



CHALLENGING HARMFUL ATTITUDES & NORMS

FOR GENDER EQUALITY & EMPOWERMENT IN SOMALIA 2.0

(CHANGES 2.0)

2021-2025

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Save the Children



In partnership with

Canada

INTRODUCTION

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is a serious violation of human rights and a form of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), with 650 million women and girls already affected globally. CEFM remains common in Somalia; the latest available national data shows 36% of girls under 18, and 8% under 15 are married. Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is also a serious violation of human rights and form of SGBV, with roughly 230 million women and girls affected globally. The prevalence of FGM/C in Somalia is the highest in the world, with the latest available national data showing FGM/C prevalence of 98% among girls and women aged 15 to 49 years.

To address these harmful practices, Save the Children led a consortium with CARE International and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and with six national partners to implement phase two of the “Challenging Harmful Attitudes and Norms for Gender Equality and Empowerment in Somalia 2.0” (CHANGES 2.0) project. Funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and the Royal Norwegian Embassy (RNE), the CHANGES 2.0 project (2021-2025) was built on evidence-based practices on positive gender norms and behaviour change, with participatory approaches to empower local adolescent girls and women. This was complemented by building local movements and strengthening local protective networks to more effectively and sensitively respond to SGBV (including CEFM and FGM/C) amongst and towards adolescent girls aged 10-19, especially vulnerable groups who face intersectional discrimination (e.g. rural, marginalized communities).

Recognizing the intersectional and overlapping causes and consequences of CEFM, FGM/C, and gender inequality, the project implemented a holistic approach, based on the socio-ecological model, which centred around adolescent girls from 10 to 19 years old. This included interventions with adolescent girls and boys, their parents and caregivers, religious leaders and scholars, women’s rights organizations (WROs), journalists, SGBV service providers, sub-national, national, and regional government stakeholders.

Building off the groundwork and legacy of the CHANGES 1.0 project (2016-2020) funded by the UK government, CHANGES 2.0 ignited a powerful movement for gender equality across Somalia. From remote villages to regional capitals, women and girls have begun to reclaim their voices, their choices, and their futures. Younger and older adolescent girls and boys are leading community dialogues, religious leaders and scholars are challenging harmful traditions (such as CEFM and FGM/C), and women are stepping into economic and civic spaces once closed to them. Increasingly, regional governments are adopting legislation to ban FGM/C.

These gains, hard-won and deeply meaningful, are a testament to the courage of communities, particularly women and girls, and the strategic support of donors and national/sub-national governments in Somalia who believed in the possibility of change. Yet, the journey is far from over. Deep-rooted norms, fragile institutions, and persistent inequalities continue to threaten progress. CHANGES 2.0 has laid a strong foundation, but sustained investment and long-term commitment are essential to ensure that the momentum does not fade, and that every girl and woman in Somalia can live free from violence, discrimination, and exclusion. Future programming to eradicate CEFM and FGM/C in Somalia could further explore supporting survivors of CEFM and FGM/C, engaging traditional and medical practitioners who perform FGM/C, enhancing protection systems to prevent and respond to all forms of SGBV, including CEFM and FGM/C, and continue supporting WROs who are leading the charge for policy and advocacy for legislative reform and enforcement related to CEFM and FGM/C.



Sarah Anderson
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**Note that all project participants' names were changed in this brief to protect their identity and safety.*

Sources:

- Girls Not Brides website, 2025
- Somalia Demographic and Health Survey 2020



CONTEXT OVERVIEW

HUMANITARIAN AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Somalia continues to face a complex and fragile humanitarian situation. Somalia is ranked among the most climate-vulnerable countries globally, despite contributing negligibly to greenhouse gas emissions (less than 0.03% of global emissions). Somalia faced its worst drought in 40 years (2021–2023), affecting 7.8 million people and displacing 1.3 million. After prolonged drought, El Niño-driven floods in late 2023 displaced 750,000 people and damaged infrastructure, farmland, and schools. In 2024, conflict was the main driver of new internal displacements, accounting for 53 per cent of 477,000 displacements. In 2024 alone, 854 civilian casualties were recorded, alongside 1,636 grave violations against children (71% of boys), including unlawful detentions and attacks on schools and hospitals. In 2025, 6 million Somalis are in need of humanitarian assistance, representing nearly one in three people. Armed conflict and insecurity -especially in Jubaland, South-West, Hirshabelle, and Galmudug- have disrupted access to essential services and displaced large populations into urban centres.

These conditions have exacerbated poverty and increased protection risks, particularly for women, girls, and persons with disabilities. Conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, sexual exploitation, harassment, abuse, and trafficking for forced marriages, remains a critical concern, especially for women and girls and in internally displaced people sites and host communities.

Political developments have been mixed. Puntland's 2024 elections reverted to council-based voting due to disputes, excluding women from participation. In Somaliland, constitutional tensions and delays in presidential and party elections led to unrest. Nationally, while the 2022 presidential elections saw increased female candidacy, Somalia failed to meet its 30% quota for women's representation. However, the election of Her Excellency Saadia Yasin as Deputy Speaker of Parliament marked a historic milestone for women's political leadership.

GENDER EQUALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS & LEGAL REFORM

2015

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) ratified

2019

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ratified

2021

Anti-FGM/C bill submitted to Puntland parliament

2022

Child Rights Act passed in Somaliland

2023

National action plan on SGBV drafted

2024

Anti-FGM/C legislation passed in Galmudug + Somaliland signed its Anti-FGM Policy + National Disability Rights Protection Bill approved

2025

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child Ratified by Somalia

Galmudug became first Federal Member State to turn its FGM policy into law

Sources:

- OCHA, Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Somalia, 2025
- World Resources Institute, [Profiles of Adaptation, Somalia](#), 2023
- UNDP website, 2025
- Children's Right Research website, 2025
- UNFPA website, 2025



Several concerns remain:

Contrary to the UNCRC, the 2022 Child Rights Act sets the legal marriage age at 15 and links adulthood to girls' physical maturity. This risks reversing progress against CEFM. Without amendments or strong countermeasures, the Act may empower community leaders who support child marriage and deny 15–18-year-olds—especially girls—access to essential rights and protections.

Religious and community leaders who support FGM/C and CEFM may use the Act's alignment with Sharia law to justify harmful practices. Many openly endorse Sunnah FGM/C ("small cut," Type I or II) while rejecting the more severe Pharaonic form. A considerable number also view puberty as an acceptable age for girls to marry.

Implementation of international conventions remains limited due to institutional and resource constraints.

FGM/C prevalence among women and girls aged 15–49 is still around 98%, with most girls undergoing the practice between ages 5 and 9.

REGIONAL LEARNING & ADVOCACY INFLUENCE

- Advocacy for the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women gained momentum, focusing on eliminating FGM/C and promoting women's rights
- Emphasis placed on longer-term program funding to sustain advocacy gains, strengthen media engagement, and support evidence-based policy reform.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

PROJECT TITLE: Challenging Harmful Attitudes and Norms for Gender Equality and Empowerment in Somalia 2.0 (CHANGES 2.0)

ULTIMATE GOAL: Strengthened gender equality and empowerment for women and girls in Somalia

KEY PROJECT DATA



4 YEARS (MARCH 2021 - MARCH 2025)



16 DISTRICTS ACROSS SOMALIA



CAD 15.6 MILLION (GLOBAL AFFAIRS CANADA
& ROYAL NORWEGIAN EMBASSY)



FINAL DIRECT REACH OF 14,000 PEOPLE

WHO DID WE WORK WITH?

- ADOLESCENT GIRLS & BOYS (AGED 10-19)
- PARENTS/CAREGIVERS
- RELIGIOUS/TRADITIONAL LEADERS & SCHOLARS
- WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS
- JOURNALISTS
- PARTNERS (2 CONSORTIUM AND 6 NATIONAL)



SAHRA*, FROM ERIGAVO DISTRICT OF
SOMALILAND

“I am happy that my husband has been supportive in educating other parents against FGM/C. I want to advise others that FGM/C deprives young girls of their self-respect and should be banned in Gudmobias and Somaliland once and for all.”

“My name is Sahra*, I was born and brought up in Erigavo district of Somaliland. I am 37 years old. I went to a Muslim school but did not complete my education in Quran and schooling due to injuries and pain from undergoing FGM/C. I am the fourth daughter in the family and as a child; my sisters and I did a lot of housework ranging from cooking, and rearing sheep, and goats to fetching water for the rest of the family. At the age of 12, my mother took me to the nearby village, where I found other young girls, some of them my neighbours, brought to undergo FGM/C. Many mothers from the village had grouped in the tents to give support to the woman who was to perform the cut.

The woman used a blade on each one of us to cut into our female organs and it was the most painful experience in my childhood; I thought I would die due to the pain. I grew up with the pain, later when I got married, I had a big problem having sex with my husband and I gave birth to my eight daughters’ under very difficult circumstances.

As my daughters grew older, my heart clenched with fear and apprehension at the thought of subjecting them to the same pain I had suffered. I could not bear the thought of them experiencing the same fear, the same sense of violation, the same loss of bodily autonomy.”

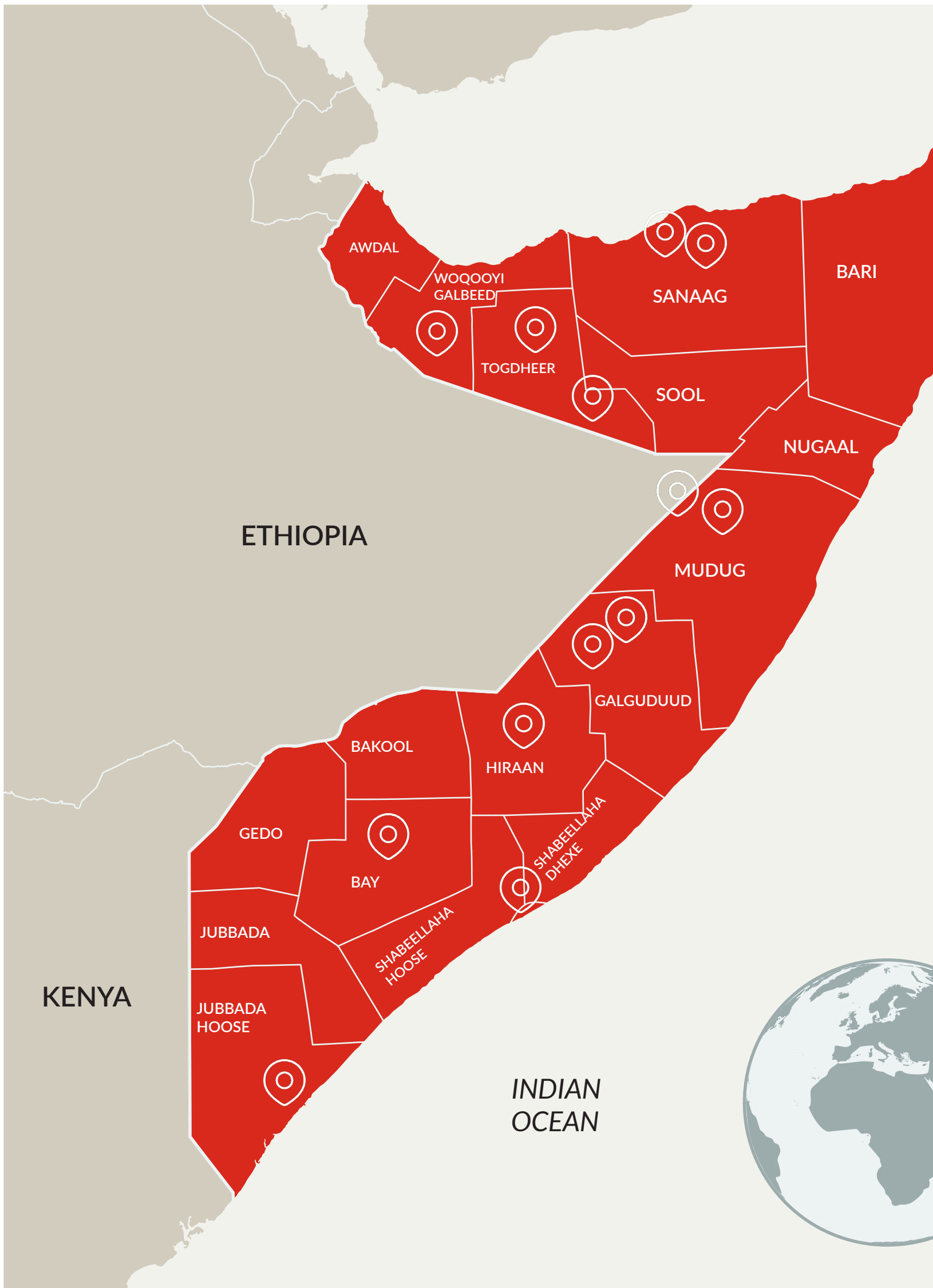
A beacon of hope emerged with the CHANGES project, a gender-transformative initiative to prevent SGBV, including FGM/C. Sahra joined a community dialogue group seeking resolution and empowerment.



Through the project, she learned about the physical, psychological, and emotional harm of FGM/C, its violation of human rights, and the patriarchal norms sustaining it. Dialogue sessions with female Islamic scholars revealed that Islam does not condone FGM/C—a revelation that strengthened Sahra’s resolve to protect her daughters from this practice.

Determined, Sahra shared her decision with her husband. Though initially hesitant, he eventually supported her. Together, they became advocates, speaking out against FGM/C, educating others, and encouraging parents to protect their daughters.

Sahra’s courage inspired change. Gradually, community attitudes shifted as more parents questioned FGM/C and embraced the importance of bodily autonomy. Sahra’s story is a testament to the power of knowledge and the unwavering spirit of a mother’s love. Her decision to break free from harmful traditions and protect her daughters ignited a ripple effect, helping to transform her community’s perception of FGM/C and paving the way for a future free from this harmful practice, in harmony with her faith and the rights of women and girls.



ETHIOPIA

KENYA

INDIAN
OCEAN



KEY ACTIVITIES INCLUDED:



WHAT DID WE DO?

1

Girls' Empowerment & Rights

(Safe Spaces, Mentorship for enhanced leadership and life skills and public speaking, advocacy activities, awareness sessions)

2

Engaging Men and Boys, Parents/ Caregivers, Community Leaders, and Religious Scholars

("Boys Wise" curriculum, gender equality dialogue series between couples, video testimonies, gender equality champions)

3

Advocacy and leadership of Women and Girls Rights Organizations

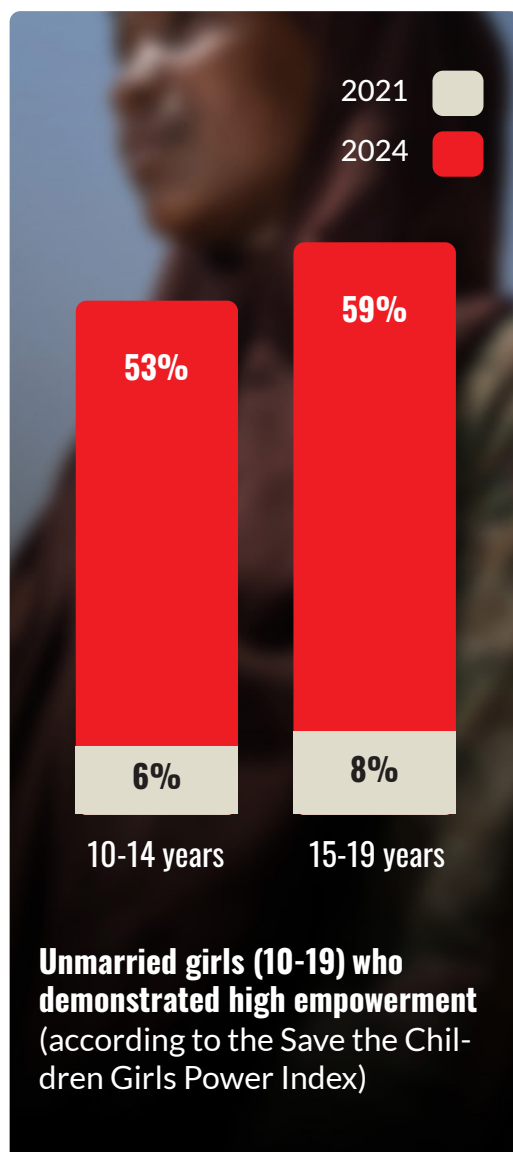
(Trainings on policy and advocacy, leadership and mentoring, alliance building, stakeholder engagement, awareness campaigns, etc.)

4

Women's Economic Empowerment and Enhanced Decision-Making

(Village Saving and Loans Associations: trainings on business skills and financial literacy, equipment and tools, entrepreneurship networks, gender equality dialogues; Crisis modifiers: cash transfer)

KEY RESULTS



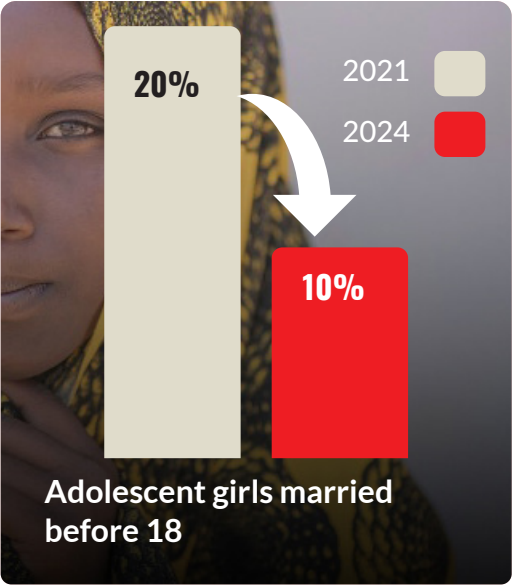
12 partnerships signed with media actors to create spaces for women and girls' engagement

8,320 community members (50% women) sensitized on gender equality and positive social norms:

3,040 adolescents, **3,040** caregivers and community members, **2,240** community influencers

+3,000 children/adolescents (50% girls) and **+10,000** adults (over 50% women) directly reached by project activities

45% of male caregivers and community leaders had positive attitudes towards gender equality and equal rights for girls and boys (respectively 6 and 18% in 2021)



1,320 adolescent girls participated in advocacy activities on gender equality and girls' rights

13 national advocacy campaigns conducted



THEMES

BUILDING GIRLS' & BOYS' AGENCY & VOICES

At the core of the socio-ecological model are the rights, needs, and voices of adolescent girls. CHANGES 2.0 prioritized enhancing the empowerment of adolescent girls and boys (aged 10-19) by enhancing their agency, voice, and leadership in community advocacy. Over 3,200 adolescents (10-19) participated in tailored curricula –Save the Children's evidenced-based CHOICES curriculum- that focused on gender equality, life skills, and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR). These sessions fostered critical thinking, self-confidence, and peer dialogue, leading to measurable improvements in attitudes and behaviours.

Peer mentorship was a cornerstone of this approach. Trained mentors facilitated discussions on gender norms, relationships, and rights, creating safe spaces for adolescents to express themselves and challenge harmful stereotypes. IRC's flagship Girls Shine curriculum (focused on SGBV and empowerment) and CARE's piloted Boys Wise curriculum (focused on boys' engagement for gender equality and preventing all forms of SGBV) further supported this by equipping adolescents with advocacy and facilitation skills.

Adolescent girls and boys led community engagement initiatives—including drama, poetry, and debates—that addressed FGM/C, CEFM, and other forms of SGBV. These youth-led initiatives not only raised awareness but also demonstrated the capacity of young people to influence social change.

The project also supported girls in developing advocacy action plans with mentorship from women's rights organizations, supporting the adolescent girls with advocacy and facilitation skills.

Overall, CHANGES 2.0 successfully created platforms for adolescent girls and boys to raise their voices, advocate for their rights, and become agents of change in their communities. As a result, the project saw high empowerment scores among very young and older adolescent girls rise from from 6% and 8% respectively at the baseline, to 53% and 59% respectively by the end of the project.

"I've learned in Girl Shine training that girls can be heroes just like boys and can serve as role models and public figures in their communities." Sohane, Girl (15-19).*

"It's good to support your sister and other girls in the house by sharing chores. This gives them time to study, do their homework, and even have the opportunity to attend school." Jawaan, Boy (15-19).*



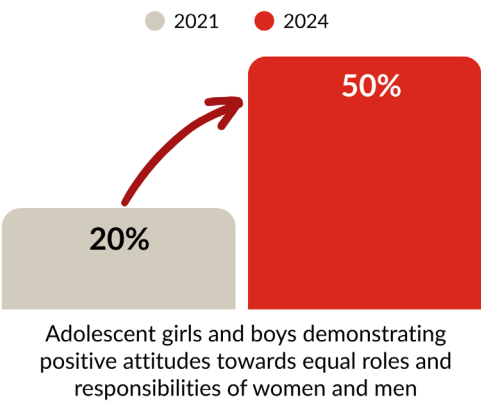
SHIFTING DISCRIMINATORY NORMS & PRACTICES

Attitudes refer to the personal beliefs that individuals hold about a particular behaviour. Social norms are the unwritten rules of behaviour that are shared by members of a given group or society. They are the informal, often implicit rules that most people in a community accept and abide by and are known to have a strong influence over individual behaviours. The project’s theory of change posited that a shift in social norms was required in order to bring about the behaviour change required to achieve the ultimate outcome: Strengthened gender equality and empowerment of women in Somalia. The CHANGES 2.0 project made significant strides in challenging entrenched discriminatory norms and practices in Somalia, particularly those that perpetuate SGBV, including CEFM and FGM/C.

Through a multi-layered approach, the project engaged over 3,000 parents/caregivers (over 50% women) and over 2,200 community influencers (50% women). To improve the attitudes of caregivers and community members towards positive social norms in favour of gender equality, including moving away from CEFM and FGM/C, community dialogues were conducted based on SC’s evidenced-based gender equality and social behaviour change ‘VOICES’ approach.

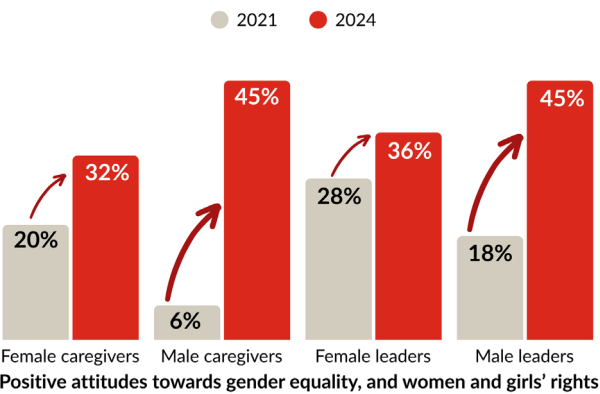
The VOICES approach uses recorded testimonies of project participants who have changed their attitudes/behaviours as it relates to project outcomes.

In this case, video testimonies focused on attitudes and behaviour changes within families related to CEFM, FGM/C, girls’ education, shared household chores, and women’s economic empowerment and decision-making. These recorded testimonies were then used to spark reflection and community dialogues with other community members. This approach has proven effective as the testimonies are shared by other project participants in the same regions and language.



Religious leaders and scholars were engaged through scholarly debates regarding beliefs that FGM/C is a religious requirement. The project saw a significant reduction in the perceptions held around both harmful practices being required under religion, shifting to an understanding that they are more societal expectations.

“Many scholars, including those from prominent Islamic institutions, argue that the practice {FGM/C} is not part of the core teachings of Islam and should not be linked to religious obligation.” Nahlaa, female community leader, Erigavo.*



Despite persistent challenges—such as social resistance and weak legal enforcement—the project succeeded in fostering a more informed and engaged community.

“It was a great honor for me to participate in these eye-opening sessions. The issues raised in the session are relevant to our daily routines and I have learned a lot about FGM/C and its harmfulness, and I will be able to reach out to many girls and parents and transfer the little knowledge I have gained in these sessions.” - Faduun, Female IDP in Baidoa District.*



ENABLING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR GENDER EQUALITY & WOMEN'S & GIRLS' RIGHTS

Recognizing that individual empowerment must be supported by systemic change, CHANGES 2.0 focused on strengthening the enabling environment for gender equality through policy advocacy, media engagement, and institutional capacity-building. The project trained 480 women's rights organizations' (WRO) members to hold governments accountable for the adoption and implementation of gender equality laws. These WROs developed 31 action plans and engaged in high-level advocacy with federal and regional decision-makers.

Government officials, including 306 police and gender desk officers, were sensitized on gender equality laws and policies. Exchange visits to Rwanda and Djibouti provided Somali lawmakers with exposure to successful models of gender-responsive governance, leading to the development of national action plans and renewed commitments to legislative reform.

CHANGES 1.0 and CHANGES 2.0 contributed significantly towards policy and advocacy initiatives that resulted in four out of six states (including Federal Member States) adopting legislation against FGM/C. These initiatives were led by the project's national partners, including the WRO partners.

The project also worked with media actors and journalists to amplify messages challenging discriminatory norms. Training sessions equipped them with gender-responsive reporting skills and encouraged accountability journalism. Over 300 journalists were

"The CHANGES project has been invaluable in supporting us as we work to advance this policy across all levels –from grassroots civil society to government and even at the presidential level. With their assistance, we have launched girls' clubs dedicated to advocating against FGM/C. These clubs serve as beacons of hope for young girls in Somaliland, empowering them to stand up for their rights."

Mona Isse Mahad, Director of the Department of Women at Ministry of Employment, Social Affairs, and Family.

trained to report on gender issues and hold government accountable. Post-training assessments showed a 77% improvement in journalists' knowledge of gender equality laws, and qualitative interviews confirmed increased media coverage and public pressure on officials. These efforts led to increased public discourse on gender equality and contributed to shifting community attitudes.

Despite challenges in enforcement and political will, the project contributed to increased awareness of gender equality laws among communities and duty bearers. It also fostered collaboration between civil society, media, and government actors—laying the foundation for sustained advocacy and policy change.



“When my wife participated in these VSLA meetings without my notice, I got angry. There was always a conflict between us on managing resources. But today, we are happy we understood more about cooperation and decision-sharing. We even discussed our future financial plans.” Gaarane, Male Project Participant*

“This initiative has empowered me and ignited a vision for the future. I hope my journey inspires my neighbours and other Somali women to take steps toward independence and success.” Tawllan, Female Project Participant*

ENHANCED SOCIAL & ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

CHANGES 2.0 significantly advanced women’s economic empowerment, recognizing its critical role in shifting household and community power dynamics. Through Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), business skills training, and gender discussion series, the project supported 1,660 women in building financial literacy, communication, and shared decision-making skills with their male household members (primarily husbands/partners).

By the end of the project, 51% of female caregivers had started or sustained income-generating activities—up from 17% at the baseline in 2021. Of these, 96% reported having decision-making power over how their income was used, with 67% making decisions independently.

Women’s perceived economic contribution to the household rose from 13% to 41%, and their involvement in household and community decision-making increased significantly.

Over 90% of women reported decision-making power in household matters, and 80% reported being involved in community decisions such as dispute resolution and resource allocation.

The project also addressed structural barriers by promoting climate-resilient livelihoods and advocating for inclusive financial services. These efforts not only improved women’s economic status but also strengthened their ability to challenge harmful practices like CEFM and FGM/C.

CHANGES 2.0 demonstrated that economic empowerment is a powerful lever for gender equality, enabling women to assert their rights and influence decisions at all levels.



BEST PRACTICES

Holistic Integrated Approach:

Implement a socio-ecological approach for CEFM and FGM/C prevention

Adolescent Girls' Voice and Agency:

Enhance empowerment of adolescent girls and boys for gender equality to create a generational impact

Economic Empowerment:

Engage mothers of unmarried adolescent girls in group savings and income generation support, supplemented with gender dialogues with male partners, for equitable intra-household decision making and prevention of CEFM and FGM/C

Partnerships:

Engage with respected community-level allies and government institutions to foster community and government ownership for culturally sensitive gender-transformative programming

Sustainability:

Focus on strengthening the capacity of existing organizations and structures, including women and girls' rights organizations, and fostering ownership of duty bearers



LESSONS LEARNED FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

CEFM Prevention

- Explore economic empowerment strategies (e.g. Village Savings and Loan Associations) for adolescent girls in addition to their mothers to reduce vulnerability of girls to CEFM and increase their agency
- Explore alternative income generation strategies, e.g., entrepreneurship trainings, to support FGM/C practitioners in pivoting away from participation in harmful practices.

Responding to CEFM and FGM/C

- Support adolescent girls who are already married and/or undergone FGM/C

Crisis Modifiers

- Provide funding flexibility to respond to predictable and unpredictable shocks, preserve project gains and minimise negative coping strategies in times of crises.





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