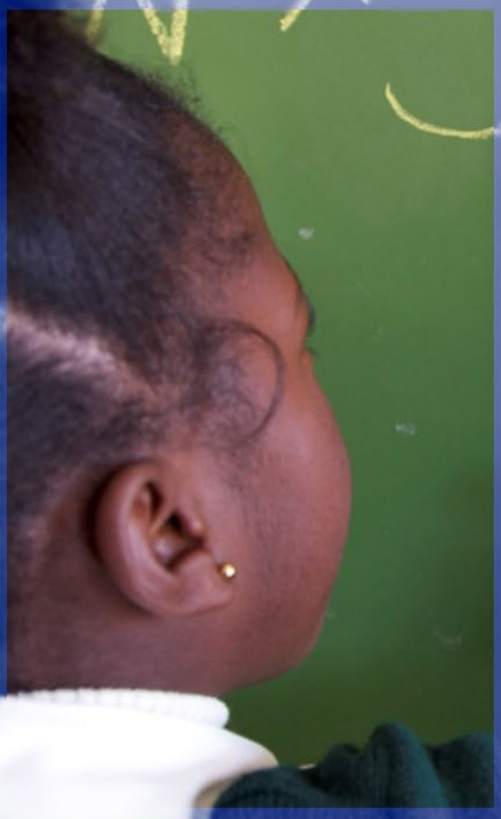
Impact Assessment of the Girls Get Equal multi-country program to prevent child, early, and forced marriage

Plan International Norway
Final Report



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The report is the product of KPMG AS and the findings and interpretations presented in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of Plan International Norway, or any of the stakeholders engaged.

Acronyms

CBCP - Community-Based Child Protection

CEFM - Child, Early and Forced Marriage

CNERS - Comité National d'Éthique pour la Recherche en Santé (Niger)

CSO - Civil Society Organization

DHS - Demographic and Health Surveys

EMIS - Education Management Information Systems

FGDs - Focus Group Discussions

FGM - Female Genital Mutilation

GGE - Girls Get Equal

KIIs - Key Informant Interviews

IGA - Income Generating Activity

LNOB - Leave No One Behind

MER - Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research

MICS - Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys

MTAKUWWA - National Plan to End Violence Against Girls and Women (Tanzania)

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

Norad - The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation

PYA - Plan Youth Advocates

PTA - Parent-Teacher Association

SMC - Sustainable Management Committee

SRHR - Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

STI - Sexually Transmitted Infection

ToC - Theory of Change

TVET - Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UNCST - Uganda National Council for Science and Technology

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund

UNICEF - United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

VSLAs - Village Savings and Loan Associations

WHO - World Health Organization

Content

Executive summary

Background and objectives

The harmful effects of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) on individual girls' health, education, rights and autonomy is well documented, and a limited but increasing body of literature identifies evidence-based approaches toward ending this harmful practice. The Girls Get Equal Program (GGE) is a five-year framework agreement between Plan International Norway and The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), which was implemented from 2020 through 2024. The overall aim of the program was to reduce the prevalence of CEFM in selected target areas in six countries: Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, Niger, Tanzania, and Uganda. The programme was implemented using a holistic approach which addressed 5 interconnected outcomes as presented in the GGE Theory of Change (ToC) below.

This impact assessment aims to: 1) Assess the program's effects on society and how the program has contributed to reduced levels of child, early and forced marriage in the program areas; 2) Assess how the GGE has affected the conditions of adolescent girls, boys, and their families in the program areas.

The impact assessment centers the lived realities and observed personal and societal changes of those that were impacted by the GGE program and emphasizes the subjective experiences of persons targeted by GGE interventions when assessing the likely impact of the program. It further takes a retrospective approach to explore pathways of change that were likely achieved through the interventions. Gendered power-dynamics is central to understanding the issue of CEFM. Accordingly, the assessment adopts a gender-transformative perspective that places gender relations and equality at the core of measuring positive change.

Key findings

This Impact Assessment of the GGE Program confirms that the program's holistic design and approach, which integrates educational support, SRHR programming, economic empowerment, and child protection, addresses the interdependent nature of drivers of CEFM.

The assessment provides an overview of the program's observed contribution to norm change across different levels of impact, as illustrated in Figure 2. Overall, the impact assessment demonstrates notable observed

norm change experienced at the individual (interpersonal) and household level (intrapersonal). Although the evidence for impact at the community and social environment level is less strong, as such changes are affected by multiple complex factors, the assessment does provide a range of examples of changes at these levels which stakeholders find may have been influenced by the program. The visual presentation of the socioecological model below further illustrates these levels of change:

Individual level
Several stakeholders identified individual-level changes resulting from the GGE Program, that contribute towards ending CEFM. Across the GGE program countries, girls interviewed speak of how their sense of agency has changed, due to program interventions. Girls involved in GGE are expressing a desire to delay marriage, pursue education, and redefine their roles within families and communities. Through youth clubs, sports, intergenerational dialogues, and peer networks, the program has created safe spaces for skills-building, self-expression, and collective resistance to harmful practice, among youth, and girls in particular. While resistance to girls' empowerment persists in some contexts, there is consistent evidence of shifts in attitudes due to the GGE Program.

> *"The project made us confident on speaking up. We now talk to parents who are planning to get their child married at a young age. If they don't agree, we inform the police." (Girls, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)*

Household, family, and peer level
At the household level, changes in parental attitudes, especially among fathers, and increased involvement of mothers in decision-making, reflect gradual shifts in how girls' roles are understood. Economic and skills-based interventions for women and youth have supported more equitable dynamics, including some redistribution of domestic responsibilities. Due to the GGE program, traditional gender roles within households are reportedly beginning to shift with boys contributing to domestic work and girls engaging in tasks traditionally performed by boys and men. However, these changes are not observed by all stakeholders, and some resistance remains.

> *"Parents now believe that the division of responsibilities involves both boys and girls. (…) Tasks previously thought to be only for girls at home, like fetching water, sweeping, and washing dishes, are also done by boys. When help is provided, we feel good." (Girls, FGD, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)*

Community Level
A key finding from the primary data collected across all target countries, is the reported change in attitudes and norms relating to child marriage at the community level, and a reduction in CEFM as a result of the GGE Program. Key actors, including parents, teachers, religious and traditional leaders, and male champions, have been central to challenging entrenched beliefs. A common theme is the growing recognition of girls' value and prospects beyond marriage, supported by factors such as their school performance and participation in economic activities. Stakeholders report that CEFM is no longer seen as 'normal' in many areas, and that they observe a decline in CEFM and increased support for girls' education. The program's sustained, multi-stakeholder efforts have laid important groundwork for lasting community transformation toward gender equality and CEFM prevention.

> *"Girls aged 12, 14, are no longer seen as marriageable. They are rather seen as needing to go to school. When they go to school, they can reach 20 years without marrying. But when they don't, at 16, they are already considered for marriage." (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Jan Toudou, Niger)*

Societal level

While societal-level transformation remains a long-term challenge, the GGE Program has contributed to some policy and institutional changes that support broader norm change. Across several countries, stakeholders noted that the program had contributed to improvements in child protection frameworks, enforcement of marriage laws, and the adoption of gender-sensitive local by-laws. These outcomes reflect the program's role in strengthening cross-sector collaboration, though deeper structural change will require continued investment and multi-level engagement over time.

> *"The GGE program has led to a substantial decrease in child marriages in the community. The introduction of by-laws with strict penalties has deterred child marriages, changing social norms and community attitudes." (Religious/traditional leaders, KII, Phalombe, Malawi*)

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

The assessment highlights the importance of integrating SRHR across all thematic areas due to its central role in driving norm change across all GGE outcome areas - education, economic empowerment, and child protection. Improved menstrual health, through the provision of products, facilities, and education, was linked to increased school attendance among girls. The GGE SRHR programming combined 'soft' components (training and attitude change) with 'hard' components (menstrual products and WASH facilities). Interviews reveal a shift in perceptions of menstruation, reducing discriminatory practices and potentially affecting early pregnancy rates, though lacking secondary data for verification. Nevertheless, the program faces risks from mixed stakeholder views on prioritizing SRHR. Parents in particular were less confident in the appropriateness of SRHR components and more supportive of economic empowerment components. In some contexts, stakeholders and participants involved in SRHR, focused greatly on the personal hygiene aspects of SRHR, demonstrating a possible limited internalization of how SRHR relates to issues of gender roles, power and girls' autonomy.

Economic empowerment

Across all countries and in interviews with all stakeholders, the effect of vocational skills training, savings groups, and income-generating activities on the financial independence and decision-making power of girls, young persons, and parents/mothers was emphasized. Women and girls stepping into traditionally male-dominated roles, such as electrical work and construction in Tanzania, and hairdressing/cutting in Nepal, has expanded perceptions about what women and girls can achieve. Across all contexts, the reduction in youths 'idleness', such as being part of a training program, was considered important aspects of the Program, especially by parents, in fostering a more industrious community. Although our findings do confirm that some youths gained financial independence through the program, persons interviewed were adamant that support over a longer duration and intensity, was needed for sustained economic empowerment.

Education

Stakeholders reported a shift in community norms, with increased respect for school-going girls and greater parental support for girls' education. Teachers played a key role in influencing these changes, especially around schooling, SRHR, and CEFM. The linkage between preventing CEFM and providing vocational training was noted as a distinctive and effective feature by some stakeholders. The reintegration of pregnant girls, young mothers, and girls experiencing CEFM was observed, which helps reduce exclusion and supports their continued education. Key challenges include social stigma around teenage pregnancy, limited educational opportunities for out-of-school children, and the lack of kindergarten support for young mothers attending school, highlighting program barriers to inclusive educational outcomes.

Child Protection

The program has contributed to the advancement of laws and policies against child marriage and violence against children through advocacy and coalition-building with NGOs and civil society actors. This effort has helped enhance the reporting of child marriages and abuse, supported by strengthened referral systems and increased legal awareness in GGE communities. Empowerment among girls to report abuse and resist early marriage is evident in the primary data collected and driven by awareness campaigns and GGE club activities. Improved collaboration among child protection entities has been a key program outcome. The impact assessment provides evidence of the vital role of child protection within CEFM programming; however, it also reveals that 'protection' was at times misinterpreted by actors at various levels as a means to control and restrict girls' agency. This underscores the importance of ensuring that the implementation of activities aligns with gender-transformative and 'do no harm' principles. The use of fear-based tactics - such as warning parents about legal consequences or potential loss of custody - was commonly cited as an 'effective

approach' by stakeholders. Similar fear-based messaging, highlighting the legal consequences of sexual assault and legal aspects of CEFM, was also used to target men and boys. However, such strategies could be limited in terms of social norm change and sustainability of girls' empowerment interventions.

Inclusion of boys and men
Evidence from all target countries confirms the GGE Program to some level managed to engage boys and men in the topic of preventing CEFM, and that this has been important to prevent resistance towards the GGE program. 'Social cohesion', such as improved relationship between fathers and daughters, was understood as an important GGE program outcome by many men and boy themselves. Evidence from the assessment demonstrate that strategic and targeted engagement of men, boys, parents, and traditional leaders, was important for the achievement of impact-level results. However, it also highlights risks of diluted resources when GGE activities targeting boys and men were not clearly connected to gender equality outcomes.

Leave no one behind
Testimonies indicated positive effects of inclusive programming aligned with a 'leave no one behind' approach, such as tailored learning tools and the construction of disability-friendly WASH infrastructure. However, the assessment found a limited focus among stakeholders on non-physical disabilities, and few testimonies demonstrated the application of an intersectional approach in addressing the diverse needs of marginalized groups.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this report, the following recommendations are made to Plan International for their future programming to prevent child, early, and forced marriage.

Normative change
- Integrate a consistent focus on norm change recognizing parents as key decision-makers in CEFM.
- Consider how CEFM programming is addressing norm change at different levels (individual, household, community, and societal level) to understand the interconnectedness of norm change and potential impact - where altering norms at one level might not yield effectiveness at another level.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Ensure the delivery of comprehensive SRHR advocacy which promote rights-based aspects, while balancing culturally relevant messaging on SRHR, to ensure SRHR is not diluted and reduced to girls' hygiene and 'health' that do not support girls' agency and empowerment.
- Engage men in SRHR programming, to ensure that SRHR is not left as a women's/girls' issue and promote norms where men are important actors in preventing STIs and early pregnancy.
- Strengthen inclusion of national stakeholders and parents to ensure buy-in and support to comprehensive SRHR education.

Economic empowerment
- Skills training programs have the potential to improve girls' status. To achieve this, economic empowerment programs should focus not only on teaching specific skills but also on building girls' confidence, increasing their awareness of important issues related to their agency, and supporting their freedom of movement and choice.

Education
- Strengthen training and support for teachers and school management on gender equality to empower them to promote positive gender norms and address stigma. This initiative is crucial for facilitating the reintegration of girls who are married, have children, or are pregnant, and for fostering acceptance of SRHR within the school environment.
- Strengthen human rights-focused messaging within the education sector that emphasizes the inherent value and dignity of all children, regardless of their enrollment status. This approach is essential to prevent out-of-school children from experiencing increased stigma as efforts prioritize formal schooling.
- Assess potential risks with 'rewards' to best performing students and/or food rations. Ensure 'no one is left behind', especially out-of-school children and most vulnerable. Consider inclusive approaches that rewards diversity of traits among students.

Child protection
- Strengthen democratic, rights-based and gender responsive community interventions to avoid legitimization of CEFM messages that centers around controlling the behavior, movement, sexuality of girls and women in CEFM programming. Challenge stereotypes and work with boys and men to

address sexual assault and rape, while promoting positive messaging around the evolving bodily autonomy for all young people.

- Refrain from using or legitimization fear-based advocacy to prevent CEFM. Instead, empower key stakeholders involved in child protection mechanisms with skills to that promote human rights-based approaches and democratic governance mechanisms, especially to address potential risks working with law enforcement authorities. Ensure inclusive processes by actively involving those affected by child protection laws - including initiators, boys and men - and address lack of legal protection in implementation of such laws.

Inclusion of boys and men

- Implement a more targeted approach recognizing that men are not a homogenous group, considering factors like age and status that influence their ability to support the reduction in CEFM. This could mean targeting young religious leaders, fathers, and boys in separate interventions. Consider low hanging fruit (natural allies) vs. influential actors, and target both.
- Ensure that program activities that include men and boys are driving gender equality results and contributing to a reduction in CEFM (gender transformative approach) to avoid dilution of resources towards men, while securing their support to prevent GBV and backlash to changing gender roles. (Ensure Plan staff and implementing partners understand the objective of engaging men and boys as a strategy rather than as a beneficiary group)
- Advocacy messages directed to men and boys in CEFM should avoid a narrow focus on legal aspects/fear-based tactics and include how gender equality and positive masculinity strengthens social cohesion and ultimately benefits boys and men.
- Religious and traditional leaders can either promote an abandonment of CEFM or be a voice of support towards its continuation. Focus resources and capacity building on bottom-up approaches that considers local dynamics for authentic engagement of leaders in dismantle stigmas and norms reinforcing CEFM.

Leave no one behind

- Ensure disability inclusion in CEFM programming goes beyond inclusion focused on physical disability to address invisible or hidden disabilities, to understand how these factors impact the continued practice of CEFM.
- Strengthen the intersectional approach in CEFM programming to ensure inclusive programming that take into account intersecting identities of most marginalized groups, such as LGBTQI status, class, caste, ethnicity, and assess the differential impact of CEFM.

Other risks and 'Do No Harm'

- Preventing CEFM depends not only on the choice of approach but critically on how interventions are *designed and implemented*. To maintain fidelity and effectiveness, it is important that *implementation* is led by individuals and organisations who uphold gender-equitable values. Plan International should therefore strengthen comprehensive training, both prior to and throughout the intervention, that address potential discomfort with sensitive subjects such as 'power' and 'sexuality' among program teams, facilitators and implementing partners. This will help ensure that the behaviours of those delivering the program are consistent with Plan International's principles and contribute to achieving the intended social norm outcomes.
- Apply nuance in depictions of CEFM in material and interventions to ensure that girls who self-initiate (chose) marriage are heard and provided with resources and support considering local realities and vulnerabilities.
- Offer real alternatives to girls and families at risk of CEFM, such as to avoid the practice being disguised as 'cohabitation' which could potentially offer even fewer legal rights for girls.
- Target groups that are at risk of CEFM and migration with specific program support to prevent migration as a strategy to CEFM. Provide viable alternatives/life choices that can prevent CEFM as an attractive strategy.
- Ensure that CEFM interventions are driven by feminist principles, where gender equality and girls' and women's' empowerment is the ultimate objective, as a guide to address messaging of CEFM being coopted and used as a strategy to control girls' behavior and sexuality.

Climate change

- Consider the impact of climate change on the likelihood, risks, and trends of child marriage in the short and medium term, as well as the unique needs of girls and adolescents in climate-driven emergencies compared to conflict-driven crises to address the intersecting challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

1.Introduction

1.1 Background and context

The harmful effects of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) on individual girls' health, education, rights and autonomy is well documented, and a limited[1] but increasing[2] body of literature identifies evidence-based approaches toward ending this harmful practice. Although a global decline in the prevalence of CEFM is observed[3], the reduction is uneven across regions and countries. Further, it is estimated that the global Covid-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the reduced rates of CEFM, although it is not yet fully reflected in global statistics.[4]

CEFM is a multifaceted issue driven by a complex mix of social, economic, and cultural factors. Understanding these drivers is essential for creating effective strategies to combat CEFM and supporting those affected by it. Among multiple such drivers, poverty disproportionately affects women and girls in the poorest quintiles, who are 2.5 times more likely to marry in childhood compared to their counterparts in wealthier quintiles[5]. For adolescents from low-income families, the lack of employment opportunities and the inability of parents to afford living expenses render young girls as economic burdens. Consequently, child marriage is often viewed as an economic strategy to mitigate family financial pressures.[6] [7]

Low level of education is another notable driver of CEFM, as evidenced by data from Malawi, where nearly two-thirds of women with no formal education were married as children, compared to only 5% of women who attended secondary school or higher[8]. Research consistently shows that each additional year a girl spends in secondary education reduces her likelihood of marrying before the age of 18 by 5%.[9] Cultural and gender norms, deeply embedded in patriarchal systems, drive the prevalence of CEFM. Gender inequality, negative perceptions of girls' value, socio-cultural and religious traditions, collectively generate concerns over girls' safety, fears of family dishonor due to premarital sex or pregnancy, and economic pressures that lead families to exchange girls for dowries or bride prices. This persistence of harmful practices not only hampers efforts to end child marriage but also acts as a catalyst for its continuation.[10]

Environmental and economic stressors linked to climate change also drive child marriage. Extreme weather events create additional pressures by increasing household expenditures, leading some families to marry off daughters as a coping strategy.[11] Additionally, displacement caused by armed conflict or natural disasters

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[1] *Siddiqi M, Greene ME. Mapping the field of child marriage: evidence, gaps, and future directions from a large-scale systematic scoping review, 2000–2019. J Adolesc Health. 2022 Mar;70(3 Suppl):S9-S16.*

[2] *Bokaie M, Bostani Khalesi Z, Ashoobi MT. Challenges and strategies to end child marriage. Int J Adolesc Med Health. 2021 Apr 19;33(3):75-81. doi: 10.1515/ijamh-2021-0017. PMID: 33866695.*

[3] *Unicef. (2024). The Child Marriage Data Portal. Retrieved from: https://childmarriagedata.org/global-trends/*

[4] *Shukla S, Ezebuihe JA, Steinert JI. Association between public health emergencies and sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, and early marriage among adolescent girls: a rapid review. BMC Public Health. 2023 Jan 17;23(1):117. doi: 10.1186/s12889-023-15054-7. PMID: 36650493; PMCID: PMC9844939.*

5 UNICEF. Ending Child Marriage – Progress and prospects. 2014.

6 Kabir, M., Rahman, M. M. Do adolescents support early marriage in Bangladesh? Evidence from study. 2005. JNMA J Nepal Med Assoc. 2005 Jul-Sep, 44(159):73-8. Retrieved from: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16554858/

7 Chouhan, P., Roy, A. Girl child marriage in Malda district of West Bengal: analysis of prevalence and socio-economic factors. 2021. Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies, Volume 16, 2021 – Issue 4, p. 293-306. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/17450128.2021.1923878

8 UNICEF. Ending Child Marriage – Progress and prospects. 2014.

9 World Bank. Educating Girls, Ending Child Marriage. 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage

10 *UN Women. Multi-Country Analytical Study of Legislation, Policies, Interventions and Cultural Practices on Child Marriage in Africa. 2018.*

[11] *Ahmed, K.J., Haq, S.M.A., Bartiaux, F. The nexus between extreme weather events, sexual violence, and early marriage: a study of vulnerable populations in Bangladesh. 2019. Population and Environment, Vol. 40, p. 303-324. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11111-019-0312-3*

exposes girls to heightened risks of sexual violence, particularly in temporary shelters, reinforcing the perceived necessity of early marriage as a protective measure of the family's reputation.[12] [13]

1.1.1 Plan International's Girls Get Equal Program

The Girls Get Equal Program (GGE) is a five-year framework agreement between Plan International Norway and The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), which was implemented from 2020 through 2024. The overall aim of the program was to reduce the prevalence of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) in selected target areas in six countries: Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, Niger, Tanzania, and Uganda. The program further aimed to reach more than 317,000 children, adolescents, and youth, 544 schools and 741 communities, while mainstreaming inclusion of children and youth with disabilities. Contributing to reaching the overall goal, the program had five integrated outcome areas as per the table below:

Overall goal: Reduce the prevalence of Child, Early and Forced Marriage
Outcome 1: Retention of girls in school
Outcome 2: Knowledge of SRHR among adolescents
Outcome 3: Economical opportunities for girls and families at high risk of CEFM
Outcome 4: Communities embrace norms that value the girls and support girls and boys to delay marriage
Outcome 5: Responsiveness of duty bearers at national, district and sub-district levels to prevent and respond to child rights violations, particularly CEFM

As per the GGE programs' Theory of Change (ToC), Plan International aimed to address the contextual root causes to CEFM, and to identify effective approaches for addressing CEFM tailored to each given context[14]. Plan International employed four different strategies for reaching the overall outcome and impact goals, including i) empowerment of girls and adolescents, ii) access to economic resources, iii) mobilization for social norm and behavioral change, and iv) strengthening the implementation and enforcement of legal and policy frameworks. Plan International also chose a cross-cutting approach toward reaching overall goals, among other by engaging in civil society strengthening and applying a gender and 'leave no one behind' (LNOB) lense to all its work. The GGE program was thus designed with an evidence-based and whole-of-society approach toward reducing the prevalence of CEFM, by targeting root causes, individual stakeholders, communities, systems, and structures.

As the program was nearing the final phase of its implementation, Plan International Norway set out to understand the societal impact of the program, if any, and to explore which factors led to the impact identified. The aim of the exercise was to harvest best practices and specific examples and contribute to future program design for maximal programmatic impact. KPMG AS Norway, in collaboration with six national consultants from each GGE country, were contracted to conduct the Impact Assessment. This report provides the results from the assignment, and related recommendations.

1.2 Assessment aims and objectives

The specific aims of the impact assessment were to assess the following two specific aims and related sub-questions:

12 *Alston, M., Godden, N., Haynes, A., Whittenbury, K. Are climate challenges reinforcing child and forced marriage and dowry as adaptation strategies in the context of Bangladesh? 2014. Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 47, Part A, November-December 2014, p 137-144. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.08.005*

13 *UN General Assembly. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2016 – 71/175. Child, early and forced marriage. 2017. Retrieved from: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/857708?ln=en&v=pdf*

[14] *Plan International. (n.d.). Theory of change - Girls Get Equal: Preventing Child, Early and Forced Marriage.*

Specific aim 1 Assess the program's effects on society and how the program has contributed to reduced levels of child, early and forced marriage in the program areas	Specific aim 2 Assess how the GGE has affected the conditions of adolescent girls, boys, and their families in the program areas
✓ What are the GGE program's main intended and unintended effects?	✓ How has the GGE affected the conditions of adolescent girls, boys, and their families in the programming areas?
✓ What are some of the higher-level contextual/social changes in policies, attitudes and development indicators achieved during the implementation period?	✓ How has the GGE contributed to an overall improvement/change in the communities in which the program was implemented?
✓ How has the GGE program contributed to reduced levels of child, early and forced marriage in the program areas?	✓ How has the GGE contributed to an overall improvement/change in the communities in which the program was implemented?
✓ How has the program effected the program communities and the greater society?	✓ How has the GGE been gender transformative in the communities in which the program was implemented?
	✓ How the GGE encouraged meaningful youth engagement and met their needs, and how may this be strengthened and/or improved in the future?
	✓ What are some of the high-level achievements of the GGE program which will be sustained in the future?

2. Methodology

2.1 Impact assessment design

To respond to the specific aims outlined in Section 1.2, an exploratory sequential mixed methods design as articulated by Creswell & Plano (2011)[15] was used. This involved both primary and secondary data collection/analysis, starting with a desk review of key documentation, followed by an outcome harvesting exercise, before conducting primary data collection through key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) in all six countries.

The impact assessment centers the lived realities and observed personal and societal changes of those that were impacted by the GGE program and emphasizes the subjective experiences of persons targeted by GGE interventions when assessing the likely impact of the program. It further takes a retrospective approach, through outcome harvesting which explored pathways of change that were likely achieved through the interventions, and subsequently substantiated through primary data collection.

The research study was exploratory in nature and primary data collection tools were developed iteratively to achieve a tailored and comprehensive assessment of programmatic impact. Furthermore, a reliance on a broad range of stakeholders and data sources, validation sessions with Plan country offices, and a focus on the lived experiences of the program's target groups, further enhances the credibility of findings. The overall purpose of the impact assessment is to make valuable contributions to the evidence base and inform programmatic and advocacy recommendations for future implementation related to CEFM.

2.1.1 Guiding principles and elements of the impact assessment design

Gendered power-dynamics is central to understanding the issue of CEFM. As such, this impact assessment is guided by a gender transformative perspective, which places discourses on gender at its core. Gender is understood as a social construction, where the gendered identities of men or women are shaped by cultural and historical contexts and informs societal codes and norms.[16] As such, gender must be examined within the broader social structures, at the societal level, and understood as constructed, negotiated, maintained, and reproduced.[17] Butler (1988) argues that gender is not an innate or natural attribute of men and women, and is continuously created and reinforced through performative acts. Recognizing gender as a performative act provides a lens through which the complexities of gendered experiences can be explored at different levels of society, from the individual level to societal level. While gender transformative research encompasses a range of approaches and theoretical positions, this impact assessment is rooted in an understanding that considers gendered contextual influences, gender inequalities, women's empowerment and agency, and advocates for inclusive and equitable systems and practices, while affirming the significance and validity of women's lived experiences. In addition, Plan International's Gender Equality and Inclusion principles, as well as Plan Gender Transformative Marker[18], informs our assessment of the degree to which the results from the program are gender transformative.

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[15] *Creswell JW, Clark VL. Designing and conducting mixed methods research. 2017. Sage publications; 2017 Aug 31.*

[16] *West C, Zimmerman DH. Doing gender. 1987. Gender Soc. 1987 Jun;1(2):125-151.*

17 Heise L, Greene ME, Opper N, Stavropoulou M, Harper C, Nascimento M, Zewdie D; Gender Equality, Norms, and Health Steering Committee. Gender inequality and restrictive gender norms: framing the challenges to health.2019. Lancet. 2019 Jun 15;393(10189):2440-2454. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30652-X. Epub 2019 May 30. PMID: 31155275.

[18] *Plan International. Living Up to Our Commitment – Gender Transformative Programming And Influencing During Covid-19. 2020.*

2.1.1.1 Socioecological model

The assessment was also informed by the socioecological model, a framework organized by multiple levels of influence that demonstrate an individual's interactions with their physical and sociocultural environment[19] and focuses on the interdependence between these factors. The socioecological models are often used to facilitate understanding of multiple levels of influence. For this study, the socioecological model was used to help identify and categorize different levels of observed norm change, which is presented in section 4.2.8, with findings organized according to the different levels of the socioecological model (e.g. interpersonal, intrapersonal (family), and community levels and the broader social environment).

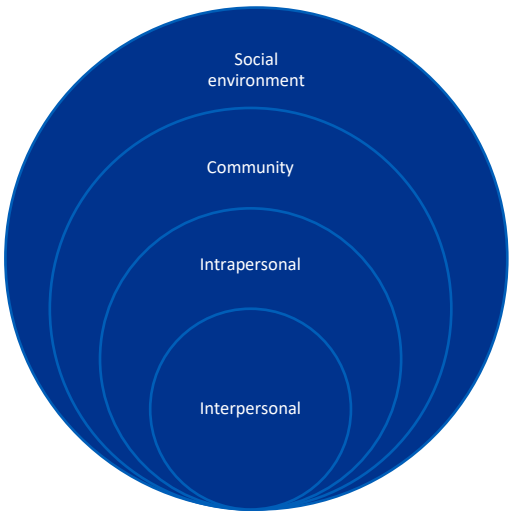


Figure 1. Visual presentation of the socioecological model

2.1.1.2 Youth Engagement

The team incorporated principles of youth engagement into the design of the assessment via two avenues:

1) by partnering the local consultants with youth researchers at the country level, to guide the in-country design, data gathering, analysis and validation of the research, and

2) by selecting youth-friendly, participatory methods for data collection across all stages of the assignment.

A core element of youth centric approach is to surrender the role of 'expert'.[20] The team therefore sought, after approval of ethical protocols, to partner with youth researchers to assess and decide on language used in KIIs and FGDs, deciding where and how interviews with students should take place, and on prioritizing questions that addressed concerns seen as most relevant for youth and using an inclusive and culturally appropriate language.

The practical inclusion of youth researchers varied in the different contexts depending on external and internal circumstances, however, their involvement and insights throughout the data collection in all contexts shaped the collection of data, as well as promoted an environment of co-learning and co-creation in all six countries. To identify youth researchers, KPMG first approached the Plan International national offices, to gage whether there were suitable candidates within the networks of Plan which could be approached. Where appropriate, youth researchers were subsequently nominated, and a dedicated ToR was developed to determine the scope of their involvement. Where Plan was not able to propose youth researchers, the local researchers recruited from their networks. It is important to note that the youth researchers were not intended to represent the communities in which the assessment was taking place. Rather, the youth researcher role was an opportunity for personal and professional development for the young person engaged, which in turn benefited the assessment. The formality, scope, and level of collaboration between the youth researchers was decided

[19] *Schölmerich VL, Kawachi I. Translating the socio-ecological perspective into multilevel interventions: Gaps between theory and practice. 2016. Health Education & Behavior. 2016 Feb;43(1):17-20.*

[20] *Balonoff Suleiman, A., Nash., A., Kennedy, H., Abraczinskas, M., Ozer, E. 2024. Leveraging Best Practices to Design Your Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Project.Annie E. Casey Foundation.*

by the youth researcher, local researcher and KPMG, and varied from country to country based on the persons engaged and their circumstances[21].

Youth-friendly participatory research methods were also selected as part of the primary data collection tools. A participatory research mapping exercise was added to the data collection tools, to be conducted with young girls who were also targeted for FGDs. As part of this exercise youth created a visual map of their community to provide alternative tools and space to share their perception of power dynamics and agency within their communities. Further information on primary data collection is presented under section 2.4.3 – Data gathering activities.

2.2 Desk review

A desk review was conducted to review available documents and published studies relevant to the scope of the assignment. More specifically, the desk review provided the foundation for the development of qualitative data collection tools, subsequent analysis, and triangulation of findings. Literature utilized included information and documents, as well as GGE program-related documents such as overall project description, results framework and reporting, theory of change, and national databases with publicly available information of key indicators.

It also important to acknowledge that this assessment deviates from traditional endline evaluations by prioritizing societal-level impact over individual indicators. Moreover, primary data collection was executed independently from secondary baseline and program-level monitoring, enabling Plan to identify any disparities between these sources.

The desk review included an attempt by the impact assessment team to extract quantitative secondary data derived from national databases that may capture societal-level impact throughout the program period, to assess their suitability for comparison against programmatic outcomes and impact. The availability of data was determined by an initial data landscape assessment, where we located publicly available data to facilitate such comparison.

[21] *Plan International. Pathways to partnering with youth-led groups and organizations. 2019.*

2.3 Outcome harvesting

Following the initial desk review, and prior to primary data collection, six outcome harvesting workshops were conducted online with Plan International national staff and implementing partners. Outcome Harvesting is a participatory methodology to comprehensively identify, formulate, verify, and make sense of outcomes achieved through programming. It served as a retrospective component of the impact assessment design, allowing to unpack various causal pathways between GGE program intervention and perceived and likely programmatic outcomes and impacts.

The KPMG team carried out six individual outcome harvesting exercises with each Plan Country Office as well as national implementing partners engaged in the GGE program. The outcome harvesting exercises was organized as inter-active virtual workshops to understand specific outcomes and impacts (both intended and unintended) generated by the program. This exercise also identified which program components worked in which contexts and why, to enhance an understanding of how different aspects of programs work and for whom, unpacking various causal pathways between GGE program intervention and programmatic outcomes and impacts.[22] Each workshop included 7-15 participants and informed the interview guides for KIIs and FGDs, to ensure questions were developed to capture information within the most relevant areas of change in each country contexts. Outcome harvesting further strengthened the participative nature of the impact assessment, to provide those who were directly involved in the program delivery to identity and verify outcomes going beyond the GGE results framework and provided an opportunity for KPMG to 'harvest' relevant evidence to determine relevant outcome trajectories.

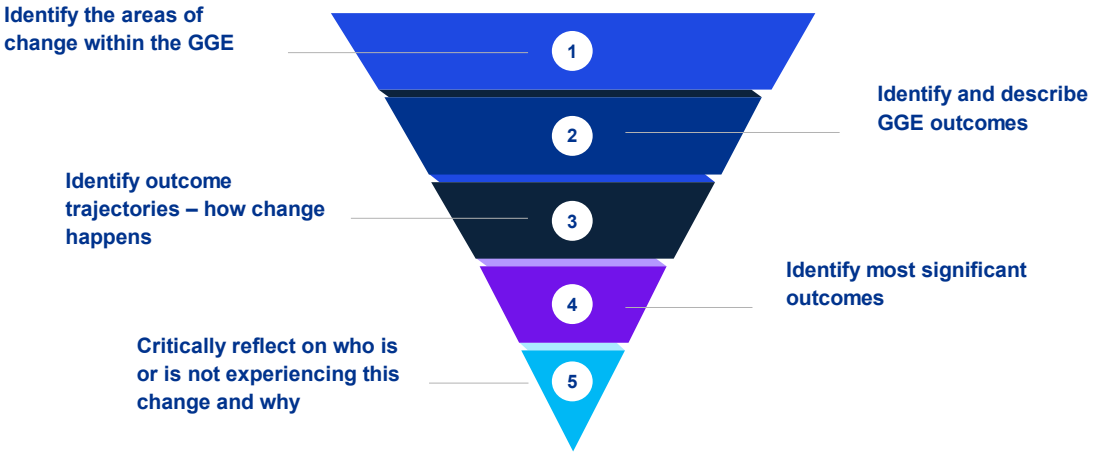


Figure 2. Outcome harvesting visual representation

[22] *Astbury, B., & Leeuw, F. L. Unpacking black boxes: mechanisms and theory building in evaluation. 2010. American Journal of Evaluation, 31(3), 363-381.*

2.4 Primary data collection

Following the desk review and outcome harvesting, and the obtention of ethical clearances covering all countries, qualitative, primary data collection took place in all GGE countries. The qualitative component involved semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in all six targeted countries (Uganda, Niger, Tanzania, Malawi, Nepal and Bangladesh). The primary data collection component of this impact assessment focused on addressing the overall purpose and corresponding objectives as outlined in Section 1.2.

The table below provides an overview of the plan for primary data collection activities in each country.

Table 1. Overview of primary data collection plan per country

Primary data collection activities	Stakeholder type	Participants
KIIs	Other stakeholders	• 1-2 KIIs with donors Key partners/ project stakeholders including: • 1-2 KIIs with key persons in ministries • 2-3 KIIs with representatives from relevant VSLAs or cooperatives • 2-3 KIIs with religious/traditional leaders • 1-2 KIIs with government officials • 1-2 KIIs with official duty bearers/CBCP members • 2-3 KIIs with representatives of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy
KIIs	Implementors	• 3-5 KIIs with educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels) • 3-5 KIIs with educational staff of TVET
Participatory mapping	Beneficiaries	• 5-10 mapping exercises with girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools • 5-10 mapping exercises with out-of-of school children
FGDs	Beneficiaries	• 1-2 FGDs with girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools • 1-2 FGDs with out-of-of school children • 1-2 FGDs with youth (former program participants in employment trainings) • 1-2 FGDs with families of girls at risk for CEFM or traditional initiators • 1-2 FGDs with student cabinet members • 1-2 FGDs with PTA and/or SMC members • 2 FGDs (one with boys and one with men)

2.4.1 Target Population and geographic scope

The target population for this assessment study were girls (age 10-24) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools, out-of-of school children, youth (former program participants in employment trainings), families of girls at risk for CEFM or traditional initiators, boys and men, GGE staff, and other relevant stakeholders. Other stakeholders included educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels), educational staff of TVET, PTA and/or SMC members, student cabinet members, key persons in ministries, representatives from relevant VSLAs or cooperatives, religious/traditional leaders and government officials, official duty bearers/CBCP members, and civil society organizations engaged in advocacy.

The data collection took place in the following locations in each country:

Bangladesh

- Barguna Sadar upazila, Barguna district, Barisal division
- Taltoli upazila, Barguna district, Barisal division

Malawi

- Lilongwe district
- Mulanje district
- Phalombe district

Nepal

- Selected municipalities in Bardiya district, Lumbini province
- Selected municipalities in Jumla district, Karnali province
- Selected municipalities in Kalikot district, Karnali province

Niger

- Sherkin Haoussa Commune, Mayahi Department, Maradi Region
- Ourafane Commune, Tessaoua Department, Maradi Region

Tanzania

- Kalambo district council, Rukwa region
- Nkasi district council, Rukwa region
- Sumbawanga district council, Rukwa region

Uganda

- Adjumani district, West Nile region
- Nebbi district, West Nile region
- Pakwach district, West Nile region
- Zombo district, West Nile region

2.4.2 Selection of participants and sampling strategy

To achieve the specific aims of the study, the assessment team employed a multi-stage sampling strategy (See Figure 3) to select study participants given that the GGE program is multifaceted and somewhat complex. The target population as depicted in Table 2 and section 2.4.1 was adapted to each unique context and the nature of the GGE program locally.

First, depending on the number of partner organizations convenience sampling was employed to recruit participating primary and secondary schools, communities, implementing partner organizations, and government partners who were involved in the implementation of the intervention. These organizations were selected on the basis of their involvement in the GGE program. After, participating schools, communities, partner organizations, and government partners were identified and invited to participate, they then helped select the impact assessment team to get contact information of former participants who may have in-depth insights into program and programmatic impact which may involve school administrators/management; Student representatives/student cabinets/youth clubs, PTAs, teachers, girls, out-of-school adolescents, at-risk girls, gatekeepers and community decision-makers, boys/men, stakeholder representatives of implementing partner organizations, and CBCPCs. Finally, purposive sampling and snowball sampling was employed to identify and recruit families of at-risk girls who received cash transfers, skills training/vocational education trainees who received capacity building, and girls and young women who participated in livelihood skills trainings/vocational education activities under the GGE program.

The selection of impact study participants primarily involved purposive sampling rather than a randomized, population-based sample. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to other populations across the targeted countries. However, a targeted approach was done to ensure diversity among participants in terms of meaningful demographic characteristics such as age, gender, socioeconomic status/caste, disability status, educational attainment, and other factors deemed relevant to ensure comprehensive representation throughout the sample, with an intention to mirror the breadth and diversity of former intervention participants and to capture a broad spectrum of contexts, experiences, and impacts.

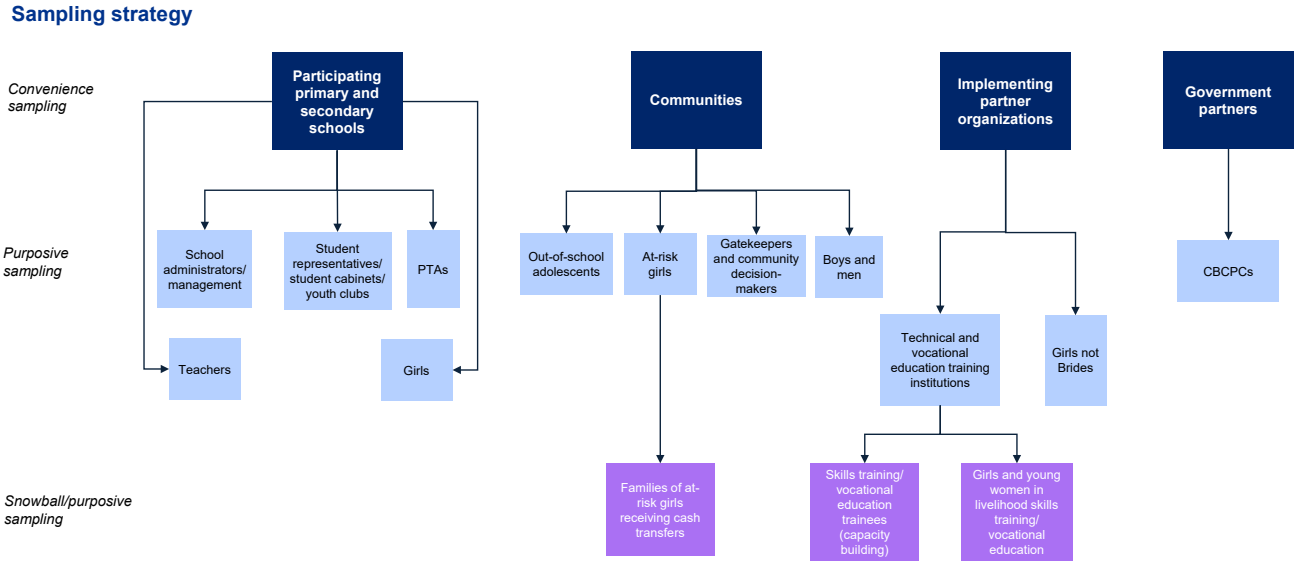


Figure 3. Overview of sampling strategy

2.4.3 Data gathering activities

In total, the research team conducted 128 KIIs and 68 FGDs across the six countries as presented below:

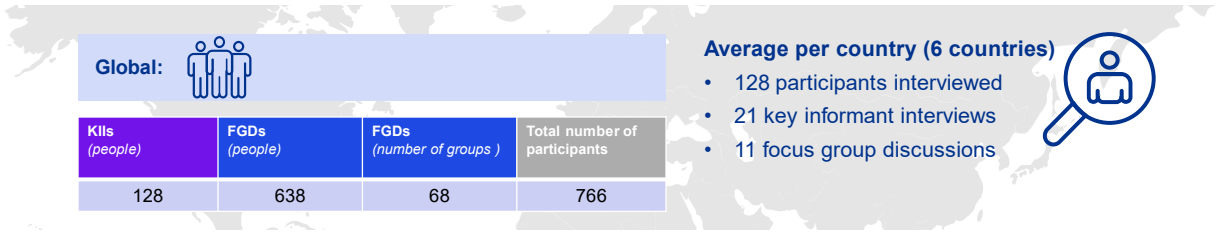


Figure 4. Overview of conducted KIIs and FGDs

The interview guides were informed by the outcome harvesting workshops, feedback from youth researchers, and piloted by the local consultants to assess whether the concepts and questions were understood in the different contexts. KII and FGDs were semi-structured and conducted using an interview guide and probes that include open-ended (direct, indirect, and storytelling) questions[23,24] to provide an in-depth understanding of the potential societal impact of the program, if any, and to explore which factors led to the impact identified. Working with the local consultants, local research assistants conducted the interviews in local languages in person. Transcriptions or interview notes were used in the analysis.

[23] *Plan International. DEVELOPING AND CONDUCTING A Focus Group Discussions: Detailed Guidelines. 2019.*

[24] *Plan International. DEVELOPING AND CONDUCTING Interviews: Detailed Guidelines. 2019.*

Table 2. Overview of focus group discussions and interviews conducted per country

Country	Participants reached	Data collection method						
		FGD				KII		
		FGD	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Bangladesh	Boys and men	1	7	0	**7**			
	Families of girls at risk of CEFM	1	0	10	**10**			
	Girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools	1	0	10	**10**			
	Educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels)	1	1	2	**3**			**2**
	Educational staff of TVET							**1**
	Government officials							**1**
	Official duty bearers/CBCP members							**1**
	Religious/traditional leaders	1	3	0	**3**			**1**
	Representatives of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy and/or service delivery	1	2	6	**8**			**1**
Malawi	Families of girls at risk of CEFM	2	13	20	**33**			
	Girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools	2	0	31	**31**	0	15	**15**
	Out-of-of school children	2	0	45	**45**			
	Student cabinet members	1	9	4	**13**			
	Youth (former program participants in employment trainings)					0	5	**5**
	Educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels)					4	0	**4**
	Educational staff of TVET					3	0	**3**
	Key persons in ministries					4	0	**4**
	Official duty bearers/CBCP members					1	0	**1**
	Religious/traditional leaders					1	2	**3**
	Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives	2	2	24	**26**	0	2	**2**
Nepal	Boys and men	3	31	0	**31**			
	Families of girls at risk of CEFM	1	0	12	**12**			
	Girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools	2	0	15	**15**			
	Out-of-of school children	2	0	10	**10**			
	PTA and/or Sustainable Management Committee members	2	12	1	**13**			
	Religious/traditional leaders	1	7	0	**7**			
	Student cabinet members	1	2	3	**5**			
	Youth (former program participants in employment trainings)	3	4	13	**17**			
	Educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels)							**2**
	Educational staff of TVET							**3**
	Educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels)							**1**
	Government officials							**3**

	Official duty bearers/CBCP members							**3**
	Religious/traditional leaders	1	7	3	**10**			**1**
	Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives							**2**
	Representatives of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy and/or service delivery							**3**
Niger	Boys and men	2	13	0	**13**			
	Families of girls at risk of CEFM	2	7	11	**18**			
	Girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools	2	0	22	**22**			
	Out-of-of school children	2	0	16	**16**			
	PTA and/or Sustainable Management Committee members	3	18	8	**26**			
	Youth (former program participants in employment trainings)	3	0	26	**26**			
	Educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels)					6	0	**6**
	Educational staff of TVET					2	0	**2**
	Government officials					1	0	**1**
	Key persons in ministries					2	0	**2**
	Official duty bearers/CBCP members					1	1	**2**
	Religious/traditional leaders					2	0	**2**
	Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives					0	3	**3**
	Representatives of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy and/or service delivery					2	1	**3**
Tanzania	Boys and men	2			**12**			
	Families of girls at risk of CEFM	1		10	**10**			
	Girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools	3		18	**27**			
	Out-of-of school children	1		6	**6**			
	PTA and/or Sustainable Management Committee members	1	6	2	**8**			
	Student cabinet members	1	4	4	**8**			
	Youth (former program participants in employment trainings)	1	5	5	**10**			
	Educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels)							**6**
	Educational staff of TVET							**3**
	Government officials							**4**
	Key persons in ministries							**1**
	Religious/traditional leaders							**3**
	Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives							**3**
	Representatives of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy and/or service delivery							**3**
Uganda	Boys and men	1	9	0	**9**			
	Families of girls at risk of CEFM	2	8	10	**18**			
	Girls (age 15-18) including students from targeted primary and secondary schools	2	0	20	**20**			
	Out-of-of school children	2	0	20	**20**			

	PTA and/or Sustainable Management Committee members	2	11	9	**20**			
	Student cabinet members	2	10	10	**20**			
	Youth (former program participants in employment trainings)	2	10	10	**20**			
	Educational staff (at both primary and secondary school levels)					1	4	**5**
	Educational staff of TVET					2	0	**2**
	Plan staff					2	0	**2**
	Government officials					2	0	**2**
	Key persons in ministries					1	1	**2**
	Official duty bearers/CBCP members					0	2	**2**
	Religious/traditional leaders					2	0	**2**
	Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives					1	1	**2**
	Representatives of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy and/or service delivery					2	1	**3**
Total		FGD				KII		
		FGD	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
		68	201	416	638	42	38	128

2.5 Limitations and strengths of the impact assessment

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method where the researcher chooses participants based on specific characteristics or criteria pertinent to the overall objectives. Although this approach can be advantageous in primarily qualitative research, it has certain limitations, such as restricted generalizability to other contexts and populations, and the possibility of sampling biases. Additionally, the lack of control over the entire population reached by the GGE program further limits the ability to generalize the findings. However, the aim of this Impact Assessment was not to generalize findings, but to gather a sample that could offer deep insights into the experiences of the target population in the GGE countries.

To address possible recruitment bias regarding the purposive selection of participants who were participants in the GGE programming, KPMG worked with liaison persons in the Plan International National Offices to help with recruitment of participants. Sampling criteria were set to encompass key demographic and contextual characteristics to capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives. The purposive sampling has contributed to the varied, subjective, sometimes contradicting views of persons affected by the GGE program, providing a richness which is considered a strength for the Impact Assessment.

The need for translation of data collection tools into local languages and back into English posed an increased risk of misinterpretation and loss of nuance from interviews, and added complexity and resource demands to the assignment. Ensuring consistency in translation across different contexts was challenging. However, the effort to translate into local languages enhanced the accessibility of the research and ensured broader participant inclusion. Translations of notes back into English were conducted with attention to preserving expressions and idioms, and local consultants provided context notes when deemed necessary. The team ensured that data was collected in the language of the participants' choice and that adequate translation of the interview transcripts was completed before the onset of analysis. Further, validation workshops were held early in the coding and analysis process between the KPMG team, local consultants, and Plan International National Offices, to ensure that possible translation and interpretation errors were clarified.

In some contexts, primary data collection was expedited due to the phasing out of the GGE program, such as in Bangladesh, and the need to complete data collection before the onset of rains or festival seasons (such as in Nepal). Local consultants collaborated with Plan counterparts to optimize the timing of data collection, ensuring that children were in school and accessible. However, in a few instances, focus group discussions with students were shortened due to school activities. The compressed timelines for data collection in Bangladesh, particularly following a period of political protests and subsequent government overthrow, resulted in fewer interviews with young people compared to other countries. Despite these challenges, the

team was able to gain valuable insights into the functioning and achievements of the GGE program in Bangladesh through outcome harvesting and validation workshops with the Plan office.

In this Impact Assessment, the potential for social desirability bias remains a potential limitation to the data obtained, particularly given the influence of gender stereotypes and the presence of national laws prohibiting child marriage. Participants, aware of laws and by-laws prohibiting CEFM, and of the goals of the GGE program, may have provided responses they perceived as correct or acceptable, rather than their true opinions, especially regarding CEFM which remains a sensitive topic. This tendency was possibly heightened by the fact that the local consultants, as educated individuals from outside the communities, might have inadvertently influenced participants' desire to respond in a manner they believed aligned with the researchers' expectations. Additionally, findings of this impact assessment reveal the prevalence of gender stereotypes influencing what young women can or cannot do which may have introduced some social desirability biases into how young women formulated their responses to certain questions. To mitigate these biases, the study employed non-judgmental and open-ended questions to foster a non-threatening environment, encouraging honest and open sharing of experiences and opinions. Furthermore, a purposive sampling strategy was used to capture a broad range of perspectives, reflecting both internalized gender stereotypes and views that challenged them.

Another limitation of the Impact Assessment is the insufficient level of disaggregated data, which hinders the ability to analyze how the GGE Program impacts different groups, such as LGBTQI individuals, children versus adolescents, and people holding other intersectional characteristics like ethnicity, caste, religion, and educational background. While there is some evidence available to assess disability inclusion in the program, the lack of comprehensive disaggregated data limits the depth and specificity of the analysis regarding these diverse groups.

2.6 Data analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data followed a structured approach, beginning with thematic network analysis and the development of a codebook to identify key topics and concepts. An inter-coder reliability workshop was then conducted to ensure consistency among coders, leading to the refinement of the codebook. This framework served as a structured guide for subsequent steps of coding and categorizing the data, which was done using qualitative analysis software, NVivo. A validation workshop was conducted with Plan Norway and Plan offices in the six countries separately, where emerging findings were showcased and areas needing clarification were addressed. Finally, a comprehensive analysis of all sources and notes was performed, culminating in the writing of the report based on the main emerging themes considering the assessment aims.

3. Research Ethics

Ethics considerations were made to the qualitative component of the Impact Assessment, which involved primary data collection. The assessment protocol was meticulously designed in alignment with Plan International's comprehensive ethical guidelines, including the Framework for Ethical Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research (MER), Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Policy, and the Global Policy on Safeguarding Children and Young People. Best practices for conducting qualitative research were also integrated into the protocol. Throughout the research process, the team engaged in continuous reflection on ethical considerations, addressing any challenges that arose.

KPMG sought and obtained ethical approvals from several independent review committees, based on discussions with Plan International in Norway and all program countries, to align with best practices and national procedures. Approval was obtained by the Plan International Ethical Review Team for the overall Impact Assessment, as well as nationally by committees in Niger, Tanzania, and Uganda.

- Plan ERT: approval dated 20 August, 2024
- Niger: CNERS – approval dated 9 September, 2024
- Tanzania: NIMR approval dated 17 October, 2024
- Uganda: UNCST approval dated 18 October, 2024

The study involved minimal risks for participants, though the nature of the interviews could potentially evoke strong emotional responses. The assessment team, experienced in human subjects research, ensured that data collectors were trained to listen empathetically and refer participants needing further support to appropriate services. To build trust and accountability, the team clearly communicated the assessment's purpose and provided detailed information about participation in interviews or focus group discussions.

The assessment team carefully evaluated potential risks and implemented safeguarding measures to ensure that the benefits of participation outweighed any risks. Strict anonymity was maintained, with no personal information shared outside the assessment team. The "do-no-harm" principle was applied with a focus on gender, age, and equity, fostering an emotionally supportive environment in FGDs. In cases of emotional distress or disclosures of sensitive issues, the team had a protocol of referring to relevant services. No such cases were reported. Participants were free to withdraw at any time, and efforts were made to schedule sessions conveniently to minimize inconvenience.

Data privacy was ensured through secure file transfers using KPMG's large file transfer system, with all identifiers removed from notes. Data collectors addressed privacy concerns and explained study objectives to participants. Confidential information was stored securely per Plan International's policies, with transcripts de-identified and audio files erased post-transcription (not used in all contexts per local ethical approval). Participants' privacy was protected by assigning identification numbers, and all data was stored securely with access limited to the assessment team. Identifiable data was not published, and secure communication platforms were used for online data collection.

All consent processes were informed and voluntary, with full disclosure of the study's intent, methods, and potential risks and benefits. Participants could withdraw at any stage without repercussions. Information sheets were provided, and facilitators explained the content to those who were not literate.

For participants aged 10-24, parental consent and verbal assent were required for those under 18. Parents received detailed information sheets and consent forms in English or local languages. Interviewers explained the content to non-literate parents and referred them to organizational representatives if needed. Participants were informed that non-participation or withdrawal would have no consequences.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, without consequence, during the informed consent process. They were encouraged to ask questions and express concerns, ensuring their autonomy and comfort throughout the study.

4. Findings

Section 4 is comprised of a summary of the findings from the scoping review which was conducted as part of the desk review (Section 4.1), and findings from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions from the six country case studies (Section 4.2). The findings are presented as emerging themes, responding to the overall impact assessment aim of assessing the program's effects on society, and how the program has contributed to reduced levels of child, early and forced marriage in the program areas and assess how the GGE has affected the conditions of adolescent girls, boys and their families in the programming areas.

4.1 Findings from desk review

This section provides an overview of key CEFM indicators and frameworks in the six target countries.

4.1.1 CEFM indicators in the GGE countries

The below Table 3 provides an overview of key indicators relating to CEFM in the GGE countries.

The overview of available secondary data shows that the legal age for marriage is 18 years or older in all GGE countries, except for in Niger, where the marriage of girls aged 15 and above is permissible per the civil code, if parental consent is obtained. Where available, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) or Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data further shows that the incidence of teenage pregnancies is marked in GGE countries, which is reflected in the qualitative findings in section 4.2.3.4 – Early pregnancy and contraception.

Further indicators on child marriage prevalence, as maintained by UNICEF in the Child Marriage Data Portal, show that although all GGE countries have rates of child marriage at 29% or higher, the prevalence of child marriage by ages 15 and 18 has decreased in all GGE countries over the last ten years. The Child Marriage Data Portal provides updated data on child marriage prevalence by sourcing national household surveys, predominantly MICS and DHS data. The portal offers an overview of child marriage trends as of 2023 and contrasts them with levels from ten years ago. The table below illustrates that in all GGE countries, a decline in child marriage rates for girls by ages 15 and 18 has been observed, although the prevalence and rates of decline vary.

Table 3: Summary overview of child marriage-relevant indicators: prevalence, % incidence of teenage pregnancies and legal age of marriage across GGE countries

Country	**Married by 15**		**Married by 18**		**% Incidence of teenage pregnancies**		**Legal age of marriage**	
	10 years ago	***Per 2023***	***10 years ago***	***Per 2023***	***Incidence***	***Source***	***Age***	***Source, comment***
Bangladesh	28.2%	15.5%	63.7%	51.4%	Bangladesh: 18.5% Barishal: 17.7%	MICS, 2019	18 years for female 21 years for male	Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017
Malawi	12.4%	7.5%	47.8%	37.7%	No data		18 years	In 2017, the Parliament removed the opportunity to marry under 15, which had previously been possible with parental consent[25]
Nepal	10.7%	5.8%	41.6%	34.9%	Nepal: 13.6% Lumbini: 9.8%	DHS, 2022	20 years	Marriage Registration Act, 2028 (1971)

[25] *UNICEF. Malawi. Retrieved from: https://data.unicef.org/crvs/malawi/*

					Karnali: 20.5%			
Niger	34 %	28 %	78.4%	76.3%	Niger: 40.4% Maradi: 43.6%	DHS, 2012	15 years for female 18 years for male	The Civil code (2005) establishes 15 and 18 years as the minimum marriage age (with parental consent)
Tanzania	5.6%	5.2%	31.2%	29 %	Tanzania: 22% Rukwa: 29.6%	DHS, 2022	18 years	In 2016, the legal age of marriage for girls was increased from 15 years to 18 years. Previously, marriage was legal for girls as young as 14.
Uganda	13.1%	7.3%	45.6%	34 %	Uganda: 23.5% West Nile: 18.2%	DHS, 2022	18 years	The minimum age of marriage is set to 18 years in the Children's Act 2016 and in the Ugandan Constitution. There are religious and customary legal frameworks that interacts with formal legal provisions, where religious laws present lower age of marriage or do not set a minimum age of marriage.[26]

4.1.2 National CEFM-related policies

In **Bangladesh** in 2018, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs developed the National Action Plan to End Child Marriage (2018-2030). Prior to this, several policies were established to promote the development of women and children in Bangladesh, including the National Women Development Policy 2011, the National Children Policy 2011, the Children Act 2013, and the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017. Aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030, which set targets for preventing child marriage, Bangladesh has also established 4,883 adolescent clubs across unions and pourashavas (local government bodies in Bangladesh).[27]

In **Malawi,** a dedicated Male Engagement Strategy was developed in 2023 to address gender equality, gender-based violence, HIV and SRHR.[28] The National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage was launched first in 2018[29], and a second strategy was developed in 2024[30].

In **Nepal**, the government, along with various stakeholders, has implemented several national policies and initiatives to address CEFM. In 2016, the Government of Nepal launched the National Strategy to end child marriage by 2030. The Children's Act (2018) and the Constitution of Nepal (2015) are two other policies aiming to protecting children's rights.[31]

[26] *UNICEF. Uganda – data. 2017. Retrieved from: https://data.unicef.org/crvs/uganda/*

[27] *Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. National Action Plan to End Child Marriage (2018-2030). 2018*

[28] *Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare. National Male Engagement Strategy for Gender Equality, Gender Based Violence, HIV and Sexual Reproductive Health Rights: 2023-2030. 2023*

[29] *Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. Workshop Report - Learning Event on Ending Child Marriages in Malawi. 2019*

[30] *Girls Not Brides. Malawi Launches National Strategy to End Child Marriage. Retrieved from: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/malawi-launches-national-strategy-to-end-child-marriage/*

[31] *UNICEF, UNFPA. Ending Child Marriage in Nepal. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/401/file/Ending%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Nepal.pdf*

Within **Niger**, CEFM remains sensitive and politized, and initiatives to reduce CEFM is challenged by religious leaders.[32] In 2017, UN Women reported that the President Issoufou declared child marriage as harmful, however there is no specific legal bill on child marriage. There are a number of development initiatives in Niger that addresses CEFM,[33] led by development partners, and a National Strategy that aims to strengthen girls and women's education and training, including re-enrollment of girls. A National Action Plan to end Child Marriage was developed in 2018, however there is limited evidence of its implementation. [34]

Tanzania has developed several policies that address CEFM, such as the Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Girls from 2017-2022[35] and the National FGM Strategy and Implementation Plan 2019-2022[36]. In 2017, the former president endorsed a law that allowed schools to expel female students who are pregnant or married, which was reversed in 2021, in addition, the government pledged to forbid testing of pregnant girls in school, which had been a common practice.[37] In 2017, a national survey on drivers and consequences of child marriage in Tanzania was published.[38]

The **Ugandan** government has developed a national strategy to address child marriage and teenage pregnancy, which has been implemented and costed throughout the country.[39]

[32] *UN Women. Multi-Country Analytical Study of Legislation, Policies, Interventions and Cultural Practices on Child Marriage in Africa. 2018.*

[33] *UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. Niger – Country Profile. 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/media/111396/file/Child-marriage-country-profile-Niger-2021.pdf*

[34] *Girls Not Brides. Niger. Retrieved from: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/niger/*

[35] *UNICEF. National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children in Tanzania 2017/18 – 2021/22. 2016*

[36] *UN General Assembly. Human Rights Council – National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 – United Republic of Tanzania. 2021. Retrieved from: https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g21/225/37/pdf/g2122537.pdf?OpenElement*

[37] *Human Rights Watch. Tanzania: Expedite Protections for Girls' Education. 2022. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/23/tanzania-expedite-protections-girls-education*

[38] *The United Republic of Tanzania, Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children. National Survey on the Drivers and Consequences of Child Marriage in Tanzania. 2017. Retrieved from https://www.forwarduk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Forward-230-Page-Report-2017-Updated-Branding-WEB.pdf*

[39] *The Republic of Uganda. The National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy 2022/2023 – 2026/2027. 2022. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/13666/file/National%20Strategy%20to%20end%20Child%20marriage%20and%20Teenage%20Pregnancy%202022-2027.pdf*

4.2 Findings from qualitative primary data collection

This section presents overarching key findings from primary data collection activities, namely the qualitative semi-structured interviews and FGDs with girls, boys, parents, community members, teachers, CSO implementing partners, duty bearers, and other stakeholders in each of the GGE locations. Data was collected in local languages and then translated to English. Some of the excerpts presented have been further edited or paraphrased for readability and grammatical correctness, including removal of distracting phrasing and identifying information. All major changes are indicated by square brackets. The findings are presented according to the main themes which emerged in the analysis stage of the impact assessment, following an iterative coding and analysis process.

4.2.1 Views on marriage in general and on CEFM in the program areas

The primary data collection led to rich insights on the views of the target population on marriage and CEFM. This sub-chapter does not speak directly to observed changes following the GGE implementation, rather, provides further details on how the GGE target population considers marriage in general, and what drives CEFM in general, in their communities. The qualitative findings may be useful information for future Plan programming, including for baselines and situational analysis.

4.2.1.1 Observed and accepted marrying age

Respondents from all countries shared their views on the appropriate or acceptable age for marriage, identified what they considered to be a 'common' marrying age within their communities, and reported the youngest age at which they had observed someone getting married.

Beyond citing appropriate age for marriage, respondents explained which factors they believe must be in place as a prerequisite for a successful marriage (not in the case of CEFM). Young persons and adult stakeholders alike underlined the importance of education and/or financial independence as a prerequisite for marriage, to ensure its success and avoid harmful outcomes such as health problems, economic hardship or GBV.

- **Bangladesh:** there were fewer data points regarding marrying age in Bangladesh, but statements were made regarding the increased respect for the marrying age of 18, and the inclusion of imams in the GGE program as a factor in delaying marriage. One Imam stated that he would deny marriage of young persons that were three months from reaching 18.

- **Nepal:** stands out as the country with reported higher ages in marriage, and the highest reported appropriate age for marriage. Persons interviewed generally said both persons getting married should be 20 years or older. Some respondents provided even higher age brackets, citing the importance of emotional maturity and financial circumstance, i.e., *"Men 27 and women 25 as they are able to withstand the family pressure, take care of family, and matured enough to conceive and deliver child"* (FGD with boys/men aged 16-22, Bardiya, Nepal)

- **Niger:** Early marriage seems to have reduced alongside the project, according to the participants, but there are marriages at 16 and 17 years, which is considered "normal," even though the ideal age is 18 for girls. School-going status seems to be a determining factor for marriageability. Quotes from Niger further explain the age which is considered appropriate for girls to be married. Notably, marriage below the age of 18 is considered appropriate for girls who are not pursuing higher education:

  "The ideal age for a girl to marry is between 15 and 20 years, depending on whether she goes to school or not. How can you marry a girl when she is younger than that? (Laughter)." Out of school children, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger

  "17-18 years for girls: because at this age, she is not afraid (of getting married). (…) 23 to 25 for boys: because he must be able to provide for his household. At this age, in principle, he knows how to earn money and take care of himself; when married earlier, he might even resort to drug use. Before, marriages occurred between 14 and 15 years for girls; most of us were married at that age (laughs), it's for the best if these situations have changed." (PTA members, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

- **Malawi:** Most participants in Malawi identified the legal marrying age at 18, but the majority of persons interviewed stated they considered a higher marrying age as more appropriate (naming intervals around the age of 20-25 years), as this would allow for some level of financial independence

and emotional maturity. CEFM starting with girls at 13 or 14 years was cited as more common in the past, but still occurring in the communities. Some respondents said this was becoming more and more rare, although many, including girls, had seen this happen. Notably, in a FGD in Phalombe, parents indicated that children who have started being sexually active are ready for marriage and opposed the existence of a legal age for marriage, as they believed children who had chosen to be sexually active consequently also chose marriage. As a contrasting view, out-of-school girls in Phalombe stated that the government's minimum marriage age of 18 is too low, believing that the ideal age to marry should be from 22 years onward.

- **Tanzania:** in Tanzania, extensive feedback was provided on the perceived appropriate age for marriage. No persons said marriage could be appropriate below 18 years, and most provided ages in the interval between 20-30. Generally, respondents stated men should be older than women at the time of marriage, both because they need to become financially independent before marrying, and because there should be an age difference between men and women. Notably, multiple respondents stated they had observed marriages of children (girls) as young as 12 years old, with a marrying age of 14-16 coming across as conventional. Girls stated in an FGD that many parents believe that a girl should marry as soon as she reaches puberty. A PTA member also shared that "*In our environment and customs, once a child completes primary school (from the age of 12), parents say she should get married because she has grown up. Here they get married at the age of 15 and 16.*"

- **Uganda:** The responses in Uganda were very similar to Malawi and Tanzania, with most respondents naming years 18 and above (oftentimes closer to 30) as appropriate ages of marriage, to ensure financial and emotional maturity ahead of starting a family life. The appropriate age cited was a contrast to the young ages observed, which go as low as 12, 13 and 14.

The age ranges for appropriate marriage provided in the various countries should not be interpreted as representing views of the population at large in the programming areas. Rather, they shed light on what those involved in GGE programming consider appropriate age of marriage. The concept of social desirability bias mentioned in section 2.5 – limitations and strengths should also be considered when reading these statements, as the FGDs were opened with a range of general questions about marriage to build rapport, and the participants may have felt compelled to share what they understand is the "right" message. For instance, the frequent mentions of higher age ranges, and need for education and stable income before marriage as cited in Tanzania and Uganda, cannot be interpreted to mean that the accepted marrying age is higher in these countries as opposed to the other locations.

4.2.1.2 The importance of marriage, gender roles in marriage, and perceived marital success

Clear and traditional, heteronormative roles in marriage were discerned for men and women, by participants in all countries that were asked on this topic (in FGDs with girls, boys, parents, VSLA members). The findings do not provide a basis for discerning clear differences in views across the GGE locations. These views and opinions were framed positively when prompted by the interviewer, as shown by the below quotes. A recurring theme in the depictions of gender roles in marriage, were that men are the provider, and women are the nurturer/carer. Their individual contributions to the marriage were still deemed as equally important, as both roles were considered important in their unique ways. Collaboration and peace in the home was also highly valued.

> *"Students appreciate that marriage is unity of a man and a woman. Gender roles are clearly pointed out; women cook and take care of children and their well-being, ensuring they maintain hygiene and have shaped morals. Nonetheless men are providers, rear animals and ensure there is security. Successful marriage is reflected in provision, fear of God, love and trust."* (Girls, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

> *"Marriage represents dignity, especially for women (particularly when they have no activity), marriage also brings more peace and stability to both men and women. The role of the woman: Biyeyya (submission), taking care of her husband, respecting her husband's parents. The role of the man: maintaining his wife's health, taking care of her." (*Youth, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

> *"Role of the wife:*
>
> *P6: Manages household matters and takes care of the family, including the father and children;*
>
> *P4: Focuses on household responsibilities and does everything her husband tells her;*

P2: A woman is an advisor to her husband.

Role of the husband:

P9: The man is the head of the house and serves the family by providing household needs."

(Youth, FGD, Rukwa, Tanzania)

In a FGD with parents in Phalombe, Malawi, it was made clear that the value of marriage is rooted in distinct roles: the wife handles reproductive and childcare duties, while the husband is the primary provider. They expressed that women are honored with the role of bringing life into the world and are responsible for nurturing that life, noting that mothers are uniquely equipped to care for infants, as they are the ones with breast milk. Their views on gender roles in marriage included:

"God has assigned women the responsibility of bearing children, so there's no need to question this divine plan."

"For men, God commanded that they will eat their sweat (earn their livelihood through hard work), so they have to provide for the family. Even if a woman is employed, she should not neglect her childcare duties, nor does her employment lessen the husband's responsibility to provide for the household."

(Parents, FGD, Phalombe, Malawi)

Nevertheless, interviews further uncovered some groups that saw gender roles in marriage in changing light. Parents in Mulanje, Malawi said that the community's attitude towards the roles of wife and husband is changing. Most community members were of the view that women should not be restricted to household chores, that they need assistance from their husbands, and that they can be empowered to support their husbands financially. They shared:

"Previously, women were expected to cook for their husbands and care for the children, while husbands provided for the family. However, times have changed. Today, women are increasingly becoming the primary breadwinners, and husbands are taking on household chores."

"One person cannot support a family of six on their own; such a burden can lead to stress and even health issues like heart attacks. It's essential to work as a team and support one another. For example, if a wife has twins or triplets, it's unrealistic to expect her to manage everything by herself. She will definitely need her husband's support."

(Parents, FGD, Mulanje, Malawi)

Among young persons in Phalombe and Mulanje, other changing perspectives on marriage roles were shared. One respondent shared that she now considers herself as having an equal responsibility in supporting the household financially, rather than solely focusing on domestic duties and expecting her husband to be the primary provider:

"In the past, we were led to believe that the responsibility of supporting the household rested solely on the husband. As a result, husbands were burdened with providing for their families, which also fueled various forms of abuse against women, as they were seen as incapable of supporting themselves. However, today, we understand that in marriage, both partners are equal and should contribute equally to the needs of their family." (Young woman, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

Similarly, regarding the role of women in marriage, girls in an FGD in Phalombe did not limit women to just reproductive and childcare duties. They viewed a wife as an equal partner, sharing the responsibility of providing for the household alongside her husband, while also expecting husbands to share in family caregiving roles. This is what one participant had to say:

"To be honest, the Bible describes the woman as a helper, suggesting that the man is primarily responsible for household duties and work, with the woman there to support him. However, what we often see in communities is that men have re-assigned themselves to the role of helper or, in some cases, merely observers." (Out-of-school girl, FGD, Phalombe, Malawi)

The importance and sacredness of marriage was underlined in all contexts, with marriage being a goal for many persons interviewed. In a focus-group discussion with out-of-school children in Phalombe, Malawi, the following views on the importance of marriage were shared:

> *"Marriage is a gift from God to humanity. It's a beautiful union, and the Bible even says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and earns the Lord's favor." Some blessings only come when you are married"*
>
> *"Marriage is also very important in child-bringing. Single parenting is very challenging and stressful. So, when you are two, there is a division of labor."*
>
> *"Marriage is essential for maintaining order in society. Without it, people would engage in relationships with anyone, without commitment, like animals. Marriage brings dignity to intimacy, which is part of God's plan for humanity."*
>
> *"The primary purpose of marriage is for reproduction. It's the institution entrusted with the responsibility of creating new life."*
>
> (Out-of-school children, FGD, Phalombe, Malawi)

Similar importance was attached to marriage by parents in Adjumani, Uganda. They also shared that persons who remain unmarried have a low status in the community, further underlining the importance of marriage in their own perception and that of the wider community. They shared among other:

> *"To me marriage is just a husband getting a wife whom he loves and produce children then keeping them to grow up till they are ready for marriage."*
>
> *"Marriage is just picking a lady and staying with her in order to enjoy life and also produce children in the process."*
>
> *"In our culture you are said to be married unless you have paid the bridal wealth to the parents of the lady and you will be free to produce children as many as possible."*
>
> *"Okay in our community here marriage is more than anything in life and the priority for every human being at least to get a partner to stay with and produce as many children as possible because we are to fill the world and we have plenty of land."*
>
> *"And also people look at you as a child who doesn't have experience in life and also people shall not pick your advice and views."*
>
> *"It makes you to have a sense of belonging by having somebody who will care for your personal needs like food and treatments and have value in life."*
>
> *"Produce children and raise them up where they will care for you when you are old and get bridal wealth from your daughters which you can use it and also pay school fees with the bride prices of your boys."*
>
> (Parents, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

In Niger, out-of-school children expressed similar views on the sacredness of marriage, and what a good marriage resembles:

> *Marriage is "sunna manzon Allah"; it is a practice of the prophet. A good marriage is a marriage of love in which there is peace; if people who do not love each other are put together, the marriage will not last.* (Out-of-school children, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

Parents in Maraké, Niger, further stated what they consider a successful marriage, and mentioned that they have observed stability and improved family relations in marriages based on a love connection between the couple:

"A household built on love and trust with children where peace reigns; (We have noticed that love marriages bring more respect even between the two families. Because when your son-in-law does not love his wife, his family will not be grateful to you)." (Parents, FGD, Maraké, Niger)

Similarly, peace and respect, but also economic success was emphasized by parents in Zombo, Uganda:

P10: "A successful marriage is when the two are living in harmony and respects one another but above all respect is key"

P6: "To me a successful marriage is dependent on money because when there is no money it's not easy"

P3: "Successful marriage is when there is food, assets like animals are there and when visitors come you give them tea with sugar and people go back knowing that that marriage is successful"

(Parents, FGD, Zombo, Uganda)

We interviewed one young woman in Phalombe, Malawi who had been supported by the program after exiting a violent and early marriage. When asked what marriage means to her, she stated that it is pointless and should be abolished. She described marriage as a modern form of imprisonment and slavery, where women are treated as objects, particularly as sexual possessions. She noted that very few men genuinely love their partners, while many marry for ulterior motives. Regarding the importance of marriage, the respondent believes that it holds no value in the world. In her view, marriage exists primarily to exploit women. Her views constituted an outlier in the responses received regarding the importance of marriage.

4.2.1.3 Factors driving CEFM and possible motivations for marriage in the program areas

FGDs with stakeholders also provided perceptions of participants on i) which reasons or factors they believe contribute to the continued practice of CEFM, and ii) own motivation for marriage (actual or potential future marriage). The views expressed echo global literature on the drivers behind CEFM explored in Section 1.1 – Background and context, and further substantiate how these factors play out in the context of the GGE programming areas. The various reasonings and motivations for marriage and CEFM which were shared in the primary data gathering, are clustered into the below interrelated and overlapping themes:

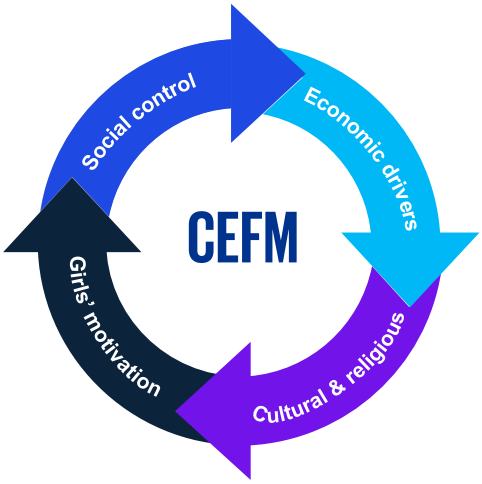


Figure 5: Factors driving CEFM in GGE programming areas

4.2.1.3.1 Poverty

- Families lack financial resources to support children and consider marriage as a strategy for lessening household financial burden.
- Bride price offers financial relief and is seen as a potential source of income to withstand economic hardship.
- Husbands/fathers usually hold control over household finances, and are (often) decision makers for marital decisions and regarding keeping girls in school.

4.2.1.3.2 Cultural & religious factors

- Although many respondents were adamant that religion was not a reason for the continued practice of CEFM, others stated that interpretations of religious teachings and among other the practice of polygamy in society was a driving factor for persisting CEFM.
- In Malawi, girls and parents spoke of initiation rituals for girls, which can include taking girls out of school for extended periods, teaching them about menstruation and sex, and even engaging in sex as a 'how-to' lesson. Girls interviewed said that this traditional practice was reducing, but that they knew persons who had experienced it.

4.2.1.3.3 Social control, shame, and stigma

- Marriage ensures socially acceptable reproduction and is a preferred option for suspected or actual sexually active individuals. Marriage insures families from pregnancy out of wedlock and associated shame.
- Parents who feel like daughters are grown up, difficult to monitor or to control, see marriage as an avenue to avoid socially shameful behaviors. Parents in Phalombe, Malawi, spoke of how children who were sexually active had de facto chosen marriage through their behaviors.
- Parents may marry off daughters to monitor or protect them from shame, pregnancy, or to protect them from gender-based violence by keeping them "pure" in the eyes of the community.

Views on marriage as a strategy for avoiding shame associated with pre-marital sexual activity were found across all contexts. For instance, girls in Ourafane, Niger expressed that there are "some girls" who grow up too fast, and that this may motivate parents to pursue marriage on their behalf:

> *"Girls are married at 15 because some girls grow up too fast, or girls who "exceed their parents' capacities" (do not listen to their parents), a girl "likes boys too much". For these girls, marriage is better, to avoid pregnancies out of wedlock. Parents want to protect her dignity."* (Girls, FGD, Ourafane, Niger)

The self-motivation of young persons to pursue marriage to engage in (or continue to engage in) sexual relations, and the motivation of parents to pursue early marriage as a protective measure for their children was also underlined in Bangladesh, as per the below quote:

> *"There are two main reasons why child marriage is still prevalent. One is that there are many young boys and girls who have sexual relations and now wanted to get married as this is the accepted outcome in society. The second reason is safety and security of young girls, as fathers and mothers in this area often work outside due to lack of livelihood opportunities. In a culture where gender based violence is normalized and has devastating consequences on the victims future life including marriage prospects, getting a daughter married at a young age is a way for ensuring their safety and security."* (Duty Bearer, KII, Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh)

4.2.1.3.4 Girls' and stakeholders' perceptions of self-initiated early marriage

- Falling in love was described as a primary marital motivation by some persons interviewed. It was heavily emphasized in the Nepal context, where the marrying age is also higher.
- Young persons' desire to be sexually active was perceived by girls and other interviewees as a motivation for marriage, although no persons interviewed stated this as a personal motivation for choosing marriage in the future (or in the past if they were married).
- Difficult living situations, including economic hardship, strained family ties, and parents residing elsewhere and not being present to care for their children on a daily basis were further stated as possible motivations for girls, as they may seek a better living situation in another household.
- Peer pressure, the desire for status, or the desire to conform to prevailing cultural norms regarding marriage, was further stated as a motivation for girls to seek marriage.
- The lack of other options beyond marriage, or 'idleness' was also highlighted as a motivation for girls to enter marriage, as this would provide a level of status in society and new opportunities.

Regarding the point on peer pressure and the desire for status, young persons in Jan Toudou, Niger, confirmed the understanding that sometimes girls marry because others around them have already done so:

> *"The "show-off" (social behavior of acting primarily based on what others might think or to please them) of parents and even children. Others marry because their friends have married. Early marriage has been stopped. But due to poverty and the fact that a girl doesn't stay calm, she is forced to marry."* (Youth, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

Idleness leading to a lack of purposeful activity, and not having options for financial income was underlined as a motivation for girls to get married by a TVET teacher in Mulanje, Malawi:

> *"You know most of the girls get married when they don't have anything to do. So, when I train these girls, they become more busy with their careers and are able to support themselves. Additionally, financially independent girls cannot be coaxed into marriage".* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

Student cabinet members in Nebbi, Uganda, explained the reasons they perceive CEFM to be a continuing practice in Nebbi, and emphasized both the pressure from parents, the agency and motivations of the young persons choosing to enter marriage, and the possible abusive and exploitative home situations which could lead to deciding to enter early marriage:

> *P1: "It happens usually when parents force their children to go into marriage, especially when they no longer want them around home. Sometimes they want wealth by the time one is 15 years."*
>
> *P6: "In my opinion it's a bad thing but sometimes someone feels they are of age to marry. Sometimes when they are bullied by older learners at school, they end up going for marriage so that they are safe."*
>
> *P9: "Sometimes when they are exploited with a lot of work at home they end up going for marriage."*
>
> *P10: "Sometimes they are orphans and others have drunk parents so they end up marrying."*
>
> (Student Cabinet Members, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

4.2.1.4 Marital decision-making

The FGDs and KIIs further provided insights into marital decision-making processes, and the decision-maker(s) involved in CEFM decisions. Among other, interviews confirmed that religious and community leaders play a vital role in advising families about marriage, sometimes encouraging to wait until the legal age for marriage.

Parents are often cited as a primary marital decision-maker, often playing a significant role in marital decisions, especially in situations where economic pressures are present. For example, the lack of school fees or financial incentives offered by potential suitors can lead parents to agree to early marriages for their daughters. In some cases, parents may prioritize financial gain over the well-being of their daughters, accepting offers from suitors in exchange for money or goods, according to persons interviewed.

Some girls make their own decisions regarding marriage, reportedly sometimes influenced by peer pressure or challenging family situations, such as domestic conflicts. The lack of support or resources from parents can push girls towards early marriage as a perceived escape from their circumstances. Economic hardships and the absence of parental figures or relatives can leave girls feeling they have no choice but to marry.

Girls in Jan Toudou, Niger, provided an example of drivers or motivations for marriage, which provided credit to both parents and girls as decision makers in marriage, depending on their circumstances:

> *"If the girl does not go to school, she can be married; their parents do not reason, some because they do not want to see the girl stay at home, they are not at ease until she is with her husband (for fear of pregnancy); Some girls are excluded, and they marry; Some deliberately get excluded to be able to marry (for example, insulting the teacher, or failing exams, etc.)"* (Out-of-of school children, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

Inter-household power in marital decision making was discussed by participants in multiple contexts including in Bangladesh, where it was stated that fathers have more power when it comes to marital decisions for children, but that mothers can gain more power in decision-making through economic empowerment. These themes are further explored in section 4.2.2 Economic empowerment and 4.2.10 Norm change and gender transformative approaches.

> *"In this area, a lot of the child marriage cases are due to economic reasons. We see that fathers want to get their daughters married because they don't have economic means to support her. We see that mothers often do not want their girl children to get married but because of economic reasons and power difference in the household decision making, it is the father's way in the end. We see this shifting with women who now have their own extra income and are saving this with us. They are able to push back on this decision."* (CSOs, KII, Taltoli, Bangladesh)

Speaking of how marital decision making has changed since the GGE program started, girls in Ourafane explained that delays in marriage are more accepted, and shared: *"For example, we can receive a marriage proposal if the girl is not of age, we can wait until she is of age for the marriage celebration.*" Parents in Jan Toudou echoed a similar change regarding marital decisions, stating that *"School has become a priority to the point where some parents believe marriage is only an option if there is no future in school (failure, exclusion) for their daughters*."

Boys in Jigga, Niger, explained how, in their view, marital decision-making is taking place in their context. They were clear that the starting point is a romantic relationship, but that the pathway to marriage is to follow steps according to the prevailing cultural norms:

> *"Regarding marriage in general, nowadays it starts with a romantic relationship between a girl and a boy. If they both feel ready, the boy approaches a close relative (like his uncle) who can speak to his father on his behalf. The marriage proposal is made through the boy's representatives, who visit the girl's parents to inquire if they are aware of the relationship and their potential visit (as the girl usually informs her mother, who then informs the father to receive the representatives of her future fiancé). Once done, they ask if the girl is not already promised (engaged) to someone else. If not, they pay 10,000 CFA francs for the proposal and 110,000 CFA francs for the dowry, for example, after discussion (there is no fixed amount for these payments; these are examples of common practices here in Jigga)."* (Boys and men, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

4.2.2 Economic empowerment

4.2.2.1 Economic outcomes experienced by girls and their families

The findings from primary data collection largely supports and expands on the ToC underpinning the GGE program. Findings strengthen the case for the inter-relatedness of GGE outcomes, with particular emphasis on the relationship between outcomes from economic program components and educational outcomes for girls.

Across all countries and in interviews with all stakeholders, the effect of vocational skills training and income-generating activities on the financial independence and decision-making power of girls, young persons, and parents/mothers was emphasized. Young persons, with particular emphasis in our data set on girls, have been enrolled in technical and vocational skills training, learned crafts such as construction work or tailoring, and in many instances reported of increased financial income and financial independence due to the income the new skills are generating.

Many trained youths have established their own businesses, contributing to their financial independence, and reducing economic pressures that lead to child marriages. When coupled with savings activities, youth have been empowered to access loans, facilitating their involvement in business and economic activities. The program has provided tools and resources to TVET institutions and to young persons, such as sewing machines, to support self-employment and entrepreneurship.

In Bangladesh, families were supported to engage in new income-generating activities. Participants reported to have been able to increase their assets by among other purchasing livestock, and to have invested in farming, contributing to their economic resilience. Program participants further stated they have constructed homes and acquired land, demonstrating long-term financial stability and asset building following the GGE Program intervention. A PTA member spoke fondly of how a girl had transformed her life and become a well-esteemed member of society, following her participation in a training program:

> *"One of the girls who received training climbed the ranks and ended up investing in millet, which prospered to the point of buying a field. This is a very good thing, she made her parents proud, and she is an example for many other girls who try to emulate her."* (PTA member, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

A tailoring teacher in Mulanje, Malawi, shared examples of how his students have been able to develop their tailoring businesses, and how their businesses are thriving and making them financially independent:

> *"The 60 youths I have trained are now financially independent some doing far much better than myself. Others even send me money they make from the same tailoring business they learned from me. Some are working within the country, while others have found opportunities abroad. For example, three of my former students are running tailoring businesses in South Africa, and two others are doing the same in Mozambique. Many others are working in Blantyre, Limbe, and Mulanje Boma"* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

Young persons engaged in skills enhancement/technical trainings by Plan attest to a change in their personal lives, in that they have more funding, are able to spend income on supporting their families, their education, siblings' education, or their children's. The impacts on the lives of young persons of engaging in economic activities after skills-training is further illustrated in this FGD with youth in Rukwa, Tanzania:

> *"Before the GGE project was introduced by Plan International, we didn't have any skills to help us earn an income, but the project has given me the skill of being a construction worker, and now I earn an income through my work."*
>
> *"The project has given me sewing skills, so I earn an income to support my family and children."*
>
> *"I have become a craftsman, and now my life has improved because I earn a little money."*
>
> (Youth, FGD, Rukwa, Tanzania)

In Bangladesh, the inclusion of women in a livestock rearing project was initially met with skepticism by husbands, according to a TVET Education Officer. As livestock rearing was considered a man's domain, there was initial pushback to the decision, as men considered they should receive the training and share learnings with their wives. The Education Officer considers women coming to trainings as evidence of mindset in itself, and that the additional income has helped prioritizing daughters' education. He further stated:

> *"So, you see that by GGE projects and its advocacy around gender and gender roles, not only have families now less loss of livestock and thus more income but also women have been able to [have] a little more power in the household*." (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh)

Out-of-school girls also spoke of how they felt empowered by skills training, enabling them to manage their own businesses and reduce vulnerability to exploitative situations. Teenage mothers and girls who exited child, early or forced marriages were supported financially through the program.

In an FGD with out-of-school girls engaged in a Plan-funded youth club in Phalombe, Malawi, it was stated that out of the 26 girls in the club, 18 have started small-scale businesses after receiving training from the GGE program. The girls themselves considered themselves to be financially empowered and less vulnerable to child and forced marriages, which they consider to be poverty driven. A similar sentiment was voiced by a PTA member in Jan Toudou, Niger, who stated that as girls through the program have savings accounts, they are *"less tempted by boys' money".*

Financial independence among young persons has eased economic burdens on families, allowing them to contribute to household income. Livelihood support interventions, such as livestock rearing and tailoring, has provided additional income to families, prioritizing girls' education and delaying child marriages. Further, women who were part of VSLAs shared that their participation in such groups allowed them to make household decisions such as increasing spending on quality food or education. Some stated that they experienced having more decision-making power in the household but did not elaborate whether this extended beyond decisions on how to spend money saved through VSLAs. A girl in Tanzania spoke of how she felt confident she could obtain food without help from her husband, through her small earnings from hear seamstress work:

> *"Plan has strengthened me economically; even if my husband leaves in the morning without leaving any money, I am still assured of food because I am a seamstress, and through my work, I earn small earnings."* (Girls, FGD, Rukwa, Tanzania)

The program has enabled parents who struggle with school fees to pay small amounts, allowing their children to continue their education. The program has provided economic incentives for families to keep their children in school, reducing dropout rates and delaying child marriages. Parents in FGDs speak of witnessing the benefits of investing in education, with many students progressing to higher education and securing good jobs.

Beyond skills training leading to economic outcomes, the Village Savings and Loan Associations and Youth Savings and Loan Associations have reportedly improved financial literacy and savings among participants, allowing families to support their children's education and plan for the future.

4.2.2.2 Other changes and results experienced through economic activities

A few reports were made in interviews on how economic opportunities may have improved inter-household relations and subsequently domestic violence rates. These reports were mainly based on perceptions of change in households, rather than the lived experience of any person interviewed. Some interviewees, such as the young woman in Phalombe, Malawi referenced in section 4.2.1.2, shared they had been empowered through financial opportunities to leave an abusive relationship, or heard of others being able to leave. Such perceived pathways for change are further illustrated in Figure 6, below:

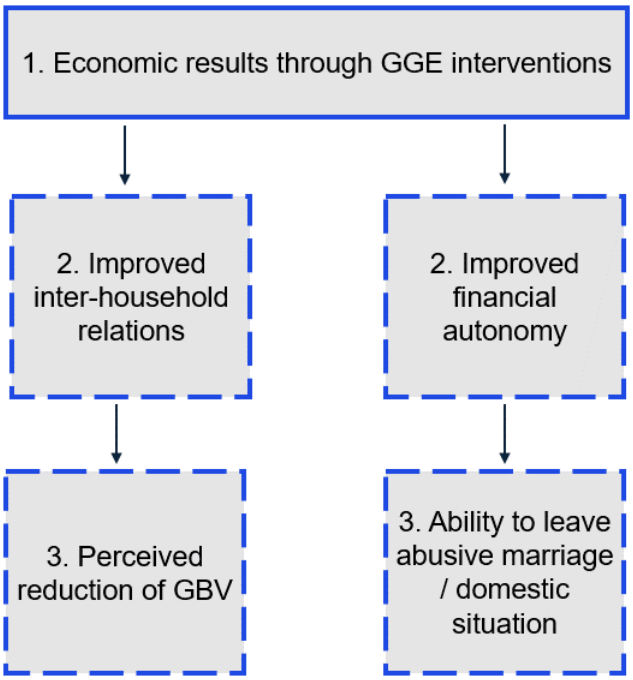


Figure 6. Perceived pathways for change, from economic opportunities to reduced GBV through more harmonious households or through 'ability to leave'

It is important to note that such perceived pathways for change were mostly not experienced directly by the interviewees themselves, with some exceptions. However, changes such as being less worried about food purchases, school fees, or having more freedom to make economic decisions, were experienced by multiple interviewees who were involved in the program.

A Government official in Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh, shared their perception that there has been an attitudinal shift regarding girls and their future in the last few years. S/he attributes this shift to the GGE project and its interventions in schools, and the provision of apprenticeship trainings, which show that there are other avenues for girls to earn income and support households, in turn incentivizing delaying child marriage. In short, economic empowerment activities have improved incomes and contributed to shifting mentalities towards young girls, increasing their consideration and support within families. Such interventions have also improved young girls' views on themselves. The impact the increased income had on a girl in Jan Toudou, Niger, comes across in the next quote:

> *"When my business was doing well, I bought a goat, and now it will soon give birth. My mom has greatly benefited from my help. I also help the family a lot with sewing, for example, I contributed ten thousand (10,000) CFA francs to my mother's brother's wedding. I bought a goat and took charge of the family's ice during Ramadan. There are other expenses we ease for parents. I plan to pay the money to enroll and try another chance to pass the BEPC exam (3rd level). Now, I train other girls in catering. I am very proud, it's the mothers of the girls who ask me to train their daughters.*" (Girls, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

Across all contexts, the impact of 'keeping young people busy' was emphasized in KIIs and FGDs. The GGE program has reportedly reduced 'idleness' among youth and associated behaviours. Being part of a training program is a constructive and well-considered activity, which has fostered a more industrious community, in the views of persons interviewed. Persons interviewed stated there is less theft because young persons have been included in the program and are focusing on developmental activities and improving community well-being.

> *"The young people are busy working or going to school, they have the opportunity to be autonomous, and they are able to help their families. For example, girls who receive support for their education have bought furniture for their future marriage with the funds allocated to them by a project"* (Religious/traditional leader, KII, Mayahi, Niger)

In addition to having had a direct economic impact on the lives of those engaged in skills-building initiatives, the program contributed to transforming views on gender roles, particularly highlighted in Tanzania and Nepal. Women and girls taking on roles traditionally seen as male-dominated, such as electrical work and construction in Tanzania, and hairdressing/cutting in Nepal, has expanded views about what is possible to achieve for women and girls.

> *"Some people believed that these girls wouldn't be able to become economically independent, but now they witness girls doing well even in fields like electrical work and construction. Even this college building (administration) was built by girls, and people are amazed to see girls doing work that was previously seen as male jobs, such as electrical work and construction."* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

4.2.2.3 Limitations to broader impact

Generally, although TVET programs have increased skills of young persons, the lack of start-up kits and start-up capital placed limitations on the amount of persons who were able to create viable businesses for sustained economic outcomes following Plan interventions. Although our findings do confirm that some youths gained financial independence through the program, persons interviewed were adamant that more support was needed for sustained economic empowerment. The qualitative findings from the data collection may provide further context to Plan's self-reported indicator reporting, which includes an overview of the number of total youth that are sustaining their own income after the GGE program. Numbers for 2022 and 2023 are provided in the graph below. Discrepancies between countries, as depicted in the graph, were not observed during field level data collection due to the limited samples of participants interviewed in each context. The qualitative findings from the impact assessment suggest that the training activities were highly important in and of themselves, and that they generated income for many young persons, as depicted in the below graph. However, the impact assessment further finds that the majority of young persons involved in trainings and IGA's stated they required to be part of more sustained interventions to reach a more secure financial status.

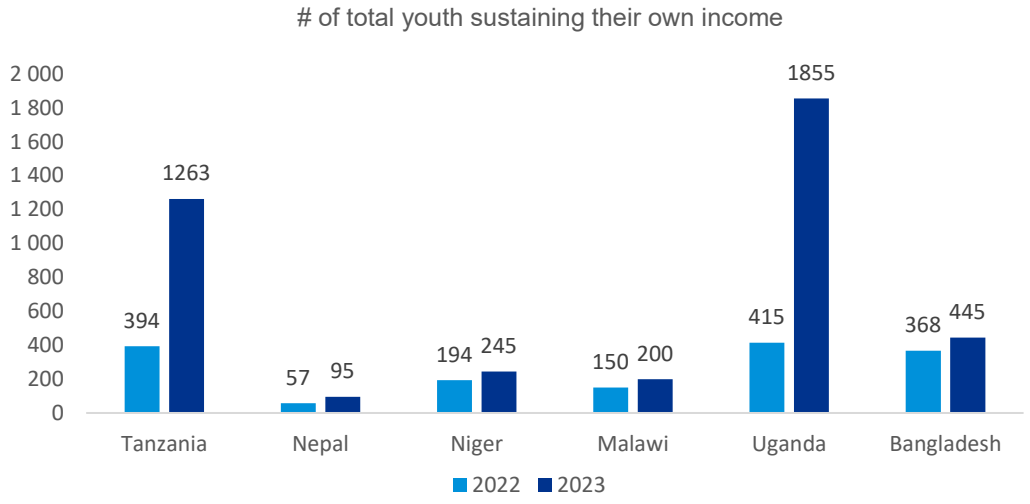


Figure 7: Number of total youth sustaining their own income - Plan GGE indicator reporting per 04042024

An example is found in Malawi, where there was enough funding in Phalombe to train thirteen young persons (nine girls and four boys) in tailoring. Among those trained, two were reported to have established their own

tailoring businesses and to be owning sewing machines, while the other eleven are working to raise funds to purchase sewing machines, according to a CSO stakeholder interviewed in Phalombe, Malawi.

Although finance schemes through microcredit loans were available in Bangladesh, a CSO stakeholder explained that they have never been utilized by the families supported by the program, as the poverty levels may be too severe for families to be able to access such financial products:

> *"Through GGE project we have been able to get connected with such a large number of families who are investing their savings with us. We also provide loan facilities to these families, however no one has taken a loan from us till now. We offer very small loans, loans for buying raw material and business capital. But currently no family engaged with us through the GGE program has availed this facility. This is mostly because these families are very poor."* (CSOs, KII, Taltoli, Bangladesh)

The economic empowerment trainings have primarily been targeted at children who have left school or have never attended, providing them with skills in areas such as sewing, catering, and animal care, which contribute to financial stability. No "pull" factor, risking children being attracted by the economic opportunities of skills trainings, was detected through primary data collection or validation activities. The value placed on education as a transformative power in peoples' lives (including how girls with education are valued per some of the contexts), outweighs the attraction of economic opportunities, according to the qualitative findings of this impact assessment. Further, skills training has not led to economic outcomes for all participants. Program staff engaged in validation and duty bearers interviewed all consider the skills training programs to be complementary to education interventions, reaching children who would otherwise not be engaged in any formal or informal programs.

Lastly, obtaining "more money" is not a strategy in and of itself for reducing CEFM, if not coupled with other norm changing activities. For instance, in an FGD with VSLA members, the following was said about the observed change during GGE implementation. In this example, having more financial means was associated with marriage outcomes, rather than delaying or stopping marriage:

> "*According to my position, they have significantly reduced it [CEFM]. Before the project started, after harvesting, youths would think of getting married using the money they earned from the harvest, or even parents would use the harvest money to help their child get married*. (VSLA member, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

4.2.3 Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

4.2.3.1 Menstrual health, menstrual hygiene management, and impact on school attendance and retention

The GGE program contributed to improvements in girls' school attendance and helped reduce the fear and shame associated with menstruation through a multifaceted approach to menstrual health. By providing physical infrastructure, such as private and hygienic facilities, the program aimed to create a more supportive environment for girls to manage their menstruation while attending school. Additionally, the program included trainings on menstrual health, which sought to equip girls with the knowledge and confidence needed to handle their menstrual cycles effectively, without fear and shame. The provision of sanitary pads further supported girls by ensuring they had the necessary resources to attend school more comfortably during their periods. These efforts collectively worked towards fostering a more inclusive educational setting for girls, addressing stigma and fear associated with menstruation.

> "*Ever since we got the trainings, now we can manage menstrual periods. And it has made girls to stay in school."* (Girls, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

> *"Improvement in menstrual hygiene management which has encouraged the girls to go the school and attend classes without fear and shame"* (Parents, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

> *"The training and menstrual hygiene kits have greatly contributed because before, it happened that girls would not return to school because they were surprised by their periods in class and mocked by their classmates"* (Parents, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

> *"Prior to project we were not sending our daughters to school during her mensuration but after we were associated with the project we have been sending them as they get free sanitary pads in school if the need and there are rest rooms if they need to rest during studies."* (Religious/traditional leaders, FGD, Jumla, Nepal)

Although improvement of WASH facilities was not completed in all schools of intervention, where they happened all stakeholders interviewed - government officials, girls, boys, teachers, and parents - spoke about the importance these facilities have for uninterrupted school attendance. These results strengthen findings in section 4.2.4.4 – Improved learning environment, demonstrating the potential impact of the GGE Program on learning environment and educational outcomes.

> "*Previously there was no toilet and drinking water facility in the school but now the school distributes sanitary pads for free to menstruating girls, has a sick (rest) room, pad changing and disposal facility within the school. (…) The girls find it comfortable in resting at school compared to their home. This has substantially increased school attendance of girls*" (Educational staff, KII, Bardiya, Nepal)

> *"The girls' changing room has increased retention in school"* (Educational staff, KII, Zombo, Uganda)

> *"Through infrastructures such as latrines, the program has facilitated school life for young girls both in terms of convenience and security"* (Government official, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

> *"Plan constructed toilets and changing rooms for girls and this has changed the mid set of the community, but it has also been a good motivating factor in girls' retention is schools and also attracting other girls to the school."* (PTA/Sustainable Management Committee members, Pakwach, Uganda)

4.2.3.2 SRHR and health facilities

Interviews with girls and parents included a few specific mentions of how health facilities have been improved, and that youth were encouraged to visit health facilities as part of the GGE Program. The messaging toward girls and women has focused on the importance of seeking health centers for consultations during pregnancy and for delivery, and respondents shared how they have gradually shifted their perception on the importance of health centers, among other as they facilitate formal birth registration and are associated with improved health outcome:

> *"Health-wise, our women used to give birth at home because they were mistreated in centers, and there was more noise. But conditions have improved, and we noticed that keeping records is very important for civil status, information, and especially for health. There is a major who fines families who give birth at home."* (Parents, FGD, Maraké, Niger)

4.2.3.3 Attitudes towards menstruation, and SRHR more broadly

In a series of interviews with girls from Nepal, Tanzania, Bangladesh, and Niger, the GGE Program was noted to have contributed to, or sparked, a shift in how menstruation is perceived. Previously, discriminatory practices such as girls and women receiving reduced food allocations or being isolated in 'menstrual rooms' during their periods were more prevalent, but the practices have been phased out over time in some contexts. In Nepal, it was noted that attitudes are changing, and there is increasing awareness about the importance of including women in daily life despite the stage of their cycle. However, internalized shame regarding menstruation was perceived to still impact how women behave during their periods. This observed gradual shift in attitudes has been aided by programs which include messaging which acknowledges menstruation as a natural process, leading to a decrease in associated shame and stigma. Students and other stakeholders made mention of the role of teachers and the introduction of the 'gender curriculum' in schools, as important for reducing stigma and shame around menstruation and other SRHR topics.

> *"Girls were kept in a cowshed or a menstrual room, but with the project people sharing us on hygiene, we now allow them to stay inside the house (…) for us SRHR was a topic not to be discussed with others, it was a shame but now the children tell us (mothers) about it and share (…) the knowledge and teach on preparing sanitary pads, their use and disposal to their mothers, sisters/sisters-in-law, aunties, etc. Now we are convinced that there is no issue of God becoming angry and punish us if the female having menstruation stay away from home, eat separately, etc. Now with tap water at home, they can take shower and keep their clothes clean. Earlier they were not given milk products but now there is no such issue, they can stay in one dedicated room. Now science is heavy on religion.*" (Religious/traditional leaders, FGD, Jumla, Nepal)

> *"At first, I was afraid to say how to say, what to say to them, etc. Now we understand that it is a natural thing. All girls will have it."* (Girls, FGD, Taltoli upazila, Bangladesh)

> *"The community has changed as they previously had negative views about menstruation, believing that a girl on her period should not go to the farm as it could cause crops to dry up, but that view no longer exists. (…) Fathers can buy pads for their daughters and educate them on how to use them (…) The value of girls has increased; when they are on their period, they are not isolated, and teachers care for girls and boys equally"* (Girls, FGD, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

Overall, there are examples across all GGE countries that accentuate the linkage between improved overall menstrual health and improved school attendance for girls, as practical challenges, stigma and shame associated with menstruation contributes to girls' school attendance and performance. Menstruation-related stigma also contributes to narratives of girls' perceived marriageability, as it was noted in an example from Bangladesh that girls who have started their periods were at risk of being withdrawn from school for marriage as they may be considered 'mature'.

> *"Earlier, when we were menstruating, we could not come to school. I was afraid to come to school because of whom to tell about this situation? What to do? Our parents did not allow us to come to school. But since the GGE project came, sanitary napkins are available in our school. When I have my period, I buy it for 10 taka and use it. Earlier, we were told that not all foods can be eaten during menstruation. After this project came, I realized that these are all wrong ideas*." (Girl, FGD, Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh)

There are also specific myths associated with menstruation and girls' learning and school attendance, specifically that girls are not able to learn during menstruation, that have been addressed through the GGE Program.

> *"In our society there was a saying that if one goes to school during menstruation, they will forget all what they have studied and thus girls were not allowed to study during [menstruation]. After the project was implemented, it has changed and there are facilities such as free pads, sick rooms in the school".* (Youth, FGD, Jumla, Nepal)

More broadly, the GGE Program was credited by multiple stakeholders to changing the narrative and way in which SRHR issues are discussed, leading to less fear and stigma associated with SRHR topics. Traditional and religious leaders in Nepal and Bangladesh, also confirmed this view and acknowledged how engagements with the GGE Program shifted their perceptions about menstruation and SRHR more broadly. Trainings on gender, sex and bodily changes are noted as having increased the agency of youth, especially girls' agency, and changed attitudes, which is believed by stakeholders to influence early pregnancies and CEFM.

> *"After the training on SRHR we can now talk openly with our parents, our siblings, male teachers, and community seniors. We used to either lower our head or bunk the class during classes on reproductive health, but now we do not feel ashamed on such topics"* (Girls, FGD, Kalikot, Nepal)

> *"Now adolescents (even girls) talk about SRHR. They attend classes on such topic"* (Boys and men, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)

> *"Today, young people can openly discuss SRHR topics without facing backlash."* (CBCP members, KII, Phalombe, Malawi)

4.2.3.4 Early pregnancy and contraception

It also emerged from the interviews that many stakeholders considered the GGE Program to have directly affected the rates of early pregnancy in the various communities. This is an observed change reported by multiple stakeholders, without further secondary data to substantiate the perception that there are indeed fewer rates of teenage pregnancies. Participants considered the pathway of change to reduced teenage pregnancies to include i) increased knowledge, acceptance, and access to contraception, and ii) reduced rates of CEFM, which are directly associated with teenage pregnancy. Conversely, reducing teenage pregnancies can also contribute to lower rates of CEFM.

> *"In five years, I haven't seen a lot of teenage pregnancies in our villages and this is because of the program"* (VSLA member, KII, Nebbi, Uganda)

> *"We used to avoid health classes (…). We are not shy talking about contraceptives and pills now."* (Girls, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)

Girls themselves considered the trainings on family planning provided through the GGE Program as a way of preventing early pregnancy, which they considered would help themselves and their peers to avoid CEFM. A teacher in Pakwach, Uganda, described how s/he had observed a change over time in the community of reduced rates of teenage pregnancy, and how the GGE program may have contributed to the reduction. The teacher emphasized the student/teacher relationship, supported by program materials, as a pathway for reducing teenage pregnancies:

> *"This issue of teenage pregnancy has now reduced because before, you would find around 5-7 girls getting pregnant, but nowadays we don't receive any cases of teenage pregnancy. That means the effect of Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation is great and Girls Get Equal is working. Because we used to get girls getting pregnant before the term ended, we can receive like 10 cases, or 5 cases, but as I talk right now, we haven't received any single case. That means girls are taking the advice that teachers are giving them, because we always guide and counsel them, even during teaching, even the materials which Plan International gave us, for teaching these girls, we are reading them, practicing them and using them well*." (Educational staff, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

It is noted that although the Covid-19 pandemic happened during the GGE program implementation period, few participants focused on the impact of lockdowns when reflecting on CEFM rates and teenage pregnancy rates in their communities, which could result from not being prompted to reflect on how the pandemic impacted the outcomes. However, a reference was made by a Ministry Official in Nepal that there had been an increase in CEFM and early pregnancies in Nepal during Covid-19, an assumption that is made globally but requires further research.

4.2.3.5 Opposition and challenges related to SRHR outcomes

Some stakeholders made known their beliefs and attitudes regarding SRHR, stating that such components 'should not be prioritized', as they considered program components which include opportunities for economic empowerment as more pertinent than SRHR knowledge and skills for addressing CEFM directly. Some parents, in Malawi, believed that school materials should be provided to students instead of SRHR supplies, as the latter were perceived to negatively influence the children, and were deemed as not being 'appropriate' for the Malawian context nor the age of the children. In Tanzania, some parents who were members of a VSLA group in Kalambo expressed their view that information about SRHR made girls 'arrogant' as they 'insulted the parents by mentioning words like menstruation'. Opposition to the SRHR component was also found with a Malawi government official, who noted the programmatic materials had not been vetted or pre-approved by the Malawian government, indicating opposition to the GGE Program SRHR or/and lack of engagement with national stakeholders.

Some findings from Niger and Uganda suggest that the GGE Program component on SRHR may be understood by the target group as primarily focusing on girls' hygiene or health, potentially limiting a comprehensive understanding of SRHR. Although language around SRHR needs to be tailored to local contexts, adopting appropriate expressions to avoid backlash, a narrow understanding of SRHR in terms of hygiene management could result in limited impact on attitudes and knowledge related SRHR. This could in turn cause harm to girls' emotional and physical wellbeing, if seen as an effective strategy to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as detailed in the excerpts below:

> *"We have learned that the greatest prevention lies in body hygiene, especially for young girls and women (Kiwon Lahia)."* (Parents, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

> *"They helped to teach me how to keep personal hygiene like bathing, being clean and combing my hair. (…) In terms of increasing knowledge on menstruation, girls were sensitized on how they can handle it when it occurs. Then they also provided the girls with pads. They also advised us through teaching on puberty on how to keep clean by shaving away pubic hairs on our bodies."* (Student cabinet members, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

In an interview with student cabinet members, it was noted how there were still negative attitudes towards SRHR issues and advocates for CEFM.

> *"Some of the community members speak negatively about these issues. One of the reasons is that when they see a girl who has developed breasts, they associate them to be sexually active. This makes me feel bad so I suggest that they are sensitized too because they don't have understanding of such issues like menstruation etc (…) They also say girls who have breasts should get married which makes me feel bad."* (Student cabinet members, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

4.2.4 Education

4.2.4.1 Retention and reintegration of girls in school

A notable improvement observed across all target countries was an increase in the number of girls being supported to attend school following early pregnancy or after leaving a child, early or forced marriage. The GGE Program contributed to such reintegration in schools through comprehensive support to girls and boys, to facilitate their reintroduction to the educational system. Further, across all contexts, it was found that girls were retained in school at higher grade levels and at higher rates, such as in Phalombe, Malawi:

> "*We have now seen a more than 50% increase in senior class retention for girls. This year, nearly equal numbers of girls and boys are sitting for primary school examinations, which was not the case before. Previously, the number of girls was often only 50-80% of the boys in senior classes. While this improvement can't be solely attributed to the GGE program, it has undoubtedly contributed to the positive change we are experiencing."* (Key persons in ministries, KII, Phalombe, Malawi)

The GGE program has also supported schools which provide a learning arena for those that may have dropped out, among other due to early pregnancy and CEFM. In Niger, the 'Bridge center' was noted as particularly impactful for the reintegration of children in the school system, providing a new pathway to access learning and skills development for out-of-school children.

> "*Thanks to bridge centers, many children have taken the opportunity to reintegrate into the school system*" (PTA/Sustainable Management Committee members, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

> *"When you take an exam twice without passing, you cannot try again. But there are young people who would like to try again, but we know girls in this situation who have tried twice without achieving the result but have resorted to the bridge school (marhaba da jakai - welcome to the donkeys - those with a hard head) and there are very positive results."* (Parents, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

The qualitative findings from the primary data collection as part of this Impact Assessment, provide more context to the self-reported results from Plan regarding retention of girls (and boys) in school. Per Plan results reporting, after program completion in 2023 (when there was one year of implementation remaining), the drop-out rates for girls and boys in the targeted primary (Figures 7 and 8) and secondary schools (Figure 9 and 10), had reduced as compared to the baselines set in 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the decline in drop-out rates was similar for boys and girls for primary school levels, the graphs below show that there was a larger decline in girls dropping out of secondary school, reaching a slightly lower level than boys in 2023 (from 8.49% drop-out in 2019 to 3.24% in 2023 for girls, and from 7.3% drop out in 2019 to 4.05% drop-out for boys in 2023).

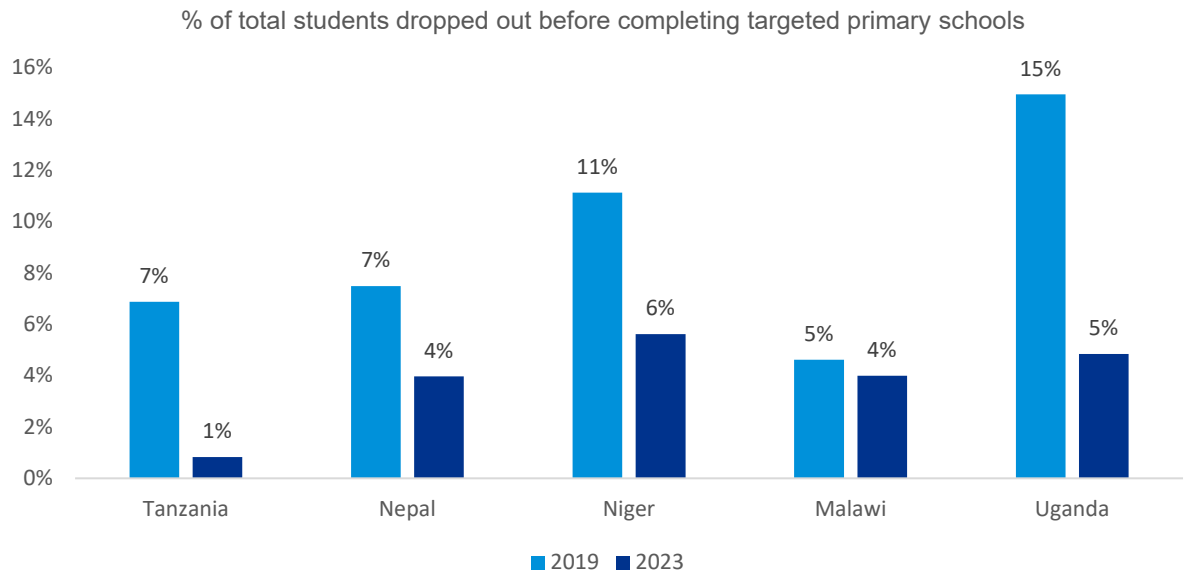


Figure 8: Percentage of total students dropped out before completing targeted primary schools

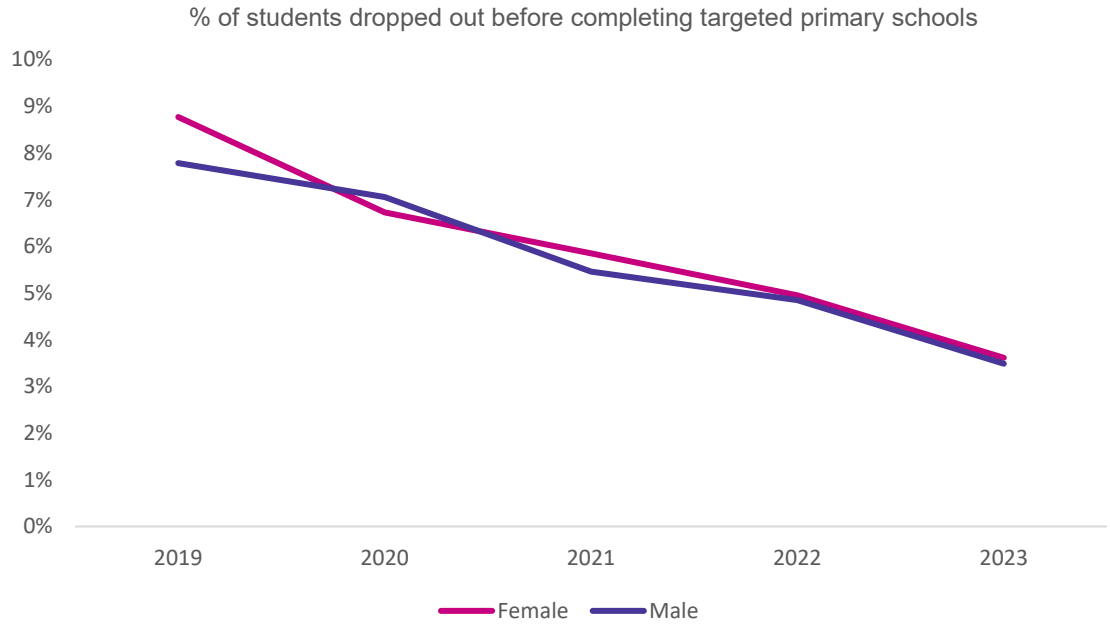


Figure 9. Percentage of students dropped out before completing targeted primary schools

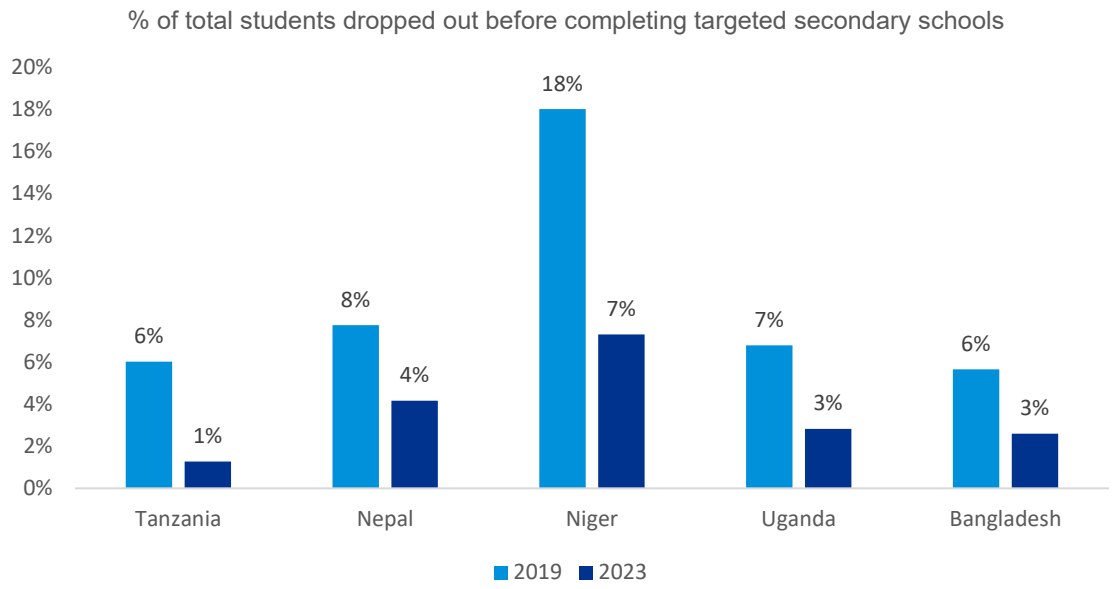


Figure 10. Percentage of total students dropped out before completing targeted secondary schools

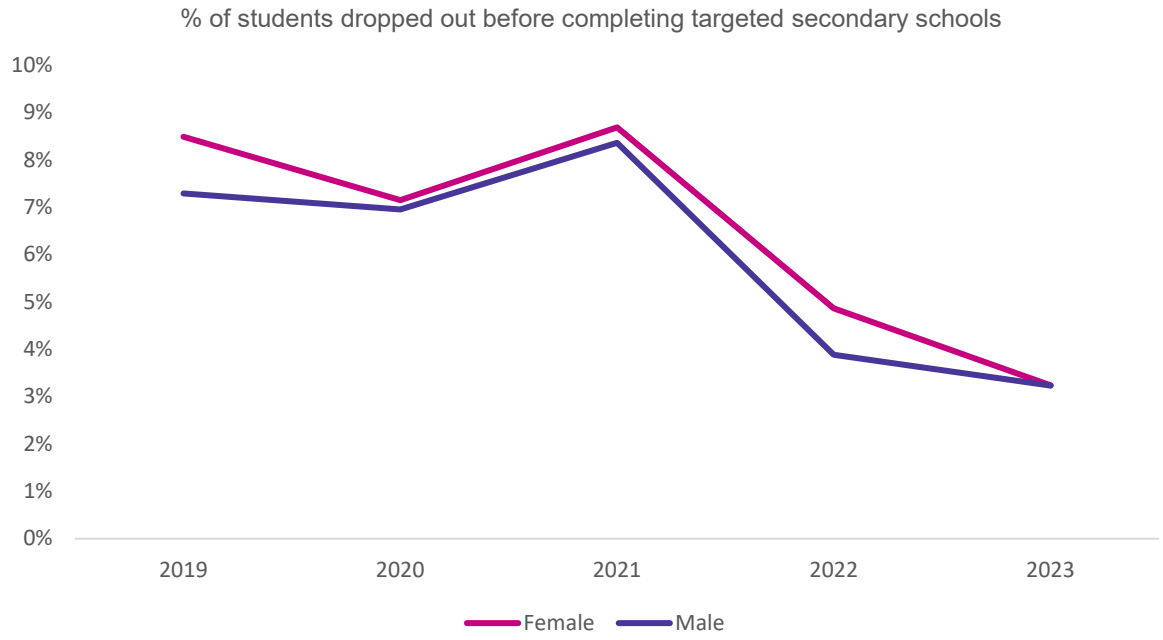


Figure 11. Percentage of students dropped out before completing targeted secondary schools

The GGE Program has a particular focus on girls, both to ensure that out-of-school girls could return to education, and to ensure that girls stay in school longer. In Tanzania, where the harmful ban on pregnant girls and adolescent mothers attending school was revoked in 2021, traditional and religious leaders in Rukwa shared their general observation that girls who were pregnant had returned to school during the program period. Similarly, religious and traditional leaders in Malawi highlighted how 24 girls were readmitted to school, and that this was facilitated by GGE Program's support to enforcing by-laws, using a grassroots approach which fostered community involvement to support readmission, as well as supporting with practical facilitation such as the provision of school uniforms and supplies. A government official in Mulanje, Malawi reported that 127 girls had been removed from marriages and reintegrated into school and received essential school supplies.

Government officials further stated they considered the results of the GGE Program to be more sustainable compared to other initiatives due to its approach, which not only focuses on removing girls from marriage but also on actively supporting their continued school attendance and providing opportunities for alternative education and vocational training. In Uganda, CSO implementing partners noted how the GGE Program had worked with schools to change attitudes on school dropouts, particularly regarding non-payment of school fees, which led to children being readmitted to school.

Youth who had dropped out from the formal school system have also been reached by the program through technical and vocational training options, providing educational outcomes outside of the traditional, formal schooling system. In Rukwa, a TVET teacher noted that the TVET Center only had 352 young persons enrolled at the start of the GGE program, but at the end had 872, noting the widened pool of children that have experienced a level of formal training as supported by the GGE program.

Despite the continued engagement with schools to allow for readmission of girl, an interview with an education officer in Zombo, Uganda, illustrates how views that exclude girls from school still exist:

> *"Girls are still getting pregnant though the rate has reduced. This is because when they go for long holiday they come back pregnant, and in most cases we test them after the third week and we advise them to come back to school after giving birth."* [40](Educational staff, KII, Zombo, Uganda)

During a separate interview with parents who were less acquainted with the GGE Program specifically, opposition to readmission programs was clearly stated, shedding light on attitudinal obstacles that discourage girls from returning to school.

> "*They viewed such initiatives, particularly the readmission program, as conflicting with their cultural beliefs, which hold that once a girl becomes sexually active, she should marry.* (Parents, FGD, Phalombe, Malawi)

4.2.4.2 Attitudes towards children in school

A community-level change of attitudes toward girls being in school was observed by stakeholders in all GGE countries. Many stakeholders associated these attitudinal shifts to specific GGE program messaging and interventions.

> *"Haba haba (as if to say it's obvious) (Laughs). Thanks to the program, it has become normal for a girl to pursue a normal school curriculum. And this is a kind of impact both for the girls who have this opportunity and for the families who are ultimately delighted*." (Religious/traditional leaders, KII, Ourafane, Niger)

> "*The attitude in the community is that now school-going girls are highly respected*." (Educational staff, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

In Nepal, youth explained that prior to the GGE Program, they had experienced pressure and/or physical abuse if they did not attend to all their chores prior to going to school, and that such abuse had ceased after GGE Program implementation. Mothers in Bardiya, Nepal, also explained that their views on the importance of education for their daughters had changed through being involved in the GGE Program:

> *"We, mothers, do not ask our daughters to do household chores, instead we encourage to study hard and be independent, not like us (…) Prior to the project we would ask our daughters to help us in household chores such as getting fodder for animals in the morning but now we ask them to study."* (Parents, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)

The attitudinal shift found in Nepal is echoed in other interviews, such as in Niger where "*Parents who let their children study are seen as intelligent*", according to a teacher in Sherkin Haoussa, who further explained that years before, some people considered it abnormal for girls to attend school beyond primary. Parents across the GGE countries shared that they were proud of their children's improved academic achievements, and appreciated the improved economic outcomes associated with higher levels of schooling:

[40] Ref. "testing after the third week", this was explained by the local consultant to entail pregnancy testing. It was explained that such practice commonly takes place in secondary schools. It was stated that the schools, especially boarding schools such as the school in question, consider the presence of pregnant girls as a risk as they are not equipped to provide adequate antenatal care, rest, or nutrition. If girls are about to sit for final exams, some day schools may consider keeping girls in school.

> *"Parents in this area have been able to see the result of investing in their children's education. During this GGE period, many students have done well in school, some have gone on to University and get good jobs. This is an incentive for other parents to keep their children in school."* (CSOs, KII, Taltoli upazila, Bangladesh)

Youth confirms the shift in attitudes, not only by the parents, but also how they personally have started to value education more than they did previously:

> "*Today, thanks to awareness campaigns and other program achievements, parents take care of us and encourage us to study, especially dads. Moms too. We also want to progress. We have understood that school is progress, gaining knowledge, and thanks to school, we have the opportunity to teach or become a doctor."* (Girls, FGD, Nanaya, Niger)

This assumed attitudinal shift at community, family and individual level, presented above is further validated in statements regarding girls' school enrollment, including beyond primary levels, as noted in excerpts from interviews in Niger:

> *"Thanks to the training, awareness campaigns, and structures created by the program, statistics show that nearly all girls aged 9 to 12*[41] *are in school, and even those who are not, have other prospects besides marriage*." (CSOs, KII, Maradi, Niger)

> "*Now, there are girls who have graduated from high school, in previous years [before the program], girls were not even allowed to reach middle school. This is due to monitoring, awareness campaigns, and kits.*" (Student cabinet members, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

4.2.4.3 Economic empowerment and school enrollment

The primary data collection confirmed the GGE ToC assumption, of the interrelation of improved financial status and school retention and enrollment, as outlined in presentation of findings in section 4.2.2 on Economic Opportunities for girls and their families. In Bangladesh, a government official noted that the greatest achievements of the project had been the increase in school enrollment observed during the program period. S/he noted that earlier, a child's education was at risk of being discontinued, because families were dependent on additional income and support from their children or could not support fees related to school attendance. Similar stories of change are recorded from families and teachers in Uganda and Malawi, where the economic empowerment of mothers leading to increased investment in education, is highlighted in several findings such as the quote below:

> *"The VSLA group has made it easy to borrow loans and pay fees. I received money after share out (400,000/=). I went home and asked my daughter what I should do with the money. She told me "mommy, I want to go back to school". In the past I used not to save I used to just eat my money."* (Parents, FGD, Zombo, Uganda)

4.2.4.4 Improved learning environment

The role of teachers was highlighted as a 'critical link' in shifting norms and values in the community, also regarding addressing gender-based violence. This was mentioned especially in Bangladesh and Tanzania.

> *"During monitoring, I saw how motivated teachers were, following up on children, especially girls, when they missed school, and also addressing gender-based violence cases." (*Government officials, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

There are findings that note how increased collaboration between parents and teachers, have positively impacted school attendance, such as through the 'future husbands clubs' in Niger.

> ***"****The school of husbands and teachers now collaborate. The school of husbands is vigilant about the relationship between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents of students, and between students and their parents. We have fewer and fewer dropouts."* (Parents, FGD, Maraké, Niger)

[41] *Explanatory note from local research consultant "(9-12) was the age at which people already started thinking about a good match for the very near future concerning them"*

Incentives, such as student awards, were noted as important to improve student motivation and performance, especially in Niger, but also in Malawi and Bangladesh.

> *"In terms of school results, rates have increased, mainly thanks to the rewards girls receive when they perform well."* (Key persons in ministries, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

Further discussions regarding some of the potential harmful risks and unintended results to this practice is further discussed below and in section 4.2.9 – Unintended outcomes.

4.2.4.5 Challenges to reaching and sustaining educational outcomes

Overcoming the barrier of returning to school after CEFM or teenage pregnancy requires continuous support and engagement. As indicated in a FGD with Student Cabinet Members in Mulanje, Malawi, stigma and associated shame for girls affected by CEFM remains prevalent in contexts such as Malawi, and requires comprehensive responses to be addressed effectively, including the involvement of teachers. The Student Cabinet Members explained how they had experienced the readmission of girls who had dropped out due top early pregnancy or CEFM. They noted that the school management instructed students not to bully or tease these girls, warning that anyone making them uncomfortable would face serious punishment. However, the respondents felt that it can be quite embarrassing for girls to return to school, especially if they have a child.

In Niger, Out-of-of school children in several locations, spoke about how they would have wanted to go to school, and were intending on making this dream a reality for their own children in the future:

> *"Our children will run to school (without hesitation) because we cannot make the same mistake twice (ba'a batchewa gida biyu) (our parents were wrong, and we will not be wrong)."* (Out-of-of school children, FGD, Maraké, Niger)

However, as in the example below, despite Plan staff engaging with parents, families were not able to bring their children back into formal schools. Families in an FGD also noted how kindergarten would be important to ensure continued education for girls with children.

> "*We would even like to have a kindergarten, it's the only obstacle because we no longer want our school-going children to babysit because ilimi hitila duniya (Knowledge is a lamp for the world)."* (Parents, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

With the increasing emphasis on children's education, there is a potential for heightened stigma against out-of-school children and those pursuing vocational training. A stakeholder from a SMC in Niger highlighted a shift in preference, where boys are becoming hesitant to marry girls who are not receiving an education. Additionally, during an interview with a community member in Niger, it was noted that individuals without formal education are now being viewed as inferior. This suggests that as the value of educated children rises, those without formal schooling may face devaluation, with factors such as cleanliness and behavior being associated with school attendance.

Another potential risk associated with educational components of the GGE Program is the clear pattern from interviews conducted in Niger, that incentives, such as dry food and 'bags' are used as encouragement for school attendance and given out to the children who receive highest grades. It is commonly cited as something positive, which has had an impact on enrollment.

> *"The program provided me with a bag as part of the rewards for girls who worked hard, it encourages girls to work better in school."* (Girls, FGD, Ourafane, Niger)

However, there are certain risks associated with this approach, such as lack of inclusion/indirect punishment of children who perform poorly, unhealthy pressure from parents to perform well in school, stigma and shame for children who do not perform well, as well as the double punishment for out-of-school children who might be most vulnerable and/or lack parental support. In validation sessions with Plan Niger, it was noted how handing out food rations was part of government mandated policy, which was observed to have increased the value of girls' education.

4.2.5 Child protection

4.2.5.1 New policies and by-laws

The program has contributed to the development and enforcement of laws and policies against child marriage and violence against children, through targeted advocacy with key stakeholders, and through working in coalitions with other NGOs and civil society actors over a longer time period. This includes community by-laws with (reportedly) strict penalties for offenders, and collaboration with traditional and religious leaders to enforce these laws.

Laws and by-laws have also been enacted during the program period to meet the shifting forms of CEFM, such as the case of remote marriages in Niger (*armin guirké*), where the program has worked with judges and canton administrations to ensure that laws and by-laws are understood and enforced. An elaborate discussion and presentation of new policies and laws across target countries are presented under section 4.2.8.4 in the context of norm change at societal level.

4.2.5.2 New and strengthened child protection mechanisms, committees, and referral pathways

In all the GGE targeted communities, there has been a reported increase in the reporting of child marriages and other forms of abuse, facilitated by strengthened referral systems and greater awareness of laws and bylaws. Communities are now more active in reporting cases to Community-Based Child Protection Committees, to the police, and to other community leaders. The GGE program has worked broadly and specifically to improve child protection systems, structures, and policies/legislation that protect children from CEFM and other harmful practices.

Communities have been sensitized and made aware through wide awareness campaigns about the adverse effects of CEFM, and the consequences for perpetrators. For instance, in Malawi, Student Cabinet members could name a government decree and the related prison consequences for perpetrators:

> *"The government has issued a decree that no one in this community should marry a child, and those who do face imprisonment. The government is collaborating with traditional leaders to ensure that no child marriages occur and to protect children from being forced into marriage. In school, we are also learning about the dangers of child marriage and the serious consequences for anyone who marries an underage person."* (Student Cabinet Members, FGD, Mulanje, Malawi)

Awareness campaigns have complemented and strengthened official government messaging. A Government official in Taltoli upazila, Bangladesh, shared how the project has streamlined advocacy messages and strengthened the reporting and redressal mechanism, by coordinating with relevant stakeholders. Action in communities has been prompted through such increased awareness, as impunity for crimes against children is no longer assumed, as came across in an interview with parents in Niger:

> *"Now with the complaint mechanisms, people for whom awareness is not yet sufficient have understood that persisting can take you to Niamey. (As if to say, if the person persists, they risk being arrested and taken to the civil prison of Niamey)*." (Parents, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

Interviews with girls demonstrate an intention and feeling of empowerment among girls, to report abuse and resist early marriage, which they state has been achieved among other through awareness campaigns and activities in GGE clubs. This empowerment is supported by the establishment of gender desks and protection committees that provide safe spaces for reporting and addressing cases of abuse. Girls interviewed in all contexts explained i) how they knew where they could raise concerns about potential abuse, ii) their intention of utilizing such formal or informal referral mechanisms if needed, and/or iii) their experience utilizing referral mechanisms in concrete cases.

In Bangladesh, girls interviewed were aware of the hotline one can call to report cases of CEFM and expressed their intention of calling it upon need. In Tanzania, multiple concrete cases of use of child protection mechanisms were mentioned in interviews, such as the following:

> *"Last year, a child came to the office and reported that a friend told her she was being forced into anal intercourse by a family member. We were very pleased with the confidentiality of the girl raising her voice for her friend. We called the parties involved to the office until we resolved the case. So, you can see how these desks and committees established by the program work to protect and defend the child."* (Government official, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

[On how reporting has increased] "Empowering girls to be brave enough to report to desks when they experience abuse, such as the MTAKUWWA desk. For example, there was a case where a girl was married to two men, both from the same house, and another case where a girl was forced to marry her uncle. This case was taken to the police, and Plan facilitated the DNA testing process. During the trial, they enabled welfare officers to attend court, and eventually, the verdict was reached, and the uncle was imprisoned." (Government official, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

Referral pathways have been strengthened and become more numerous and stronger. Girls and young persons interviewed mentioned a range of persons they would address and have addressed in concrete instances where CEFM was planned or threatened. Girls and young persons interviewed stated they would talk to parents, take action themselves (and provided examples of having done so), approach law enforcement, teachers, CBCP members or other protection mechanism members, or "a close person".

"If a case of attempted early marriage is in front of us, we will try to sensitize the perpetrators, and if the person persists, we will go to the village chief. On these issues, the Nanas (one of the members of the village child protection committee) intervene in this regard. Thanks to the program, there is a well-established mechanism, and the village chief is now accessible" (Youth, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

Those that have received reports of CEFM cases have also felt empowered and responsible to take action, according to our interviews.

"A young girl went to fetch water at the river, was forcibly taken, but she resisted and fought back. The case was brought to me, and I fought the case until the child was returned home, and those involved in the abduction were arrested, charged, and ultimately convicted." (Government official, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

The sustainability of child protection components has been built into most work streams, by working through existing structures, or working to incorporate new structures into national systems. The GGE program has also initiated the establishment of structures such as the Community-based Child Protection Committees and linked them with police and child protection volunteers.

"The program facilitated the establishment of community structures like child protection committees at the area and group village headman levels. Though the project has concluded, these committees have been integrated into the government's system." Government Official, KII, Mulanje, Malawi

According to duty bearers interviewed, referral systems have been used to increase the reporting on number of child marriages, and there is a higher use of referral systems and formal mechanisms than before the program was implemented. This change has happened because the pathways for referral have been strengthened through the project, and the public has a greater awareness of laws and bylaws.

*"The protection committee also closely monitors the marriages of young girls who can be taken out of school to marry, they are also interested in abuses (mouzgounawa), such as violence against children, small activities, and commerce of moms at the expense of school. We can tell the victim's parents that it is not appropriate to do this. There is also the protection committee to which we can speak via the one who follows us (a sort of godmother)". (*Youth, FGD, Sherkin Haoussa, Niger)

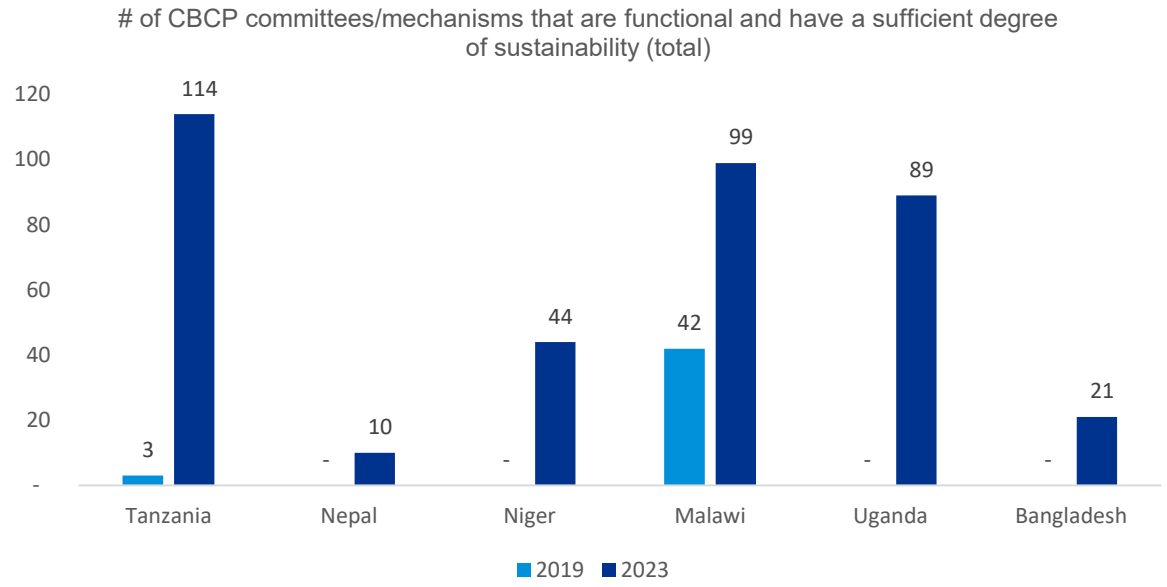


Figure 12. Number of CBCP committees/mechanisms that are functional and have sufficient degree of sustainability (total)

Plan has tracked the establishment and strengthening of CBCPs in their various local forms, and the findings from the Impact Assessment further back up the claim that referral pathways and systems are more numerous, strengthened, and accessible for the public. The CBCPs provide a local structure and local, low-threshold response to threats of CEFM and other child protection cases. They provide an avenue for grassroots conflict management and protection, which are linked to the formal services (police) when escalation is needed. The way that CBCPs work in Niger was explained in an interview:

> *"In each village, there is a protection committee composed of 12 members who help and are directly connected to the community, they refer to the child protection directorate as they do not provide care. The meetings they hold are referred to the directorate. This committee is composed of health agents, the midwife, teachers, the village chief, the imam… These people are considered responsible for their communities. Regarding mechanisms, now girls can report through self-presentation (a complaint mode where she presents herself to report the abuse she is or will potentially be a victim of, for example, forced or early marriage). She can also have her friends or someone else from the community notify the committee or protection service. One day we will win the battle (smile). For example: Two weeks ago, a girl came to tell me that her friend would be a victim of forced marriage, I called my colleague in Aguié (another commune not part of the GGE project) and we intervened to stop this abuse.* (Duty Bearer, KII, Mayahi, Niger)

Gradual negotiation is an important pathway for child protection in concrete cases where CEFM is threatened, but also for norm spreading over time. CBCP members understand their role as negotiators, describing how they appeal to the common sense of families that are considering CEFM for their children. CBCP committee members interviewed speak of a gradual negotiation process with families at risk of CEFM, including attempts to sensitize the perpetrator.

> *"We are members of the protection committee, when this happens, we do khoutouba (reminder of common sense), in principle, people generally understand. If they still refuse to give up, we go to the town hall, then to the child protection service, they are the ones who send them where they can only listen and obey (prison)."* (PTA members, FGD, Azzazala, Niger)

In addition to appealing and negotiating about the illegality of CEFM practices, a main, current negotiation tactic is to point to the detrimental health outcomes of marriage (or as is associated with marriage – pregnancy). In Nepal, a gradual, social sanctioning process leading up to reporting to authorities was described by stakeholders interviewed. In Nepal, where there is a higher prevalence of "self-elopement" as per qualitative findings, negotiation is more likely to happen with the young couple itself:

> *"We go to the bride/groom's house and convince them, if they don't agree we inform the police and local representatives. This mechanism is established by the project which has helped in reducing child or early marriages."* (Girls, FGD, Kalikot, Nepal)

The provision of psychosocial support services to girls who have reported was considered by CSOs/service providers as an essential component leading to the increased reporting of CEFM cases. In addition, the knowledge that law enforcement is taking the issue seriously and is likely to follow-up, has further incentivized the use of referral mechanisms.

Buy-in from key leaders, including village chiefs and religious leaders, has been important for strengthened messaging and reporting of CEFM cases. In Uganda, the inclusion of the Kingdom of Ker Alur in program messaging was particularly highlighted as a pathway for change. In Niger, the commitment of government to combatting CEFM was considered as essential for effective programming.

> *"Commitment from local authorities (such as the highly respected Chief of Canton of Mayahi) through their strong involvement in prevention activities, resulting in the enactment of laws prohibiting religious and village leaders from celebrating child marriages. The involvement and collective movement of all actors: primary and secondary school directors, marabouts, teachers, opinion leaders, heads of families, village chiefs, women leaders, group members, and household heads and members."* (CSOs, KII, Maradi, Niger)

Child protection programming was an important component and workstream of the GGE program, and served as a negotiating tactic with families to avoid the marriage of their daughters. Parents in Maraké, Niger, clearly stated that the existence of child protection mechanisms helped keep girls in school:

> *"There was no child protection, so if you don't marry off your daughter early, her future will be ruined (risk of teenage pregnancy), so sometimes we are forced. But with child protection, we are reassured and let them study"* (Parents, FGD, Maraké, Niger)

A few mentions were made in interviews in Uganda about how "rules against fighting" and rules about disciplining children, coupled with awareness raising over time about the harm of corporal punishment of children, had changed practice in schools regarding discipline. The perception among teachers was reported by a CSO/implementing partner to have changed over time, as they started to see corporal punishment not as a way of disciplining and increasing or enhancing the performance of a child, but rather as having negative implications to the mental health of the child.

4.2.5.3 Improved collaboration between duty-bearers on child protection issues

Improved collaboration and synergy between child protection duty bearers/structures was another reported outcome contribution by the GGE program. The program initiated the creation of structures such as Child Protection Committees, gender desks in schools, and community by-laws aimed at curbing child marriage and protecting children from abuse. These structures were in turn been integrated into government systems for sustainability. Local authorities, schools, and community leaders have taken ownership of child protection efforts, establishing, and enforcing rules aimed to protect young persons from CEFM and other harms. The program has created a framework for collaboration among various actors in child protection, including government officials, community leaders, and civil society organizations, enhancing the systemic response to child protection issues.

This systemic response was noted in Niger, illustrated by the following quotes:

> "*The project created a framework for collaboration and synergy among different actors working in the field of child protection, particularly between technical services.*" (Government official, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

> *(Response to the question: "Where would you go if a child was threatened with early or forced marriage?") "A system has been established. When there is an imminent case of child marriage, we go to the village chief and the imam who summon the guardian to dissuade them. The committee has committed not to disclose the cases they are seized with, and we, in turn, notify the village chief on the matter. Each neighborhood and social stratum is represented in the committee, so we effectively address these issues."* (PTA member, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

The existence of a network of actors with which to engage was further evidenced in Uganda:

"Mentors have been appointed by Plan International to whom we report those cases and they normally advise the parents. If they failed, [they] would involve the LC1 and handle the issue. And if they all failed would refer to the community development officer at the sub county." (Parents, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

4.2.5.4 Emphasis on legal enforcement of laws [42]

Across all contexts, the concept of protection was understood broadly, but also narrowly as the enforcement of laws and increased/adequate punishment of perpetrators. There was an understanding among stakeholders interviewed that there is now more accountability for the breach of CEFM laws and by-laws, as opposed to prior to GGE implementation.

A Religious/Traditional Leader in Phalombe, Malawi, discussed in a KII how he considered the GGE project to have "significantly reduced child marriages". He explained how, previously, girls in his area would commonly marry at ages 14 through 16, with early marriage being almost a trend among young girls. With the introduction of GGE, he led the creation of community by-laws against child marriage, enforcing strict penalties for anyone who marries or facilitates the marriage of young girls. In addition, he organized several awareness meetings to communicate these penalties and discourage child marriage. On the issues, this is what the community leader had to say:

"Initially, people doubted that the penalties outlined in the by-laws would be enforceable. However, several community members who either married or facilitated the marriage of children were confronted, and the penalties were strictly imposed. Some cases were even reported to the police. Two cases ended in saving a jail sentence. As a result, I began to notice a decline in child marriage cases. In fact, we collected approximately MK94,000 (around 50 dollars) from child marriage penalties, which was used to purchase school uniforms for children from low-income families. After a few years, I observed a significant reduction in child marriage incidents. Now, community members humorously refer to young adolescents as YONECO implying that marrying them is akin to imprisonment and carries penalties." (Religious/traditional leaders, KII, Phalombe, Malawi)

Young persons in interviews in Niger, Uganda, and Nepal further echoed that the (likely) arrest of perpetrators was due to laws and/or law enforcement that were enforced because of increased engagement under the GGE Program. The threat of jailtime or fines were noted by many persons interviewed, such as by these young men in Jumla, Nepal:

"During the awareness programs we inform those who marry will be fined NPR 30,000 [approximately Euro 200] and serve jail sentence of three years." (Boys and men, FGD, Jumla, Nepal)

In Uganda, enforcement of new by-laws, reportedly implemented as a result of the program, had led to the punishment of parents whose children do not go to school, as well as a practice of interrogating parents on both sides if teenage pregnancy occurs.

The belief that there could be accountability for perpetrators through formal structures was considered a shift in itself in some of these societies. In Pakwach, Uganda, a CSO member explained change s/he has observed:

"It happened in Wadelai, where PYAs marched a perpetrator up to police without harming him and up to know he is still arrested. Otherwise, without mindset change, they would have killed the perpetrator. Even now the project has ended but people are still reporting cases to police and to us, and where we see we can help we help. Where we can't we refer to the CDO. If the offence looks like something the CDO can't handle, we refer to police." (CSOs, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

The ways in which referrals are met and followed up in practice was further described by the same person:

"Like there was a case in Amor West village, a child was defiled, the parent kept quiet, these youths were the ones who reported the case to us, then when we sent a PLO we connected with the CLO of the police about the case to go and investigate, the parents tried to hide the case, claiming the girl was 19 years yet the girl was 16 years, the LC I tried to blocked the police to make arrest, and the

[42] Please note that the Plan International approach to preventing CEFM is not to emphasize criminalization, to avoid driving the practice underground or across borders. However, this section highlights the emphasis that key GGE stakeholders place on laws and law enforcement.

boy took off, then the CLO of police arrested the LC I. It was the initiative of the youths who reported the case, the parents wanted to get something in return." (CSOs, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

Many persons spoke of how there still is, or in some instances used to be more, impunity for committing crimes including CEFM or sexual crimes against minors for well-connected persons or persons with money. However, some persons interviewed noted that there has been a change in this lack of accountability through GGE program activities:

> *"When we reminded them of the 1961 law prohibiting such practices. We warned during our awareness campaigns that there would be consequences for the perpetrators and that they could not count on the chieftaincy to cover them under the pretext of affinities and family ties. We also tell village chiefs to see the severity of the consequences observed in hospitals and therefore not to show any tolerance towards those caught trying to marry off a girl early."* (Religious leaders/Traditional leader, KII, Ourafane, Niger)

4.2.5.5 Barriers to sustaining child protection systems

Ensuring the durability of new child protection systems, to sustain the effective reporting of protection cases, requires sustained support. Notably, in Pakwach, Uganda, CSO staff explained that reporting of cases to the police had increased, also because Plan supported case management (police usually request "support" or funding to take on cases).

> *"There has been increased reporting in case incidences ever since the program at both the police and the various channels for reporting compared to 2020 when the program was not yet being implemented."* (CSOs, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

This bears the question whether reporting numbers will be maintained beyond the program period. Further, although gender desks in schools in Tanzania have proven effective for children to report, they must be funded by other structures to continue being accessible to young persons in schools. Lastly, for serious cases of CEFM which end up in the court system, the protection needs are still massive, as demonstrated in Tanzania:

> *"We suggest considering having a safe house because even when we conduct these cases in court, it becomes a problem when the perpetrator and the victim come from the same family or area. They reach an agreement and do not appear in court, so sometimes cases lack continuity. But if the victim were housed in a safe house, it would be easier to continue the case to the end."* (Government official, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

Girls interviewed in an FGD in Phalombe, Malawi expressed that they have learned to report any instances of child abuse, sexual harassment, and child marriage to the village headman, teachers, and the police. However, they felt that the program has not made any significant contributions toward reducing child marriages, as young girls continue to marry. Many of these girls when married temporarily relocate to other areas or even move to Mozambique.

4.2.6 Inclusion of boys and men

Evidence from all target countries confirms the GGE Program to some level managed to engage boys and men in the topic of preventing CEFM. Overall, the qualitative findings underpin the importance of investigating the diversity of voices of men and boys, while providing more evidence of how working with this group can be an effective strategy for preventing CEFM, albeit noting some challenges and risks.

4.2.6.1 Outcomes achieved through the inclusion of men and boys

The engagement of boys and men and the program's engagement with inter-familial and communal relationships, contributed to improved social cohesion, showcasing how working toward gender equality is fundamentally about strengthening harmonious relationships between different groups.

> *"The program has promoted social cohesion. People now gather quickly, the population is more dynamic, collective work is done by these populations on public hygiene-related infrastructures, for example*" (Duty bearer, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

> *"This project has strengthened relationships in raising and nurturing children, especially girls. In the past, only the mother could talk to the girl, but through this project, even the father can discuss important growth issues with the girl*" (Boys and men, Rukwa, Tanzania)

"This program has brought boys and girls together in terms of responsibility sharing, considering equality and equal educational opportunities." (Educational staff, KII, Nkasi, Rukwa, Tanzania)

The qualitative findings include a range of statements which speak to a gradual shift in perceptions concerning traditional gender roles. In Nepal, Malawi, and Tanzania, stakeholders shared statements about how boys were now conducting household tasks which previously had only been done by girls. A more elaborate discussion on norm change, which involves boys and men, is presented in section 5.2.8 – norm change and gender transformative approaches.

The potential positive impact of engaging boys as advocates against CEFM was emphasized by multiple stakeholders, after having been engaged by the GGE Program to reflect on the harmful effects of CEFM and provided with an enabling environment to speak out against the issue.

"The boy champions go to the communities to talk to the girls to return to school and they came back to school. (…) But because they gave us trainings, I went to talk to the mother, and I asked her whether they have any problems with her daughter. I explained to her that the daughter told me that "you're forcing her to get married", so she's asking me what she would do. I had to ask them whether if it is because of school fees, is that why you're forcing the child to get married? The mother explained to me that now it is OK, she will not do that. I also told her that her daughter is still 16 years. She cannot manage even to give birth, should not even manage to take care of the family, so right now her daughter has been taken to school. She's doing hairdressing" (Boys and men, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

"We also established male champions advocating against child marriage. These empowered men actively worked to combat child marriage, demonstrating a significant shift in attitudes and social perceptions." (Key persons in ministries, KII, Phalombe, Malawi)

"Boys have expanded their understanding of how to protect girls to give them the opportunity to continue their education, leading to opposition to child marriages." (Government officials, KII, Kalambo, Rukwa)

4.2.6.2 Successful strategies to engage boys and men

4.2.6.2.1 Targeted approach

Findings from interviews also notes the importance of having a targeted approach when engaging with boys and men, and especially recognizing how age plays a central role in managing gender roles and power relations. Examples from Bangladesh highlighted how *young* Imams especially, became more active advocates against CEFM because of the GGE Program. Whereas an example from Uganda highlights how at-risk girls carefully maneuver within given gender roles, and how the age of stakeholders is a determinant of power and status.

"Like my uncles' daughter: the mother is forcing her to get married. It is very hard for the girl to talk to her father, so she called me and told me what is happening at home. I told her "how do you feel about it?", and she said that she feels so bad about it and she doesn't want to get married" (Boys and men, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

4.2.6.2.2 Motivations for men and boys engaged in CEFM programs

The findings suggest that men and boys participate in the GGE program for various reasons, and their commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment may not always be the primary motivation. A recurring reason cited for men's and boys' involvement in preventing CEFM through the GGE Program, is the normative and potentially punitive consequences of violating legal age of marriage laws. This could imply that engaging men as advocates against CEFM is more effectively addressed through messaging around law enforcement, and/or that the GGE Program in its messaging/training for boys and men is primarily focused on informing about legal consequences, rather than presenting the case for gender equality and girls' empowerment, which is not the intended approach of the GGE program. Section 4.2.9 – unintended outcomes further explores some of the potential limitations regarding such 'fear based' motivations.

"They started respecting girls more after realizing that there are laws that guide them" (…) "it also made boys who did not know there is a law in place that protects our girls from early sexual relationship. The boys really started respecting these young girls. They fear [refrain from] engaging them in sexual activities." (CSOs, KII, Nebbi, Uganda)

"They have benefited from the education provided during that time regarding the consequences they may face if they marry a girl under 18, such as going to jail (…) Boys benefited because they received

education that if they impregnate a young girl, they ruin her life, and they will also face the law." (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

These quotes also speak to the complexity of engaging with CEFM activities and messaging that directly supports enforcement of child protection laws, where the GGE Program might have limited influence in enforcement of the law and where there are potential risks related to protection of boys.

Furthermore, there are findings which demonstrate how the GGE Program has thoughtfully engaged men and boys through a gender transformative lens.

> *"When activities were implemented, they did not discriminate boys and the aim was to have them to support the girls. But there were specific activities that were limited to girls. For example, you cannot distribute menstrual pads to boys, you will only give them to girls. But they were there in all other education activities for example how to explain themselves, how to spot out abuse."* (Key persons in ministries, KII, Dodoma, Tanzania)

> *"Boys should also be included in the project because they are tomorrow's fathers and boda-boda riders."* (Educational staff, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

4.2.6.2.3 Engaging men and boys in SRHR programming

Men and boys learned about SRHR topics through trainings on early pregnancies and STIs. Boys and young men expressed a level of knowledge about SRHR topics in interviews:

> *"Both adolescent boys and girls have positive attitude because of the trainings offered in the program. For example, they trained us before taking us for informal studies on the harm of early sex and early marriage. Taught [us] how to protect [ourselves] from pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases" (*Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Nebbi, Uganda)

> *"How can someone so young even know what marriage is, how to handle a new family, how to raise babies. (…) We have heard of a lot of girls who die during childbirth and all these girls were so young, then who will take care of the baby? This is why child marriage is bad and harmful*" (Boys and men, FGD, Bangladesh, Borgona upazila)

Engaging men in SRHR trainings and program components is an important strategy to avoid that the GGE Program outcomes not only lead to an expect change in girls' behavior, and thus creating a notion that only girls are responsible for issues such as early pregnancy and STDs. More findings from the qualitative research illustrates how the Program has influenced men's sense of responsibility for their behavior, and as such challenges discriminatory norms of girls being responsible for issues related to SRHR. Another example shows how there has been a shift in attitudes which directly benefit girls while addressing stigma, stemming from GGE activities for boys on SRHR issues that are also specific to women's health:

> *"In the past, a boy couldn't help a girl during her period, but now boys approach and assist them when needed, and they have stopped stigmatizing them during their periods (…) Boys have been influential in protecting girls. For example, there is a scenario where a boy in class had seen a girl whose skirt had period blood. He did not bully her but gave her his sweater so that she could cover the part of the skirt that was stained".* (CSOs, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> *"This has really changed my mindset. If I am to have sex with a girl, I have to make sure I use a condom, because there is HIV, syphilis etc. that I don't want to acquire again."* (Out-of-of school children, FGD, Pakwach, Uganda)

4.2.6.3 How the GGE program has benefitted boys and men

Interviews also highlights vulnerabilities of men and boys related to CEFM, and how agency of boys and men is limited by cultural norms, i.e. role of breadwinners, can also be a burden, and how GGE is seen to directly benefitting boys and men.

> *"Boys have benefited a lot because boys who move in and become victims of early marriage, who impregnate a girl, as early as possible, will have problems in providing basic needs. So you find out that this program of Girls Get Equal Opportunity and Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation has helped boys from suffering, looking for basic needs, foodstuff, and things to use at home to raise the family. You find children who are unable to raise this, they are at school, so it has reduced boys from these burdens. And has made boys continue with their studies, instead of boys looking for these requirements here, boys are now at school. So it has helped them not to look for basic needs and hardships."* (Educational staff, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

Furthermore, GGE Program has also included boys and men in activities that may not directly relate to CEFM, or drive gender transformative results, although they still could address indirect causes of CEFM, such as poverty and education. A challenge in inclusion of men and boys in activities that are not gender transformative, is the risk of diverting funds away from targeting women/girls. These findings might note some instances of risks associated with GGE Program focused on inclusion of men and boys where implementers might interpret male engagement as 'providing the same to men and boys' and thus not strategically engaging men and boys to further the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment.

> *"It was a good program because we have been able to acquire property from it. We have been educated from it."* (Youth, FGD, Lilongwe, Malawi)

> *"Boys now enjoy school and no longer rush to herd cattle (..) They also received education on economic empowerment through savings groups."* (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> *"Due to various training provided, male youth now have developmental ideas. They have been given capital, which has helped them become economically self-reliant. They have been empowered with manual activities that help reduce impulsiveness. They have learned tailoring, and some young men have become construction and welding artisans. (…) "Boys have become self-aware. They have been empowered to be patriotic to their community."* (Religious/traditional leaders, KII, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> "*Imams reported that boys have become more interested in going to school and enthusiastic about doing well in their studies."* (Religious/traditional leaders, FGD, Taltoli upazila, Bangladesh)

4.2.6.4 Engaging men and boys to prevent resistance towards gender equality outcomes

Findings further indicate that inclusion of men and boys has been important to prevent resistance towards the program, and potential gender-based violence against women and girls benefitting from economic opportunities in rural areas.

> *"The encouragement award was a surprise in that the first year, as girls had been prioritized. One of the boys showed his frustration, which led to a correction. Now the award is dedicated to the best girls and the best boys."* (Representatives of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy, KII, Maradi, Niger)

> *"The program is certainly designed primarily for girls, but boys have not been forgotten. Especially since an incident with a boy who expressed his frustration at feeling his work unappreciated when a girl with a general average of 12 (less than the boy) was rewarded. The program has since taken note and corrected this, and now they are also rewarded"* (Government official, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

> *"For example, the skills development program targets both girls and boys. With funds from Plan International, our youth organization have trained five boys and eight girls in tailoring, showing that the program did not discriminate against boys. Our campaigns consistently engaged both*" (CSOs, KII Phalombe, Malawi)

As the program is implemented in remote communities with scarce resources, there is significant competition for program funds, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion among boys and men. Where economic opportunities are provided to girls and women, this challenges traditional perceptions of gender roles and particularly men's role as breadwinners for the family. As is highlighted here, male engagement is expected to align with their role as breadwinners, contributing to income earning activities. This expectation poses a challenge in terms of men's buy-in and engagement in GGE activities that are not deemed 'financially beneficial'.

> *"The program has received requests from boys who demand to be considered a bit more by the program to have other options than migration.*" (CBCP members, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

> "*Members of the model husbands' school club have no activities outside of awareness and sanitation activities, which are not actually paid. They need income to continue the fight, and to maintain their credibility.*" (Boys and men, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

> *"That the program considers our efforts and finds opportunities for us as well, we do not intend to stop our volunteering, but we would like to benefit from kits, training, or anything that could lead to opportunities."* (Boys and men, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

> *"When it comes to gender roles, we boys tend to do the more demanding tasks. Although girls may appear to be working more, their jobs are often smaller and easier. For instance, they don't dig pit*

latrines or construct kitchens and bathrooms. We have never complained about this, but it seems that girls are often over-pampered and tend to voice their frustrations more loudly." (CBCP members, FGD, Mulanje, Malawi)

Although not prevalent among findings, there are some statements that suggest that engagement of men and boys should be strengthened.

> *"Boys have been reached to a small extent, so the program has not benefited them significantly."* (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KIIs, Nkasi, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> *"The boys asked for more trainings because the trainings they had were not enough."* (Boys and men, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

Overall, the findings suggest that boys and men have been actively engaged in all target countries through the GGE Program, with many reporting how these initiatives have empowered them to advocate against CEFM. Nevertheless, challenging traditional gender norms is a complex task which requires targeted interventions that address the expectations of boys and men, while engaging them in strategic activities that effectively promote gender transformative results.

4.2.7 Disability inclusion

4.2.7.1 GGE approach to disability inclusion

The GGE program was implemented with a LNOB approach as per the ToC, and efforts were made in most contexts to include persons with disabilities by identifying and including them in activities, recognizing their needs and providing specific resources, such as trainings, equipment, and mobility support. This includes the provision of special learning tools, construction of disability-friendly WASH infrastructure in schools, and vocational training opportunities. Testimonies were provided in the qualitative data collection on the impact such program efforts have made on the lives of persons living with disabilities and their families.

In Nkasi, Rukwa, Tanzania, the program worked with persons with disabilities directly. A CSO implementing partner identified young persons with special needs. *"I managed to gather several (two were helped by the project, given education, disabled bicycles, and eyeglasses)",* said the CSO staff of the support provided. A Religious leader further said that leaders were told (through the project) to visit and invite all children with various challenges, provide training, and connect them with sewing opportunities and various tools to help them cope with health challenges.

In Rukwa, Tanzania, teachers in formal education settings and TVET centers, explained how students with disabilities were identified and accompanied to ordinary and special schools, how disability-friendly WASH services were built, and how they were provided specialized sewing machines for persons with leg disabilities to engage in income-generating activities, as well as walking sticks and wheelchairs.

In Niger, too, persons interviewed provided examples of accommodations of persons with physical disabilities. A teacher in Sharkin Haoussa spoke of how two persons with learning disabilities had been admitted to the learning center in 2024, and provided this as proof that the program has reached all groups without discrimination.

Beyond inclusion in economic and learning activities and closer in line with a rights-based approach which emphasizes advocacy, in Jumla in Nepal, six networks were created for disabled persons in six wards of Sinja Rural Municipality, with 11 members in each committee.

A government official in Mulanje, Malawi, said there was a special focus on young persons with physical disabilities in the project:

> *"I can give an example of a girl who was being mistreated by her parents because she had mobility challenges. She was enrolled in a tailoring school through the program, graduated, and is now financially independent. Her parents now appreciate her even more because she is supporting the family financially. This is just one example, but the project reached out to many youths with different disabilities and changed their destinies."* (Government official, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

Generally, the GGE program has ensured that households at risk of CEFM were connected to VSLAs, including households with persons with disabilities, and persons in Nepal defined as belonging to Dalit caste households.

4.2.7.2 Individual empowerment, community attitudes, and perceptions

The program has worked to change community attitudes regarding disability, encouraging the inclusion of persons with disabilities in various activities and structures. This includes involving local authorities and community structures to support project dissemination and participation. There are positive examples where individuals with disabilities have experienced increased recognition, or a change in how they are perceived in society and which opportunities they face in terms of education and employment. These include cases where individuals have gained financial independence through vocational training and small businesses, leading to improved treatment and recognition within their communities.

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in "regular" school clubs has been important for the students in question. The below example from Nebbi, Uganda, illustrates how a student cabinet member has felt transformed by club activities relating to non-violent communication:

> *"As a person with disability (blind), I came in 2018 in Primary 1. I grew up here and didn't know anything about education before I came here since I was previously living with my grandfather in Congo. When I joined, some learners used to bully me a lot especially when they ask me to interpret to them what I was taught in class. You know, for us we use dots so whenever they wouldn't understand my interpretation they would beat me up and forcefully take my snacks. Therefore, I also grew annoyed and said I need to also bully the new learners that shall come to the school just like they did to me. But with time, the teachers started counselling me on how to behave well and that's why I am now a good adviser, I can't advise my fellows wrongly. I have self-control and am friends with everyone even the younger ones. Through this program, I learnt that paying back violence with violence is bad. I have also become a leader since am the club chairperson that means I am well behaved. The learners elected me to continue leading and I think it's because am exemplary and approachable." (*Student Cabinet Member, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

Persons interviewed made remarks of how attitudes within the community regarding persons with disabilities has changed over time, including during the GGE program implementation period. The below example from Tanzania shows how a simple activity such as including a person with disability in TVET changed perceptions on the abilities of persons with physical disabilities:

> *"As I mentioned, attitudes in the community changed, especially regarding children with special needs, whom people did not believe could be trained in vocational skills and work. There were special machines for people without legs, and nearly 10 people were reached"* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

Other observed changes in community attitudes to persons with disabilities were traced to GGE program interventions. For instance, the inclusion of disabled persons in IGAs changed community perceptions as improved financial status of individuals is associated with higher status in communities. The integration of persons with disabilities in public schools in Jigga and Tessaoua in Niger changed perceptions on what persons with disabilities can achieve, as disabled students were rated highest in class based on performance. A notable perceived change from GGE programming, the interventions have contributed to people with disabilities not being "hidden" from society as they had before, or at least being part of public spaces to a greater extent.

> *"Once they started doing business, our in-laws including sister-in-laws and others in community have changed treatment with them. One of them is a physically disabled woman and she was treated badly, but once she started her small shop where she prepares potato chips, soybean, popcorn etc and sells there is a different treatment to her."* (Youth, FGD, Jumla, Nepal)

> *"People with disabilities have been reached because the community initially hid them, but after being educated, they became aware and stopped hiding them".* (CSOs, KII, Nkasi, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> *"People with disabilities were hidden, but through this project, we identified people with disabilities and connected them with various services. For example, we found them equipment, and they received training. A total of 6 people with disabilities benefited in this area."* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

A government official in Rukwa, Tanzania, shared how he/she had worked on a specific case following GGE instructions. He/she stated that the project in collaboration with the government ensured the establishment of special needs (disabled) classrooms, and further stated:

> *"Following the project's instructions, I was able to reach a disabled child who had never been outside for 18 years, as he was hidden indoors. I talked to the parents extensively until they understood and agreed to let him start going outside and walking around the village. So those classrooms have been established, and children with special needs are studying, with some receiving equipment from the project."* (Government official, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

In this example, the GGE program directly led to the inclusion into societal structures of a young person who had experienced years of exclusion and isolation.

4.2.7.3 Inclusive programming with targeting-limitations

The GGE approach to including persons with disabilities has focused on providing disability-friendly services in schools, but persons with disabilities have not been targeted specifically in all contexts. For instance, when asked whether boys and individuals with disabilities have benefited from the program focused on withdrawing girls from marriage, VSLA members in Phalombe, Malawi, indicated that they had not observed this directly. They noted that there was no initial communication about including individuals with physical disabilities in their group.

A similar sentiment was echoed in Tanzania, where VSLA members in Nkasi stated that the implementation time of the project had been too short to reach persons with disabilities, and where a religious leader stated that people with disabilities had not been reached in a timely manner due to their locations and a lack of cooperation between the community and project personnel.

> *"In the project's actions, I have not seen a person with a disability benefit from the program. There was training, equipment, but there are still no approvals by the mayors, these authorizations are missing."* (Duty Bearer, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

An explanation from the data collector further explains this quote, stating that although training and equipment was provided to persons with disabilities, there are authorizations that must be signed by the mayors as an approval to formalize the beneficiaries' trades, which was not obtained in the project's implementation cycle. The benefits from the support are therefore considered as limited.

Although the program has disaggregated and tracked its reach to persons with disabilities the findings suggest that the GGE program was implemented without an explicit emphasis on persons with disabilities. From a Leave No One Behind perspective, the findings may suggest an over-emphasis on the supply of equipment and provision of services to people with disabilities.

> *"This school program is inclusive, we don't segregate, and all the categories have received the program, because during counsel we handle boys and girls, and every other child, we handle everyone at the same time, whether vulnerable or not vulnerable, and we treat them equally. They have the energy, you find these vulnerable children at the school here are studying very well, they are just normal because of this program, we have empowered them telling them they can do anything. This program talks about encouragement, and child participation even in class, we encourage both the vulnerable and not vulnerable, we always involve them equally, and when we are grouping them, we do it equally, we don't segregate."* (Educational staff, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

4.2.7.4 Other groups experiencing marginalization

The qualitative primary data collection does not provide clear data points for assessing which groups experiencing marginalization were not reached, as the primary data collection focused on persons who could speak to societal changes from being directly engaged by the GGE program.

However, testimonies were provided about the importance of mobile social welfare services (Tanzania) and caravans (Niger), which benefited other areas than the specific program locations. The program was designed to reach those at risk of CEFM, such as orphans, persons with disabilities, or people experiencing multifaceted vulnerabilities.

Multiple respondents considered the in-school components to be more thorough than the out-of-school components, suggesting that unschooled girls and children had less support and follow-up and were more unlikely to have similar results to the girls in school (stated among other in Tanzania and Niger).

The follow-up of those who had experienced gender-based violence was also limited, as health workers and gender desk officers did not have a budget to conduct tests and counselling for those who have experienced gender-based violence.

4.2.8 Norm change and gender transformative[43] approaches

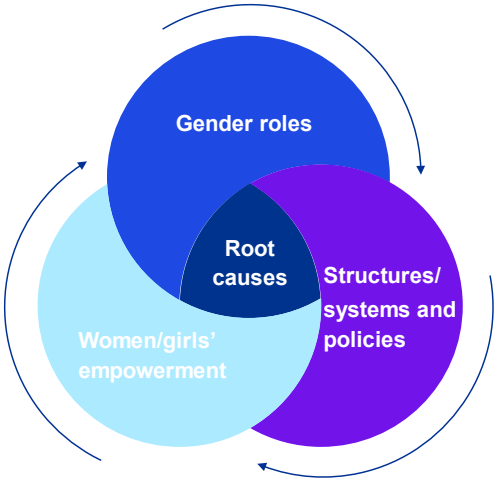


Figure 13. Key elements of a gender transformative approach

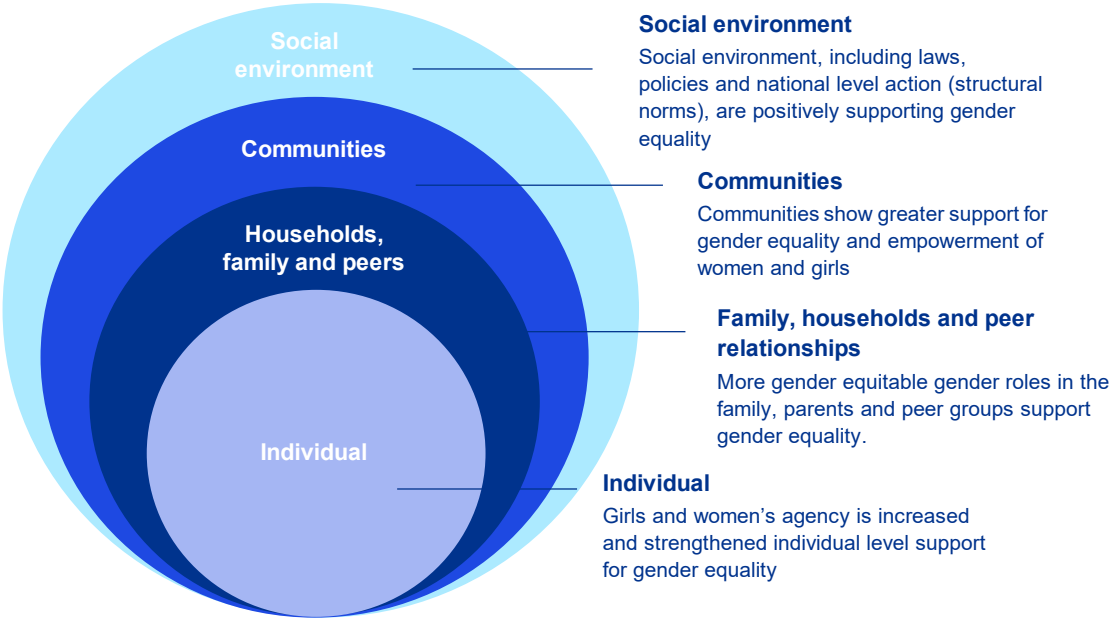
[44]

Plan's definition of a gender transformative approach is essentially about addressing root causes as an effective means to achieve gender equality. A gender transformative approach in its core, will be able reshaping unequal power relations to achieve girls' rights and equality among children, youth and adults - regardless of gender. This approach it will have a targeted approach that elevates the relative position conditions for women and girls to enable them to take informed decisions, acting upon these without threat of punishment. An important component of gender transformative approaches are results achieved at multiple levels of the society.
It contains 6 elements:
1. Understand and address gender norms
2. Strengthen agency of women and girl
3. Work with and support boys, young men and men
4. Consider girls, boys, young women and young men in all their diversity
5. Strengthen conditions (daily needs) and social position (value or status)
6. Foster an enabling environment

The socioecological model, also described in section 2.1.1.1, illustrates how change can be achieved at different levels in society, and how these are interdependent. Findings related to normative change and gender transformative approaches, are presented according to the socioecological model in the below analysis to show different levels of impact from the GGE Program.

[43] *Plan International. Our Gender Transformative Approach: Tackling The Root Causes Of Gender Inequality | Plan International EU Liaison Office*. Retrieved from: https://plan-international.org/eu/blog/2019/01/24/blog-alex-munive-gender-transformative-approach/

[44] *UNICEF. Gender-Transformative Programming. UNICEF Gender Policy and Action Plan 2022-2025. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/media/43146/file*



[45]Figure 14: Gender transformative outcomes across the socioecological model

4.2.8.1 Individual level

Several stakeholders have identified individual-level changes resulting from the GGE Program, that contribute towards ending CEFM.

The interviews provide a large body of evidence of how girls themselves speak of how their sense of agency has changed, resulting from the GGE Program. The statements below highlight how strengthening girls' agency interplays with the reduction of CEFM rates:

> *"The project made us confident on speaking up. We now talk to parents who are planning to get their child marry at a young age. If they don't agree we inform the police.*" (Girls, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)

> *"Earlier, people used to say that girls only do housework, boys don't. But after this GGE project came, we realized that both boys and girls are equal (…) Many people say that girls cannot run the family. But if girls are given that opportunity, then girls can also take charge of the family."* (Girls, FGD, Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh)

> "*Thanks to our activities, we are now responsible. My dad, it's me who advises him, there is no decision he makes without consulting me. I was consulted for my sister's marriage, I gave my approval because she was of age. Even on farm matters, I am consulted. Our status has changed in the community; we are relied upon to teach other children our expertise, for example, a mother asked me to train her daughter in catering. People didn't even greet us, didn't even look at us, rely on us for loans and such, some people we help in training if not financially."* (Girls, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

Other stakeholders in the communities report of witnessing that girls and women have an increased sense of agency, describing them as more knowledgeable and confident.

> *"Women are now able to compete with men. They are now contesting as LCs, and committee members, even at school here you find the PTA are mostly women. Women are empowered, they stand up and speak up*." (Educational staff, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

> "*Women are confident that they can and are self-reliant, with no shame or fear."* (Government officials, KII, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

[45] *Schölmerich VL, Kawachi I. Translating the socio-ecological perspective into multilevel interventions: Gaps between theory and practice. 2016. Health Education & Behavior. 2016 Feb;43(1):17-20.*

Especially the normative views on CEFM have changed, according to multiple stakeholders in Malawi, Bangladesh, Niger and Uganda. Girls who were out-of-school, in Phalombe, Malawi, said they now wanted the age for marriage to be 22 years, and challenged the traditional gender roles in marriage. Similar views were expressed by stakeholders in Uganda and Niger:

> *"I had plans of getting of getting married since I no longer study but when this training came. I realized that I was too young to get married so I have postponed the plan till I turn 30. I believe by then I would be in position to decide what is good or bad for me*." (Out-of-of school children, FGD, Pakwach, Uganda)

> "*We are too young to get married (laughter from all participants), there is even a girl who informed the Mai gari (village chief) when her father wanted to marry her off*." (Out-of-school children, FGD, Maraké, Niger)

> ***"****I have noticed a change in attitude of people especially women, women no longer focus on marriage, they are goal oriented and are striving for financial independence"* (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, FGD, Zombo, Uganda)

The program has shifted perceptions, with girls now seen as needing education rather than being marriageable at a young age, resulting in delayed marriages and increased school attendance.

However, there are some statements which show potential resistance towards girls' increased agency in the target areas, and negative attitudes towards girls' empowerment.

> *"Marriages break up due to men not understanding or lacking education; if a girl tries to assert her rights, she ends up being beaten. The program seems to give girls ignorance"* (VSLA members, KII, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> *"Because girls now like to question many things when they feel they are not being treated fairly, the community, especially their peers, respond with sarcasm, saying, 'Stay with your knowledge of knowing rights and see if you will get men to marry you.'"* (VSLA members, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> *"A girl may misuse the opportunity by overstepping boundaries, leading to negative impacts on her. It can create challenges in marriage/family by having excessive confidence and overstepping marital boundaries, such as wanting to be above the husband."* (Educational staff, KII, Nkasi, Rukwa, Tanzania)

4.2.8.1.1 Youth empowerment

Youth report feeling empowered to discuss puberty, sexuality, bodily changes, and life situations with peers, teachers, parents, and in the wider community. The GGE Program has provided avenues for youth to meet, practice skills and build their confidence, providing arenas for young persons to spend their time learning and contributing to the community, creating a sense of belonging.

> "*My peers were in bad groups, but the project has kept us busy with craftsmanship work due to the skills we gained through this program, so now we are doing developmental things, and we don't have time to waste*." (Youth, FGD, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> "*Before joining the club, I struggled with confidence and feared speaking in public. I thought I was the only one with this problem, but I realized many children feel the same way. Through constant practice and encouragement from our patron, I am now comfortable speaking in groups*." (Youth, FGD, Lilongwe, Malawi)

Youth empowerment was also considered important to prevent negative influence from peers, as discussed in section 4.2.3.5 – opposition and challenges related to SRHR outcomes.

> *"Enabling youth to have various activities to engage in, thus closing the gaps that might lead to temptation."* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Nkasi, Rukwa, Tanzania)

Youth are also brought together in networks where their confidence, voice and agency are strengthened, and where they can collectively speak up against CEFM and have 'learned how to work together on a common cause' (Government Official, KII, Kalikot, Nepal). In youth Clubs, intergenerational exchange, participatory

approach, and activities led by youth, were cited as important is driving youth' sense of agency. Young persons also emphasized how the GGE Program has been important in enabling a sense of independence.

> *"The fact is that how I used to live my life was not enjoyable. I used to depend a lot on my parents, yet they didn't have a lot. So, with what I have got from the project, it has fulfilled my needs because I am able to take care of myself."* (VSLA member, KII, Nebbi, Uganda)

Sports was another activity which had supported girls' and youth empowerment. In Bangladesh, girls said they enjoyed how sports had provided them with 'some small moments of freedom and joy.'

Young people have more responsibilities in the community and provided an elevated role in decision-making, as illustrated by a participant's expression: "*People look at me with importance and help me with whatever I do thanks to the work we usually do together."* (Boy in FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger). In Nepal, the GGE Program's targeted approach to ensure girls' leadership was noted as important, and similary in Malawi:

> "*Through funding from the GGE project, Misomali Youth Organization has successfully promoted girls' empowerment by encouraging their leadership roles across schools, youth clubs, and community committees. As a result, 12 out of 17 youth clubs in TA Nazombe are now chaired by girls, marking a significant shift from previous male-dominated leadership*" (CSOs, KII, Phalombe, Malawi)

4.2.8.2 Households, family, and peer level

Parents were identified by respondents as important decision-makers for CEFM, with fathers making the final decision regarding marriage, as was also presented in section 4.2.1.4 – marital decision making. The qualitative research includes statements that describe how parents previously 'viewed girls as source of income' (Uganda), and how parental conception of marriage has changed as well as their view on gender equality.

> "*We are even seeing male parents whose attitude towards their wives and the female gender had been negative but now through this engagement we got to understand gender and the gender relations have improved because the message of the Girls Get Equal was pushing gender equality between the boys and the girls but now even the men directly. When you are talking about the girls there are also older girls who are now the women. So, I think gender relationship improved due to due to such intervention*." (Official duty bearers/CBCP members, KII, Nebbi, Uganda)

> "*Parents' mindset has changed towards the girl child, for example those days, when a girl gets pregnant, parents could push the girl to go get married to the man, but these days, things have changed, you deliver, go back to school."* (CSO, KII, Pakwach, Uganda)

A CSO representative spoke about the effect of economic empowerment (also discussed in section 4.2.2.1 – Economic outcomes experienced by girls and their families) on strengthening the agency of women (mothers), to empower them to speak-up against CEFM within the family.

> "*We see that mothers often do not want their girl children to get married, but because of economic reasons and power difference in the household decision making, it is the father's way in the end. We see this shifting with women who now have their own extra income and are saving this with us. They are able to push back on this decision*." (CSOs, KII, Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh)

Gender roles within the household were reported to have changed due to the GGE Program activities in interviews in Nepal, Tanzania, Uganda and Bangladesh. It was noted that work, such as cooking and caretaking roles, that were previously done by girls and women only, were now also performed by men, as there had been a shift in perceptions about gender roles in the household.

> *"Now men also cook, earlier if a boy aged 18-20 and sister even only 7, she would cook but it has changed and we and our brothers or fathers cook if female are not around."* (Boys and men, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)

> *"Girls and boys are treated equally at home through sharing roles like cooking food, washing utensils. Right now, the issue of leaving housework to the girls is no longer there, even the boys work."* (Student cabinet members, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

> "*Parents now believe that the division of responsibilities involves both boys and girls. (…) Tasks previously thought to be only for girls at home, like fetching water, sweeping, and washing dishes, are also done by boys. When help is provided, we feel good.*" (Girls, FGD, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

Highlighted in the previous section on inclusion of boys and men, the assistance of boys in traditional household chores for girls serves a dual purpose - promoting equality within the home, allowing girls time to study, and eliciting positive feedback from girls themselves, who find this change personally rewarding.

Normative changes in gendered role division no only includes boys and men contributing within the household, but also girls supporting in roles previously performed by boys and men, such as in Tanzania:

> "*We now see various responsibilities that boys used to do are now also done by girls, such as herding cattle, construction work, electrical work, and tailoring."* (Educational staff, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

However, an increase in girls' enrollment in school does not always translate into changing gender roles within the home. In an interview with boys and men in Bangladesh, it was shared how despite girls now pursuing employment and education, there had not been a shift within the household and the gendered division of labor.

> *"My sister must finish her schoolwork and still help out with the household things, such as helping my mother cook, take care of goats and hens, wash clothes and clean the house. I am also helping but only when they need something from the shop and father is not home. Otherwise, I will study and then go and play in the village."* (Boys and men, FGD, Borgona upazila, Bangladesh)

Despite many examples shared of shifts within the household, a testimony from a girl in Malawi, highlights the intimate link between gendered household chores and school attendance, and how there had not transformative change in all areas.

> *"As for me, my parents invest more in my brothers than in me and my sister. Although they have never accepted that they prefer my brothers' education more, their actions speak louder. For example, all my brothers receive school supplies promptly, while I do not have to date. They also frequently ask me and my sister to stay home from school to help with household chores, like going to the maize mill*." (Girls, FGD, Phalombe, Malawi)

4.2.8.2.1 Skills training and impact on behavioral change

The excerpts below highlight how program activities are driving norm change in societies where girls being equipped with technical skills is seen as outside the norm. The technical and vocational training opportunities offered by the GGE Program has contributed to changes in the status of women and girls. They are described as 'valuable' and 'capable' by the larger community and in the household, who comment that people have gained new perspectives as a result of skill training interventions:

> "*The program has changed the perception of people, because now women are considered valuable. For instance, the girls who were empowered with skills aren't illiterates anymore and it means whoever is coming to marry them must know that they are of a higher value*." (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Nebbi, Uganda)

> *"The GGE program is helping to change the community's perception of gender roles. Girls who have been trained at the tailoring school are increasingly recognized as capable of making financial contributions, which is shifting traditional views on early marriage. Parents are now advocating for their daughters to achieve financial stability before marrying, whether through formal education or technical skills development*." (Educational staff, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

> "*Thanks to the training received by young girls, their status within the community has changed. They are significantly considered in family decisions and have more value in the eyes of those around them*." (Youth, FGD, Jan Toudou, Niger)

Another example of how the GGE Program is driving change in norms, is the increased enrollment of girls in school. Community perceptions about 'girls right to education' might be gradually internalized as a norm by first changing the practice of enrollment of girls in school. Over time, with increased enrollment of girls in school, their presence becomes normalized, leading to a shift in societal norms over the long term.

> *"Most of the girls and parents are seeing me as an example for their children to emulate, so that they can get money to care for their needs. This has changed their mind of always expecting money from men, leading to pregnancy and early marriage, and this has helped many girls not marry at early age but first study, acquire skills and get jobs and later on marry to have a stable home.*" (Youth, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

Another example of how providing training and tools to women and girls are challenging traditional gender roles, as noted here, having assets was considered '*a man's thing*'.

> *"Women now own assets unlike in the past where assets were a man's thing."* (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Zombo, Uganda)

There are also examples of how the GGE Program provided training for girls that were not considered traditional for women/girls, as discussed in section 4.2.2.3 – Other changes and results experienced through economic activities.

> *"We witnessed girls learning trades that were initially taught only to boys, such as masonry and electrical work."* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

In contexts where women and girls are not expected to go out of the house to attend training, having women leave the household and challenge these traditional expectations, is in itself a result attributed to skills trainings.

> *"The very participation of girls in meetings is progress and a form of female leadership training."* (Official duty bearers/CBCP members, KII, Tessaoua, Niger)

In Bangladesh, it was noted that women's/girls' participation represented a change in mindset.

> *"What we see with more women coming to training is a mindset change. Husbands and family members are allowing women to get engaged in an area that was considered male only. Men of these households were thinking, 'what will our wives do in these trainings? We will learn everything and tell them'. But that was precisely the problem, they would not share the full information and women who do most of the labor of taking care of the animals would be blamed for the stock not surviving. So, you see that by GGE projects and its advocacy around gender and gender roles, not only have families now less loss of livestock and thus more income but also women have been able to a little more power in the household.*" (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Taltoli upazila, Bangladesh)

4.2.8.3 Community level

A key finding from the primary data collected across all target countries, is the change in attitudes and norms relating to child marriage at the community level, and a reduction in CEFM as a result of the GGE Program. The role of parents, teachers, religious and traditional leaders and male champions are mentioned as actors driving change at community level. There are several references to the role of girls' financial independence, community training on gender equality, and increased enrollment of girls in schools, as pathways for normative change.

Drivers of CEFM is intimately connected to normative change at the individual level and household level, as presented above, such as the change in how women/girls perceive their own agency, what status they have within the family and in the greater community. The following quotes further exemplify how harmful norms that promote CEFM have shifted:

> "*The notion that women are weak has decreased.*" (Student cabinet members, Kalambo, Rukwa, Tanzania)

> "*Some of our community members would not priorities girls, they will think of girls as they will not look at them as human in any way. They will look at them always from the secondary perspective, that also somehow improved."* (Official duty bearers/CBCP members, KII, Nebbi, Uganda)

> "*There has been a change in how girl child is viewed in the community "I have seen there is a shift in the way girls and boys were treated in the community. In the past they used to say that seating on a chair is prohibited for girls just like you have sat on the chair but now with this idea of "Gender'*

which they know it includes both females and males." (PTA/Sustainable Management Committee members, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

"*When I was growing up, we only knew of mothers and women to be in the kitchen and stay in the house. It was impossible to imagine a woman going to the market to buy eggs, meat, fish. But look where we are now! There are changes in the idea of what we think is a girl's role in the society.*" (Government officials, FGD, Taltoli upazila, Bangladesh)

These statements illustrate how challenging it is for programs to truly shift harmful gender norms from 'not being looked at as human' to valuing girls' agency. According to the persons reached by the GGE Program, the combined effort had contributed to a positive shift in norms, towards placing a higher value on girls, although communities still do not fully embrace girl's autonomy and gender equality. The linkage between girl's agency and a reduction in CEFM and the community level, is explicitly noted by several stakeholders as a pathway for change.

Some noted the importance of the GGE Program's persistence as an important factor to drive normative change.

"*By persisting, because at first, we thought we were being deceived, but day by day, with persistence, we ended up listening to them and realizing that they might be right in this matter (child marriage). So gradually, it took hold, we accepted it, and saw how positive the program's results are*." (PTA/Sustainable Management Committee members, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

Overall, stakeholders make several claims on how they have observed changes in attitudes towards CEFM in the community, as well as a reduction in cases of CEFM. This includes out-of-school children in Malawi and youth in Nepal, who noted that they themselves would have been forced to marry, without the GGE Program.

"After the project started in our villages there have no child marriages except 2-3 eloping and going to India." (Youth, FGD, Kalikot, Nepal)

"*We are the examples of positive difference the project made. Had the project not supported us, two of us would have got married and even our sisters or in-laws would have been married. With the business training our parents or in-laws listen to us*." (Youth, FGD, Jumla, Nepal)

The normative shift in how CEFM is perceived stands out clearly among the multiple stakeholders who note that CEFM is no longer considered to be 'normal' according to stakeholders in target communities.

"*It was a normal thing for children to get married for both children and their parents and no action was taken against forced marriage but now through the training organized to educate the community about early marriage and teenage pregnancy, its dangers and effect on the children their education and the life in the community*." (Youth, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

"In the past, communities didn't report such cases because it was considered normal for young girls to get married at any age. Nowadays, communities are actively reporting all instances of child and forced marriages to Child Protection Committees, the police, and even community leaders." (Key persons in ministries, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

"Girls aged 12, 14, are no longer seen as marriageable. They are rather seen as needing to go to school. When they go to school, they can reach 20 years without marrying. But when they don't, at 16, they are already considered for marriage." (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Jan Toudou, Niger)

The below statement confirms a norm change, the belief that there is a 'right' time to get married, which is presumably at an older age/after the minimum legal age.

"*It [GGE Program] has made boys to wait for the right time to get married.*" (Boys and men, FGD, Zombo, Uganda)

As the practice of CEFM was viewed as normal, CEFM also represented the dominant cultural practice. Thus, by changing how CEFM is viewed, there has also been a change in what constitutes culture and customs.

"*Initially, opposing child marriages in our community seemed like opposing our customs, but now, due to the education provided by Plan International, the community itself is surprised when they see*

someone marrying off a young child, and sometimes they participate in reporting it to the Village leadership." (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

This change in attitudes, has also shifted how CEFM is reported and addressed in some cases. However, there are still findings, as presented in the section on unintended outcomes 4.2.10, which describes how internalization of attitudes towards CEFM might be limited and primarily driven by laws and regulations causing a change in behavior:

> "*It has helped cause fears in the community about teenage pregnancy and early marriage, this has given freedom to the children to move freely in the communities because whoever is involved in sexual abuse or forced marriage is apprehended and taken to prison. There is no more negotiations between the parents of the perpetrators and the girl*." (PTA/Sustainable Management Committee members, FGD, Pakwach, Uganda)

Adding complexity to the discussion on the impact of laws and policies CEFM, a religious and traditional leader in Malawi highlights how collaborative efforts between programs and the government have played a significant role in shifting the practice of CEFM.

> *"Previously, marrying young girls was a norm, and men sought out teenage brides. Today, marrying a girl aged 15 or 16 is unacceptable - you will be jailed. The program, alongside government efforts, has protected girls, allowing them to enjoy their youth and marry at an appropriate age when they feel ready."* (Religious and traditional leaders, KII, Lilongwe, Malawi)

There are still prevalent societal attitudes that hinder the progress of girls and resist efforts to change traditional gender norms. The notion of defining a girl or woman as "eligible for marriage" is often weaponized as a means of inhibiting those who exhibit agency and push against traditional gender roles.

> "*Because girls now like to question many things when they feel they are not being treated fairly, the community, especially their peers, respond with sarcasm, saying, 'Stay with your knowledge of knowing rights and see if you will get men to marry you'."* (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

4.2.8.3.1 Findings from religious and traditional leaders

Engaging religious and traditional leaders in programs addressing CEFM is understood as key due to their influence, cultural relevance, community trust, norm-shaping role, and advocacy capabilities. By involving these leaders, programs benefit from their ability to drive norm change, promote culturally sensitive approaches, enhance community acceptance, and mobilize support for initiatives combating CEFM.

The religious leaders interviewed in Bangladesh, shared that they have seen changes in their own lives due to the gender training they received. A few of the imams shared that they have been helping their wives with their household tasks. One of the participants shared this example to illustrate this point:

> "*Say we need to eat lunch at 1pm, and my wife has too much work. So, I will help her out so we can both eat on time. Because eating on time is healthy*." (Religious and traditional leaders, FGD, Taltoli upazila, Bangladesh)

This is how a traditional/religious leader in Nepal describes the impact of the program on him personally:

> "*The project left no stones unturned to change the traditional practices that we have been applying since long time. We were reluctant to change ourselves, but the project made us change (in reference to keeping menstruating girl/women away and child marriage)."* (Religious and traditional leaders, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)

In Niger, PTA and/or Sustainable Management Committee members, noted how they observed the changes with traditional and religious leaders, especially in their messaging through regular sermons.

> *"By ensuring that young people respect adults more, notably with the contribution of ma awratan gobé (future husbands club) who do a lot for the community and are listened to by their peers; (they smoke less cannabis and shisha, they steal less); Now, even marabouts and other traditional authorities are against child marriages; everyone is sensitized on this issue. Every Friday, there are*

sermons on these practices." (PTA/Sustainable Management Committee members, FGD, Azzazala, Niger)

Religious and traditional leaders have highlighted shifts in community norms, crediting the decreasing social acceptance of CEFM to interventions by the GGE Program. Other stakeholders credit their involvement in combating CEFM through the program as central for driving changes in community norms by reinforcing what is considered acceptable practices. Acting as gatekeepers, interviews with groups, such as parents, show how these leaders are consulted by community members on marriage matters and have successfully intervened to prevent instances of CEFM.

"*Oppressive customs, such as traditional elders, have been helped to educate the community against teenage pregnancies and marriages, and we have succeeded significantly through these leaders because initially, they embraced these customs."* (Government officials, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

In Malawi, the GGE program was credited for having complimented government efforts in changed harmful practices, especially with reference to puberty initiation ceremonies which were understood to increase the risk of CEFM and HIV/AIDS, through the engagement of traditional leaders who are custodians of this practice.

Notably, traditional leaders, typically male, are also considered to play a key role in engaging boys and men in discussions around CEFM. Their engagement has been facilitated by their access to influence community gatherings through sermons and meetings to address and educate on CEFM. An example from Bangladesh showcases how religious leaders referenced Islamic teachings, emphasizing the importance of women being mature and of age before marriage. In Bangladesh, as a particular finding in that context, in FGDs with Imams and other stakeholders, younger Imams were credited as particularly active agents of social norm change 'both advocating and modeling gender equal behavior'. However, this could also entail that the GGE Program is not reaching most senior/older Imams with potentially more normative influence in society.

The overall normative messages promoted by religious and traditional leaders in their community seem to focus on harm/health aspect of CEFM, specifically for the girl, and the legal aspect, where child marriage is illegal. This messaging, while promoting behavioral change (as confirmed in interviews with men and boys), could be limited in terms of its gender transformative results in the longer term, as discussed in section 4.2.9.6 . These views are not explicitly about promoting women's agency (such as her freedom to decide who to engage with, when, or at what time) and promoting gender equality and empowerment, because it is the 'right thing to do'.

4.2.8.4 Social environment

Changing structural norms at the societal level is more challenging and complex, than addressing norms at the individual, household, and community levels. Institutional resistance (such as with religious leaders), the complex and integrated nature of societal level norms; social stigma and pressure in the wider community, the interconnected of norms at play, ultimately requires programs to drive normative change over a long time period across many different actors. The primary data collected includes references to the impact of the GGE Program on the societal level, with particular reference to new/changing laws and policies having been introduced with the contribution of the GGE Program.

In Dodoma and Rukwa, Tanzania, respondents shared that Plan and the GGE Program had worked with stakeholders to influence the National Plan to End Violence Against Girls and Women to make it more inclusive and child sensitive.

In Nepal, interview respondents shared that schools had developed school-specific child protection policies that were enforced on school premises. The municipalities of Jumla and Bardiya were reported to have prepared child-related guidelines, including guidelines on child protection, management of a child fund, and on the prevention of child marriage.

In Bangladesh, an Imam in Borgona Upazila shared that policies are now better enforced through by-laws, as the government has now made it compulsory for birth certificates of both bride and groom to be produced at the time of marriage registration.

There are also examples of how the GGE Program contributed to implementation of laws in Uganda, where child protection committee members were noting that perpetrators were now arrested and in Nebbi, traditional leaders said new community policies were in place to address cases of rape and CEFM and that police/formal

structures were dealing with such cases. In Tanzania, families in Rukwa, stated that there were new laws that protected women against abuse, and representatives from Key persons in ministries said "Policy changes have been made and implemented, especially during the implementation of this project" (Rukwa, Tanzania)

> "*The GGE program has led to a substantial decrease in child marriages in the community. The introduction of by-laws with strict penalties has deterred child marriages, changing social norms and community attitudes*." (Religious/traditional leaders, KII, Phalombe, Malawi)

The section below discusses to what extent 'introducing strict penalties' is an intended result of the GGE Program. In another statement from a high-level official, it is highlighted how the GGE Program is driving normative change working with multiple actors.

> *"The project has changed the mindset of all strata of the society including adolescent boys and girls. Now our people are committed in preventing child and early marriages. They inform us (elected representatives) and police too. Even the religious leaders also have stopped match making for underage marriages. The municipality and ward elected representatives have signed a commitment not to attend such marriages and if we unknowingly attend have to pay fine.*" (Government Official, KII, Kalikot, Nepal)

4.2.9 Unintended outcomes

4.2.9.1 Improved health outcomes

Beyond knowledge of SRHR, the GGE program has reportedly contributed to positive health outcomes for girls and their families, such as i) delays in the median marrying age leading to improved health status of young mothers and their children, ii) improved nutritional status of households (as they self-reported in KIIs and FGDs), reducing malnutrition and improving food security, and iii) fewer cases of fistula, death, surgeries relating to pregnancy. Where respondents noted that fewer girls were getting pregnant, they found there to be health improvements for adolescent health and wellbeing. In a KII in Phalombe, Malawi, the Headman noted that young pregnant girls often looked unwell and distressed, but this has improved with fewer pregnancies among adolescents. Furthermore, parents interviewed in a FGD in Maraké, Niger noted that over the last few years, it has become a "reflex to go to the hospital". Such changes in behaviour can only partly be attributed to GGE interventions as there have also been national campaigns where women who would give birth at home are fined.

4.2.9.2 Perception of 'love marriage'

Interviews reveal a perception that the GGE Program has created greater acceptance for 'love marriages', especially in Niger. The GGE Program as such is not only credited for reducing CEFM, but for promoting ideas of marriage where the partnership is based on mutual affection. More acceptance of love-based marriages is also believed to support marriage stability.

> "*Romantic relationships before marriage are not frowned upon, which is completely unprecedented.*" (Boys and Men, FGD, Jigga, Niger)

> "*Another major change is that marriages based on a romantic relationship are now seen as having many advantages. For example, my daughter is an example of this. She chose the one she wanted to marry because they were in love, and they live peacefully with children*." (Religious and traditional leaders, KII, Mayahi, Niger)

The concept of 'love-marriage' was used interchangeably with the term 'self-elopement' in Nepal. It was stated by boys and young men in an FGD in Bardiya, that the GGE program had helped to stop all other forms of child marriage, except for self-initiate marriages:

> *"The project has literally stopped child marriages except those eloping, this is all because of the project activities"* (Boys and men, FGD, Bardiya, Nepal)

4.2.9.3 Perceptions of cohabitation

The GGE Program was credited for having created greater acceptance for informal cohabitation in Malawi, because of awareness raising/capacity building activities. In interview notes from a FGD with out-of-of school girls, it was described how girls had an 'advanced understanding of marriage, clearly distinguishing it from

cohabitation. For these girls, marriage began only when formal officiation has occurred, otherwise, it was simply cohabitation. This perspective differs slightly from common beliefs in Malawi, where a couple is typically considered married once they start living together, as cohabitation is not culturally recognized. There might be some risks such as lack of legal protection for girls under the legal age of marriage living in informal cohabitation.

4.2.9.4 Self-initiated marriage

The primary data also includes examples of varying perspectives on marital decisions, where the girl in some instances might 'choose' to marry, based on a range of practical, socio-economic reasons further discussed in section 4.2.1.3 – Factors driving CEFM and possible motivations for marriage. In some statements, Parents interviewed in Phalombe, Malawi, spoke to this nuance as they stated that only those 'forced' into marriage should be removed. Overall, these difference in perceptions related to 'forced' dimensions of marriage highlights how the GGE Program engages in contexts where in some instances girls' 'choose' marriage and where parents have an understanding that only some marriages are considered 'forced'.

4.2.9.5 Strategies to continue CEFM

Despite the results achieved in reduction of CEFM in targets locations, CEFM practices sometimes adapt and morph into new forms. Eloping to other countries where laws on CEFM are less strict or not enforced, is a known strategy for continuing the practice. An unintended outcome of the GGE program, could therefore be increased levels of elopement for CEFM, and the primary data does include multiple accounts of such practices occurring. Validation sessions with Plan staff and general interviews confirmed it is a common practice in Malawi for couples to escape to Mozambique. The strategy of eloping to India was also particularly evident in Nepal, as a stakeholder shared:

> "*Child and early marriage will be minimized but eloping at an early age and getting married running away from home will continue.*" (Government Official, KII, Kalikot, Nepal)

Couples who elope might be further stigmatized if upon return they lack legal protection, financial means, or support networks.

In Niger, a form of distance marriage was shared as a practice that continued CEFM. Distance marriage is a traditional practice where two families arrange marriages between their children who may live in different villages, regions, or countries. Some indicated that the practice persisted in a new form, where the man would come to the village for the marriage itself, before departing abroad for employment opportunities.

4.2.9.6 Fear-based tactics/enforcement of laws and by-laws to prevent CEFM

Utilizing "fear" as a strategy to modify behavior was frequently mentioned as being "effective" in all GGE countries. A CBCP member in Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh, stated that the only way to prevent child marriage, and the most effective advocacy message she utilized toward parents, was to create fear of being reported to the authorities and losing their daughter. Advocacy based on 'fear' was also reportedly used in Bangladesh, according to Imams interviewed, instead of messaging focused on gender equality. Imams stated that they would speak with parents about the harmful effects or 'losses' a family will undergo if they have their children married.

As a strategy to instill behavioral change in boys and men, messaging toward these groups had focused on the legal implications of sexual assault and/or breaking the legal age of marriage, as described in section 4.2.6.2.2.:

> "*The training has made boys in the community to fear [refrain from] young girls because they know they will be arrested.*" (Student Cabinet Members, FGD, Zombo, Uganda).

> "*Boys benefited because they received education that if they impregnate a young girl, they ruin her life, and they will also face the law.*" (Representatives from VSLAs/Cooperatives, KII, Rukwa, Tanzania)

Some of the legal consequences of breaking the law, are described to have severe consequences for the individual. A CSO representative in Tanzania shared that boys who impregnate girls below 18 are made to 'flee and live a life in exile', making the point to why it is important to work with boys to prevent these situations.

"*Boys running away and ending up as thugs because they fear returning home since they have already caused a teenage pregnancy, others end up as street children or even committing suicide*." (Youth, FGD, Rukwa, Tanzania)

The primary data suggests that the GGE Program is partly attributed for utilizing 'fear' based tactics to ensure that parents support keeping their children in school in Malawi and Uganda.

"*Parents who are not taking their children to school are now penalised and punished and are followed to make sure their girls goes to school especially. This is done by the mentors.*" (Parents, FGD, Adjumani, Uganda)

"*GGE as a program contributed to my stay in school because the community doesn't allow anyone to drop out of school. The village headman punishes parents whose children drop out without a valid reason.*" (Girls, FGD, Mulanje, Malawi)

"It has changed parents' mindset on paying school fees because they now know that if you don't respond accordingly, you can be arrested. So, parents have started paying school fees." (Student cabinet members, Nebbi, Uganda)

During the validation session with Plan Bangladesh, some limitations in using fear-based tactics to influence behavioral change were discussed. These limitations included the limited results regarding internalizing norms and the risks associated with reverting to previous practices once the fear-based strategy is no longer in effect. Additionally, concerns were raised about the sustainability of results achieved through fear-driven change.

4.2.9.7 Increased control of girls and/or women

A clear unintended outcome of the GGE Program, not underlined in its ToC, is the increased patriarchal control and regulation of women/girls' movement. Where the interpretation of 'protection' of girls and boys against CEFM is understood to mean that girls should take responsibility and avoid potential risks of sexual activity or sexual assault, girls have been restricted from behaviors such as going outside during the evening/night and attending 'discos'.

"Through this project, the community has decided to reduce the time girls walk at night, with the limit being 9 PM, but before this project, youth and girls walked until 2 AM, especially in video halls." (Parents, FGD, Rukwa, Tanzania)

"*They taught us not to move at night*." (Student cabinet members, Zombo, Uganda)

"Parents have changed, they have been able to control children from wandering at night, so they will avoid teenage pregnancies, all thanks to Plan International seminars." (Youth, FGD, Rukwa, Tanzania)

"I have seen a reduction in night movements by ladies. I used to meet them late at night but these days they are rare on the streets at night." (Out-of-of school children, FGD, Pakwach, Uganda)

Some stakeholders credit the GGE Program for teaching children about risks associated with frequenting in certain locations and noted that his had improved child protection.

"*In my opinion, I have seen the programs influence on child protection through the different t trainings we were given we were able to learn about danger zones of which these are harmful places to learners they created awareness. Even in schools and communities they exist especially in small trading centers which have cinema/video halls where children may hide*." (PTA member, FGD, Nebbi, Uganda)

A VSLA member in Tanzania shared how child protection mechanisms (MTAKUWWA Council) had engaged with parents specifically to help them control their children '*who went to watch videos at night in video halls, as they encountered temptations and the morals of the videos shown were not good'*. In a validation session with Plan Uganda, it was shared how the going to the Disco was associated with risks such as sexual activity and sexual abuse. In an interview with Student cabinet members in Uganda, it was noted that "*In my community, rules on discos has been put but some of the people don't obey to it. For instance, some young girls went to dance then came back early morning and were punished".* Although these rules might not have

been imposed as a direct result of the GGE Program, they make up part of what is referred to as a strategy to reduce CEFM in the target states.

Like some of the other unintended outcomes noted above, the findings suggest there is a risk of the GGE Program validating norms that control girls' appearance and sexuality and praise 'good behaviour', which speaks to a limited gender transformative result. Girls who dress well and modest are praised, and who show 'high moral' and good behaviour, are associated with positive role models in programs that address CEFM.

> *"Girls also have savings accounts, they are less tempted by boys' money; when we meet these girls, they are clean, informed about reproductive health, well-dressed, and take better care of themselves. They know the health measures and how to protect themselves from diseases.*" (CBCP members, KII, Mayahi, Niger)

These statements could imply that norm change is limited, and that girls' agency is still restricted to behavior deemed 'appropriate' for the larger society.

4.2.10 Likely sustainability of results achieved

4.2.10.1 Traces of sustainability

Key stakeholders such as religious and traditional leaders and chiefs have bought into core messages relating to preventing CEFM, which helps ensure that new laws and by-laws have custodians who believe they have a role in defending these laws. In Nepal, persons interviewed were convinced religious leaders were unlikely to provide match-making services or ceremonies to underage couples, even after the program is finished. The religious networks which were engaged through the program were considered to be active and likely to continue their activities and keep their stance on CEFM in the future. The same statement was made by imams in Bangladesh, who considered themselves as key gatekeepers for acceptable marriage in the community.

Further, legal documents and by-laws that resulted from the program are likely to stay in place where stakeholders have been engaged. Law enforcement and municipalities have strategies and mechanisms which ensure a degree of sustainability after Plan GGE discontinue their activities in the locations.

Plan has not implemented GGE as a CEFM prevention program in isolation, which is a key factor for ensuring sustainability of results. Plan has worked in line with government strategies against CEFM, with other organizations and filling programming and geographical gaps. This was underlined in Uganda, where a Government stakeholder in Nebbi noted how there were synergies between Plan interventions (GGE and other Plan projects), and between Plan and other stakeholders, which ensured a multifaceted response to CEFM.

Importantly, the program facilitated the establishment of community structures like child protection committees at various levels of local government. In Mulanje, Malawi, a government stakeholder shared that although the project has concluded, these committees have been integrated into the government's system, which is key for sustainability of results.

The ownership taken by CBCP members, and indications of norm change on the individual, interpersonal, and community level, further underpins that there are seeds of change planted in the communities where the GGE program was implemented. In the words of a religious leader in Mulanje, Malawi:

> *"The program will be sustained because it is us the community members who are implementing it. Mind you, no one from the government was walking house to house to withdraw children from marriages or to speak to communities. We did all of that ourselves, and we will continue doing it."* (Religious/traditional leaders, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

4.2.10.2 Barriers to sustainability of results

There are central elements to the GGE program design which may challenge the sustainability of results in the program areas. For instance, the program included many trainings of committee members and teachers, and key personnel may move from the program areas, leading to the loss of a critical mass of persons working to combat CEFM. Further, implementing partners indicated that some program components were downscaled, which made it hard to penetrate the society at the intended level.

The people living in communities targeted by the GGE program face other, systemic challenges and barriers which hinder the effective and sustainable achievement of outcome- and impact-level results. Some of these challenges can be addressed through targeted interventions/through appreciating what the barriers entail for future program design, while others underline the complexity of the societies and challenge of CEFM.

The timing of activities may have posed a challenge for the inclusion of some young persons in GGE activities, as in multiple interviews, the timing of afternoon/evening activities were mentioned as a challenge or source of contention. Activities that lead to the late return home of, in particular, girls, was considered by parents as a challenge, as they were worried that girls were staying out too late and were not in their control. Girls themselves reported to feel hungry when attending afternoon activities such as club meetings.

External shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the persisting detrimental impact of climate change continue to challenge the sustainability of results and impacting lives and choices available. Drought and flooding in Niger, increased salinity of soil and cyclones in Bangladesh, and the impact of cyclone Freddy on the lives of GGE families in Malawi, were all provided as examples of how climate change continues to drive poverty and child marriage in the programming areas. The constantly changing environments in which the GGE program is implemented must be recognized, to factor in the lived realities of persons who are facing climate change. This had been achieved with some success in Bangladesh, according to a CSO stakeholder interviewed:

> *"Through the training GGE gave out to the women who are part of the programme have used it become self-employed. For example, persons from this area have only been engaged in the traditional livelihoods that are getting affected because of agrarian degradation, increasing salinity and climate change. So through this project, the beneficiaries have been able to get training on different income generating activities (IGA)s and have been able to feel financially secure."* (CSOs, KII, Taltoli Upazila, Bangladesh)

Although the skills-training programs the GGE program has reached youth with no other daily activities, and their skills were developed, the lack of capital or equipment for start-up of businesses after training poses a challenge to sustainability of results. The lack of start-ups stemming from the program suggests that the support was not at a level which allows empowerment and entrepreneurship to take hold after the intervention.

> *"The only challenge is that most of the children that come with the GGE are from resource-poor families and they cannot afford capital to establish their own business. Apart from the sowing machine, one requires start-up cloth materials, initial rent, and many more. This requires some capital. I would propose that the youth be linked up with financial service providers from the beginning so that the skills developed should be put under full youths."* (Educational staff of TVET, KII, Mulanje, Malawi)

In Malawi, the TVET trainings were highly useful, but in Mulanje they fell short of leading to a formalized diploma or fully trained tailor. It was stated by a TVET teacher in Mulanje that the GGE program supports the training only for 3 months, while the recommended period to successfully be trained as a tailor is almost 6 months. The teacher suggested GGE students had only basic skills after a three-month training, and noted that many students would come back after the GGE program to complete their trainings.

Further, the program created VSLAs which have been important for women's and household savings in case of crises and lean periods. However, in Bangladesh, it was reported that families are saving in VSLAs, but not able to take out loans because of the severe poverty level.

During validation workshops with Plan staff, the challenges posed by fluctuating exchange rates, specifically the adverse effects of the NOK/USD downgrade, were discussed. These fluctuations, coupled with already limited budgets, necessitated difficult decisions regarding resource allocation. Consequently, not all planned activities could be executed to the desired extent.

These examples may suggest that the GGE program was not thorough enough to overcome the multifaceted challenges faced by targeted girls and families. There is a need for a multitude of approaches and strategies to combat poverty and stay out of marriage, and the basic needs of girls remain unmet in many of the protracted situations of poverty, including food insecurity.

For instance, findings suggest that although the program managed to reintegrate girls in school after CEFM and teenage pregnancies, girls who were pregnant once were more likely to drop out of school again, either to take care of their child or because of new pregnancies. The lack of formal childcare services for the children

of girls who were reintegrated into school remains a persistent challenge, and the GGE program has worked with parents and encouraged them to take care of their grandchildren so that their children can attend class.

A girl who had been helped to leave her child marriage in Phalombe, Malawi, lamented about the lack of follow up after she had been taken out of her marriage:

> *"You all know I was married and was brought back by my parents after pressure from the community. But look at me now, I'm still not in school because my parents can't afford the fees. I got married in the first place because I couldn't pay for school fees, so I wasn't attending school. After returning from marriage, nothing has changed; I'm still out of school because my parents are just as poor as before, I got married."* (Out of school children, FGD, Phalombe, Malawi)

The GGE program provided comprehensive sexual education curriculums in schools, which were largely very well received by students and teachers. However, in Malawi, teachers noted that some books provided by Plan were found to be too advanced for the wide age range of club participants (from Standard 4 to Standard 8), and that parents expressed concerns about the age-appropriateness of some content, leading to some push-back against content of the program.

Financial constraints further remain real barriers for persons targeted by the GGE program, which is not easily addressed through program design. Participants spoke of financial constraints to leaving abusive marriages, financial constraints to mobility to access key services, such as the police station or health services. For instance, in Phalombe, Malawi, many reported child protection cases that require police intervention necessitate considerable travel, with community members having to walk over 8 kilometres to reach the police station. A religious leader shared how several cases escalated to court, with two resulting in sentences. However, attending court sessions has become increasingly difficult for community members who were walking long distances to participate. Girls in a participatory mapping exercise in Nkasi, Tanzania, also cited the distance to the health center as a primary challenge for attending adolescent-friendly health services.

Lastly, it was noted by participants in Nepal, Niger, and Malawi, that although formal marriages may have been successfully addressed through the program, other forms of CEFM may continue unless risk factors are addressed, and a comprehensive do-no-harm approach is adopted. In Nepal, participants note a massive reduction in CEFM rates, but also consider that eloping at an early age and getting married by running away from home will continue in the future, as young persons still need to get married to engage in sexual relations. Unions such as "remote" marriages in Niger, or cross-border migration for continuing CEFM, are further explored in section 4.2.10 – Unintended outcomes.

5. Discussion and recommendations

5.1 Implications for the GGE theory of change

The GGE Program was implemented according to a theory of change (ToC) which included a comprehensive problem analysis, defined causes and drivers of CEFM, strategies for preventing the practice, and identification of the cross-cutting issues which impact results achievement, five defined outcomes, and an impact-level goal in the form of reduced prevalence of CEFM.

This Impact Assessment of the GGE Program (2020-2024), provides further evidence that central assumptions made in the ToC are well understood, and work together and in interrelated ways, as per the GGE program design. Pathways for change on which GGE programming are founded are further strengthened by central findings in this Impact Assessment. Particularly, the connection between educational support, SRHR programming, economic empowerment, and child protection in reducing CEFM, is provided further qualitative evidence through this assessment.

The findings confirm that effective approaches to preventing CEFM must be inclusive, multifaceted (incorporating both soft and hard components), and comprehensive (addressing multiple thematic areas), as exemplified by the design of the GGE program. The GGE program recognizes the complex, mutually reinforcing, and interdependent drivers of CEFM, understanding that girls' empowerment is political, and their lives are multifaceted. Programming that addresses separate drivers of CFEM in isolation, neglects this interdependence, risks causing harm, limits girls' agency, and undermines sustainability.

Engaging men and boys, and traditional and religious leaders is an important strategy for driving impact-level results, but engagement with these actors must be strategic and focused on messaging that promotes girls' empowerment, for sustained results. This means that the engagement of men and boys must be based on a gender transformative strategy, and carefully consider dilution of resources. Strategies that empower girls and adolescents with skills and information is, according to a range of stakeholders in all six target countries, found to directly challenge traditional gender roles, and boy's and men's status within the society changes as the value of girls is emphasized.

Increased access to economic resources is an effective means to delaying and preventing CEFM, especially when economic programs target actors who can influence girls' school attendance (such as mothers). Such interventions may further influence traditional gender roles within the family by elevating the role of women.

SRHR stands as out as an area that needs to be carefully considered across all thematic areas - norm change, education, and economic empowerment. The need to balance between SRHR 'soft' (social, cultural and relational aspects) and 'hard' (practical, structural and systemic elements) components is a challenge to any program which is faced with resource constraints, or which is implemented in contexts where such programming is considered 'sensitive'. The impact assessment confirms that both components have an importance for the overall aim of fostering inclusive learning environments, keeping girls in school, combatting shame and stigma, and in turn preventing CEFM. Menstrual health management and addressing gendered stigma was considered an effective pathway to keeping girls in school and important to strengthen girls' sense of agency and self-worth, overall addressing drivers of CEFM.

Child protection is an important component of CEFM programming, and the approach chosen by Plan consisting of a grassroots approach and strengthening local mechanisms has been strategic for inclusivity and for lowering the reporting threshold. However, the impact assessment finds that 'child protection' is a concept which means different things in different contexts and may be interpreted in such a way that it results in restrictions on girls and women when CEFM is no longer an accepted strategy for controlling girls' sexuality. Such risks should be included in a comprehensive ToC for preventing CEFM which addresses root causes.

With such examples in mind, this impact assessment sheds light on the importance of 'Do No Harm'-approaches. Although Plan International has child safeguarding measures built into all aspects of its program implementation, this impact assessment shows that beyond the immediate need for safeguarding in program implementation, the potential programmatic outcomes (both intended and unintended) from social and behavioural change interventions should be comprehensively assessed, factored into implementation, and be part of continuous organizational learning.

In practice, there is a risk that CEFM programs may inadvertently reinforce conservative voices and patriarchal community structures. This could result in the co-option of CEFM programming by prevailing patriarchal norms, potentially leading to the control of girls' sexuality and freedom of movement. In light of these risks, it will be essential to ensure that CEFM programming is gender transformative, where strategies such as promoting girls/women's empowerment, as active agents in the local community and in leadership structures, must be implemented in tandem with messaging on harmful effects of CEFM. This also includes providing targeted approach that address those most vulnerable and ensure they are provided with viable alternatives to CEFM.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings in this report, the following recommendations are made to Plan International for their future programming to prevent child, early, and forced marriage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this report, the following recommendations are made to Plan International for their future programming to prevent child, early, and forced marriage.

Norm change

- Integrate a consistent focus on norm change recognizing parents as key decision-makers in CEFM.
- Consider how CEFM programming is addressing norm change at different levels (individual, household, community, and societal level) to understand the interconnectedness of norm change and potential impact - where altering norms at one level might not yield effectiveness at another level.

Economic empowerment

- Skills training programs have the potential to improve girls' status. To achieve this, economic empowerment programs should focus not only on teaching specific skills but also on building girls' confidence, increasing their awareness of important issues related to their agency, and supporting their freedom of movement and choice.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

- Ensure the delivery of comprehensive SRHR advocacy which promote rights-based aspects, while balancing culturally relevant messaging on SRHR, to ensure SRHR is not diluted and reduced to girls' hygiene and 'health' that do not support girls' agency and empowerment.
- Engage men in SRHR programming, to ensure that SRHR is not left as a women's/girls' issue and promote norms where men are important actors in preventing STIs and early pregnancy.
- Strengthen inclusion of national stakeholders and parents to ensure buy-in and support to comprehensive SRHR education.

Education

- Strengthen training and support for teachers and school management on gender equality to empower them to promote positive gender norms and address stigma. This initiative is crucial for facilitating the reintegration of girls who are married, have children, or are pregnant, and for fostering acceptance of SRHR within the school environment.
- Strengthen human rights-focused messaging within the education sector that emphasizes the inherent value and dignity of all children, regardless of their enrollment status. This approach is essential to prevent out-of-school children from experiencing increased stigma as efforts prioritize formal schooling.
- Assess potential risks with 'rewards' to best performing students and/or food rations. Ensure 'no one is left behind', especially out-of-school children and most vulnerable. Consider inclusive approaches that rewards diversity of traits among students.

Child protection

- Strengthen democratic, rights-based and gender responsive community interventions to avoid legitimization of CEFM messages that centers around controlling the behavior, movement, sexuality

of girls and women in CEFM programming. Challenge stereotypes and work with boys and men to address sexual assault and rape, while promoting positive messaging around the evolving bodily autonomy for all young people.

- Refrain from using or legitimization fear-based advocacy to prevent CEFM. Instead, empower key stakeholders involved in child protection mechanisms with skills to that promote human rights-based approaches and democratic governance mechanisms, especially to address potential risks working with law enforcement authorities. Ensure inclusive processes by actively involving those affected by child protection laws - including initiators, boys and men - and address lack of legal protection in implementation of such laws.

Inclusion of boys and men

- Implement a more targeted approach recognizing that men are not a homogenous group, considering factors like age and status that influence their ability to support the reduction in CEFM. This could mean targeting young religious leaders, fathers, and boys in separate interventions. Consider low hanging fruit (natural allies) vs. influential actors, and target both.
- Ensure that program activities that include men and boys are driving gender equality results and contributing to a reduction in CEFM (gender transformative approach) to avoid dilution of resources towards men, while securing their support to prevent GBV and backlash to changing gender roles. (Ensure Plan staff and implementing partners understand the objective of engaging men and boys as a strategy rather than as a beneficiary group)
- Advocacy messages directed to men and boys in CEFM should avoid a narrow focus on legal aspects/fear-based tactics and include how gender equality and positive masculinity strengthens social cohesion and ultimately benefits boys and men.
- Religious and traditional leaders can either promote an abandonment of CEFM or be a voice of support towards its continuation. Focus resources and capacity building on bottom-up approaches that considers local dynamics for authentic engagement of leaders in dismantle stigmas and norms reinforcing CEFM.

Leave no one behind

- Ensure disability inclusion in CEFM programming goes beyond inclusion focused on physical disability to address invisible or hidden disabilities, to understand how these factors impact the continued practice of CEFM.
- Strengthen the intersectional approach in CEFM programming to ensure inclusive programming that take into account intersecting identities of most marginalized groups, such as LGBTQI status, class, caste, ethnicity, and assess the differential impact of CEFM.

Other risks and 'Do No Harm'

- Preventing CEFM depends not only on the choice of approach but critically on how interventions are *designed and implemented*. To maintain fidelity and effectiveness, it is important that *implementation* is led by individuals and organisations who uphold gender-equitable values. Plan International should therefore strengthen comprehensive training, both prior to and throughout the intervention, that address potential discomfort with sensitive subjects such as 'power' and 'sexuality' among program teams, facilitators and implementing partners. This will help ensure that the behaviours of those delivering the program are consistent with Plan International's principles and contribute to achieving the intended social norm outcomes.
- Apply nuance in depictions of CEFM in material and interventions to ensure that girls who self-initiate (chose) marriage are heard and provided with resources and support considering local realities and vulnerabilities.
- Offer real alternatives to girls and families at risk of CEFM, such as to avoid the practice being disguised as 'cohabitation' which could potentially offer even fewer legal rights for girls.
- Target groups that are at risk of CEFM and migration with specific program support to prevent migration as a strategy to CEFM. Provide viable alternatives/life choices that can prevent CEFM as an attractive strategy.
- Ensure that CEFM interventions are driven by feminist principles, where gender equality and girls' and women's' empowerment is the ultimate objective, as a guide to address messaging of CEFM being coopted and used as a strategy to control girls' behavior and sexuality.

Climate change

- Consider the impact of climate change on the likelihood, risks, and trends of child marriage in the short and medium term, as well as the unique needs of girls and adolescents in climate-driven emergencies compared to conflict-driven crises to address the intersecting challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

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