As one Learner Guide responded to a question regarding prevailing attitudes and practices prior to the project's implementation:

> *"…girls and young women were often denied access to education due to societal expectations that they would marry early and take on domestic roles. Sending them to school was considered unnecessary, as their primary value was perceived to be in benefiting their future husbands' families rather than their own. As a result, girls and young women faced significant social stigma and marginalisation. While boys were afforded educational opportunities, girls were largely restricted to domestic training, perpetuating a cycle of inequality".* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe)

Similarly, a member of a Mother Support Group and Child Protection Committee mentioned limited leadership roles for girls and young women in the selected communities:

> *"Coming to leadership opportunities, girls were not allowed to partake in such positions, these positions were reserved for males in the community"* (KII, Mother Support Group Member, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Household-level factors such as poverty further hindered girls' education. As found in the project baseline and midline evaluations and reinforced through the interviews with community members and Learner Guides in our study, household poverty played a significant role in deterring girls' education and forcing them into early marriage (CIDT, 2018; CIDT, 2020). For instance, community members and Learner Guides interviewed for our study described how, driven by hunger and poverty, parents would force their girls into early marriage in exchange for a bride price such as grain or livestock:

> *"In the past, girls had limited access to education. They were often denied the opportunity to attend school or were forced to drop out due to hunger and poverty. Parents frequently chose to withdraw their daughters from school and gave them to wealthier families in exchange for grains or livestock"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The risk that girls may bring 'shame' to their families due to physical exploitation and/or impregnation by boys whilst attending school was another reason for not sending girls to schools. As one Learner Guide from Binga mentioned:

> *"In the past, girls were not allowed to attend secondary school. They were only allowed to attend primary school because it was believed that at secondary level they would be mature enough to fall pregnant and that secondary school made girls misbehave. Falling pregnant out of marriage was seen as an embarrassment, therefore parents preferred keeping their daughters at home so that they could marry properly without falling pregnant"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

An insufficient number of qualified teachers (especially female teachers), teachers' gender discrimination and stereotypical attitudes, and corporal punishment, impeded girls' abilities to study in school, as indicated in the project baseline evaluation report (CIDT, 2018).

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[29] According to a recent UNICEF report, the factors affecting adolescent pregnancy among the sexually active in Zimbabwe include age (i.e. higher among 15-19 year olds), settlement type, religion (e.g. higher for the Apostolic sect compared with other Christian populations), level of education, presence of a caregiver, experience of violence, knowledge of SRHR, access to condoms, access to sexuality education, access to information on sexual rights, use of condoms, and discussion with parents or guardians on menstruation and abstinence (UNICEF, 2023b).

[30] Per the Inter-Censal Demographic Survey of Zimbabwe (2017), 84 percent of the country's population age 15 years and above are Christian while 1 percent are Muslim. Of the Christians, the Apostolic sect constitutes the largest proportion (34 percent), followed by Pentecostal (20 percent) and Protestant (16 percent) (UNFPA and ZimStat, 2017).

Harassment by boys, and sexual abuse and violence in school or on the way were reported as having a negative impact on girls' attendance and retention in schools. For example, a Learner Guide from Hurungwe mentioned how girls would drop out due to teasing by boys at the time of menstruation:

> *"The few [girls] who managed to go beyond Grade 7 were met with other challenges at secondary school and were forced to drop out of school. For example, they did not have sanitary pads so when boys laughed at them they dropped out of school..."* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

6.2.   Overview of project activities aiming to shift attitudes and practices

The project followed the same cohort of marginalised girls from the first phase of the GEC (2013-2017), through their transition into secondary school and beyond (PMA & CAMFED, 2022).[31] The UVC-GE project was implemented in 24 rural districts in Zimbabwe mostly among marginalised girls, including girls whose parents were unable to pay fees; those with the inability to have regular meals at home; those belonging to low income households; with high chore or care burden; unfair treatment by guardians; and the need to work to earn money (CIDT, 2018). The project activities were designed to support improved learning outcomes, facilitate the successful transition of marginalised girls to, through and beyond secondary school, and to work with key stakeholders to sustainably improve the learning environment and welfare of marginalised girls. One of the key project activities included the continued delivery of the My Better World life skills curriculum. This was delivered over a period of 12-18 months by female school graduates known as Learner Guides. They were supported to complete school under GEC I and trained to strengthen participatory learning approaches and provide important role models for girls (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). As reported in the project's baseline evaluation, the delivery of the My Better World programme expanded its curriculum in the second phase of the GEC to include more information on sexual and reproductive health to further enhance girls' understanding of these life skills (CIDT, 2018).

In supporting the same girls whose education was funded during the first phase of GEC, the project aimed to bridge girls' transition from school to prospective pathways through the provision of a six-month transition programme, led by Transition Guides. In the Transition Guide programme introduced under the second phase of the project, the Transition Guides covered topics such as financial literacy, sexual and reproductive health and entrepreneurship, and supported the recent school graduates into education or employment (CIDT, 2020). Small financial grants were also awarded to young women through the Transition programme, and CAMFED supported young women to pool their grants in order to support the running of group businesses.

The project included activities that engaged a variety of stakeholders at the community-, individual-, school-, and government- levels to support girls' education, all of which continued from GEC Phase I (*Table 11*). These activities were intended to address discriminatory attitudes and practices through the creation of a holistic, enabling environment for girls and key stakeholders who would become part of their support system (CIDT, 2020). As one Learner Guide in our study described:

> *"the project aimed at eliminating the practices of degrading girls and the perception that women's role in community is solely child-bearing and nothing else"* (KII, Learner Guide KII, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Table 11: Brief description of project activities in Zimbabwe

Level	Activity	Description
Community	Learner Guide programme	Community engagement such as advocacy events, household visits to vulnerable children, working with communities and district governments to keep children in school and help them overcome challenges by Learner Guides, young women who returned to their local schools as a mentors and role models after receiving support from CAMFED during their secondary education.
	Transition Guide programme	A 9-month programme for the recent school graduates, led by Transition Guides, who delivered a curriculum that covered financial literacy, sexual and reproductive health education, and entrepreneurship training. This included small financial grants for young women as well as support to pool grants to run group businesses.
	Community awareness-raising	To promote girls' education and reduce practices of early marriage, the project included community awareness-raising campaigns, capacity-strengthening for local partners

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[31] The CAMFED Zimbabwe programme was also funded through other sources before, during, and after the GEC programme ended. Prior to GEC, the majority of resources for the CAMFED programme in Zimbabwe were provided through DFID (now FCDO) Zimbabwe. GEC I was co-funded by Linklaters, ELMA foundation, Pearson and Kiva while additional funders provided resources to Zimbabwe's programme in parallel with GEC, including various private foundations and major donors. After GEC II, CAMFED Zimbabwe's funding base has broadened significantly with over 20 different trusts, foundations, corporates, corporate foundations and major donors investing in the programme, in addition to GPE funding, significant in-kind contributions from government and communities, and the philanthropy of the CAMFED Association.

Level	Activity	Description
	and capacity strengthening	such as through Community Development Committees, Parent and Mother Support Groups, School Management Committees, Male Champions and engagement with influential local stakeholders.
	CAMFED Alumnae Association (CAMA) network	This refers to a network of female school graduates who were supported by CAMFED projects. CAMA members had the opportunity to be trained as Learner Guides, Transition Guides and Business Guides[32] to provide similar support to girls.
	Support to community members to set up businesses	CAMFED provided start-up capital and training to community members, including community groups such as Mother Support Groups and Parent Support Groups, to set up business enterprises in areas such as agriculture to support school meal programmes.
Individual	Financial or in-kind support	A needs-based financing mechanism was adopted to address the significant cost barriers that the most marginalised girls faced in attending school. These girls were provided with bursaries and basic necessities.
	Individual monitoring system	Individualised tracking system to follow beneficiary girls through and beyond school to keep track of girls' progress through and after school, particularly for those who may have dropped out of school.
	Kiva loans	GEC graduates who volunteered as Learner Guides received access to Kiva loans (with CAMFED as a Lending Partner) to start entrepreneurial businesses.
School	Teacher training	This included providing teacher support, training and meetings to encourage teacher motivation, engagement, and attendance.
	Delivery of the *My Better World* curriculum	A life skills curriculum, designed by CAMFED, was delivered over a 12 – 18-month period by young women trained as Learner Guides to strengthen participatory learning approaches and provide role models for girls.
Government	Collaborative partnerships with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education	The project aimed to leverage strong and collaborative partnerships with government stakeholders to explore adoption of good practices such as through the GEC National Advisory Committee to advocate for embedding proven strategies and tools within the education system.
	Engagement with local administrators	CAMFED engaged with community groups (that consisted of traditional and local leaders) as well as local administrators to undertake monitoring visits and distribute personal and learning materials (including the My Better World books).

Source: CIDT, 2018; PMA & CAMFED, 2022; KII with project IP (CAMFED).

Learner Guides and Transition Guides (part of the broader CAMA network) were particularly key to helping create awareness regarding harmful practices against girls and supporting girls in school or on their pathways to transition out of school. The Learner Guide programme involved conducting weekly sessions at school, including the delivery of the My Better World curriculum, which focused on providing life skills education such as knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and rights, decision-making and critical thinking. The implementation of the life skills curriculum involved close engagement between Learner Guides and wider community stakeholders, such as parents and village chiefs, to raise awareness about the life skills session content and increase awareness and support for attendance at the sessions. These life skills sessions were delivered both in-school and, during Covid-19, out-of-school due to school closures. As explained by a respondent from the IP team:

> *"During COVID-19, there was also delivery of the life skills curriculum outside schools, in addition to within schools. The level of community involvement increased, especially since the school closures prompted more out-of-school delivery models…Learner Guides working within communities were aware of the importance of engaging with chiefs and parents to ensure awareness and support for the delivery of the curriculum. They often used these relationships to encourage wider attendance at the sessions. Similarly, Parent Support Groups played a role in increasing attendance and raising awareness of the life skills curriculum"* (KII, IP, UVC-GE, Zimbabwe).

The life skills sessions covered critical topics such as the negative impacts of early marriage on physical and mental health, the overall importance of education, and finding role models in their female peers and teachers, as explained by a Learner Guide in our study:

> *"In my role as Learner Guide, I used to come here to school to have sessions with Form 3 and 4 girls on the importance of education and life in general. We discussed the disadvantages of early marriage that can lead to a dismal future, because of the burdens involved in taking care of the child while the mother is still also a*

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[32] Note: The Business Guide programme was not part of GEC I or GEC II. These Guides were young women in the CAMFED Association, with the skills and passion for enterprise, as well as experience of running successful businesses themselves. They aimed to help their peers start and grow successful businesses so that they could create sustainable jobs for themselves and others (CAMFED, 2024).

> *child…Also, we taught the girls on the importance of education, encouraging them to form study groups. We used the female teachers at the school as role models to say they were also students just like the girls but because they took their studies seriously, they conquered and got employed. The girls could also achieve that if they put their education first, before everything else*" (KII, Learner Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

The Learner Guides' roles also entailed monitoring girls who were at risk of dropping out of school to encourage them to re-enrol, consequently reducing school dropout rates. This monitoring was conducted in collaboration with other community stakeholders such as Business Guides who would inform Learner Guides about school dropouts. As one Business Guide explained:

> *"In my role as a Business Guide, if I encounter a school dropout in my area, I initiate a conversation with the girl to understand her situation and then inform a Learner Guide so they can intervene and provide the necessary support. This collaboration has been effective in reinforcing the value of education and keeping students engaged"* (KII, Business Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The Transition Guides and Business Guides also engaged with community stakeholders due to the wider support needed to facilitate girls' transitions to pathways post-completion of school. This included a range of individuals and groups, such as "*vocational providers, education providers, community district officers, and members of local trade associations*", who were invited to Transition Sessions hosted by CAMFED to "*open the eyes of young women to the support available and to introduce providers to the young women in rural communities*" (KII, IP, VC-GE, Zimbabwe).

Community awareness-raising campaigns were implemented to promote girls' education and address harmful practices like early marriage. Primarily delivered by Mother Support Groups, these campaigns were mainly aimed at encouraging parents to send their daughters to school. The support groups covered topics such as understanding reasons contributing to lack of enrolment or absenteeism, delaying practices of early marriage, and educating community members about healthy hygiene practices (that would potentially, in turn, promote girls' attendance at school during their menstrual cycles). The groups consisted of mothers whose children were enrolled at the schools, selected following different criteria for inclusivity and fairness. As one respondent from a FGD with a Mother Support Group described, group members were encouraged to:

> *"Avoid selecting friends or women from our own village, instead… [choose] mothers from various villages represented by the school's student body. By adhering to these criteria, we carefully selected our fellow members. The primary consideration was identifying women who we believed would be reliable and cooperative collaborators"* (FGD, Mother Support Group Member, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

As part of community awareness-raising campaigns, CAMFED also prioritised challenging discriminatory gender roles through engagement with male community members, including fathers. This was delivered by male champions who were volunteers and engaged with an array of stakeholders, including traditional leaders, government education officials, teachers, parents, and former students ([CAMFED, 2024](#)). As an example, the Chair of a Mother Support Group stated that male champion groups worked within the communities to challenge discriminatory gender roles and "*to take care of the pregnant women and [assist] them during the course of their pregnancy*" (KII, Mother Support Group Chair, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

CAMFED also promoted the generation of income by supporting community groups that focused on women's livelihoods. For example, CAMFED provided capital to Mother Support Groups and more widely, Parent Support Groups, to set up projects in agriculture and livestock, which was well-received by community members (KII, church leader, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe). These were noted to be effective in creating opportunities within communities and motivated the generation of newer projects such as "*goat-keeping, broiler production and nutritional gardens*" (KII, Village Head and Parent Support Group Member, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe). Income-generating activities supported by CAMFED enabled community women to become financially independent and pay for their basic necessities, including school fees, as well as encourage women to work in enterprises. As one FGD respondent from a Mother Support Group in our study stated:

> *"during our meetings, we mostly encourage each other to work as women so that we find something to occupy us and prevent us from being depressed. If we are busy, we can earn income through gardening projects where we sell our vegetables"* (FGD, Mother Support Group, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe) .

Additionally, respondents perceived income-generating activities to benefit learners as their inclusion in such activities contributed to "*reducing the instances of teenage pregnancies and child marriages*" (KII, Village Head and Parent Support Group Member, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe), for example, through increased economic empowerment and agency.

6.3.   Changes in community attitudes and practices associated with project activities

Overall, the project activities were reported to have had a positive influence in shifting harmful attitudes associated with girls' education. For example, the project baseline evaluation reported some evidence of changed behaviour and support for girls' education in communities and project schools (CIDT, 2018). Qualitative research during the project's endline evaluation with stakeholders such as community leaders, school-based committees, community development committees, and Headteachers also indicated project activities promoted gender equality (PMA & CAMFED, 2022).

Interviews and focus group discussions with community members in our study reinforced these findings on attitudinal change, particularly with respect to gender-based discrimination and gender stereotypes (e.g. in the division of labour or female leadership). For example, a member of a Mother Support Group in Buhera observed a greater degree of prioritisation for girls' education:

> *"I have noticed that since the introduction of CAMFED, there has been a great change, especially for the girls. Before the coming in of CAMFED, priority to pursue education was only given to boys. The perception was that educating a girl child is a mere waste of money because the girl would consequently help the family they are married into. Now, girls are [being] prioritised as well"* (KII, Mother Support Group Member, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The positive shifts in parental attitudes and practices due to project activities resulted in greater prioritisation of girls' education, encouraging enrolment and reducing school dropout. As described by Learner Guides and community stakeholders, these included positive shifts in attitudes towards the value associated with girls' education, and changing perspectives on harmful practices such as early marriage and pregnancy. For example, recalling the positive changes resulting from the project activities, a member of a Mother Support Group mentioned:

> *"These activities have pushed our community to realise that the girl child and boy child are equal. The girl child is very much capable of achieving what the boy child can achieve. So, the community learnt that the boys and girls should be accorded equal educational opportunities. That's why community members are now sending their girls to school. The practice of not sending girls to school has come to an end in our community"* (KII, Mother Support Group Member, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, a Ward Leader noted the reduction in early marriages and school drop-outs, which have enhanced educational opportunities for girls:

> *"There is a noticeable decline in the rates of early marriages and school dropouts…The [project] activities aimed at lowering rate of early marriages and also lowering rates of school drop-outs…The changes have paved the way for educational opportunities for girls"* (KII, Ward Leader, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The benefits from positive shifts in community attitudes accrued to children from marginalised backgrounds, including children with disabilities, encouraging their enrolment in school. For example, during a focus group discussion with Teacher Mentors in Hurungwe, a respondent mentioned:

> *"This focus on inclusivity extended to other schools in the area as CAMFED worked to shift community perceptions. Previously, parents of disabled children often kept them at home, believing they were not capable of attending school. CAMFED's advocacy efforts emphasised the importance of social interaction and learning opportunities for all children. As a result, children with visual impairments and mobility challenges were encouraged to enrol in school"* (FGD, Teacher Mentor, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

The material support provided to girls under the project, such as the CAMFED bursaries and materials provided by community- and CAMA- members, also helped contribute to improved attendance and retention at school. As noted in the project's baseline evaluation, bursary packages provided by CAMFED under the project removed many barriers to school attendance. These included items such as sanitary pads, school uniforms, shoes and bicycles, all of which enabled girls to attend and stay in school (CIDT, 2018). In part, such material support also facilitated shifts in attitudes and practices to support girls' education. For example, a member of a Parent Support Group in Buhera described how, over time, the support provided by CAMFED helped retain girls in school and reduce teenage pregnancy:

> *"When CAMFED arrived, it provided a lot of support, advocating for children to remain in school. They also provided bicycles, books, and uniforms. This support encouraged parents, even those who could not afford school fees, to ensure their children stayed in school and helped reduce teenage pregnancies. CAMFED's intervention really made a difference…Over time, even those who initially disagreed with this idea began to accept it, as they saw the benefits of sending their children to school. CAMFED's support made it possible for school fees to be covered, and many of the girls who were doing well because of their education became role models for others"* (KII, Parent Support Group Member, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, a member of the Community Police explained how the provision of sanitary wear aided girls' attendance at school, allowing them to avoid embarrassment and discomfort:

> *"Furthermore, the provision of sanitary wear was a game-changer. In the past, many girls missed school during their menstrual periods because they couldn't afford or didn't have access to sanitary products. With the support of CAMFED, girls could now attend school regularly, without the fear of embarrassment or discomfort. This support has been vital in keeping girls in school and ensuring they don't fall behind due to preventable reasons"* (FGD, Community Police Member, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Community structures such as Mother Support Groups also played a role in providing food to school-going children, thus encouraging them to attend school. The endline evaluation also showed that over 50% of the CAMA members personally provided money, food, clothes, shoes or school supplies to students so that they could attend school (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Such support from community- and CAMA- members was reaffirmed through interviews and focus group discussions conducted with community members. For example, a member of a Mother Support Group said:

> *"There is the Mother Support Group that I belong to. As you can see, there is serious hunger in our community and the country, and no child wants to learn on an empty stomach. We, as a support group, cook for these children, which motivates them to enjoy school. The thought of having something prepared for them to eat at school eases their minds and encourages them to attend"* (KII, Mother Support Group, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Project activities such as the My Better World Curriculum aided girls' education by creating a conducive learning environment at school. The project endline evaluation identified the My Better World programme as a positive intervention with respect to treating girls and boys fairly in school (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Through interviews with teachers, Teacher Mentors and members of Community Development Committees, the report established that the project helped schools create an enabling, safe and female-friendly environment (PMA & CAMFED, 2022), potentially encouraging girls to attend school and participate in learning. In particular, the interactive methods used by Learner Guides in delivering the My Better World Curriculum such as group discussions and role plays encouraged active participation by marginalised girls and boys in their learning (PMA & CAMFED, 2022).

Transition Guides also encouraged girls who had dropped out of school to return to education, as noted by a Business Guide in Binga:

> *"Transition Guide are also encouraging dropouts to come back to school. Through these sessions, those girl children that have interest in continuing with their education approach their parents for the support to go back to school"* (KII, Business Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

The positive changes brought about by the project contributed to improved learning outcomes for girls. For instance, marginalised girls scored an average of 22.3% on literacy tests at the project's baseline, which increased to 28.5% at midline, an increase of 6.2 percentage points (CIDT, 2020). Endline learning assessments could not be carried out because of restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. One Teacher Mentor interviewed under our study also mentioned how the project activities have encouraged girls and lent them greater confidence to pursue STEM subjects:

> *"Traditionally, these subjects [Mathematics and Science] were often perceived as being more suited for boys. However, through CAMFED's interventions, this misconception has been challenged. The organisation has successfully empowered girls to believe in their abilities and pursue these subjects with confidence"* (FGD, Teacher Mentor, M, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Another community respondent, an Agriculture Guide, in Buhera mentioned how some of the content in their sessions overlapped with what was taught at school, potentially aiding students' learning:

> *"Most pupils are attending school, and the pass rate is going up. As Agriculture Guides, we educate pupils on climate, and it helps them in some of their subjects at school"* (KII, Agriculture Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The project also positively influenced marginalised girls' transition into higher education. The project endline evaluation demonstrated evidence of successful post-school transition by girls and boys into several pathways that included higher education (alongside running a business, retaking Form 4, and being in employment).[33] During qualitative interviews and group discussions in our study, community members provided examples of marginalised girls and young women within their communities who, through support from CAMFED, were able to materialise their dreams of higher education. For instance, a Transition Guide in Hurungwe described:

> *"I can give you an example of a certain lady who lives in the rural areas. She used to be my classmate. She wanted to go to university, but her father didn't want to educate a girl child up to university level. People from CAMFED went to talk to him. They made him understand and he is now happy that his daughter is in university. She is about to finish her course right now. She is in her fourth year, second semester. This is one change I observed"* (KII, Transition Guide, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, a CAMA member in Hurungwe mentioned:

> *"Girls used to go to school up to Form 4 but as a result of the CAMFED programme, most girls have the urge to continue with education up to tertiary or university level. This is now encouraging other girls as they have role models from within their local communities"* (KII, CAMA Member, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

The project activities were reported to have encouraged girls' education through reducing early marriage and early pregnancy, although to a varying extent. The project endline evaluation noted that coordinated interventions by Teacher Mentors, Learner Guides, School Management Committees and local leaders led to improved safety and child protection, and that early pregnancy was likely mitigated due to the financial, social and/or material support given to marginalised girls and young women under the project (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Young women who were interviewed in the endline evaluation also reported positive changes such as enhanced safety and reduction in the risk of early marriage and pregnancy, attributing such changes to the support provided by the school and community structures, Teacher Mentors, Learner Guides, community leaders etc. and their involvement in campaigning against early marriage and pregnancy (PMA & CAMFED, 2022).

Interviews and group discussions conducted with Learner Guides and community members in our study reinforced these changes. For example, a Business Guide mentioned:

> *"CAMFED has contributed to lowering the rates of early marriages and school dropouts. Young women are now actively participating in income-generating projects and are no longer confined to domestic roles within their households"* (KII, Business Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Activities by the Learner Guides helped in reducing early marriage and early pregnancy, as mentioned by community respondents:

> *"The Sexual Reproductive Health Rights sessions by Learner Guides which aimed at reducing indulging in sex early contributed to reducing early pregnancies and early marriages as well. The Learner Guides are doing a very good job in working with the girls"* (KII, Community Leader, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The Transition Guides also played a role in discouraging early marriage, as described by a Learner Guide from Binga:

> *"The Transition Guides make sure that there is no girl who finishes her Ordinary Level and goes for marriage, but that she should proceed to tertiary level or do other projects that can make her earn an income"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

The positive influence of Learner and Transition Guides combined with support from Parent and Mother Support Groups helped to reduce the incidence of early marriage through raising awareness and regular follow up with girls. For example, in a focus group discussion with Teacher Mentors in Hurungwe, a respondent noted:

> *"The Learner Guides and Mother Support Groups have been instrumental in shifting community attitudes towards child protection and early marriage. By actively identifying cases of abuse and monitoring the well-*

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[33] The project endline evaluation noted that the proportion of transitees surveyed who satisfied one of more economic empowerment criteria following school completion was 77% for Zimbabwe against a target of 29% (PMA & CAMFED, 2022).

being of young girls, they have significantly reduced the incidence of early marriage" (FGD, Teacher Mentor, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Community members particularly noted positive shifts for the Apostolic sect who, following traditional religious beliefs, would traditionally marry off girls to older men. For example, a Headteacher mentioned:

"There are also some religious sects such as the Apostolic Johanne Marange which had a few individuals insisting on marrying off young girls and denying them an opportunity to proper education. However, there are noticeable changes in this church as they have given themselves a mandate of building schools which clearly shows that they have taken a positive stance towards education for both boys and girls" (KII, Headteacher, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

However, respondents mentioned how cases of early marriage continued in some instances, with follow-up becoming challenging due to misinformation by those promoting early marriage as well as 'hiding' the girls. For example, the same Headteacher from Buhera mentioned:

"The majority (of the Apostolic sect) has changed but we still have a few who are continuing with the practice of giving in marriage young girls. When we make a follow up on these cases, we usually do not find these girls, normally we are told that they have migrated to other places" (KII, Headteacher, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, another community member mentioned:

"I want to talk about parents who promote early marriage…some parents have not grasped the concept. I am saying this because we have parents who are failing to take action when a girl gets pregnant by mistake. Sometimes, they hide the girl, in a way denying her the opportunity to get help. Sometimes, they send them to other villages" (KII, Village Health Worker, M, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

There was some reported evidence of project activities making positive shifts with respect to intimate partner violence. As an example, a Village Health Worker who was also a Learner Guide in Buhera noted:

"Before CAMFED's intervention, cases of gender-based violence were very high, largely due to poverty. However, now that many young women are earning their own income, they are no longer entirely dependent on their partners. Today, women have the opportunity to work independently and become financially self-sufficient" (FGD, Village Health Worker, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Awareness-raising by Learner Guides within communities was likely to have contributed to positive influences in these practices. For example, a Learner Guide described:

"Learner Guides created a safe and supportive learning environment by providing uniforms, fees, and shelter where necessary for the children. They also engaged communities in girls' education and advocated awareness on harmful practices like early child marriages and gender-based violence, primarily through Community Care Workers" (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe)   .

Similarly, a police officer in Hurungwe mentioned:

"Some children were abused and did not know that it was abuse or were not aware of the course of action to take after the abuse. After the [awareness-raising] campaigns, they became aware of the channels to follow. They started reporting such cases to the Learner Guides who took up the cases with the Victim Friendly Unit [police] and Social Welfare. The arrest of perpetrators of child sexual abuse in the community left a big change in the community and even potential perpetrators became scared and would not abuse children" (KII, Police Victim Friendly Unit Officer, M, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

6.4.   Extent to which activities influencing community attitudes and practices are being sustained

The project, which closed in January 2022,[34] contributed to sustainability through the continuation of its activities beyond its lifecycle, as well as continuation of the shifts in harmful attitudes and practices associated with girls' education, irrespective of whether project activities continued or not.

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[34] See Table 1 of *Annex B*.

The project activities, including community-level activities, were largely reported to have continued beyond the project's lifecycle at the time of data collection (August-September 2024). All of the project activities were reported by the IP to have continued beyond the project's lifecycle (*Table 12*), except the provision of Kiva loans. Community respondents also reported knowledge of the continuation of most of the project's activities, including all the community-level activities as well as others at the individual- and school- levels. The continuation of activities was confirmed by a majority of the respondents across all stakeholder groups (such as Learner Guides, Parent Support Group members, other community members etc.) in all three districts. As a Village Health Worker who was also a Learner Guide from Buhera stated:

> *"the programmes themselves, such as the Learner Guides, bursary programmes, and business support initiatives, are still ongoing and continue to support the community. The activities are maintaining their positive impact, and many of the initiatives, such as the income-generating projects, are still running successfully. For example, even without the grants, the Learner Guides have continued their goat farming project and have found other ways to sustain their work, ensuring that students still receive the support they need, such as sanitary wear and school supplies"* (FGD, Village Health Worker and Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

All activities were reported to have continued by CAMFED, with the support of the CAMA network. This is likely to have been partly due to the fact that CAMFED was in existence in Zimbabwe prior to the GEC. The continuation of activities was facilitated by funding from other donors and philanthropic organisations, together with government in-kind support (*Table 12*).

Table 12: Continuation of UVC-GE activities beyond GEC II

Level	Activity	Source mentioning continuation of activities:		Source of continuation
		IP	**Community respondents**	
Community	Learner Guide programme	Yes	Yes	CAMFED through other donor funding and government in-kind support
	Transition Guide programme	Yes	Yes	CAMFED through other donor funding
	Community awareness-raising and capacity strengthening	Yes	Yes	CAMA/ CAMFED through other donor funding
	Establishment of the 'CAMA' alumnae network	Yes	Yes	CAMA/ CAMFED through other donor funding
	Supporting income-generating activities	Yes	Yes	CAMFED through other donor funding
Individual	Provision of student support	Yes	Yes	CAMFED through other donor funding and CAMA philanthropy
	Individual monitoring system	Yes	Yes	CAMFED through other donor funding
School	Teacher training	Yes	Yes	CAMFED through other donor funding and government in-kind support
	Delivery of the My Better World curriculum	Yes	Yes	CAMFED through other donor funding and government in-kind support
Government	Leveraging collaborative partnerships with national Ministry of Education	Yes	Not reported	CAMFED through other donor funding and government in-kind support

Note: These activities were taken from the Girls' Education Challenge website and validated during our interviews with the IP. These activities were also referred to during our data collection in the selected case study contexts.

The Learner Guide and Transition Guide programmes were continued by CAMFED. The project IP confirmed that the Learner and Transition Guide programmes were still fully active in communities, as reinforced by community members. For example, a Business Guide in Binga mentioned:

> *"Learner Guides are still delivering their sessions in schools…Through the sessions, girls themselves have realized the importance of education... Parents are now having positive attitudes towards school because they are the ones encouraging their children to keep trying…Transition Guides are also encouraging dropouts to come back to school. Through these sessions, those girl children that have interest in continuing with their*

education approach their parents for the support to go back to school" (KII, Business Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Learner Guides have also continued to support girls and young women in their communities through their own motivation, and out of a sense of duty and desire to give back to their communities. As described by a member of a Mother Support Group:

"*I believe the Learner Guides are continuing because they appreciate the support that CAMFED did for them. Therefore, they see it also as their duty to help the young ones so that they can also be better people*" (FGD, Mother Support Group Member, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The Transition Guide programme continued to encourage girls who had dropped out of school to re-enrol and liaised with the CAMA network to support their re-enrolment through the provision of resources. As explained by a Business Guide in Binga:

"*CAMA members use the resources that they pull together to provide school materials to those willing to get back to school though the fund does not target everyone. We [Guides] [then] select those [to support] that we see to have potential of making good grades at O Level*" (KII, Business Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

A Learner Guide spoke about their individual and collective efforts at the community level for re-investing profits from income-generating activities, further contributing to the continuation of project activities:

"*As Learner Guides, we are capable of managing the projects that we are implementing without eating the profits, that's why the projects are moving ahead. We are investing in more and more batches using these profits that we have acquired. We started these projects with the grants that we were given. As Learner Guides, we have the passion to cook for the school children through the school feeding programme. On this programme, we donate what we have such as vegetables etc. We understand that the backgrounds for the children are different, some attend school without eating some food especially in this drought season. As a community, we are united when carrying out these CAMFED project activities*" (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Mother Support Groups have continued to support girls and boys to attend school regularly. This included identifying and supporting more marginalised children such as those affected by poverty or living in more rural areas through the provision of basic necessities, as well as support with maintaining an enabling environment at school, such as contributing to cleanliness, maintenance and repair within schools. As explained by a member of a Mother Support Group in Hurungwe:

"*We provide food and support to children in need within our community. We identify students who are struggling to attend school, often due to poverty…We raise funds to purchase food for these children and assist them in meeting their basic needs…In addition to providing food, we also distribute sanitary pads to girls and contribute to school maintenance. We assist with cleaning the boys' dormitory, which is often neglected by those assigned the task. We also clean the toilets, as some students unfortunately choose to defecate on the floor instead of using the [chamber]*" (KII, Mother Support Group Member, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

CAMFED has continued to provide direct financial support in the form of bursaries within the project districts. This has enabled girls' attendance as their school fees were paid for, and reduced challenges related to travelling to and from school, for example through the provision of bicycles. As a Community Care Worker in Buhera stated:

"*Nowadays, even parents who are financially unable to cover their children's school fees hold the aspiration that their daughters will be included in the list of bursary recipients. To address barriers like long travel distances, CAMFED provides bicycles, ensuring that logistical challenges do not hinder girls' access to education*" (KII, Community Care Worker, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The importance of the ongoing bursary support was further emphasised by a Learner Guide from the same district who stated:

"*the bursary support is crucial, as the payment of fees is essential for ensuring that learners can attend school without disruptions. After we deliver our sessions, it is important that the learners have their fees paid so they can continue their education smoothly*" (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

CAMFED has also continued to support community groups and aided the continuation of activities of the support groups themselves. For example, a respondent from a Mother Support Group in Hurungwe mentioned:

> *"Our Mother Support Group is still continuing because CAMFED is still supporting us. Sometimes we get grants that we use for farming projects. After harvesting, we use some of the proceeds to cook for the students and they enable us to get an income and ensure sustainability of the group. That way we keep moving forward"* (KII, Mother Support Group Member, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

CAMFED's support as a lending partner for Kiva loans to young women has discontinued. This was reported by the IP to be due to the unpredictability of the fiscal environment in Zimbabwe and challenges with timely repayments:

> *"it was primarily related to the fiscal environment and its unpredictability. However, we have set up our own loan fund with the support of donors to come in behind that. We are still working through issues of delinquency, strengthening our processes around loan provision to make it much clearer to young women when repayments are due and how much they owe. So, while Kiva loans have paused, loans per se are still continuing"* (KII, IP, UVC-GE, Zimbabwe).

Stopping the Kiva loans was noted to have affected income-generating activities set up by community support groups. For example, a Learner Guide in Binga added that without CAMFED's direct support, group members' businesses suffered:

> *"The Mother Support Group used to get loans to start up business to generate income for the feeding scheme but since this stopped, their small businesses also stopped. They feel that continuing without assistance from CAMFED is a waste of their time"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Support groups were reported to have been discontinued due to a change in circumstances by a small number of respondents. For example, a member of a Mother Support Group in Hurungwe noted:

> *"The group business we were doing as the Mother Support group declined. Things didn't go as planned. We used to sell firewood and potato crisps at a stall. Since we don't have electricity, firewood was initially a good business. However, the popularity of gas stoves led to a decline. Some members left the country, while others moved to [NAME]..."* (KII, Mother Support Group Member, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Lack of clear benefits was reported to have influenced the discontinuation of a Father Support Group in Binga. As a Learner Guide explained:

> *"…this group failed to continue because they were not getting anything tangible from CAMFED, they failed to comprehend and appreciate the concept of volunteerism. The one member who was active the time I joined as Learner Guide has also stopped coming to school to talk to learners on the importance of education"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

6.5. Factors enabling sustained change in community attitudes and practices

By acting as leaders and role models for other girls, CAMA members (including Learner Guides) have inspired positive shifts in community attitudes towards girls' education. The project endline report showed qualitative evidence that there was substantial recognition of the role of CAMA members in serving communities, as well as confidence in the continued work of Learner Guides ([PMA & CAMFED, 2022](#)). During the interviews and group discussions conducted under our study, Learner Guides and community members reaffirmed how positive shifts in community attitudes have continued with inspiration for girls as role models. For example, a Learner Guide in Binga mentioned:

> *"The girls that do well in the community pose a greater influence on other girls and every parent in [community] will want to have their children do the same. As a result, the changes [in attitudes] have continued till present"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Visible success of beneficiary young women served as a reinforcement to positive shifts in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls' education. CAMA members and Learner Guides interviewed under our study provided personal accounts of the empowering influence of the project on their own and others' lives:

> *"My most enduring memory of the CAMFED project is the empowerment it provided, fostering independence... CAMFED also offered grants to initiate projects, leading me to establish a goat-keeping venture at home…The empowerment we received has significantly impacted our household. In the past, minor financial disagreements could escalate into conflicts. However, thanks to CAMFED, we now have the ability to earn our own income. Within our community, we actively worked to reduce dropout rates…By*

avoiding blame and fostering a supportive environment, we successfully motivated many children to return to school…I also took on the role of a Village Health Worker, a position that was further endorsed by village leaders who recognised my commitment to helping children…The financial resources gained from various trainings have allowed me to invest in a small business, selling airtime and snacks. I am deeply grateful for the transformative impact of CAMFED on my life and the lives of others in my community" (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Other community respondents described how their successes enabled them to act as role models within their communities. For example, the Secretary of a Mother Support Group in Buhera described:

"…people now see [NAME] as a role model, and they are always making reference of her to their girls. They want their girls to follow her footsteps. Putting all these gains into consideration, I don't think a sane person would opt to go back to those attitudes and practices that are detrimental to the future of the girl child" (KII, Mother Support Group Secretary, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Community structures and processes that were put in place for reporting child abuse and early marriage established under the project have helped enable and sustain change. For example, a Guidance and Counselling Teacher in Buhera mentioned how the child protection committees combined with the guidance and counselling available for reporting abuse or early marriage has contributed to a decline in cases of early marriage:

"Through the education they [girls] receive and the child protection committees we have as guidance and counselling, which report any cases of child marriages to us or other community stakeholders such as the child community workers or the police, everyone becomes involved, and that child who would have been married off will come back. And now people are afraid of the law, so such cases have declined, and continuously they are always being reminded and educated on the harmful practices, be it community gatherings or when they are receiving aid, the village heads emphasise those" (KII, Guidance and Counselling Teacher, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Continued engagement via community group structures that have an enhanced understanding of barriers and solutions to girls' education has helped achieve positive change in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls. The project midline evaluation indicated that structures such as the Community Development Committees demonstrated understanding of the barriers and solutions to marginalised girls' education. They further showed awareness of individual girls' circumstances, and made efforts to follow up and solve individual case issues as well as keep the programme moving (CIDT, 2020). Reinforcing these findings, a Learner Guide in Buhera mentioned how ongoing engagement through the community structures beyond the lifecycle of the project, such as the Mother Support Groups, endeavoured to increase the value associated with girls' education by parents and communities:

"The transformation in community attitudes towards girls' education is a significant development that is likely to endure. Through ongoing community engagement, Mother Support Group initiatives, and the inspiring examples set by young mothers, we are fostering a culture that values girls' education. The community is increasingly recognising the potential of their daughters and is actively working to support their educational aspirations" (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, respondents in a focus group with a Mother Support Group described how they continue to drive positive changes in girls' education, including married young women, such as through dialogue and discussion with their parents and in-laws:

"…as a group, we would go there and talk to the in-laws and give them guidance so that the young women can go back to school…We also help young women who are now married but still want to continue with school; we talk to their parents so that they go back to school; even with pregnant girls, we encourage them to get back to school; even teachers emphasise that no one should laugh at those who come to school pregnant or have impregnated someone" (FGD, Mother Support Group Member, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Key community members such as community chiefs and traditional leaders catalysed changes in attitudes and practices and enabled them to continue. More broadly, the project endline evaluation noted active engagement by community members in the implementation of project activities (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Interviews and group discussions with community members under our study further described how they had become catalysts for change and were continuing to support positive shifts in harmful attitudes and practices by spreading knowledge and awareness against the same:

"CAMFED is supporting these [harmful] community attitudes and practices to change. They empowered us to be catalysts for change in our community by sharing the knowledge and skills that we gained from CAMFED,

as such, we are passing on information on the importance of girls' education" (KII, Mother Support Group Chair, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

A Business Guide in Buhera similarly mentioned the positive role of community leaders in aiding shifts in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls' education:

"Community leaders, including chiefs, councillors, and church leaders, deserve recognition for their pivotal role in promoting gender equity and the rights of the girl child through their platforms. The community's receptivity to this awareness can be attributed to the tangible positive impacts of CAMFED's initiatives, such as Learner Guides, Business Guides, and Mother Support Groups. Furthermore, the beneficiaries' willingness to transform their lives has facilitated this change…This interactive approach has yielded remarkable outcomes, fostering a culture of gender equality and inclusivity in our community" (KII, Business Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Community members also provided personal accounts of how they are helping continue positive changes in their individual capacities. For example, a government official in Hurungwe mentioned:

"While preserving cultural heritage is important, it is essential to ensure that traditional practices do not perpetuate harmful gender norms or limit opportunities for women. As a District Head, I am invited to participate in various community events, including traditional gatherings and meetings. These are the platforms we however use to provide opportunities to address issues such as child abuse, drug abuse, and early marriages, advocating for the rights and well-being of women and girls" (KII, Government Official, M, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Positive shifts in community attitudes and practices towards girls' education are likely to continue when promoted by traditional leaders, as a Community Care Worker mentioned:

"The change in attitudes will continue because, in any community, if the change is embraced by traditional leaders and elders, it is likely to persist for a longer period. In our community, during meetings, Village Heads always emphasise the importance of reporting cases of early marriage. They also encourage community members to report any instances of girls becoming pregnant before the age of 18. This has helped create a collective responsibility within the community to fight against child marriage and early pregnancies. As a result, everyone now feels accountable for ensuring that these issues are addressed, and the community is working together to protect girls and support their education" (KII, Community Care Worker, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Collective efforts between CAMFED and communities enabled the implementation of the project and the subsequent changes particularly including community leaders and beneficiary young women. The evidence of the coherence in working partnerships and collaboration was also emphasised by CAMA members in the endline qualitative research, contributing to fewer marginalised girls getting married in their communities and managing to complete school (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). For example, a Business Guide in Buhera mentioned:

"The successful delivery of CAMFED's programmes is attributed to the synergistic partnership between CAMFED, community leaders, and programme beneficiaries, who collectively contribute to streamlined implementation and enhanced [girls'] outcomes through their dedication and willingness to provide additional support when necessary. People enthusiastically support these activities because they have witnessed profound changes and transformative impact, leading to wholehearted endorsement and voluntary participation. Moreover, the beneficiaries themselves demonstrate remarkable cooperation, empowered by the tangible transformations they [have] experienced" (KII, Business Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Headteachers and teachers played a facilitative role by encouraging girls' interest and focus in education, as well as providing material support. For instance, interviews with community members, including Headteachers themselves, indicated how schools are undertaking efforts to curb drug and substance abuse – an emerging issue among young girls (see Section 6.6) – and encouraging them to focus on education through counselling sessions (especially for girls belonging to families where their siblings or fathers use drugs), five-minute talks by teachers when calling the register etc. Similarly, a government official in Hurungwe mentioned how the project had indirectly involved teachers in providing support to both girls and boys:

"As much as we talk of direct beneficiaries, there are also silent beneficiaries. For example, the teachers themselves may not be direct beneficiaries, but I can assure you that they are very happy with the involvement of CAMFED. Some of them have already been involved in trying to sponsor one or two cases/students whose parents would have failed to raise exam fees, for instance…I have witnessed teachers contributing towards the exam fees of a Form 4 student last year for him to register for nine subjects. The boy

was an orphan and was their best hope. Teachers would regret such a talent or potential A-star student to fail to sit for their exams" (KII, Government Official, M, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Community activities were aligned with government policy to re-enrol girls in school after early pregnancy which facilitated positive shifts in these harmful practices. Zimbabwe's Education Amendment Act 2020 that enabled continued education for adolescent mothers by prohibiting the expulsion of pregnant girls from school provided a second chance for them to return to school. A Learner Guide in Buhera mentioned how government policy to re-enrol girls after becoming pregnant is continuing to help reduce dropout and shift community attitudes to support girls' education:

"*There were also negative attitudes that girls faced when they got pregnant while at school. The community believed that it's the end of their school life and they should drop out of school, but with the new policy from the Ministry of Education, which allows girls to continue at school even if they are pregnant, and after giving birth, such attitudes are fading"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe) .

Law enforcement against early marriage has similarly supported community activities to discourage early marriages, and so helped keep up the momentum for positive change. For example, a Teacher Mentor in Hurungwe mentioned:

"Whenever there is a young girl about to be married, there will be much talk about it because they [people] know CAMFED and police used to make follow ups to such cases. As a result, any cases of early marriages are now attracting much attention than before. This also acts as an inhibiting factor towards early marriages" (KII, Teacher Mentor, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Others also described how swift action by the police continues, albeit mostly for children (girls and boys) supported by CAMFED:

"…the police are now heavy handed on those who marry CAMFED [-supported] children. They actually get arrested. If you were being supported by CAMFED and you were still in school and I got you pregnant, I would be sent straight to jail. So, they know that you don't touch a CAMFED child. The cases have reduced" (KII, Agricultural Extension Officer, M, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Integrated and collaborative efforts between CAMFED's support within communities together with the government and other organisations have fostered positive changes in attitudes and practices through continued advocacy and awareness. The project endline evaluation noted how CAMFED continued to work with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, for example, by contributing to the Education Sector Specific Plan including key priorities around gender equality and access to education (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Respondents in the qualitative research under the endline evaluation, including Community Development Committee members, reported that cooperation between CAMFED and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education continued to work well and that the project activities complemented national policies and strategies (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). For example, the Curriculum Development Unit under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe reviewed the content of the My Better World curriculum and adopted it for use in all Zimbabwe schools as relevant content for guidance and counselling (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Interviews and group discussions with community respondents under our study reinforced how CAMFED and the government shared responsibility for shifting harmful attitudes and practices such as early marriages and gender inequality:

"As I told you earlier, it is not just CAMFED's responsibility to combat early marriages; the government is also against them. They advocate for equality between men and women, which means that if girls are educated, they can participate in decision-making at both the household and community levels" (KII, Father Support Group Member, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The reputation and trust CAMFED achieved within communities over the years (including before and after GEC) has aided shifts in parental attitudes towards girls' education. For example, a community member in Hurungwe described how CAMFED has developed its reputation as a reliable source of support for girls over the years and encouraged parents to proactively seek support for their children's education:

"Over the years, there has been a significant shift in parental attitudes towards CAMFED within our communities. In the past, it was challenging to identify potential beneficiaries, as parents were hesitant to seek assistance. However, today, the community proactively approaches CAMFED for support, often seeking financial assistance for their children's education…This increased demand highlights the organisation's growing reputation as a reliable source of support…The community's willingness to seek assistance from CAMFED demonstrates a growing recognition of the importance of education, particularly for girls. This shift

in perspective is a testament to the organisation's effective advocacy and support programmes" (FGD, Teacher Mentor, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Deliberate efforts to incorporate sustainability into the project design from the beginning helped CAMFED sustain project activities beyond its lifecycle. For example, a representative of the IP mentioned:

"In terms of how we planned for sustainability from the get-go, integration within existing systems has always been central for us. This builds ownership of the programme from the start. This was evident throughout all levels. For example, young women and children fed into the My Better World Curriculum and helped shape it. Schools embedded Learner Guide sessions within their timetables. We embedded the monitoring of the programme through Community Development Committees, rather than establishing separate structures. At the national level, one thing we did as part of GEC I, rather than GEC II, was set up National Advisory Committees. We became more intentional about our scaling pathways, specifically our government scaling pathways…We were very deliberate from the beginning about integrating within existing systems and structures" (KII, IP, CAMFED, Zimbabwe).

Other organisations and government departments played an important role in enabling positive changes in young girls' lives. For example, in a focus group with the Guidance and Counselling Teachers in school, a respondent mentioned the role of other organisations such as the NGO, CARE, and other government departments, like the Department of Health:

"CAMFED has supported these [positive] changes. Even as Guidance and Counselling teachers, we also work with other stakeholders, such as CARE International, the Ministry of Health, and even our very own ministry (the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education), and through laws they put in, they have contributed to the change" (KII, Guidance and Counselling Teacher, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, a Business Guide in Buhera described how community-level efforts by CAMFED as well as other organisations such as Rujeko, combined with factors like community engagement and leadership, are increasingly contributing to positive shifts in harmful attitudes and practices and, consequently, girls' education:

"CAMFED and Rujeko empowered us with knowledge about the intrinsic value of girls, which we continually disseminate to others. Notably, these organisations' awareness campaigns in our community advocating gender equity have precipitated a paradigm shift in practices and attitudes…The key factors contributing to this successful transformation include community engagement and leadership, empowerment through education and economic opportunities, shifts in societal norms, and attitudes and collaborative efforts between organisations and community stakeholders" (KII, Business Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

6.6. Barriers to sustained changes in community attitudes and practices

Poverty is likely to continue to inhibit girls' education, thus affecting longer-term viability of girls' education outcomes. The project evaluation reports noted poverty as an enduring barrier to girls' education including, for instance, parents' inability to pay school fees, and challenging circumstances such as marginalised children living in remote areas needing to travel long distances to school under fatigue and hunger (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Interviews and group discussions under our study reinforced this. For example, a Guidance and Counselling Teacher mentioned how, despite the project's efforts, poverty can continue to encourage early marriages:

"When there is nothing at home from food to clothing, a girl might end up getting married just to escape poverty. As Teacher Mentors, and even Learner Guides, through the sessions they deliver at school using the My Better World book, we try to guide and counsel them, but it remains a challenging issue" (KII, Guidance and Counselling Teacher, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Community members also mentioned how, being constrained by poverty in the first instance, the lack of educational opportunities for girls can perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty:

"It is extremely strenuous for a child to travel such long distances to attend school. Fatigue and hunger are not conducive to effective learning. Girls in these areas have lost not only the opportunity for education but also the chance to gain valuable skills from various initiatives happening in the community. Additionally, they are deprived of the ability to explore different career options. Given their challenging circumstances, many of these girls see no other option but to choose marriage at very young ages. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty and limits their potential for personal and professional growth. Without access to education, they are

unable to break free from these limitations and achieve their full potential" (KII, Headteacher, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Natural disasters such as droughts and pandemics are also likely to reinforce poverty as well as harmful practices like early marriage. The project midline report noted that external events such as flooding due to cyclones, drought and famine increased food insecurity and destitution, particularly among more marginalised people, including young girls and women (CIDT, 2020). Interviews and focus group discussions with community respondents under our study similarly illuminated how, in some instances, events like COVID-19 forced marginalised girls towards early marriage, negatively influencing their educational opportunities:

"in 2020, during the Corona era, we had a very intelligent girl who was a single orphan. She was staying with the father and the step-mother. Due to prolonged shut down of schools, she decided to get married and when follow ups were made from school, the father did not cooperate to bring the girl back to school. This disappointed everyone because they anticipated good results from her. So, I cannot say they have a positive influence because parents are still promoting such cases and girls remain the victims" (KII, Headteacher, M, Binga, Zimbabwe).

The deep rootedness of certain traditional and religious beliefs regarding early marriage make it challenging to achieve sustained positive change in girls' education. Despite positive shifts in early marriage, including within the Apostolic sect, community members interviewed mentioned how some individuals continue to follow harmful practices towards girls.

"some religious sects had a few followers still insisting on marrying young girls and denying them an opportunity for proper education even after CAMFED's intervention. These are the people I would say were stopping change from happening" (KII, Community Elder, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Reluctance to report harmful practices such as early marriage and child abuse can also inhibit positive changes in attitudes and practices and consequently girls' outcomes. For instance, community members, including representatives of the police, described people's reluctance to report harmful practices, thus making it challenging to curb or shift them:

"Regarding the community again, in some instances, there is still a reluctance to report issues of abuse or child marriages. People need to feel free to report perpetrators, even if they are relatives. The protection of our children should always come first" (KII, Headteacher, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, a member of the police mentioned:

"…This is a challenge for us as police Victim Friendly Unit to follow on these cases, sometimes the girls will lie that they are relatives to where they are married so that the perpetrators are not arrested. We may try to bring them to safe shelters, but these girls will not change their statements. So, there is no other opportunity that will come to these girls other than marriage. It will then become a generational trend" (KII, Zimbabwe Republic Police Victim Friendly Unit Officer, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Lack or withdrawal of parental or family support for young girls who eloped or became pregnant limited their opportunities for education or employment:

"Some families give up on their children if they elope or become pregnant. They believe that because the child has become involved in adult matters, they are now grown up and no longer deserve support. As a result, these young women may end up living in poor conditions, sometimes with multiple people sharing a single room. Due to early marriages that fail, some young women resort to prostitution or drug use because they have no other skills or opportunities to earn a living" (KII, Victim Friendly Unit Officer, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

The continued sexual exploitation of girls is likely to be a continued barrier to change. For instance, community members mentioned how intimate relationships detracted them from schooling:

"If we look at surrounding places at school dismissal time, you will see young men who are out of school waiting for girls who are coming from school. Where we are advising our girls not to engage in love or sexual relationships, these young men are convincing them otherwise. It really derails the changes that we want to see in the lives of girl children" (KII, Headteacher, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Traditional views towards working women hindered their employment opportunities:

"Men are jealous of their women to partake in business because they think they will have extra marital affairs once they go for business trips in towns and cities. They just want their wives at home. Men view women as people who cannot do anything to support the family except doing household chores. Not all men are like that though, some do support their wives in their businesses. Their negativity about women doing business may affect others who would have wanted their wives to start businesses for fear of them being spoiled by those that are viewed to be of loose morals" (KII, Business Guide, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

A small number of community members were sceptical about the project's benefits to girls' education, mentioning some girls' lack of interest in education, and continued tendency to drop out, get married, or choose to serve low-skill jobs potentially because of the difficult circumstances they live in:

"it is difficult to say that there are tangible results or changes. Even those girls whom we second to be part of CAMFED beneficiaries, they do not have passion with education. For example, ten girls are selected in Form 1. By the time they will reach Form 4, six would have already dropped out of school. I have been trying to follow what those girls are doing but found out that they are doing nothing at all. Some got married and some went to the city to look for jobs as house maids" (KII, Headteacher, M, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Although mentioning a positive change in girls' attendance in school, a member of a Mother Support Group and School Development Committee in Hurungwe similarly mentioned how girls act more out of fear of negative consequences towards potentially delinquent behaviour than intrinsic motivation to attend school:

"Their attitudes have changed because they used to engage into delinquent behaviour during school time…they would be hanging out with their boyfriends, who are school leavers…they are now afraid to get caught misbehaving. I am a Mother Support and also a School Development Committee member, so they fear the consequences of being caught…They know that when they see us, they should be cautious and behave well and the number of people causing trouble has significantly dropped leading to fewer incidents of mischievous behaviour" (KII, Mother Support Group and School Development Committee Member, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

The risk of drug or substance abuse among young girls and boys is also likely to inhibit positive changes in their own attitudes towards education, potentially affecting the sustainability of outcomes. For instance, community respondents described how coming under the influence of drugs and substance abuse can slow down progress in shifting harmful practices such as early pregnancy, as well as affect girls' education:

"While community attitudes and practices towards girls have changed, there is a troubling new culture of drug and substance abuse that is affecting many boys in the community. This situation also impacts girls, as they interact with these boys and may become involved in drug and alcohol use. Tragically, one boy committed suicide while under the influence of drugs. This is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently. This new practice can negatively affect girls' education. When the mind is altered by drugs or alcohol, it exposes girls to dangerous situations, such as rape, as well as increases their risk of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases" (KII, religious leader, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The stigma attached to being labelled as a project beneficiary was noted as a barrier to girls' engagement in the programme, as mentioned by a Headteacher in Binga:

"Another challenge is the issue of labelling by donors. Some years back, there was a statement uttered by someone from the community member saying that 'labels given to the support for the vulnerable and orphaned children are not good and sometimes demotivate the beneficiaries'. This affects their self-esteem negatively…This labelling means children are identified by their donor's name instead of their real names. As an example, when CAMFED people come to see their beneficiaries, they usually say they want to see the CAMFED girls. We are targeting teenagers, and they are at the stage of being very self-aware and they can start to analyse things critically such that some can abandon school even if they are benefiting from a certain organisation. Currently, I cannot say there are no changes in attitudes and practices in community, but we are still fighting for the change" (KII, Headteacher, M, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Insufficient time for shifting deep-rooted, historical norms is a barrier to sustained change. As noted in the project midline evaluation, for instance, bringing sustainable change in approaches to 'safe learning' (such as avoidance of corporal punishment, and use of positive disciplining) requires acknowledgement that such changes

require long-term planning (CIDT, 2020). Community members also emphasised how bringing about positive change in individuals' harmful attitudes and practices towards girls takes time:

> *"Change is a process that takes time and does not happen overnight, so you still find that there are some people who support those harmful attitudes and practices, such as early marriages"* (KII, Guidance and Counselling Teacher, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

6.7. Shifts in community attitudes and practices contributing to longer-term viability of girls' outcomes

This section identifies how shifts in community attitudes and practices resulting from project activities have contributed to longer-term viability for education and life outcomes for future generations, including through the empowerment of beneficiary girls. Being inspired by beneficiary young women as role models in their respective communities, future generations are likely to benefit by sending their daughters to school, and continuing to act against harmful attitudes and practices, creating a virtuous cycle.

Project activities such as the delivery of the My Better World Curriculum were reported to have enhanced girls' self-confidence and given them greater agency in decision-making. The project baseline evaluation noted that both school- and community- stakeholders had reported a difference in girls' agency and confidence, and that the majority of these learners also rated themselves high in confidence (CIDT, 2018). Similarly, the project endline evaluation noted that marginalised young women reported increased confidence, and that Headteachers, teachers and Teacher Mentors particularly praised the My Better World curriculum in making girls and young women stronger and more confident, as well as financially independent (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). Interviews and group discussions with community stakeholders under our study reinforced these findings. For example, a Business Guide in Buhera described how the project and its activities empowered her and transformed her life:

> *"I serve as a compelling example of transformation. Once an unengaged young woman in this community, CAMFED's intervention educated and empowered me. As evident, I've undergone a profound change. Today, I proudly hold multiple roles: Community Care Worker, Learner Guide, and Business Guide. These opportunities arose after CAMFED's community awareness-raising programmes transformed my life. I successfully received grants for community initiatives, enabling startup businesses. My journey demonstrates the tangible impact of changed practices and attitudes on accessing opportunities [for girls]"* (KII, Business Guide F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The project's support to beneficiary young women, including through education, allowed them to pursue employment opportunities, empowering them further. The project endline evaluation established that 'CAMFED's support for the transition of girls and young women to successful adulthood received positive appraisals from all types of respondents, including young women themselves. It was perceived by participants as successful in many respects, for example, enhancing safety, supporting business management, getting a job and being a positive role model' (PMA & CAMFED, 2022). As noted in the project's endline evaluation report, the implementation of the Transition Guide programme helped young women make informed career choices after completing school through the provision of support to enable their independence (including financial independence) by setting up their own businesses or seeking safe and secure employment (PMA & CAMFED, 2022).

The majority of respondents reaffirmed these findings by reporting positive changes in girls' employment outcomes in all three districts. For example, a member of a Mother Support Group in Hurungwe described how her daughter was able to pursue nursing as a career after completing her education with CAMFED's support:

> *"My husband died in 2010 after an accident that affected his eyesight. He couldn't work and we had a child in Form 2. Things were hard and we could not afford the fees. During her Form 3, she was taken in by CAMFED as a step-up girl. CAMFED paid for her tuition and registration fees, and she passed. They took her to Advanced Level, and she passed again. After school, she trained as a Transition Guide and applied for nursing. I was at her graduation day before yesterday. She is done with her nursing now and a product of CAMFED"* (KII, Mother Support Group Member, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Gradual changes in the gendered division of labour were identified in the project midline evaluation (CIDT, 2020). In our study, community members mentioned how boys are now participating more in domestic tasks that were traditionally associated with girls:

"In our community, the traditional gender roles, where household chores such as fetching water, cooking and gardening fell predominantly on girls, often hindered their educational opportunities. Nevertheless, men and boys are now participating in these tasks like fetching water, which alleviates the burden on girls... There is now gender division of labour between men and women thus enhancing a balance for girls and women, leaving them with time to commit to productive activities such as education. These changes have been brought by programmes such as the CAMFED whose vision is to promote girls' education" (KII, Police Officer, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Girls and young women were increasingly able to assume leadership positions after the project's implementation according to some community members:

"The coming in of CAMFED changed all these [harmful] attitudes and practices. Girls and young women are now taking up leadership positions in any developmental committee such as School Development Committee, Village Heads, and some young women are secretaries of the village heads in their communities…because they now understand their rights and they are demanding their space in any decision-making platform…Before CAMFED came in with its programmes, men could not agree to be led by a woman, even her husband would not allow her to take up that position. Men preferred their wives to stay at home and take care of their husbands' homes" (KII, Mother Support Group and Child Development Committee Member, M, Binga, Zimbabwe).

The Transition Guide programme also supported and empowered out-of-school girls or those performing poorly at school to obtain skills**.** As noted by the Chairperson for a Mother Support Group in Buhera:

"The opportunities for girls whether educated or not, is currently available through the projects…for example I have a girl that dropped out at Form 3, she participates in these group saving loans and currently she was chosen to be the youth chairperson in the community at large. Again, recently [same girl] entered a contest for chefs that was conducted in the community, where she came out in third place in the competition" (FGD, Mother Support Group Chair, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Another respondent, who was also the Chairperson for another Mother Support Group, added that employment outcomes improved for girls who may have struggled academically as well:

"I also want to support the issue of income generating activities as work opportunities, particularly for those who did not do well at school. I am the mother to a daughter too that dropped out of school in Form 2. Right now, she stays in [PLACE]. She started her business of selling second-hand clothes, and now she also has various clubs she is involved in. Her life appears to be excellent" (FGD, Mother Support Group Chair, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Training on managing businesses was a differentiating factor to other community-based programmes that endeavoured to support girls' vocational skills and employment prospects. The Transition Guide programme was noted to have been important for this. For example, a Headteacher in Buhera noted:

"The difference is that the girls in the CAMFED programme are trained in how to run their businesses effectively, giving them an upper hand over those without any form of training" (KII, Headteacher, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Increased financial independence through improved employment prospects and education outcomes were noted to have influenced young women's decision-making power and empowerment. For instance, a Senior Teacher Mentor in a focus group discussion in Buhera described:

"There is a shift in both economic and social dynamics in our community where girls and young women now have more control over their own financial resources, which gives them greater agency in decision-making. This contrasts with the situation in the past, where women often had limited control over money, typically relying on the income generated by others like husbands or male family members and often had little say in how that money was spent or invested. When women, especially young ones, can generate their own income through income-generating projects, they not only gain financial independence but also have the freedom to make decisions that impact their lives in more direct ways. This can affect everything from education choices and career paths to personal aspirations. This empowerment through financial control is key to achieving greater gender equality" (FGD, Teacher Mentor, M, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, a member of a Mother Support Group in a focus group discussion in Hurungwe explained,

> *"Girls have been given opportunities to do something in their lives by being given projects to do. Some are doing sewing and some a variety of other projects. This is bringing change in the community… In jobs now, qualification is the determinant, not the gender. The boy preference tendency has been abolished. Opportunities in all facets are now equal for both girls and boys, school, jobs and leadership roles"* (KII, Mother Support Group, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Increased opportunities for female leadership due to positive shifts in community attitudes also enhanced young women's empowerment. For instance, community members reported an increase in female leadership following the efforts of CAMFED and other organisations working towards female empowerment. As a government official in Binga noted:

> *"They [girls] are now in leadership positions, some of them are Senators or Members of Parliament. I can give you an example of [NAME] here in Binga North. She is a very young lady but has now become a Member of Parliament. It is because of organisations like CAMFED and others that are stressing the need to empower the girl child"* (KII, Government Official, M, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Similarly, respondents from a focus group discussion with Mother Support Group members in Buhera noted how women were increasingly able to participate in meetings and address communities unlike the past:

> "*The girl child is now found in positions of leadership; even as mothers, we are now into management. For example, in the past, even to attend meetings, we were forbidden to do so; our place was in the kitchen cooking and serving meals, but now we are able to attend meetings and address the community, something that was unheard of in the past*" (FGD, Mother Support Group Chairperson, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The project has contributed to longer-term viability of girls' education outcomes through shifts in community attitudes and practices. Interviews with Learner Guides and community members indicated several ways in which positive shifts in community attitudes and practices are likely to be sustained through improvements in girls' education and empowerment supported by the project.

Being inspired by beneficiary young women as role models in their respective communities, future generations are likely to benefit by sending their daughters to school and continuing to act against harmful attitudes and practices towards girls in the future. A Community Police Officer in a group discussion with Community Care Workers mentioned:

> *"As the beneficiaries of the project continue to succeed, their stories will serve as powerful motivation for future generations. I'm confident that these activities will continue because education has become engrained in the community. For example, now, when the school year begins, parents will go out of their way to ask for help if their children are not attending school, something that didn't happen before…I don't believe this will fade away. The change in attitude is permanent"* (FGD, Community Care Worker, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

Learner Guides introduced under the project are likely to perpetuate a virtuous cycle of positive change among future school learners as mentioned by a community member from Binga:

> *"The Learner Guides who are there today have become role models in the society and their activities have been appreciated by everyone in our community. This will make other young girls also become Learner Guides in the future so that they can as well teach life skills to school learners, so these activities will become a cycle and they will not end"* (KII, Internal Savings and Lending Group Member, F, Binga, Zimbabwe).

Learner Guides' ongoing motivation to help other girls and young women beyond the lifetime of the project helps promote a virtuous cycle. Interviews with community members and Learner Guides reaffirmed this continued commitment. As a Learner Guide in Hurungwe mentioned:

> *"The Learner Guide programme will be ongoing with no foreseeable end because the role of a Learner Guide is not about money but willingness to help. As long as you are a Learner Guide, your job is to visit schools helping students and providing guidance and counselling while advocating against child abuse, early marriages and early pregnancies"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

Communities themselves have urged the Learner Guides to continue supporting girls' education promoting ongoing positive effects of project activities:

> *"The local community was enthusiastic about our programme and urged us to continue our efforts. They frequently expressed admiration for the programme's positive impact. Notably, even people from diverse religious affiliations offered their encouragement"* (KII, Learner Guide, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The shifts in attitudes and practices are likely to contribute to longer-term viability of girls' outcomes by becoming embedded in communities' culture, as mentioned by a respondent in Buhera:

> *"I am confident that these changes can be sustained. When the culture of a community shifts, it's usually a long-lasting change because cultural transformation doesn't happen overnight; it is a gradual process. People have already started to change their mindsets, and this shift in attitude is likely to continue in the long term"* (FGD, Community Care Worker, F, Buhera, Zimbabwe).

The increased representation of women in leadership positions resulting from the project is also likely to contribute to longer-term viability of girls' outcomes. For example, a community respondent in Hurungwe mentioned how increased female leadership in communities lends permanence to the positive shifts in community attitudes and practices towards women's capabilities, thus bearing the potential to sustain positive change for future generations:

> *"We now have women occupying top positions and we even have female Village Heads. We have these female Village Heads because of the knowledge that people now possess. People now know that everyone has the right to lead. We will not go back to looking down on women. We realised that women are capable to lead"* (KII, School Development Committee Chairperson, M, Hurungwe, Zimbabwe).

7. Synthesis of research findings

This section synthesises the evidence on sustainability from across the GEC-T portfolio (Section 4) and from the two case studies in Nepal and Zimbabwe (Sections 5 and 6 respectively), as well as draws out the key messages of the report.

7.1. Sustainability under GEC II

The concept of sustainability evolved across the two phases of the GEC. Under the first phase of the GEC, sustainability was expressed as 'ensuring a full cycle of education for GEC girls' and measured additionally through the securing of match funding' (FCDO, 2018). The sustainability framework for projects under GEC I categorised projects as Latent, Emerging, Becoming Established, or Established, based on their likelihood to sustain positive outcomes without external support. GEC I projects generally showed characteristics of latent or emerging sustainability (FCDO, 2018) due to insufficient emphasis on sustainability in the early stages of implementation. The midline and endline evaluations of GEC I showed that projects '*took too long to embed sustainability*' with some projects only incorporating sustainability considerations in their activities at the end of project lifecycles (PwC, 2017).

The focus on sustainability became more explicit under the second phase of the GEC, in terms of "establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls" (PwC, 2022a). "Changing community attitudes and norms", together with "empowering girls" through improved girls' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence, were two of the seven intermediate outcomes likely to contribute to the overarching outcome on sustainability (PwC, 2022a). Sustainability, together with the other three GEC outcomes (enrolment, learning and transition), were anticipated to contribute to GEC's higher-level impact of achieving a better educated and empowered female population.

For the purpose of this study, we explored sustainability at the community-level, recognising that changing community attitudes and norms contributes to establishing a foundation for longer-term viability of education outcomes for girls. According to the FM, 'sustainability in the GEC is about delivering and enabling long lasting girls' empowerment through education, for current and future generations, by working with girls, families, communities, schools and systems. It can be built at the individual girl level, and also within the enabling environment for change, including at community, family, school and system levels' (PwC, 2022a).

GEC-T projects engaged communities through a range of community-level activities. These included training of community stakeholders; community-based outreach; community-based clubs; community-based workshops; community-based education; community-based mentoring and community mobilisers. Some activities such as community-based clubs, community-based workshops and community mobilisers demonstrated higher continuity rates compared to others.

Some community-level activities continued between GEC I and GEC II and beyond. The predominant enablers for continuation of project activities included strong-buy in from government- and community- level stakeholders as well as support and empowerment of young women themselves. The barriers to continuation of activities included, conversely, the lack of buy-in from stakeholders as well as the lack of financial resources.

7.2. Pathways to influence community attitudes and practice across GEC-T projects

Project activities across the GEC-T portfolio were able to influence harmful community attitudes and practices associated with girls' education through three key change pathways: (1) communities actively engaging and transforming harmful attitudes and practices themselves, (2) young women being empowered as agents of change within their communities, and (3) up-take of project activities by local and national governments to embed and sustain positive change. Through the continuation of their activities as well as change pathways, projects were able to reduce harmful practices such as early marriage and shift attitudes to foster more equal gender roles within the communities. This ultimately helped influence girls' education outcomes such as enrolment, learning, retention and transition positively (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3: Change pathways shifting harmful community attitudes and practices and improving girls' outcomes
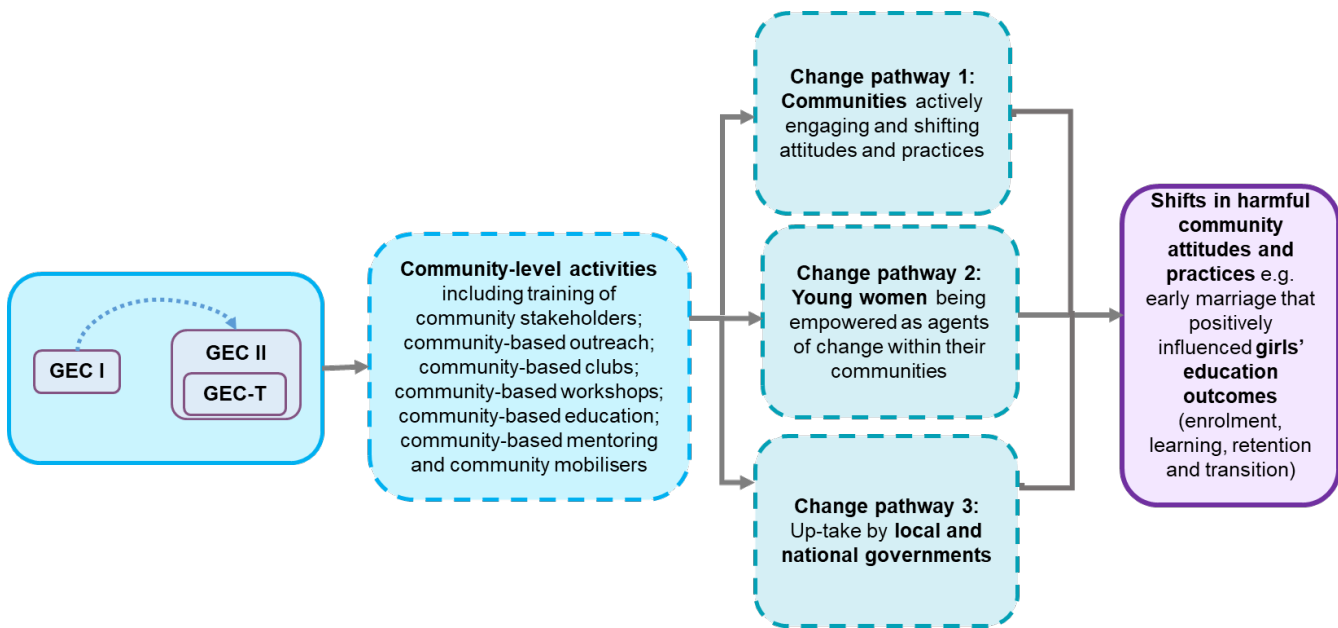
GEC-T projects have demonstrated evidence of sustained activities at the community level that have increased the likelihood of lasting positive change in girls' education outcomes. GEC-T projects mostly undertook sensitisation and awareness-raising community activities, as well as established community-based groups and clubs that mobilised support for young women and encouraged child protection and safeguarding. Evidence from the GEC-T portfolio shows that all types of community activities (such as community-based education, outreach, mentoring etc. as outlined in Section 4) continued in at least one of the projects. The evidence from the two case-study projects in Nepal and Zimbabwe shows that all project activities at the community-level continued beyond projects lifecycles. In the Nepal case study, these included street dramas, community outreach, girls' clubs, and sports and games. In Zimbabwe, these included the Learner and Transition Guide programmes, community awareness-raising and capacity strengthening, the CAMA alumnae network, and support for income-generating activities.

The continuation of project activities beyond their lifecycles has benefitted from engagement and ownership at the community level. Evidence across the GEC-T portfolio demonstrated that participatory approaches that involved engagement with a range of stakeholders, including at the community-level, fostered a sense of ownership within communities that helped community level activities and their influence on community attitudes and norms sustain. Engagement with local community members, including influential members and religious leaders, was also important and undertaken by all GEC-T projects. A higher degree of community ownership played a significant role in continuing project activities and sustaining positive change. Evidence from the two case-study project contexts including the Rural Municipalities (Village Development Committees), School Management Committees, Parent Teacher Associations and religious and other local leaders in Nepal; and the Community Development Committees, Parent and Mother Support Groups, Male Champions and influential local stakeholders in Zimbabwe affirm this. For instance, in Nepal, our findings indicate that community ownership during the design and implementation phases of the project, such as involving community groups and influential members in community outreach and initiating community dialogues through street dramas etc., encouraged sustained changes in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls. Informal efforts by local individuals such as teachers, Big Sisters and Little Sisters, Adult Champions, and other community members helped sustain change e.g. where they continued in their roles as mentors and/or advocates of positive shifts in attitudes and practices within communities. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, key community members such as community chiefs and traditional leaders catalysed changes in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls given their influence and enabled them to sustain. Communities also themselves urged Learner Guides to continue supporting girls' education promoting ongoing positive effects of project activities. By engaging with community groups and influential community members, projects were thus able to create local support, ownership and buy-in for activities that helped influence harmful attitudes and practices towards girls' education even beyond their lifecycles. This includes the likelihood of community members acting upon changed attitudes that encourage girls' education for future generations, as well as leading change.

Community structures, especially through their support for girls' education and empowerment, have helped to sustain positive change. For instance, in Nepal, Parent-Teacher Associations and School Management

Committees continued to take on requests to provide in-kind support such as uniforms, stationery and hygiene items etc. to support girls in their education. Further, training and encouragement from local businesses played a role in empowering girls through employment opportunities, and community-level organisations and clubs also helped maintain the momentum for change in girls' education. In Zimbabwe, continued engagement with community group structures to enhance understanding of barriers and solutions to girls' education helped achieve positive change in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls. In particular, community groups such as Mother Support Groups ensured that the project gains reached the more marginalised by considering different criteria for including more marginalised girls as beneficiaries in project schools. The continuation of community structures and processes that were put in place in the selected communities for Zimbabwe under the project for reporting child abuse and early marriage also helped sustain change. More broadly, the endline evaluation reports for eight of the projects, too, mentioned increased safety and protection for young women following project activities and changes in community norms.

Empowering young women as change agents is a key pathway of change, providing a virtuous cycle for sustainable change in girls' education outcomes. Across the GEC-T portfolio, engaging young women as change agents played an important role in the continuation of project activities and processes. In both Nepal and Zimbabwe, the projects engaged young women as peer mentors. In Nepal, a mentoring support scheme was embedded in communities and schools with Big Sisters supporting in-school Little Sisters and building their capacity and skills through training on civic education and life skills. The Big Sisters mentoring scheme was a key pathway for shifting harmful attitudes and practices. The improved self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem of Big Sisters enabled them to be change-makers within their communities. They also developed their social capital through participation in the project, enabling some of them to engage with government for continued support to girls' education. In Zimbabwe, peer-mentoring took the form of the Learner Guide programme which involved female school graduates known as Learner Guides conducting weekly sessions at school, including the delivery of the My Better World Curriculum. The Learner Guides were supported to complete school under GEC I and trained to strengthen participatory learning approaches and provide important role models for girls. Their delivery of the My Better World curriculum included provision of life skills education such as knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and rights, decision-making and critical thinking. The project activities empowered young women by increasing their self-confidence and agency in decision-making, their financial independence through improved employment and education opportunities, and their leadership opportunities through gradual changes in the gendered division of labour.

In Nepal and Zimbabwe, young women who were trained to lead change and serve as role models in their communities continued to inspire change within their communities out of their own initiative, beyond project lifecycles. This included the Big Sisters in Nepal and the Learner Guides in Zimbabwe. These young women were intrinsically motivated, driven by their desire for empowerment and gender equality beyond the lifecycle of the project. They played an important role in community awareness raising sessions, in classrooms, in girls' clubs, and wider community activities. Through successive awareness-raising activities, young women became pivotal figures in their communities, playing a central role in driving change and shaping new norms. Girls who benefited from their mentorship and leadership e.g. the Little Sisters in Nepal, also felt inspired to give back to their communities, becoming change agents for subsequent cohorts of girls, and promoting a virtuous cycle. Visible improvements in the lives of young women as change agents and project beneficiaries alike, such as through transition to higher education opportunities or employment opportunities, encouraged community members who witnessed these benefited to continue to advocate for changes in attitudes and practices that promote girls' education. This created a virtuous cycle that is likely to improve longer-term viability of girls' education outcomes and sustain other positive shifts in girls' lives.

Uptake of project activities by governments, either on their own or in collaboration with other organisations, was a pathway to long-term change. As shown in the two case studies, collaborative efforts between the IP, other organisations, and government-led initiatives enabled the momentum of positive and lasting change. For instance, integrated and collaborative efforts through CAMFED's support as well as government and other organisations helped foster positive changes in attitudes and practices through continued advocacy and awareness within the selected communities in Zimbabwe. Law enforcement against early marriage also facilitated community activities in discouraging early marriage through punitive action for perpetrators, and so helped keep up the momentum for positive change. Similarly, in Nepal, local municipalities incorporated some of the project activities within their budgets such as earmarked funds for the provision of sanitary napkins in schools each year, supporting sustainability. Community-level activities also continued within selected communities under other initiatives taken up by the government in Nepal e.g. girls' clubs, and provision of sports materials in schools by the local government (and SMCs).

7.3.   Factors enabling sustained changes in community attitudes and practices

National and local governments are key enablers of continuation of project activities and sustained positive change. Our evidence from across the GEC-T portfolio showed that engagement with national stakeholders, as well as alignment with national structures and policies, enabled continuation of project activities. For instance, in terms of national structures, the case-study project in Nepal continued a network that was formed under the first phase (Sisters' Education Network), and further established it as a national Girls' and Inclusive Education Network advocating for the special needs of women, girls, children with disabilities and marginalised groups to ensure they have access to equitable learning opportunities. According to the community members interviewed, government provisions, such as policies and procedures encouraging greater women's participation and employment in administrative positions, also helped improve employment outcomes for girls in Nepal. Similarly, in terms of alignment with national policies, community-level activities in Zimbabwe were aligned with government policy to re-enrol girls in school after early pregnancy, which further enabled positive shifts in harmful practices towards girls. Our evidence also shows that engagement with government was often accompanied by capacity building by IPs at the national-, district-, and community- levels, enabling them to continue or sustain project activities beyond their lifecycle (e.g. by equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills). Conversely, inconsistent engagement with the government was a barrier to continuation of project activities.

Other organisations continued some of the activities beyond the lifecycle of the project. Our evidence suggested that other organisations adopted similar community-level activities to those implemented under the VSO project in Nepal e.g. street dramas, and thus played a role in enabling project activities to continue (making positive changes in young girls' lives). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, other organisations such as the non-governmental organisation CARE International also played a role in sustaining positive shifts in young girls' lives. Such uptake and scaling up of project activities by other organisations can help contribute to sustainability.

Continued support from IPs, as well as the support and trust they won within communities over time, helped project activities and positive changes continue beyond project lifecycles. For instance, in Nepal, the IP, VSO, described how certain community-level activities such as the Big Sister – Little Sister mentoring scheme were adapted and scaled under other VSO projects. Activities like the Girls' Education Network also continued through other VSO projects supported by the same funder (FCDO), as well as other education projects (see *Table 10*). The IP also described how the project's brand 'Sisters for Sisters' Education' resonated with communities and aided the project's influence within communities. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the reputation and trust CAMFED achieved within communities over the years (including before and after GEC) aided shifts in parental attitudes towards girls' education.

Incorporating sustainability into project designs from the beginning facilitated IPs to continue project activities. Evidence from both the case-study projects in our study suggests deliberate efforts on part of the IPs to ensure sustainability through project designs. For instance, adopting a peer-mentoring model lent continuity to the Big Sister - Little Sister mentoring scheme through previously trained Big Sisters in Nepal (see *Table 10*). Similarly, the Learner Guides and broader CAMA network in Zimbabwe were able to support several project activities beyond its lifecycle through their philanthropy, such as provision of student support, community awareness-raising, and strengthening of the CAMA alumnae network (see *Table 12*). At the level of the government, IPs from both case-study projects described how strategic efforts for embedding and integrating project activities within existing government systems lent continuity to activities. This enabled government support (including in-kind support) for activities like the Bridge Courses, teacher training, training for school management and governance bodies, and the Girls' Education Network in Nepal (see *Table 10*), and, similarly, teacher training, provision of the My Better World Curriculum, and collaborative partnerships between the government and CAMFED in Zimbabwe (see *Table 12*).

The long duration of the GEC programme, involving longer-term funding, also allowed for strengthened planning for sustainability. Evidence from across the GEC-T portfolio identifies that IPs strengthened their focus on sustainability including their development of sustainability plans in the second phase to determine ways for planning for enhancing longer-term viability of girls' education outcomes. In both the case-study project contexts in Nepal and Zimbabwe, the IPs were able to support the same cohort of girls across the two phases and allowed activities to evolve to continue to address barriers to girls' education under the second phase. Longer-term funding (spread across longer implementation periods) of GEC-T projects also encouraged sustainability. Where project activities did not continue beyond project lifecycles, financial constraints were highlighted as a key barrier by IPs.

7.4. Barriers to sustained changes in community attitudes and practices

Financial constraints were highlighted as an important barrier to the continuation of project activities and sustained change. For instance, projects involving designing educational technology programmes in the GEC-T portfolio noted how lack of adequate financial resources reduced the likelihood of continuation of such resource-intensive activities. Similarly, for the case study project in Nepal, we found that some project activities faced challenges due to limited support and funds compared with when the project was active. Financial constraints therefore potentially hindered sustainability, particularly given lack of external funding or municipality support. Across the portfolio, financial constraints were also exacerbated in contexts facing political and economic instability.

Changing harmful community attitudes and practices requires changes beyond the communities themselves. To achieve sustained change, GEC-T projects included interventions at the individual level to affect individual attitudes and beliefs, at the household level, targeting individuals' family/household and peers, at the community level, influencing social networks, and at the institutional level, working to address attitudes and norms through influencing policies and systems at all levels of government (PwC, 2018a). For example, the project in Zimbabwe included teacher training at the school-level that, among other things, enhances the capacity of Teacher Mentors to tackle the issue of early pregnancy as a cause of school drop-out. Similarly, in Nepal, the project included coaching and mentoring on gender equality for officials at the level of government.

Harmful community attitudes and practices are more difficult to shift and sustain for marginalised girls. While all GEC-T projects aimed to achieve positive shifts in community attitudes and practices, our evidence from the two case-study project contexts suggests that these may be harder to achieve or sustain for girls belonging to more marginalised groups. For instance, in Zimbabwe, girls belonging to the religious Apostolic sect are still at risk where members continue harmful practices such as early marriage to older men and, in Nepal, the traditional practice of *Chhaupadi* continues to persist in certain communities. Poverty continues to pose a risk to girls' education in both countries where families are pressured into marrying girls at a young age in return for bride price (Zimbabwe) and to lower the burden of dowry (Nepal). External shocks such as changes in the socioeconomic context of countries (e.g. macroeconomic challenges or instability in Zimbabwe) or natural events like drought and COVID-19 are also likely to affect girls from more marginalised communities more. Attitudinal and norm change including ensuring positive changes to the lives of marginalised girls therefore requires time and continued advocacy.

Other context-specific barriers constrained sustained shifts in community attitudes and practices. Across the GEC-T portfolio, where there were changes in government regimes, or in contexts affected by instability or conflict, IPs faced external challenges in continuing activities. There were also barriers within the projects themselves that hindered sustained positive change. In Nepal, weak law enforcement in the selected communities was a challenge to shifting harmful attitudes and practices. Similarly, older community members and government officials sometimes perpetuated deep-rooted practices related to discrimination on the basis of caste, inhibiting sustained change. The Big Sisters and Little Sisters' sometimes moved away from their communities (e.g. for better employment opportunities, marriage etc.), potentially hampering sustainability. Even where Big Sisters and Little Sisters remained within communities and made efforts to shift harmful norms such as early marriage, parental attitudes could continue to inhibit positive change, as highlighted in the case of poverty and the burden of dowry. Given such challenges, even the longer duration of the GEC programme was, in some cases, insufficient to shifting deep-rooted norms.

8. Recommendations

The recommendations in this section aim to inform the FCDO, IPs, government and other stakeholders when designing and implementing new education projects or reform initiatives with the intention of achieving sustainability.

8.1. Planning for sustainability

- **Incorporating plans for sustainability in the design and implementation of projects from the outset is key.** This requires developing a shared understanding and buy-in of what sustainability entails in different contexts across stakeholders at the individual, community, government and funder level.

- **Funders and projects should plan for sustainability, and funding needs to be available for a sufficiently long duration.** This will ensure adequate time to shift deep-rooted norms, such as those underpinning early marriage and gender-based violence, that require time beyond traditional project cycles to have a lasting impact. Ensuring sustainability requires agreement on who is responsible for sustainability of the activities and outcomes, as well as strategic engagements with relevant stakeholders for ownership and effective delivery on their part.

- **Sustaining positive change requires prioritising marginalised girls**. This includes identifying the unique markers for marginalisation in different community contexts, determining the ways in which the most marginalised girls can be effectively included in programmes, and ensuring their inclusion through project processes. Diverse intersecting factors need complex intervention strategies to enable tailored support to address marginalisation markers and sustain positive changes.

- **Projects must take account of the wider political, economic and social environments in planning for sustainability.** Programme design should consider how enablers in the wider context such as support from government or local communities can be leveraged to continue gains made in girls' education outcomes. Similarly, programme design should consider how inhibiting factors, such as changes in political leadership, external shocks and reversals of attitudes can pose risks to sustainability. Risk mitigation can also help reduce the influence of certain factors such as external shocks e.g. political or socioeconomic changes in countries and natural disasters such as drought, famine and pandemics.

8.2. Sustaining positive change in girls' education outcomes through specific pathways

8.2.1. Engaging communities to shift attitudes and practices

- **Advocacy, awareness-raising and other activities with influential community stakeholders are needed to improve girls' education outcomes and lay the foundations for sustaining positive change.** This includes sensitising influential stakeholders such as community chiefs, religious, traditional and local leaders on issues such as the value associated with girls' education, their place in society outside traditional roles and broader gender equality.

- **Projects should leverage existing and new community groups to drive and sustain positive changes in girls' education outcomes.** This involves inviting active engagement from community groups and structures in leading change to create local support, ownership and buy-in for project activities. Such engagement on part of communities increases the likelihood of community members acting upon changed attitudes that encourage girls' education for future generations, as well as leading change.

- **Participatory, community driven approaches, working in tandem with influential community groups and stakeholders, are needed to tackle deeply entrenched attitudes and norms, especially among more marginalised groups.** Participatory approaches that involve communities in all stages of projects – from design through implementation – help build rapport, trust, and a shared sense of ownership that facilitates social sustainability. Projects should aim to work both with communities – for example, employing community-based structures that allow communities to be heard, participate in decision-making processes and take direct action on girls' education – as well as through communities, for example, targeting gender-specific barriers to education by addressing norms and attitudes held by parents /guardians, family members and other community members.

Such community-driven approaches allow people to feel part of the development process and encourage them to continue to lead efforts for positive change, thus creating a virtuous cycle.

8.2.2. Empowering young women as agents of change

- **Projects aiming to improve girls' education should consider peer-based mentoring approaches for more effective and sustained changes in girls' education outcomes.** Girls are more able to relate with peer mentors who are young women, share challenges, and build relationships of trust and support that ultimately help them in their education. These lasting relationships between mentors and mentees can continue to drive positive shifts in girls' education, and more broadly, their lives, even beyond the projects' lifecycles.

- **Young women should be empowered to become change agents within their communities to maintain the momentum for positive change in girls' education.** Empowering young women through increased knowledge (e.g. training on communication skills, financial literacy) and improved self-confidence enables them to gain greater respect and a sense of achievement in their communities. Where communities are able to witness the positive changes in young women's lives as role models (e.g. the Big and Little Sisters in Nepal or the Learner Guides in Zimbabwe), there is a greater likelihood of these changes being sustained.

8.2.3. Ensuring strong buy-in from government stakeholders

- **Early, effective and continued engagement with government is key**. This includes alignment with national policies and structures as well as integrated and collaborative efforts to address barriers to girls' education. Programmes should work with government staff at all levels – local, district, and national – to further facilitate continuation and eventual take-up of project activities by governments.

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