Save the Children

STEPPING STONES TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES TO GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT

From Save the Children's Girls' Education Programming, Funded by Canada's Charlevoix Education Initiative, Colombia, DRC, and Nigeria, 2020 to 2023

A girl is not a statistic or a piece of property. She is a child who deserves a future.

INTRODUCTION

Girls around the world face gender discrimination. If a girl's education is less valued, she is more likely to be forced into early marriage, and more likely to face violence throughout her childhood and lifetime. Her childhood is often cut short; her very life and future at risk.

For a girl, education changes everything. An educated girl is more likely to grow up healthy, safe, and empowered to determine the course of her life and future. She increases her income earning potential. She is more able to decide when she is ready for marriage and children[1], and will likely send her children to school.[2] She will likely even live a longer life.[3]

Save the Children is committed to improving girls' access to quality education, implementing gender-transformative education programs and supporting the empowerment of girls and young women through education projects, particularly focusing on the hardest to reach crisis-affected areas globally.

Through this briefing note, we share best practices and evidence from three girls' education projects funded by Global Affairs Canada. This portfolio of projects has positively impacted the lives of over 92,000 girls and their families.

This briefer will begin by exploring the context for girls' education in crisis settings, and why a focus on girls' education is imperative to achieving quality education for all. Next, the briefer will share Save the Children's overall approach to gender-transformative education that promotes girls' empowerment, and highlight high-level results from all three projects related to girls' empowerment, as well as attitudes and family support for girls' education, and safety and security at school. The briefer concludes with a summary of key policy and programming recommendations to advance girls' right to quality education in fragile contexts.

CONTENTS

EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN CRISIS FOR GIRLS

Over the past 20 years, significant progress has been made to increase universal access to primary education. Since 2015, there are 22.5 million more girls in primary school and 27.6 million in secondary education[4]. Completion rates have also increased, meaning that in 2024, 5 million more girls are completing each level of education from primary to upper secondary education as compared to 2015.[5] In 2023, the World Economic Forum reported that 117 countries have closed at least 95% of their gender gap in education attainment, although many conflict-affected countries, particularly in West and Central Africa, are still struggling to achieve gender parity.

Despite progress, there are still significant, complex and interlinked challenges girls face in accessing education. Poverty and lack of physical security to, from, and inside schools are critical challenges, and their impact is amplified by discriminatory gender norms and socio-cultural norms. Gender stereotypes about girls, low aspirations for girls' futures, girls' heavy burden of care work in the family household, and girls' own lack of decision-making power and voice are some of the reasons why low-income families might choose to prioritize boys' education over girls. Child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) are also a significant factor that prevents girls from completing school. Poverty, conflict and crisis, and socio-cultural norms often combine to increase rates of CEFMU, as families may have limited income to sustain multiple children in the household and therefore seek marriage options for their daughters. Although the global prevalence of CEFMU has fallen from 23% to 19% in the last 10 years, the COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to have led to an additional 12 million cases of CEFMU[6].

Even if girls are able to enroll in school, they may experience further barriers that can prevent them from completing their education. Journeys to and from school may pose safety risks for girls, and parents may keep girls at home for reasons of physical protection. Sexual and gender-based violence is also an unfortunate reality in many schools. Globally, minimum estimates indicate that over 115 million children and adolescents experience school-related gender-based violence (GBV) in the form of physical, emotional and/or sexual violence every year[7].

New and escalating challenges threaten to slow down or reverse our global progress on girls' access to education. The interconnected threats of climate change, conflict, and COVID-19 have pushed even more learners out of school, and increased the vulnerability of girls. Girls living in low and middle income countries who are most impacted by the interconnected threats of climate change, conflict, and COVID-19 are also those likely to lose access to quality education, impacting their long-term potential to gain key foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy.

Around the world, 244 million children are out of school, 129 million (53%) of whom are girls. Girls living in conflict face 20% higher risk of child marriage, limiting their ability to complete their education. 1.3 billion school-aged children live in areas that are highly vulnerable to climate impacts[8], and disasters are increasing in severity and occurring almost five times as frequently as 40 years ago – already, disasters disrupt the education of nearly 40 million children a year[9]. Girls and marginalised groups are disproportionately affected by climate and environmental change due to existing gender and other inequalities, and are much more likely to die in extreme weather events[10]. Long-term disruptions to schooling during the pandemic led to millions of children falling behind in their foundational skills. UNICEF reports that in low- and middle-income countries, 70% of 10-year-olds are unable to read or understand a simple text, up from 53% prior to the pandemic.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

OUR THEORY OF CHANGE FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

If teaching and learning is gender-transformative; if learning environments are safe, healthy, inclusive and empowering; if communities support girls' learning and empowerment; if policies and systems are gender-transformative; then there will be improved learning, wellbeing, and empowerment for deprived and marginalized girls; and girls empowerment and equality in and through education can be realized.
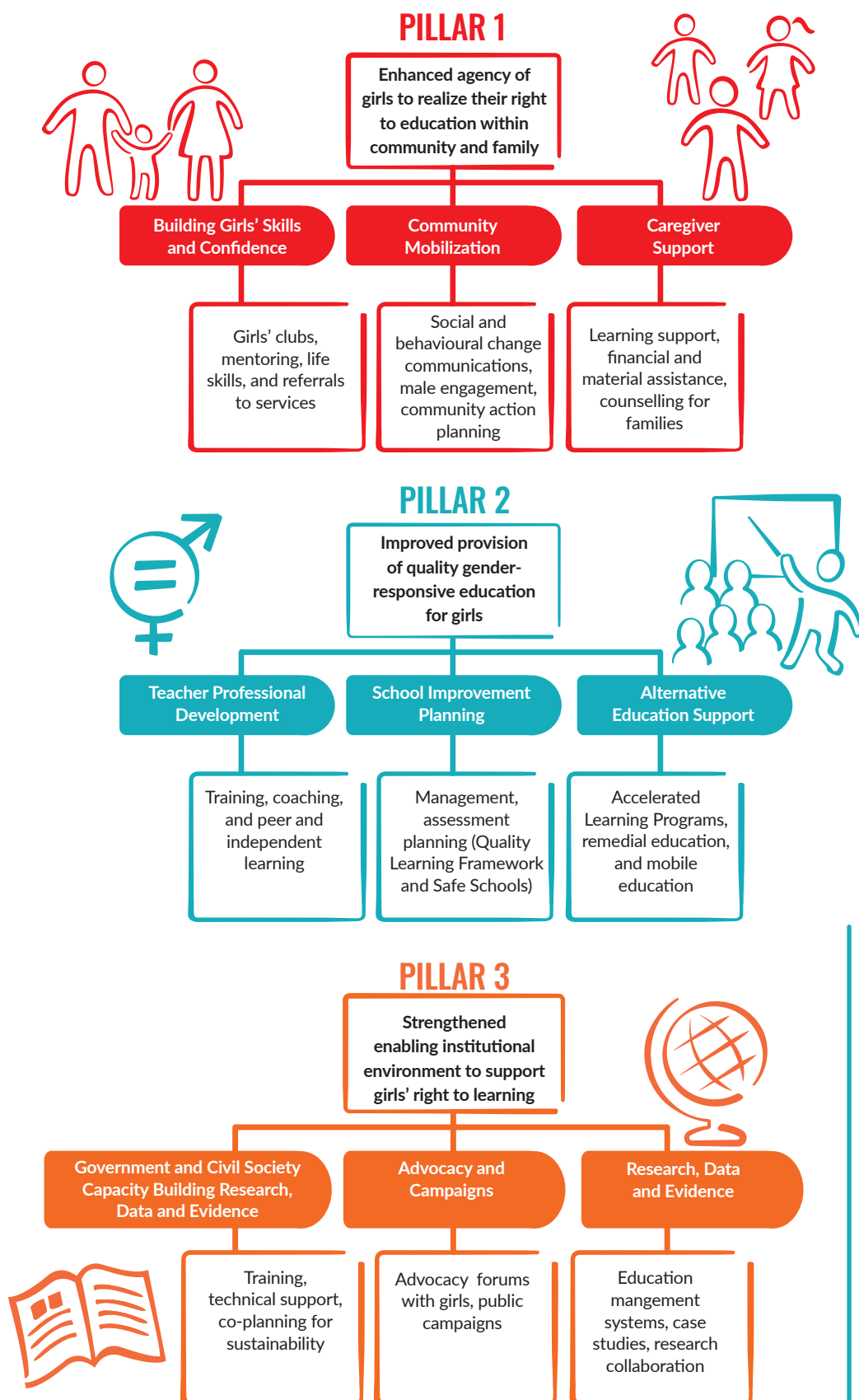
In 2020, Save the Children began implementation of gender-transformative education programs focused on in-school and out-of-school girls and boys aged 5 to 18 in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Nigeria. Together, these projects have reached over 260,440 girls, boys, parents, teachers, community members, and other stakeholders. More than 92,779 girls have directly benefited through targeted interventions.

These programs, funded by Global Affairs Canada under the Charlevoix Declaration (2018), share the same overall objective – to support girls to fulfil their right to safe, quality, and gender-responsive education, and improve their ability to access their right to gender equality in all aspects of their lives. They are fully aligned with the Government of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, which aims to promote gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. Research conducted by Save the Children in our "Voices on Empowerment" Report (2022) demonstrates that girls themselves see education as a critical pathway to achieve personal empowerment, and feel that school (and other informal quality learning opportunities) are critical to their own success. Save the Children's socio-ecological model engages girls, boys, families, schools, and communities to ensure that girls are supported in their educational goals at home, at school, and in their daily lives.

Although every project implemented by Save the Children is adapted to the local context through consultation with partners, government stakeholders, and project participants, there are also commonalities across our programs that reflect best practices on how to achieve holistic change for girls. Save the Children works with key stakeholders to identify, address, and positively transform the root causes of gender inequality for women, girls, men, and boys.

We work with girls themselves, as well as their families, schools, and broader communities in ways that support girls' agency and empowerment.

The framework below shows the varied types of interventions and activities that reflect how we can foster and support holistic change for girls, their families, schools, and communities.

PILLAR 1

Enhanced agency of girls to realize their right to education within community and family

Building Girls' Skills and Confidence	Community Mobilization	Caregiver Support
Girls' clubs, mentoring, life skills, and referrals to services	Social and behavioural change communications, male engagement, community action planning	Learning support, financial and material assistance, counselling for families

PILLAR 2

Improved provision of quality gender-responsive education for girls

Teacher Professional Development	School Improvement Planning	Alternative Education Support
Training, coaching, and peer and independent learning	Management, assessment planning (Quality Learning Framework and Safe Schools)	Accelerated Learning Programs, remedial education, and mobile education

PILLAR 3

Strengthened enabling institutional environment to support girls' right to learning

Government and Civil Society Capacity Building Research, Data and Evidence	Advocacy and Campaigns	Research, Data and Evidence
Training, technical support, co-planning for sustainability	Advocacy forums with girls, public campaigns	Education mangement systems, case studies, research collaboration

Figure 1: Example of a Results Chain Framework for a Girls' Education Intervention.

The evidence is clear – it is critical to work at all these levels simultaneously so that girls can feel safe and supported to speak out and use their voices and enable their own success through education. A truly gender-transformative approach must support girls as agents of change

UNDERSTANDING AND MEASURING GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT

The Power Index was developed by Save the Children to help us better understand and measure girls' experiences of empowerment through our education programs.

We know that empowerment is personal, political, contextual, and highly complex. Empowerment is both a process and an end goal, and can be significantly affected by external variables such as new policies or legislation. What girls themselves experience and define as personal success is a key component

of empowerment. The complexity of empowerment makes it difficult to measure – but despite these challenges, Save the Children recognizes the importance of understanding girls' experiences of power to enhance and improve our programming. Measuring empowerment also ensure that we hold ourselves accountable to achieving results with girls. The Power Index measures four key dimensions, outlined in Figure 2.
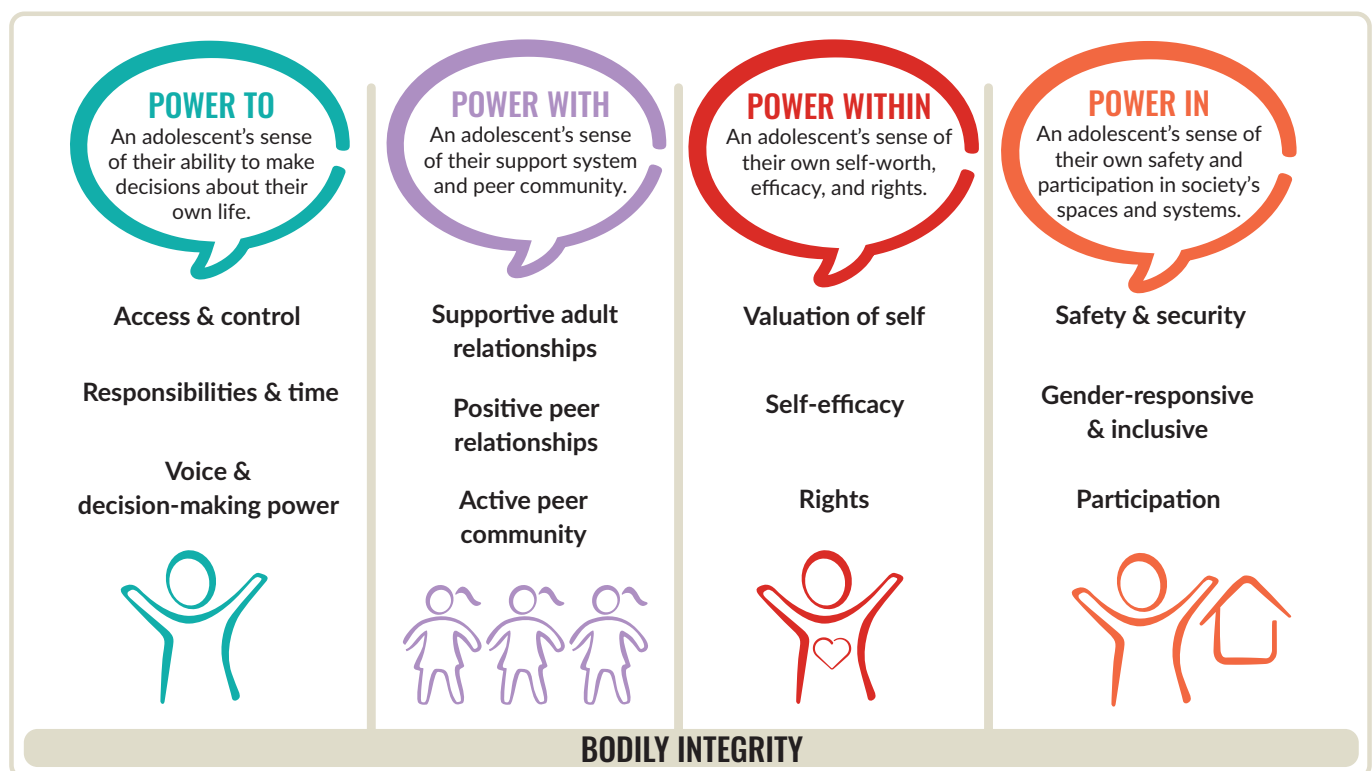
POWER TO
An adolescent's sense of their ability to make decisions about their own life.

Access & control

Responsibilities & time

Voice & decision-making power

POWER WITH
An adolescent's sense of their support system and peer community.

Supportive adult relationships

Positive peer relationships

Active peer community

POWER WITHIN
An adolescent's sense of their own self-worth, efficacy, and rights.

Valuation of self

Self-efficacy

Rights

POWER IN
An adolescent's sense of their own safety and participation in society's spaces and systems.

Safety & security

Gender-responsive & inclusive

Participation

BODILY INTEGRITY

Figure 2: The Power Index

The Power Index includes a quantitative survey as well as complementary qualitative tools with adolescent-friendly participatory action research methodologies. In designing the Power Index, Save the Children sought to create a measurement system based on our years of experience learning about girls' own lives and what they value; grounded in the latest research and theory; featuring measures that are personally meaningful for girls, useful for reporting purposes, and applicable across multiple projects to consolidate insights from our portfolio as a whole. The resulting Power Index has been used in all three of Save the Children's Charlevoix Education Initiative projects, and the aggregated results have enabled us to have a strong understanding of the overall impact of our socio-ecological model and approach to gender-transformative education projects.

QUALITATIVE Elements of the Power Index	QUANTITATIVE Elements of the Power Index

• A composite index score that can be presented as a clear percentage to demonstrate the overall proportion of girls who feel "highly empowered" through our interventions.
 	
• Girls respond to a series of adaptable survey questions using a 4-point Likert scale.
  • The responses on the Likert scale are used to calculate the relative "level" of empowerment (i.e. We are using High, Moderate, and Low).
 	
• Questions are organized based on the four dimensions of Power, covering a wide variety of issues that are important to girls.
	• Qualitative tools are used to better understand girls' experiences of empowerment and what is important to them.
	
	• These tools have been used to inform the index design, and to triangulate the index score with qualitative information.
	
	• Examples of tools that centre adolescent-friendly, participatory action research methodologies include:
	  • Focus group discussion guide organized on the four dimensions of power
	  • Tools to map relationships, places, and barriers
	  • Rolling profile case study guide

OUR RESULTS – GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT

OVER 92,779 girls in Colombia, Nigeria, and DRC have engaged in project activities to strengthen their sense of empowerment

These interventions include diverse activities such as:

- Girls' clubs and mentorship groups to foster critical life skills such as self-esteem, emotional regulation, teamwork, and communication skills;

- Leadership opportunities such as girl-led media campaigns, community dialogues, participating in school management committees;

- Participating in advocacy campaigns through representation at meetings, in Child Parliaments, and in communications and advocacy materials;

- Interventions to transform family and community attitudes and support for girls' education.

- Interventions to strengthen safe and gender-responsive learning environments.

All three girls' education projects implemented by Save the Children led to improvements in girls' sense of personal empowerment, and all projects saw increases across all four dimensions of empowerment[11].

Save the Children's project in DRC shows a more significant percentage improvement in empowerment scores as compared to our project in Colombia. This is likely due to the comparatively low baseline scores in DRC, and the relatively higher value that some key programmatic interventions have in low-income contexts. For example, the provision of menstrual hygiene supplies or education kits may have a more significant overall impact on girls' sense of well-being in low-income contexts where these materials are harder to obtain. When examining the results of the "Power To" dimension (which assesses girls' access to and control of resources), we can see that 78% of girls in the Colombia project were highly empowered in this dimension at baseline. The comparatively strong economic situation in the middle-income country of Colombia is likely a factor in girls' high baseline scores.

Although socio-cultural norms and discriminatory gender norms more broadly speaking are critical factors that affect girls' education, poverty continues to be a significant barrier that has a multiplier effect on other barriers to access. Save the Children's experience worldwide shows that most parents and caregivers believe that girls should attend primary and secondary school. However, if parents and caregivers have limited income, they are forced to prioritize their expenses, and often make these decisions in a way that is aligned with discriminatory gender norms that view girls' education as less important. Our project in Nigeria directly addressed

this challenge by providing cash transfers to the families of children who were out-of-school and engaged in paid work. The project also promoted enrolment through various media and community engagement campaigns, resulting in 14,623 children (8,956 girls) successfully reenrolling in school. A community leader in Yobe state commented that "before the start-up of the project, we had a lot of girls hawking in the street to support their families…. quite a number of girls have stopped hawking and returned to school, and their parents also have been supported." Interventions to directly address poverty can therefore have a significant impact on the Power To dimension, particularly when combined with engaging parents and caregivers to discuss the importance of girls' education. This was certainly the case in Nigeria, where the project reported a 21% increase in the number of girls reporting that they had received emotional, financial, or material support from their parents to pursue their education.

The results of our Power Index show that well-designed, holistic projects can effectively foster girls' empowerment and have a significant impact on their sense of solidarity with other girls, *Power With*, and their ability to access resources to support their education, *Power To*. However, Figure 3 only tells part of the story – these benchmarks alone cannot capture the uneven progress and complexity of how change occurs at the community level. Figure 3 presents only the information about girls who have reported being "highly empowered". In the *Ni Someshe* project in DRC, there was an increase of 23% in the number of girls who moved from "low" empowerment to "moderate" empowerment; an important improvement.
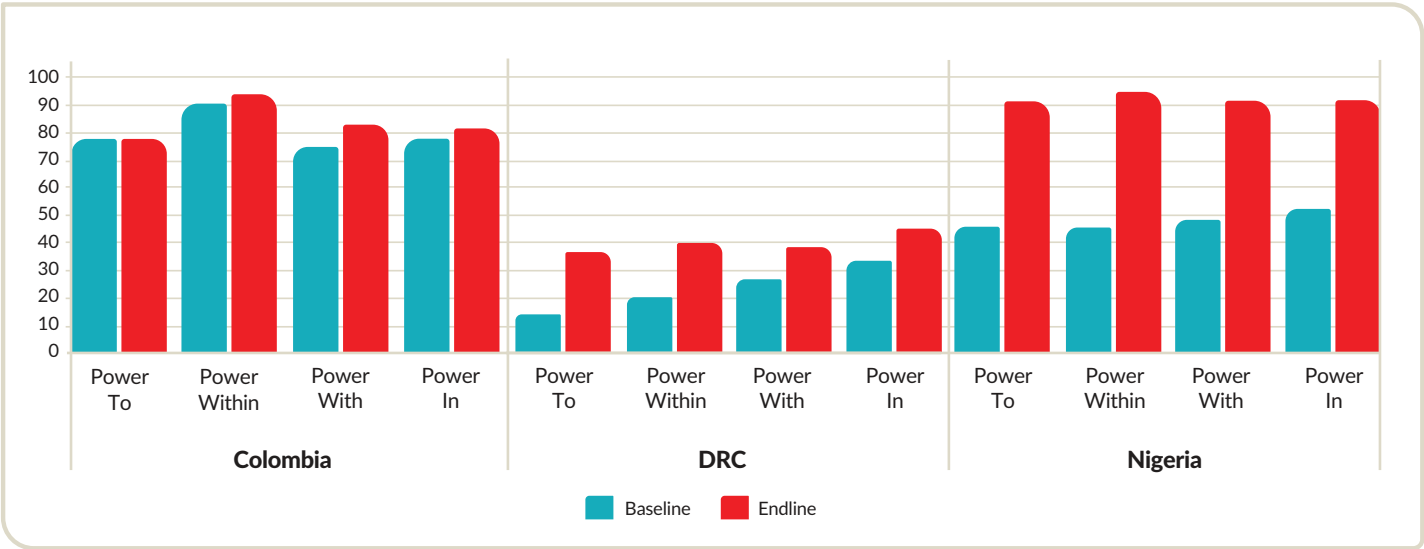

Figure 3: Girl's Power Index Results, showing the % of girls who reported high levels of empowerment per power dimension.

Save the Children also collected qualitative data through focus group discussions and adolescent-friendly activities. This helped us contextualize the quantitative results of the Power Index and understand girls' own perspectives on empowerment. Through research conducted in DRC, Colombia, and Nigeria, we learned that:

- The vast majority of girls acknowledged the critical importance of education to their own personal empowerment. At the same time, girls are acutely aware that they do not have the same opportunities as boys with regards to education.

- Girls identified positive and supportive peer networks as one of the most critical enabling factors to their success in school and in life.

- Girls widely recognized that financial independence was critical, and that making and controlling their own money would allow them to make more decisions in their lives. Generally, girls accepted that taking on a "triple burden[12]" was an inherent part of the life of an empowered woman. Household and care work, income-generating activities or employment, and community volunteer work were all seen by girls as important elements of what it means to be an "empowered woman."

- Having a supportive male domestic partner to take on and share these responsibilities did not emerge strongly in girls' future visions of empowerment. At the same time, girls still perceived being married and having a family as an important marker of social status and achievement. Many girls also expressed that dressing well and/or beauty was associated with success.

PROUD COURAGEOUS SELF-CONFIDENT DETERMINED AMBITIOUS

Key words girls used to describe an empowered girl.

Girls' feelings around marriage, beauty, and women's triple burden reflect the challenges they face as they navigate patriarchal cultural norms. While girls recognize that aligning with patriarchal norms such as pressure to marry can confer rewards or status, they also understand empowerment as being about what girls and women can *be, do,* and *achieve* for themselves and to improve the lives of their communities.

TRANSFORMING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ATTITUDES AND SUPPORT FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

Community engagement is a critical component of Save the Children's evidence-based, socio-ecological approach to girls' education. To change family and community attitudes around girls' education, we must first identify the power dynamics that underpin these attitudes, and the key community stakeholders (teachers, traditional leaders, male parents/caregivers) that are influencing and affecting these power dynamics.

For example, if traditional community leaders are one of the driving forces behind CEFMU in the community, then it is critical to understand why those individuals are motivated to promote CEFMU. By understanding motivations and power dynamics, we can better understand how to influence positive change – and find the right local, community-based champions to promote positive attitudes toward gender equality.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

Our project in Nigeria worked with and through community members to change attitudes about girls' education. As a result of sensitization sessions held by the project on topics such as gender-based barriers to education and child rights, the project team observed remarkable improvement in the way that local School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) conducted their business. For instance, deliberate efforts were being made by a number of SBMCs to have more female members not only attend their meetings, but also participate in their deliberations. Views of female members of SBMCs were actively sought and influenced strategic decisions that the SBMCs made with respect to school governance issues. Ultimately, having more women and children involved in school management and governance can improve and transform girls' experiences at school.

> **"The intervention from Save the Children and SBMC has helped the enrolment of many children from our community into school. The money that was distributed to households has helped many women to start their own small businesses."** Woman community leader, Borno State, Nigeria

To better understand the complex factors that drive phenomena such as CEFMU, Save the Children integrates gender analyses into all our girls' education projects, enabling us to focus in on several key factors that influence girls' education in a particular context. Subsequently, we develop targeted activities that will strengthen enabling factors (such as increasing awareness of legislation prohibiting CEFMU) and overcome barriers (such as the influence of a traditional leader who is a supporter of CEFMU). Typical activities include:

- Identifying male and female *Gender Equality Champions* and community volunteers who are passionate about girls' education, child rights, and gender equality. Save the Children and our partners provide training and coaching to these volunteers to implement activities such as community events, door-to-door campaigns, education fairs in communities, and Gender Equality Dialogue Sessions.

- *Gender Equality Dialogue Sessions* are an important part of the complex and time-consuming work of addressing deeply rooted gender norms. Designed for parents of school-age girls, these sessions bring men and women together to openly discuss gender equality and share experiences and knowledge about girls' education. Sessions often cover topics such as sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, and awareness-raising on how rigid gendered social norms negatively impact both women and men. These sessions are designed to challenge cultural assumptions and stereotypes about women, girls, and other discriminated groups (ethnicities, linguistic groups, people with disabilities, etc).

- *Social and Behaviour Change Communications* (SBCC) strategies are also an important component of fostering community change, particularly when used in complement with face-to-face approaches. Radio programs, community theatre, awareness sessions, and girls' education fairs in local languages disseminate gender transformative messaging in engaging ways, and ensure that conversations about girls' education and gender equality are reaching a critical mass of community members.

These approaches recommended above have all contributed to positive results in Colombia, DRC, and Nigeria in terms of community attitudes toward girls' education. The most significant change was visible in the *Ni Someshe* project in DRC, where at the beginning of the project only 9.3% of parents demonstrated a positive attitude towards the equal right of girls and boys to education. This figure rose to 55.4% of parents in the final evaluation. This enormous change can be attributed in part to community engagement work which more clearly explained the barriers to girls' education, the benefits of girls' education, concepts of child rights, relevant national laws, and emphasized empathy and support for children's aspirations and dreams of education. Even with these significant changes in attitudes, we can see that there are still some persistent and deep-rooted socio-cultural norms in play. For example, in the *Ni Someshe* project, only 45% of parents said that pregnant girls and young mothers should continue to fight for their right to education even if asked to leave school, demonstrating that – despite improvements in the perception of girls' education – support may still be conditional. These findings showcase that changing socio-cultural norms requires long-term, holistic investments.
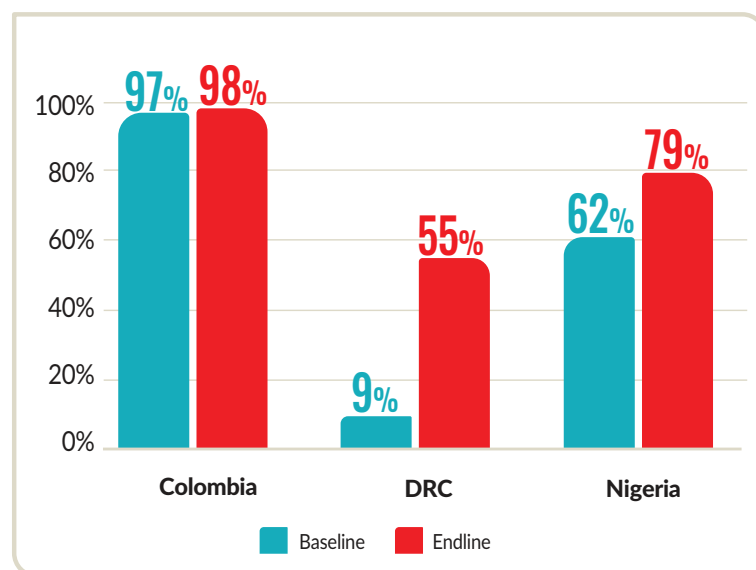

Figure 4: % of community members demonstrating positive attitudes toward girls' right to education.

As demonstrated in Figure 4, the change from baseline to Endline in Colombia was low, which is explained by the high baseline results. Although evidence from Colombia shows that attitudes toward girls' education were generally very supportive, there was still room to improve the emotional, practical, and material support provided to girls to complete their education. For example, parents and caregivers could adopt new behaviours such as attending parent-teacher conferences or reducing household chores (emotional support); helping their child to complete homework or taking them to school in the morning (practical support); or purchasing needed supplies for education (material support). As compared to the beginning of the Beyond Borders project, there was a 14% increase in the proportion of caregivers who provided at least one type of support to their child's education (10% increase for female caregivers; 19% increase for male caregivers). At the end of the project, 87% of male caregivers and 78% of female caregivers were providing at least one type of tangible support to their daughter's education on a regular basis. Changing attitudes toward girls' education is an important prerequisite to changing deeper-seated behaviours and practices that directly lead to more girls in school.

> **We don't know what God has in store for each of us in the future; whether it's a boy or a girl, everyone can take care of their family if they are well educated**
>
> Father in North Kivu, DRC

#NIÑAS AL MANDO (GIRLS IN CHARGE)
Girls Leading Social Transformation in Colombia

185 GIRLS
FROM 21 GIRLS' CLUBS IN THE BEYOND BORDERS PROJECT

developed the skills to produce videos, conduct interviews, and write blog posts that reached a combined total of

4.5 MILLION
PEOPLE ACROSS COLOMBIA.

The campaign shared messages about girls' rights and leadership through short films, social media, newspaper articles, and interviews with inspiring leaders. Other key topics included healthy masculinities, working together against xenophobia, and sharing the experiences of girls who were migrants from Venezuela. Girls who participated in the campaign reported that they felt more confident and valued working with their peers to make their communities better, which increased their overall feeling of empowerment. Girls' sense of "Power With" (i.e. solidarity with peers and collective support) increased by almost 10% over the course of the project.

Save the Children Canada is increasingly investing in girl-led approaches to program design, research, campaigns, and more. Based on consultations with girl-led activist groups around the world, Save the Children has developed a series of principles to guide us when supporting girl-led movements. These principles emphasize the importance of acting as a convener and facilitator: reducing bureaucracy and barriers to girls' participation; compensating girls for their work; and considering and addressing all of the risks that may result from girls' participation, including providing support and protection from gender-based violence.

BOYS' CLUBS & MALE ENGAGEMENT

Boys can also play an important role in girls' education as champions and supports. In the Beyond Borders project in Colombia, boys participated in life skills clubs to learn about positive masculinities and other key concepts such as sexual and reproductive health rights. At the end of the project, boys reported a better understanding of the impact of unequal distribution of chores in the home, and stated that they were working to participate in these responsibilities to support their sisters.

829 BOYS
participated in life skills clubs

83% OF BOYS AGED 10 TO 18
demonstrated knowledge of gender equality principles at the end of the project

STRENGTHENING A SAFE & GENDER-RESPONSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Our results

Our girls' education projects funded under the Charlevoix Education Initiative were implemented in crisis and conflict-affected contexts, requiring an increased focus on aspects of safety and security – including school-related sexual and gender-based violence. Save the Children's Safe Schools Common Approach provides a holistic framework to engage at all the required levels to ensure student safety: policies and systems, school management, school facilities, teachers, parents, and children themselves. In addition, we aim to understand, anticipate, and mitigate the impact of external threats that are out of the control of projects, such as the movement of armed groups and climate change-induced natural disasters.

In our girls' education project in Nigeria, there was a 40% increase in girls who reported positively on the safety of their learning environment. Qualitative data added further nuance to this picture, as some families and community members reported that the project's work to increase awareness of girls' right to education was influencing their decision-making, despite security challenges. While girls and families understood the risks, they were becoming more willing to attend school and find ways to do so safely, despite ongoing security concerns in the area.

Despite the work done to improve safety and security, external threats can have a significant effect on girls' feelings of safety. In Colombia and DRC, we saw girls' feeling of safety reduce by 2-5% points from the beginning of the project due to external threats outside the control of the project. In the *Ni Someshe* project in DRC, girls reported that infrastructure improvements to schools and changes in teacher behaviour had increased their feelings of safety within schools themselves – but that they felt increasingly unsafe on the way to and from school, due to higher mobility of armed groups in project areas. Despite the challenging experiences of girls trying to navigate in the broader community, qualitative evidence from *Ni Someshe* also showcases the importance of basic investments in physical infrastructure. Children who were previously working in classrooms without proper walls and which often leaked or flooded in rainy periods have experienced a significant improvement in their experience of the classroom environment.

Save the Children examines and understands these safety dimensions through gender analyses and close collaboration with local stakeholders and project teams. As relevant, we implement context-specific interventions to improve safety on the way to and from school, the physical safety of school infrastructure, the resources available at schools to protect and support children, and the attitudes and behaviours of individuals who play a key role in child protection, such as teachers and school principles.

Typical activities include:

- Engaging teachers and school management to improve child protection policies and resources within the school, such as developing and disseminating Codes of Conduct, and providing training and support for teachers to change their behaviour. For example, the *Ni Someshe* project in DRC trained teachers on positive discipline techniques to reduce corporal punishment in the classroom. In the Nigeria project, 60 schools developed school safety plans that focused on SGBV prevention and the expansion of psycho-social support services in school.

- Disseminating information about available support services is another important aspect of increasing safety and security. All of Save the Children's girls education projects have included an activity where we map the available services (health, counselling, legal, etc.) in the project communities so that we can make referrals and share information about these services and supports.

- Engaging community members – especially members of volunteer groups and parents of school-age children – is another important way to enhance safety and security. With the right training and support, members of volunteer groups can become important focal points to refer girls to needed services, and to share important information with community members about child rights, such as making them aware of legislation around child, early and forced marriage and unions.

- Training on life skills and the provision of extracurricular activities, such as girls' clubs or community sports, are also important aspects of increasing safety. Bullying by peers is a challenge that can be experienced by girls and boys alike. Increased communication, teamwork, empathy-building, and negotiation skills can be important tools to prevent or mitigate bullying. Interventions such as girls' clubs can also be highly influential in terms of increasing feelings of solidarity and collective action amongst girls (our "Power With" dimension).

> **❝ *Sometimes we are not safe because the soldiers are all around us and we are afraid of them, even though they are there almost every day.* ❞**
>
> Girl from Nyiragongo, North Kivu, DRC

Building Safe and Inclusive Classrooms

Every student should feel safe in their classroom and receive direct support from teachers that helps to address their unique needs. However, this can be extremely challenging in contexts where there are large classroom sizes and where teachers do not have enough training or support. Save the Children works with relevant government actors and key stakeholders at the school level to coach and support teachers to identify and apply different ways of adapting their day-to-day practices and classroom behaviour. Even if teachers do not have enough time for every single student, there are still ways of working that can improve the feeling of support and camaraderie in the classroom.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children learn to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. All of these skills can help children become better classmates and friends to each other and promote safe and inclusive classrooms. A classroom with strong SEL is one in which stronger students can help coach weaker students in certain subjects; where there is healthy conflict resolution instead of bullying; and where all children, including girls and children with disabilities, are included. Training teachers on practices of self-care, raising awareness about the importance of mental health, and introducing more interactive, dynamic, and participatory activities in classrooms are all important ways to promote SEL.

Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) is another important framework that can transform classrooms for the better. GRP is a framework to mainstream gender considerations into teaching skills such as child-centered instructional methods, classroom management, lesson planning, positive discipline, evaluation and assessment, and reflective practice. GRP encourages teachers to promote critical thinking in their classrooms (for example, when reading gender-biased materials); identify students who feel left out and offer additional support; and use instructional techniques such as group work that can promote the participation of children who might otherwise not engage in lessons. In some contexts, Save the Children might implement GRP training in alignment with other changes to school curricula that promote gender equality, such as improved comprehensive sexuality education or updated textbooks. When this is not possible due to project constraints, extracurricular activities – such as girls' clubs or mentorship groups that develop life skills and knowledge of sexual and reproductive health – are important and will complement teacher training on GRP. GRP can improve the quality of instruction, as well as the safety and supportiveness of the classroom environment.

Through the Beyond Borders project in Colombia, Save the Children and local organization Aulas en Paz jointly developed teacher training materials to integrate best practices in GRP as well as content on addressing xenophobia against migrant students in the classroom by strengthening key socio-emotional skills such as empathy. In this way, we can see how socio-emotional skills are also highly relevant to peace building.

Over 4,410 teachers (73% women) were reached through this training. Assessments found that 29% of female teachers and 19% of male teachers significantly improved their classroom practices in terms of gender-responsive and inclusive teaching. Girls reported a 17% increase in the safety, quality, and gender-responsiveness of their learning environments compared to the start of the project.

How can we strengthen the resiliency of schools to crisis and conflict?

Gender-responsive School Risk Assessments

Particularly when working in conflict-affected contexts, schools may need support to better understand and prepare for the risks that their students face. A gender-responsive School Risk Assessment would include basic information such as gender-equitable WASH facilities, but would also help implementers to better understand if there are unique risks, such as threats to female teachers, or recruitment of boys into militarized groups.

School Improvement Plans & Emergency Preparedness Plans

All schools, but particularly those in conflict-zones or areas at high risk of natural disasters, should prepare gender-responsive school improvement plans and emergency preparedness plans. These plans would outline key improvements required for schools to address identified risks (such as improved fencing and perimeter security), as well as outlining clear procedures and protocols in cases where schools are affected by emergencies or natural disasters. Ensuring that women and girls are involved in school-level safety and security committees can help to ensure that gender-related risks are identified, and that plans are communicated via channels identified as most likely to reach girls and women.

Anticipatory Action

This approach systematically links early warnings and triggers to actions designed to protect families, communities and public services (including national education systems) ahead of a hazard. For example, Anticipatory Action funding could be used to provide food aid and materials for radio-based learning programs to children who live in an area that is expected to experience extreme flooding that will prevent them from going to school. Anticipatory Action offers the potential to address humanitarian crises in a way that is pro-active rather than reactive, in order to save lives and reduce the impact of hazards on education infrastructure, education personnel, learners, and their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Across all three projects, Save the Children has seen positive results in terms of girls' overall sense of personal empowerment, and increases in girls' ability to access quality, safe and gender-responsive education. While many challenges remain, particularly in conflict and crisis-affected contexts, these interventions have helped to show us a positive way forward. Key recommendations to strengthen gender equality and support girls' empowerment through education include:

Facilitating girls' empowerment

- **Ensure education programs are held accountable to promote girls' empowerment:** What gets measured, gets done. Although best practices to measure girls' empowerment are still debated, having indicators to girls' empowerment will ensure programs deliver on this key gender equality outcome. Part of this process can include the development of a learning agenda to cultivate knowledge and expertise on understanding and measuring girls' empowerment to strengthen measurement methodologies, including more use of participatory, girl-led measures of empowerment.

- **Invest in foundational literacy, numeracy and social and emotional learning to build girls' empowerment:** Literacy and numeracy skills are fundamental for girls' empowerment – where such skills open doors for girls to participate meaningfully in teaching and learning processes and advance in their education at higher levels. Play-based SEL approaches work to build self-confidence and self-efficacy, and cultivate girls' dreams and aspirations for the future. Prioritizing these foundational learning outcomes are critical in girls' education programming.

- **Honour sources of power identified by girls:** While our programs aim to prevent early, and forced marriage, for some girls, marriage or unions, even under the age of 18, may represent power or support them in other goals, such as love or an escape from a more challenging life situation. Messaging which criticizes early marriage can cause unintended consequences, such as unmarried and married girls withdrawing from programs, or stigmatizing girls who are married. Projects should aim to foster and promote positive messages, such as discussing what a healthy marriage might look like. For example, a husband who shares household chores to enable her to complete her education. At the same time, projects should work toward the goal of all girls being able to make their own informed decisions on when and who to marry, including understanding the risks of early marriage for their education, health and decision-making power. This requires careful consideration and nuanced language when discussing with girls and their families.

Transforming family & community attitudes & behaviours for girls' education

- **Leverage best practices in behavioural science to shift negative gender-based attitudes and norms on girls' education:** Investments into behavioural science approaches, including participatory action-based formative research with girls, boys, families and communities, is highly valuable to a) identify the key gatekeepers who reinforce discriminatory attitudes and norms and their underlying motivations and b) create effective and targeted social behaviour change communication (SBCC) campaigns with emotion-based messaging to drive attitude and norm change. From our projects, our most effective campaigns are those led by local female and male leaders and influencers, in collaboration with girls themselves, who champion gender equality and act as spokespeople who are relatable and inspiring for female and male caregivers and community members at large.

- **Create incentives to reach the most under-served:** The ability to access education relies heavily on the financial security and socioeconomic background of girls' families. Testing and adopting incentive programs, such as conditional cash transfers, savings and loan groups, and/or voucher programs is highly recommended and proven to support girls' empowerment in education.

- **"Nothing for us, without us" – Invest in girl-led movements, networks and campaigns:** Empowerment is as much an outcome as a process. To truly support girls' empowerment we must create spaces for girls to lead the way to positively transform the communities they live in. An important element is for girls themselves to select the issues they want to prioritize in campaigns, and to design and lead the campaigns. In our projects, we were able to mobilize girl-led campaigns through our Girls' Clubs or Girls' Safe Spaces. See our Principles for Supporting Girl-Led Gropus, Networks, and Movements.

- **Engage boys and men:** Boys play a crucial role in either

undermining or supporting girls' right to quality education. It is critical to design safe spaces for boys where they can strengthen their own life skills and SEL, and engage in discussions about positive masculinities, social cohesion, ASRHR and SGBV, with male facilitators who model positive behaviours. Engaging adult men (fathers, husbands, brothers and community leaders) in dialogue to breakdown discriminatory norms is also essential. Innovative targeted strategies specifically to engage males such as messaging through media commonly used by men, sports events, workplaces, and invitations to sessions by influential male community leaders, etc. were effective in ensuring male's participation and seeing change in their support to girls' education.

Strengthening a Safe & Gender-Responsive Learning Environment

- **Establish a comprehensive whole-school approach to safety and child protection, including SGBV:** Everyone has a role to play in ensuring safety and children's protection in school, around school, and travelling to and from school. It is recommended to assess or audit schools' overall level of safety from a child protection lens, including school-related sexual and gender-based violence, and reporting mechanisms, to ensure effective, safe, and confidential reporting. This involves engaging girls and boys in the audit process, and using audit results to develop gender-responsive safe school improvement plans that consider the 'whole school' and all of its actors, and that take appropriate measures to identify gaps or issues, with regular monitoring and follow-up.

- **Adopt Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Pedagogies to mainstream gender equality in all education programs for girls and boys:** Gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogies puts children and their learning and development needs at the centre. This is critical to ensure equality and inclusion in children's education rights.

- **Invest in flexible education programming focused on education response, recovery and resiliency with a gender equality lens:** Flexible funding that supports anticipatory action, education in emergency responses, as well as education recovery and resilient education systems is essential.

- **Establish longer-term programming (5+ years) to realize gender-transformational change:** While projects made significant progress in addressing root causes of gender inequality in education, shifting discriminatory norms and behaviours, and strengthening equitable and inclusive education systems requires significant time beyond a 2.5-year project.

ENDNOTES

1 The power of education to end child marriage

2 Girls' learning and empowerment: the role of school environments

3 The Effect of Girls' Education on Health Outcomes: Fact Sheet

4 UNESCO SDG4 Indicators

5 Save the Children, Girls' Education Technical Package

6 Is an End to Child Marriage Within Reach

7 Preventing school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)

8 Children Experiencing Climate Risk, Poverty and Conflict: A methodological note

9 Safe Schools: A hidden crisis

10 Addressing the climate, environment, and biodiversity crises in and through girls' education

11 With the exception of the "Power To" dimension in the Beyond Borders project in Colombia, which remained the same from Baseline Evaluation to Endline Evaluation, at 78%

12 Triple burden refers to the concept of women taking on three "full-time jobs" in their families and communities: paid employment, care work within the immediate family (child care and domestic chores), and community care work (caring for elderly relatives or extended family; volunteering). This triple burden impacts women's physical and mental health, as well as their retention in the labour market. Source: Equal Measures

RESOURCES FOR A DEEPER DIVE

Girls' Education Technical Package

Global Girlhood Report 2023 – Girls at the centre of the storm: Her planet, her future, her solutions

Principles for supporting girl-led groups, networks and movements: Core values

Save the Children

In partnership with
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