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SHIFTING NORMS AND PRACTICES TOWARDS GIRLS' EDUCATION IN SOMALIA

Stories of change from the Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia (AGES) project

The *Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia* (AGES) project is an ambitious six-year initiative (2018-2024) funded by FCDO and USAID, which seeks to enable 83,945 ultra-marginalised girls and female youth living in conflict-affected areas of Somalia to access quality education responsive to their needs. AGES enrolled a total of 90,698 girls in education pathways responsive to their needs, including 21,945 in primary education, 1,244 in formal special needs schools, 13,276 in accelerated basic education (ABE), and 54,233 in non-formal education classes (NFE).

AGES specifically targets girls who face the intersection of multiple barriers to education, including displacement, minority identity, language, disability, marriage and motherhood, pastoralist livelihoods, and child labour, among others. AGES combines the provision of three education modalities with financial literacy, youth savings groups, life skills, mentorship, and girl-led civic action. To enhance the likelihood of reaching and retaining the ultra-marginalised – minority girls, girls with disabilities, displaced, and the extremely poor – AGES facilitates social norm change processes at community and school levels and within girls' groups.

This paper summarises key findings and recommendations from a qualitative study conducted by CARE International, to better understand if and how AGES has contributed to shifts in gender and social norms, exploring girls' perspectives on how those changes have impacted their lives.



Findings

Girls' narratives suggest that the participation in AGES has contributed to a transformational change in their self-image and on gender norms, particularly regarding girls' education and roles within the household. Girls described the AGES learning process as 'life changing', fostering independence, self-confidence, economic empowerment, and enhancing their social standing within the community. Furthermore, girls explained how they are teaching the same skills to others – their siblings, parents, children, and other girls.

Gender norms at home: Household chores

The prioritisation of household chores was identified as a key barrier to marginalised girls' attendance at the AGES baseline, with 65% of all girls, 76% of minority girls, and 93% of married girls or young mothers spending at least a few hours each day on chores. At the project's midline, the proportion of caregivers who believed it was acceptable to keep their daughter out of school so that she could help with chores at home had decreased by 24 percentage points in relation to the baseline (from 36% to 12%).

"My mother said that any girl who goes to school should not be assigned any work. It changed now. I teach my younger brothers on how to write at home and even my mother."
[Mogadishu, minority girl]

From obstacles to advocates: Family support for education

Girls described how their parent's perspectives about girls' education have changed during the last two or three years to become strong supporters. The girls associated this change to community mobilisation, describing how teachers and Community Education Committee (CEC) members have contributed to shift parental attitudes towards attendance and workload.

(My parents) said to me, "We were not educated, but for you, you have to educate yourself". They say "Your assignments are more important than home activities like cooking. If you study, you can turn on the light, if you don't study, you will bring darkness." They advise to take advantage of my time.
Baidoa, ABE student

Girls noted how parents are proud of their achievements – not only of their schooling, but also of their newly developed self-confidence and voice. Parents are reportedly encouraging girls to prioritise their studies, following up on their attendance, and seeking to provide for basic needs – stationery, uniform, and renting living spaces near the school. Furthermore, girls have spoken of how their older siblings – boys as well as girls – are contributing to their education by helping them with lessons, sharing household chores, and encouraging them to stay in school. The strong support at home is reflected in the high retention rates observed in AGES. Among primary education students enrolled in 2019, 80% have remained in school; among ABE students (ages 17-19), 49% have remained

in education; and among NFE students (now aged 20-24), 26% have transitioned into primary education or other forms of ABE/NFE.

Learning

Girls' narratives highlight the transformative power of being able to read, write, and perform maths calculations. Learning is described as 'life changing', enabling girls to become more independent, self-confident, conduct business, and contributing to enhance their social standing. Furthermore, girls are not just learning for themselves, but have also repeatedly explained how they are passing on the skills learned to others – their siblings, parents, children, and other girls. For young mothers, acquiring basic literacy and numeracy is also enabling them to engage in their children's education. Their initial exposure to education has increased their ambition for further education. Some participants explained how they have enrolled in other

Since I am a mother, I pass on everything I learn to my children, and it has really helped. Also, I now have control over my children's education.
Kismayo, minority girl

courses, including in some cases those offered by private schools, in hope to further develop their skills.

Strengthening girls' agency and girl-led action

Girls and their parents have articulated how attending school, participating in GEFs, and engaging in community activities have enabled them to speak out at home, with peers, and during class. Girls reported sharing school experiences with their parents, including concerns about teacher behaviour and their own absenteeism/ lateness, and how they have negotiated with their families to obtain money for school fees and other needs. Particularly vulnerable girls – with disabilities, from minority groups – explained how they have gained self-confidence and overcome their fear of participating in class.

I met many mothers who say, "Leave this girl, she doesn't want to learn or she can't because she is disabled and the community discriminate her." We try to convince mothers to allow their disabled children to come to school.
Mogadishu, GEF member

Instances of girl-led action were primarily described by Girls' Empowerment Forum (GEF) members. GEFs are school-based clubs where marginalised students are supported by a mentor, participate in activities to develop leadership skills, are linked to resource persons within the community and to the CEC, and develop plans to address issues of their choice through girl-led action. GEF participants are trained to act as peer mentors within their schools and community, reaching out to other girls to provide support, and engaging in joint advocacy and action.

We have established a WhatsApp group to encourage others and talk about the importance of education for girls in the society.
Baidoa, GEF member

Girls described how they have encouraged others to attend school; followed up on cases of absenteeism; supported each other to negotiate for support at home; and sought to address discrimination against girls with disabilities, minority girls, and displaced students, among other actions. Girls have shared how their parents see them as role models for younger siblings, and how they are sharing what they have learned at home, teaching their parents and siblings about improved practices.

Economic empowerment and assets

Through AGES, girls are receiving training on financial literacy and forming savings groups (VSLAs). AGES is coaching members of savings groups on business selection, planning, and management. AGES is also linking VSLA members to financial institutions, which provide training on the types of financial products available and how those can be used by savings groups to expand businesses. AGES has supported 597 youth VSLAs, contributing to the economic empowerment of 11,071 female youth. Among non-formal education students, the average income increased from \$15 to \$40.

Yes, I have a small shop at home. At first, when a person took from me a loan, I did not know how to write the loan in a book but now since I started to go to school, I can write everything.
Baidoa, VSLA member

Recommendations

The AGES qualitative study put forward several recommendations for practitioners:

Household and gender

The strong results observed in this area suggest the need for further expansion of the work done with CECs and religious leaders in conducting dialogues with parents to shift norms about girls' roles. In particular, this approach could be expanded to target husbands and in-laws to further reduce barriers to education for vulnerable married girls and young women.

Norms and practices at school

The results indicate that a partial shift in traditional power relations and inclusion norms has taken place in schools. Nonetheless, there is need for a continued investment in (i) facilitating school-level dialogues on social norm change; (ii) training teachers on the use of positive classroom management practices and remedial support, particularly with students facing mental health issues; and (iii) equipping education staff and school administrators/ CECs with the skills to identify and address the use of exclusionary and violent practices towards vulnerable students.

Girls' agency, contribution, and social cohesion

The results indicate that the AGES model has been particularly successful in facilitating shifts in this domain. Still, participation in school-based groups – GEFs and VSLAs - remains limited, particularly in the latter. The positive results suggest that an expansion of the membership in both platforms would maximize the impact seen to date, particularly if amplifying the outreach actions already being conducted by existing groups. Overall, 27% of the girls participating in youth networks have engaged in activities to prevent early marriage.

Economic empowerment and assets

While the narrative about economic empowerment is overwhelmingly positive, findings about the limited inclusion of the poorest girls, concerns about their ability to repay loans, and attrition highlight the need for further screening of VSLAs by village agents to ensure targeted coaching of the most vulnerable girls and linkages with safety net programs (cash transfers and in-kind humanitarian aid) to enable continuous membership.

Inclusion and discrimination

The results indicate major shifts in the inclusion of girls with disabilities, minority girls, and the extremely poor, but also suggest the need for further investment in school and community-level dialogues on social norm change with CECs and religious leaders to address persistent discrimination against minority girls and GWDs.

Want to find out more?

For more information on AGES programming please contact: Abdifarhan Gure, gure.farah@care.org

