

Policy Brief

# Girls' clubs and life skills programmes

Positive potential,  
unanswered questions

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## Summary

Girls' clubs have become an increasingly common component of school-based and community-based programmes that aim to improve outcomes and well-being of adolescent girls in developing countries. Yet views on the effectiveness of these interventions (often based on scant evidence) are somewhat polarised. While some are enthusiastic about the potential of girls' clubs to empower girls, others raise questions about their impact, reach, sustainability and cost-effectiveness.

GAGE undertook a rigorous review of 63 studies on the empowerment impacts of 44 girls' or youth development clubs and gender-equality-focused life skills programmes. We found substantial evidence of the positive impact of these programmes on girls' self-confidence and self-efficacy, their levels of knowledge of key issues, and on their attitudes to gender equality. Some also had a notable impact on school retention and attainment. Those with a focus on improving economic well-being through boosting savings or vocational training were also largely successful, with some evidence that including a life skills education component boosted the effectiveness of economic-focused activities. In some cases, participants had been inspired to engage with local officials to advocate better services or to report perpetrators of violence. The programmes with the greatest impact on gender-discriminatory practices such as child marriage worked with girls' parents and other community members to achieve change, as well as helping girls gain the confidence to negotiate on matters that were important to them.

The studies examined are starting to shed light on the programming approaches that maximise effectiveness. However, questions of reach, longer-term sustainability and cost-effectiveness remain under-explored.

## Background

Girls' clubs and adolescent development clubs have become an increasingly common element of programmes aiming to boost children's and adolescents' health and well-being outcomes. Typically, these programmes have a strong emphasis on building young people's self-confidence and self-efficacy, and on non-formal education to raise awareness of gender equality. Most also seek to impart specific knowledge around sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and legal rights. A new generation of school-based life skills programmes has shifted from a primary focus on HIV and AIDS education to a broader curriculum with a greater emphasis on gender equality. Innovation in programming of this kind has been led by a few organisations – BRAC, the Population Council and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) – but there many other well-established or more experimental programmes that are developing innovative approaches. Both to inform its future activities and to contribute to global knowledge, GAGE undertook this review to bring together what is known about the effectiveness of programmes of this kind.

We undertook a rigorous narrative review that used a systematic search methodology and clear inclusion criteria. As we were interested in uncovering the details of programme design and implementation that led to the outcomes observed, we drew on qualitative and process studies as well as quantitative impact assessments. Two-thirds of the studies reviewed used experimental or quasi-experimental designs; 17 used randomised control trials (RCTs) and 17 (including some overlap with the RCT studies) used statistical analytical methods particularly suited to impact evaluation, such as propensity score matching and difference-in-difference analysis. Twenty-two mixed-methods studies combined rigorous quantitative analysis with valuable qualitative insights into the perspectives of girls, their families and, in some cases, programme implementers. Very few studies used retrospective approaches to understand participants' perceptions of the long-term impacts of club participation. Just over half the studies were internal evaluations (34/63); 24 (almost 40%) were carried out by external evaluators. Our analysis does not segment findings by research design; however, almost all the quantitative data quoted comes from evaluations

with experimental or quasi-experimental designs; the qualitative data draws on both these and observational studies.

The vast majority of programmes we reviewed were implemented in sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia (50% and 48% respectively), with only three in the Middle East and North Africa (Yemen and Egypt) and just one in any other region (Honduras). The clubs examined were primarily community-based (33/44), with 10 school-based clubs, and 6 life skills programmes (numbers add up to more than 44 because some programmes worked in multiple settings). Two-thirds of programmes worked only with girls (other than outreach work to familiarise families with the programme). All programmes worked with poor adolescents, with roughly equal numbers in rural and urban areas. Eleven programmes explicitly aimed to reach marginalised adolescents who were

either out of school or working or were recent migrants. Only one programme appeared to have made an effort to make clubs available to disabled girls, and none took place in conflict-affected environments.

In the main, the programmes we examined were small scale, with half reaching fewer than 20,000 girls and a quarter reaching fewer than 5,000. The five programmes with the greatest reach were community-based initiatives run by large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as BRAC, working fully or partially through the education system as part of broader quality improvement initiatives. Almost three-quarters of the programmes – all of them community-based – provided additional activities such as vocational skills training, savings accounts, catch-up basic education classes or sports.



Girl students discuss their issues a Girl's Club meeting at Oda Aneso Primary School 10 April, 2014. Pastoralist in Afar and Oromia region of Ethiopia, Alternative Basic Education Center

## Key Findings

The programmes reviewed contributed to girls' empowerment in the following areas:

### Change in discriminatory gender norms and practices

Almost three-quarters of programmes led to changes in attitudes to gender equality, while more than half helped reduce gender-discriminatory practices such as child marriage or limits on girls' mobility outside the home. The nine programmes that led to success in reducing child marriage rates were all community-based and engaged parents and other family members in activities, as well as empowering girls to speak out. Twelve programmes (spanning school and community settings) contributed to reduced acceptance of gender-based violence (GBV). Although increases in reported experiences of GBV were common following an intervention, this was generally attributed to increased awareness of what constitutes GBV and greater knowledge of how to report and challenge it (as a result of the programme).

### Psychosocial gains

Nearly half of the programmes – a mixture of school- and community-based clubs – helped girls increase their confidence to speak out among peers, family or in the community. This was usually through activities to boost communications skills, paired with gender and rights education. Almost all these programmes worked with girls only. Thirteen community-based programmes also helped out-of-school girls build stronger peer networks, while five helped girls develop stronger networks with adults in their communities who they could turn to in times of need. Seven also helped strengthen parent-child communication – these were mostly programmes that ran joint sessions with parents and children.

### Increased knowledge and educational achievement

Community-based clubs and extra-curricular clubs led to some impressive increases in knowledge, particularly of SRH and girls' legal rights. For example, in one programme, the proportion of girls who understood puberty and menstruation rose by more than 20 percentage points. A quarter of programmes helped increase school enrolment and attainment and reduce drop-out. These

were either larger education improvement initiatives that included extra-curricular clubs, or community-based programmes offering catch-up education to girls who had missed out on schooling, with some offering financial incentives to offset schooling costs. Some clubs appeared to play an important role in boosting girls' aspirations, leading to greater commitment to study.

### Economic well-being

Less than half of the programmes (19 in total) involved economic empowerment components; all those that did were community-based and worked with girls only, mostly with older cohorts (though savings programmes targeted a wider age range). The most common economic empowerment components were vocational training, financial literacy education and support for savings, with a few programmes targeting older girls and providing loans and entrepreneurship education. Ten of the 19 led to enhanced vocational skills, in most cases via training provided by a technical specialist rather than by programme staff providing life skills education, and 11 led to enhanced savings.

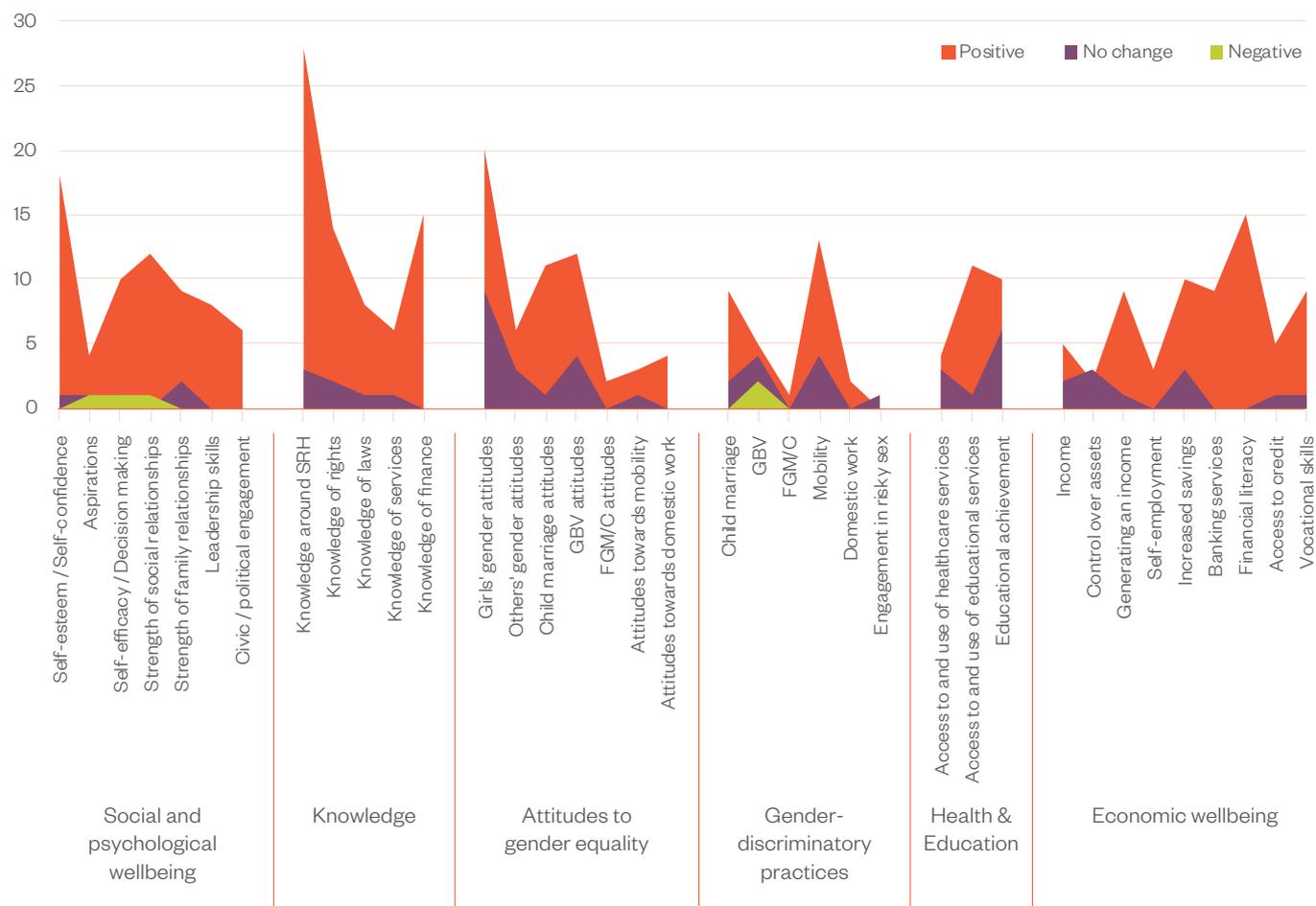
### Civic engagement

Six programmes reported increased community-level action, ranging from participants negotiating with elected officials to improve local services, reporting child abuse or planned child marriages to the authorities, to taking part in village councils. One particularly striking finding was that younger adolescents (10-14) were just as willing to get involved in civic action of this kind as their older peers.

The more effective programmes typically:

- worked with family members, members of the wider community and other opinion-formers and gatekeepers. This was particularly important to change perceptions of programmes from being seen as places for girls to gossip or as a threat to local cultures and traditions to being seen as valuable places for learning new skills and knowledge;
- had a stronger emphasis on gender equality within programme curricula, though there were some notable exceptions;
- provided adequate remuneration and refresher training to facilitators to sustain motivation, and also monitored their performance. Investing in good-

Figure 1: Programme impacts on different indicators



- quality facilitation is vital as group sessions are at the heart of these programmes; in addition, facilitators are important role models for adolescent girls and poor facilitation is thus a doubly missed opportunity;
- ensured sufficient time for girls to relax and socialise as well as providing structured learning. The importance of this aspect of girls'/adolescent clubs is often not recognised, but process evaluations increasingly suggest that it plays a critical role in the development of girls' self-confidence and social networks;
  - integrated games and other fun and active methods of learning. Some programmes achieved this through regular games nights, while others ensured participatory activities in all sessions. Alongside

incentives such as snacks and rations, and non-financial rewards such as graduation ceremonies and certificates, ensuring that sessions were enjoyable seemed to help ensure regular attendance and thus greater impact.

Girls who experienced the greatest changes typically attended more regularly (at least half to two-thirds of sessions). The two evaluations that examined the impact of attending for a longer period also found greater impacts from attendance lasting more than a year. However, relatively few studies explored how duration of programmes or regularity of attendance affect impact, and there is certainly evidence of attitude and practice change as a result of some short (12-session) life skills courses.

## Knowledge gaps

- Understanding the value of particular programme activities within an intervention package. Few evaluations (8/63) compared the effectiveness of different strategies within overall programmes. Those that did confirmed that club participation, which entails focused discussion, generally leads to greater change in gender-discriminatory attitudes and practices than exposure to public awareness campaigns. Two evaluations found participating in general gender awareness-raising activities in girls' groups to have the most profound impact on a range of indicators (knowledge, self-efficacy, attitudes to gender equality); three suggested that economic empowerment activities are more effective when combined with life skills education that boosts self-confidence and critical thinking.
- Impact of programme activities. None of the programmes offered access to helplines, though these are steadily becoming more common, particularly in programmes combating violence or abuse. None used mobile phone technology to connect girls or to communicate with them; indeed, only two provided any opportunities for girls to learn ICT skills. Only three programmes had a sport component, and apart from one programme where it was the main focus, the effectiveness of sports activities for girls' empowerment is under-researched.
- Relative impact of clubs and more system-focused activities. The studies examined provide evidence of the immediate impact of girls'/adolescent clubs and life skills programmes. However, they do not provide a basis for comparing the relative contributions



**Young Mother Case Study:** The 2015 earthquakes in Nepal had a major impact on women and girls in Nepal. In the months following the devastating earthquakes, young girls continued to express how they were personally impacted and the challenges they faced. Recognising that young adolescent girls aged 12-18 were not actively participating in protection services being offered at the community level, Plan International decided to organise Adolescent Friendly Spaces throughout Nepal. Credit: Plan International.

of programmes that work directly with girls with those that strengthen service delivery systems or reduce poverty. In part, this reflects the fact that these approaches are not comparable; they work in different ways and complement one another. But it also reflects the fact that such comparisons – of interest for policy-oriented questions and audiences – were outside the scope of evaluations that focused on the impact of individual projects.

- **Long-term impacts.** Only eight studies examined whether these programmes have led to lasting changes. Evidence is mixed and varied from programme to programme. Attitude changes persisted in some but not others; knowledge gains appeared to have been sustained; economic empowerment gains (such as increased incomes or use of vocational skills learnt) appeared to be more durable, but there were too few studies to draw firm conclusions, and no studies examined whether girls had sustained gains in self-confidence or self-efficacy. It would be particularly helpful to follow up with programme graduates and probe whether girls are able to carry over changes in attitudes and practices into married life.

- **Sustainability of programmes.** All programmes were externally funded and time-limited. We found no studies of more institutionalised groups, such as Girl Guides or groups associated with religious organisations. GAGE will be starting to address this evidence gap. There was limited discussion of under-funding, though this is a recognised problem, particularly for school-based clubs. Only one evaluation discussed the problem of teachers in school clubs being trained to run extra-curricular clubs and then moving on to take up new jobs, which can undermine impact as others need to be trained in their place. There is a clear need for greater attention to promoting sustainability, along with more analysis of what has proved successful and what has proved ineffective over time.
- **Cost-effectiveness.** The few evaluations that did report on cost-effectiveness provide estimates of cost per girl/participant, but these are rarely compared with other potential approaches. GAGE's longitudinal and qualitative studies can contribute to generating evidence on this issue.



UNICEF Ethiopia 2015 Bhindra.

## Recommendations

Girls' clubs and life skills programmes can play a very positive role in building girls' self-confidence and self-efficacy and their knowledge on key issues, such as how bodies work and women's and girls' legal rights. Such programmes also have a proven track record in changing attitudes to gender equality issues, both among girls and (in mixed-sex programmes) among boys. There were, of course, variations in programme impact and effectiveness, and in the more culturally conservative settings, changes in knowledge and self-confidence were greater than changes in attitudes to gender equality or reductions in gender-discriminatory practices. The following recommendations emerge from the review:

- **Engage with families to reduce resistance and for greater change in attitudes and practices.** There has been much less engagement to date with fathers than mothers, but only half of the programmes reviewed engaged with any parents, with spouses or partners of older participants. Some programmes have had success framing work with parents as 'parent-child communication' classes.
- **Use 'hooks' such as vocational training or knowledge widely perceived to be useful (e.g. health and hygiene) to encourage girls to join programmes and to reduce resistance to their participation.** Doing so not only enhances skills and knowledge but also provides a hook that maintains commitment to the programme, creating space for education on gender equality and rights and empowerment processes.
- **Ensure that programme content is appropriate to participants' age and education level.** Many programmes have had to simplify content after finding that girls, particularly those with little education, could not understand life skills material.
- **Experiment further with approaches that:**
  - **Promote good attendance (given the positive effects of regular participation).** The impact of addressing poverty-related barriers, such as transport in urban areas or providing cooked food or rations is under-explored in the studies examined. Outreach work with family members is also vital to ensure good attendance.
  - **Increase inclusion.** Only one of the 44 programmes examined made any attempt to increase accessibility to disabled girls, and only one attempted to reduce caste discrimination. Beyond this, there is little evidence that these programmes attempted to reduce the marginalisation faced by some girls. More attention is needed to understand the processes of social exclusion at local level in order to extend programme reach.
  - **Extend impact.** Alumnae clubs and follow-up events in the community have potential, as does an approach that involves engaging graduates as mentors to current-day club participants, but their impact has not been evaluated. Likewise, simple approaches to widening impact – such as encouraging participants to share knowledge with others – could also be researched and, if effective, easily built into future programmes.
- **Invest in further programming and research to fill the knowledge gaps outlined above.** Further studies of implementation processes and their effects on programme outcomes, studies probing thresholds for impact (in terms of programme length and frequency of meetings), studies comparing the impacts of single-sex and mixed-sex programmes on different areas of empowerment, and retrospective studies probing how far effects are (or are not) sustained into adulthood would be particularly helpful.

## Further reading

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## About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit [www.gage.odi.org.uk](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

## Disclaimer

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Front cover: Mekedes, a member of the Keep it Real Girls Group. The Keep it Real programme has been created by Save the Children in co-operation with the Government to better inform girls and boys about their sexual and reproductive health and empowers girls to say no to harmful traditional practices such as child marriage which robs girls of opportunities to learn, thrive and be happy. Fikir was nearly a victim of child marriage but after joining the Keep it Real Programme she prevented the marriage and has now been empowered to regularly attend school and fight for her future.

Ayina Michael, Ethiopia. 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016.

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