

Study Brief #7
Independent Evaluation



**Sustaining Changes in Community Attitudes
and Norms to Improve Girls' Education
Outcomes**

Sustaining Changes in Community Attitudes and Norms to Improve Girls' Education Outcomes

This study examines the influence of projects in the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) Phase II programme on changing community attitudes and norms to contribute to establishing a foundation for sustained change in girls' education outcomes.

Summary of findings

GEC-T projects demonstrated evidence of sustained activities at the community level that increased the likelihood of lasting positive change in girls' education outcomes. There was evidence of all types of community activities continuing beyond projects' lifecycles.

Three pathways were identified as important for influencing harmful community attitudes and practices:

- 1) **Communities** shifting harmful attitudes and practices themselves, including through their engagement in community structures.
- 2) **Young women** being empowered as agents of change within their communities.
- 3) **Local and national governments** adopting and continuing some project activities, either on their own or in collaboration with other organisations, to embed and sustain positive change.



Image: Portrait of Nepalese woman sitting at Durbar Square, PATAN, NEPAL - Shutterstock

Enabling factors included:

- Engagement with national and local governments and alignment with national structures and policies.
- Continued support from governments, implementing partners, and other organisations for activities.
- Support and ownership from local communities, including community structures and influential community members.
- Implementing partners incorporating sustainability into project designs from the beginning.
- The long duration of the GEC programme, involving longer-term funding and support to projects part of both phases.

Barriers to changes included:

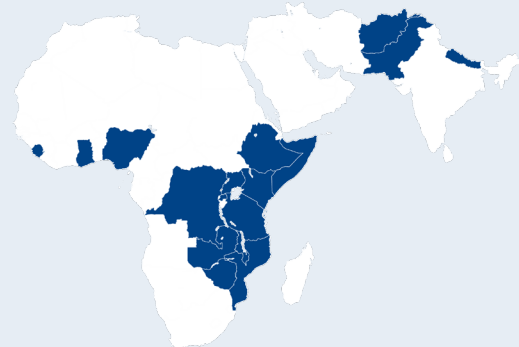
- Financial constraints, cross-cutting across household, community, government and organisation-levels.
- The deep rootedness of certain community attitudes and practices (e.g., dowry, gender-based violence) that made it more challenging to shift in the projects' timeframes.
- External shocks such as macroeconomic challenges, instability, conflict, changes in government regimes, and natural events like climate-related crises and COVID-19.

Image Front Cover: Courtesy of Jon Pilch/CAMFED. A CAMFED Learner Guide sits outside a school in Hurungwe district, Zimbabwe, talking to two students.

Background


The Girls' Education Challenge Phase II is an eight-year (2017-2025), £500m programme supported by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that aims to improve the learning opportunities and outcomes of over 1.6 million girls around the world. The programme spans 17 countries and includes 41 projects through two funding windows: the Girls' Education Challenge – Transition (GEC-T) Window with 27 projects, and the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) Window with 14 projects targeting the most marginalised out-of-school girls.


The evaluation is based on evidence from the 27 GEC-T projects, including two in-depth case studies.





Recommendations

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 (including financial 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. 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.


 **Sustained positive change in girls' education outcomes requires prioritising marginalised girls,** including identifying the unique markers for marginalisation in specific contexts, determining the ways in which the most marginalised can be effectively included in programmes, and ensuring their inclusion through project processes.


 **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 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 external shocks.

Sustaining positive change in girls' education outcomes through specific pathways

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 the 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 sustainability. Projects should aim to work both *with* communities as well as *through* communities.

2) Empowering young women as agents of change



Projects aiming to improve girls' education should consider peer-based mentoring approaches for 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 keep up the momentum for positive change in girls' education. Empowering young women through increased knowledge 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, there is a greater likelihood of these changes being sustained.

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. Close consultation with key government and local community stakeholders in the development of sustainability plans at the outset is needed. In this process, identifying what is feasible and in their longer-term interests with respect to continuing project activities, can be an effective strategy for ensuring sustainability. 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.

Image: Girls at school in Harare Zimbabwe - Shutterstock



Findings

Sustainability of projects

GEC-T projects demonstrated evidence of sustained activities at the community level that increased the likelihood of lasting positive change in girls' education outcomes. All 27 GEC-T projects included activities aimed at changing community attitudes and practices towards the needs and benefits of girls' education. These activities 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.

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.

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

1) *Communities actively shifting harmful attitudes and practices*

Ownership at the community level has been a key enabler of the continuation of project activities beyond their lifecycles. Participatory approaches involving a range of stakeholders, including influential community members and religious leaders, fostered a sense of ownership within communities. In Nepal, teachers, young women peer mentors (Big Sisters and Little Sisters), Adult Champions, and other community members helped sustain change. In Zimbabwe, Learner Guides, young women who acted as peer mentors and were trained to deliver the life skills curriculum, and community members such as community chiefs and traditional leaders catalysed changes in harmful attitudes and practices towards girls.

for change in girls' education. In Zimbabwe, community groups such as Mother Support Groups ensured that project gains reached the more marginalised, and community structures and processes that were put in place under the project for reporting child abuse and early marriage helped sustain change.

2) *Young women empowered as agents of change within their communities*

Empowering young women as change agents provides a virtuous cycle for sustainable change in girls' 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, such as UNICEF and the World Bank, are increasingly focusing on girls and women as agents of positive change in their programmes, empowering them to improve their own quality of life, as well as their families' and communities'. 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 continued to inspire change within their communities out of their own initiative beyond project lifecycles. They played important roles in community awareness raising sessions, in classrooms, in girls' clubs, and wider community activities. 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.

"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-being of young girls, they have significantly reduced the incidence of early marriage."

(Female Teacher Mentor, Zimbabwe)

Community structures supporting girls' education and empowerment helped sustain positive change. In Nepal, for example, Parent-Teacher Associations and School Management Committees continued to take on requests for in-kind support such as uniforms, stationery and hygiene items to support girls. Local businesses played a role in empowering girls through employment opportunities; and community-level organisations and clubs helped maintain momentum

“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 the IP [Name] providing the platform and validity.”

(Interview, Implementing Partner, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe)

Visible improvements in the lives of young women, such as transition to higher education opportunities 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 sustain girls’ education outcomes and other positive changes in girls’ lives.

“[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.”

(Interview, Male Teacher, Nepal)

3) Local and national governments adopting project initiatives to embed and sustain positive change.

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.

“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.”

(Interview, Implementing Partner, Mozambique)

Factors enabling sustained changes in community attitudes and practices

- **Engaging with national and local governments and alignment with national structures and policies**, including integrating activities within existing government systems, were key factors supporting positive change. Engagement with government was often accompanied by capacity building at the national, district, and community levels.
- Some activities were adopted by **other organisations** and/or carried on by implementing partners as part of other projects.
- Implementing partners gained **support and trust from local communities** over time.
- **Community structures and influential community members** were facilitators of change.
- **Incorporating sustainability into project designs** from the beginning helped implementing partners continue project activities.
- The **long duration** of the GEC programme, involving **longer-term funding**, enabled planning for sustainability.

“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.”

(Interview, Implementing Partner, Uganda)



Image: Girls at school in Harare Zimbabwe - Shutterstock

Barriers to sustained changes in community attitudes and practices

- **Insufficient financial resources** were a constraint to the continuation of project activities.
- The **deep-rootedness of some attitudes and practices** associated with girls' education was more challenging to shift in the timeframe of the project.
- Harmful community attitudes and practices are more difficult to shift and sustain for **marginalised girls**, such as girls from particular religious or caste groups or living in greater poverty.
- **External shocks** such as macroeconomic challenges, instability, conflict, and natural events like climate-related crises and COVID-19 affected the sustainability of many projects and are likely to have stronger effects on girls from more marginalised communities.

“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... where loss of livelihoods has meant reduced or depleted family resources in income... so it will either be bride price or rustling, and that that may erode the gains that we have really worked towards.”

(Interview, Implementing Partner, Kenya)



Image: Female young muslim students in Elementary school, Harar, Ethiopia, Africa - Shutterstock

Methodology

This evaluation was based on documentary evidence from all 27 GEC-T projects, interviews with representatives from 20 projects' implementing partners, and two in-depth case studies (in Nepal and Zimbabwe) that also included stakeholder identification workshops, interviews and focus group discussions with community members, young women, and government officials.

Challenges and limitations encountered by the evaluation team included: limited access to some documentation; inability to carry out interviews with seven implementing partners; and limited recall on the part of some interviewees, due in part to the time elapsed since the end of projects. The purposive selection of the case studies may limit generalisability of findings.

For more information

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

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This policy brief is a summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the complete evaluation report which is available at: <https://intdev.tetratecheurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/GEC-II-IE-Study-7-Report-FINAL.pdf>