



CASE STUDY

UGANDA

ABOUT

The Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP) in Uganda, funded by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and implemented between 2023 and 2025, addressed barriers such as child marriage, the undervaluation of education for girls and domestic work responsibilities that prevent girls from accessing and completing school. In response, the Girls' Education Movement (GEM) Clubs in Uganda were developed under the Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP) II (2023–2025). The strategy aimed to empower girls, foster gender equality and challenge harmful social norms. The clubs operated in both primary and secondary schools across MYRP locations (Yumbe district – Bidibidi refugee settlement; Terego/Madi Okollo district – Imvepi refugee settlement; Kyegegwa district – Kyaka II refugee settlement; Kikuube district – Kyangwali refugee settlement). It engaged boys as allies, trained teachers as club leaders, and involved caregivers and communities through awareness campaigns while integrating WASH and health education to ensure sustainable and inclusive access to quality education.

THE PROBLEM

In Uganda, deeply entrenched social norms and systemic barriers limit girls' access to and continuity in education. Girls are often expected to prioritise domestic chores and care work, with their education considered secondary to that of boys. Cultural norms, such as the belief that girls' primary role is to take care of household duties like childcare and cooking, reinforce the perception that education is less essential for them. This view is particularly pronounced in rural areas where girls' education is undervalued, and where child, early and forced marriage is considered a more viable option than pursuing education. Moreover, girls are often socialised into accepting subordination, with limited agency to make decisions about their lives or advocate for their rights. One interviewee explained how girls have a fear of making decisions, and believe they are supposed to be at home: ***"They are not supposed to be at school, and education is meant for boys..."***

The broader issue of gender-based power imbalances manifests in the perception that marriage provides more immediate security for girls than education does. The notion, according to one interviewee, is that when a girl marries, ***"there's a lot more peace than struggling to go to school and pass very many levels to finish education. So... it is an easy way to get into a marriage if a man provides for you. There is everything set for you. Do not struggle. You do not read and then also go to school..."*** Families often prioritise boys' education because they are seen as future providers.

One interviewee felt that the gender imbalance between girls and boys, women and men was ***"the biggest contributing factor to all these other social norms"***. The interviewee described how girls are ***"always seen as the second option"***, with boys being given ***"lighter work"*** and being able to go to school. This imbalance affects the resources allocated to education by a household. Perceptions of power is also a factor, in that ***"the boy believes that if they go to school, they can finish, while the girl child may meet other hurdles in the way, like child marriage"***.

As a result, girls often see education as a second choice. They are unable to compete with the societal pressure to marry and take on household roles. These deep-rooted cultural beliefs and systemic power imbalances create significant barriers for girls to access and continue their education.



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THE RESPONSE

The strategy

To address these critical barriers, the programme employed multiple strategies to improve the access, continuity and retention of girls in education. Among these strategies, the GEM Club strategy stands out as a key intervention with significant potential for driving gender transformation. The objective of the GEM Club was to mobilise girls and boys to promote girls' education. Although a girls' movement, male engagement is key to enabling boys to appreciate and understand the issues that girls face, according to an interviewee. The strategy integrated key components: working with boys and girls, engaging teachers, involving communities, and advocating with policymakers.

Girls and boys

The GEM clubs were established in all the schools where MYRP worked. Every club had 30 members (20 girls and 10 boys) and operated in primary and secondary schools. Participants ranged in age from 7 to 11 years in primary schools and 12 to 24 years in secondary schools, ensuring that a broad spectrum of students benefited from the initiative. The selection process for GEM club members was based on interest, with teachers and club patrons playing a key role in identifying students who were passionate about promoting girls' education.

“ The first point of entry is on an interest basis. If a girl or a boy is interested, they are vetted and joined. But [club organisers] ensure that they are not in more than three clubs, ensuring they can balance their academic responsibilities with their participation in extracurricular activities [...] The boys who are passionate about promoting girls' education and mobilising girls to realise their full potential often self-volunteer to register for the club. Additionally, boys who may have faced challenges, such as dropping out of school and later returning, are also encouraged to join the club to share their experiences and motivate others. ”

Uganda MYRP member interview

Learners with disabilities were actively encouraged to join, ensuring inclusion of girls and boys with different needs and identities. Membership tracking was disaggregated by sex, age and disability. An interviewee described working with a partner organisation that specialises in disability inclusion. Their efforts to incorporate sign language interpreters and develop visual aids were key to improving access for students with disabilities.

The clubs met monthly, guided by trained teachers or school staff, with sessions held outside regular school hours to avoid interfering with learning. The clubs focused on empowering girls by building their agency, confidence and leadership skills to identify and address barriers to their education. Boys, meanwhile, were engaged as allies to challenge gender stereotypes and promote equality. Noting that male engagement was key in gender transformative approaches, one interviewee described how boys were encouraged to help address the barriers that girls face, including creating a safe environment for girls to enrol in school.

Club activities are guided by an 11-topic curriculum covering assertive communication, menstrual hygiene management, life skills, gender equality and preventing school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV). These topics were carefully selected and contextualised to address the specific challenges faced by students, particularly girls, and to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to overcome these barriers. Developing the GEM club guidelines was thoughtful and deliberate, as one interviewee explained: **“We spent a lot of time picking topics from various sources. We used content from Plan International's Champions of Change, which is a popular approach for gender transformation. We did not take it in its entirety because Champions of Change content is for different levels and contexts, including for both men and women and out-of-school youth. Instead, we selected and contextualised topics for children in a way that was both child-friendly and relevant”**. The result is a tailored curriculum that is adapted to the children's realities.

The curriculum is designed to be comprehensive and child-friendly, focusing on practical, life-changing skills. One of the first topics covered was **assertive communication**, essential for club participation. This skill was crucial for enabling girls to advocate for themselves and others, giving them the confidence to speak up in various situations, from school environments to home and community settings.

“ The first topic we take the club members through is assertive communication. They need the skills to talk to other girls, in or out of school. They should be able to influence others and negotiate effectively, such as saying ‘no’ when faced with challenges like peer pressure or potential school dropout. [We also] focus on what gender equality means in terms of the school, home, and community. What does it mean to promote gender equality in these different contexts? ”

Uganda MYRP member interview

Another key topic was **gender equality**, which helped students to understand the importance of equal rights for girls and boys in school, at home and in the community. These discussions aimed to challenge stereotypes and promote the idea that education is a right for both girls and boys.

Menstrual hygiene management was also a critical topic, particularly for addressing barriers to school attendance. The aim was to break the silence and stigma around menstruation, ensuring that girls could manage their menstrual health with dignity and attend school regularly.

“ ...We did a gender analysis and found that one of the barriers to school attendance for girls is menstruation. Many girls do not come to school when they menstruate. So, we educate them on managing menstruation, making them understand that it is normal and providing the confidence to challenge myths surrounding menstruation. We discuss how girls can educate their peers about their rights and responsibilities and how they can take charge of their reproductive health, [and] we have topics around creating a safe, enabling environment for children with disabilities. This ensures that all children, regardless of ability, can feel included and supported in their educational journey. ”

Uganda MYRP member interview

The curriculum also covered **reproductive health and children’s rights**, emphasising education and personal responsibility. This ensured that learners understood their rights and had the tools to help educate others in their community. Additionally, inclusion was a fundamental aspect of the curriculum, with specific lessons on **creating a supportive and inclusive environment for girls and boys with disabilities**.

The curriculum also placed a strong emphasis on **protection**, equipping members to prevent and respond to gender-based violence as part of their efforts to ensure safer school environments. They were trained on referral pathways, enabling them to report incidents of GBV and to connect survivors with appropriate support systems, even when these fall outside the consortium’s direct interventions.

Additionally, the clubs played an essential role in **health education** by disseminating critical disease prevention and response information. For instance, during outbreaks such as Mpox or sexually transmitted diseases, GEM clubs raised awareness through creative activities like dramas and advocacy sessions. These efforts helped learners to understand how to prevent and address health risks and to foster a culture of proactive health management.

“ Let us talk about protection. First of all, they are trained on how to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. They have been given a referral pathway if they experience or hear of any GBV or anyone perpetrating it. They are empowered on where to report, how to report, and how to respond. Additionally, they are encouraged to speak out about protection issues around the school and report directly to the designated members of the consortium responsible for this sector. ... This approach ensures that GEM Club members are proactive in preventing GBV and knowledgeable about responding effectively when cases arise. ”

Uganda MYRP member interview

Sessions were initially sex-disaggregated to provide a safe space for open discussions and were later combined for collective reflections. For topics like life skills or SRGBV, however, learners of all ages were taught similar content. **“SRGBV can affect anyone, regardless of age, even a three-year-old,”** according to an interviewee. The curriculum was designed to ensure that each topic was presented so that all learners, regardless of age, could grasp and apply it. In some cases, facilitators gave varied examples to suit the different ages and ensured the content was accessible to all students.

“So, they are asked different questions to gauge their understanding, such as how they would manage their menstrual hygiene or how their parents handle it at home. These discussions are tailored to be age-appropriate, helping the learners understand the topic in a way that resonates with their experiences. Boys, for instance, are asked what they would do if a 13-year-old girl received her period – what actions they would take to support her and whether they would laugh or make fun of her. The content is therefore adjusted to ensure that it is appropriate for the age and developmental level of the learners.”

Uganda MYRP member interview

Occasionally, technical experts such as health workers were invited to provide specialised training on topics like reproductive health, ensuring that learners receive accurate, context-specific information which is age-appropriate and relatable.

The clubs extended their impact beyond their members through awareness campaigns, peer-led messaging and creative activities such as drama and music shows performed in schools and community spaces. These initiatives helped to disseminate key messages, normalise conversations about gender equality, and promoted education as a right for both boys and girls. Facilitators ensured that parental consent was obtained for participation and that all activities were scheduled in alignment with co-curricular plans to maintain a balance with students' academic responsibilities.

Communities and caregivers

In addition to these club-based activities, the programme actively engaged communities and caregivers to address deeply rooted social norms, and promoted shared household responsibilities. One of the main strategies involved organising back-to-school campaigns, where GEM club members, supported by their teachers, reached out to parents and caregivers to garner support for their daughters' and sons' education, especially girls' education. These campaigns focused on shifting household dynamics by encouraging parents to balance the workload between boys and girls.

“Although not directly one of the activities, GEM club members engage in back-to-school campaigns. They get to the community with the help of their patrons and talk to their peers, then extend this message to their parents, encouraging them to take responsibility for supporting their children to get to school and promoting balanced household chores.”

Uganda MYRP member interview

A key issue identified in these campaigns was the unequal workload regarding household chores. Boys were often allowed to go to school in the mornings while girls were tasked with domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning and working in the garden. **“Many parents prefer to send their girls to afternoon school shifts because girls are expected to complete all the domestic chores in the morning,”** an interviewee said. The programme addressed this by encouraging parents to balance chores more equitably. For example, girls were encouraged to attend the first school shift in the morning, and boys were urged to go to the afternoon shifts. This adjustment helped ensure that girls were not overburdened with household chores, allowing them to focus better in school.

By involving both students and their families in these efforts, the programme aimed to create a more supportive environment for girls' education, where gender equality was promoted inside and outside school, and to foster a community where boys and girls share domestic responsibilities.

Community engagement activities included skits, poems and dramas performed during parent-teacher meetings or other community events. These performances highlighted the importance of shared responsibilities, proper nutrition and addressing harmful norms such as prioritising boys' education over that of girls. These creative tools engaged the community and challenged ingrained beliefs about gender roles.

However, attendance at the meetings was often low. Ongoing efforts aim to increase caregiver participation to maximise impact. To address this, the programme was working to find new ways to engage parents and caregivers.

Occasionally, the programme incorporated specific topics into these campaigns, such as ensuring girls and boys were not malnourished and could concentrate in class, while reinforcing the broader goal of creating an enabling environment for girls' education. This holistic approach addressed academic barriers and sought to create healthier, more supportive environments for both boys and girls to thrive in their education.

Teachers

The role of teachers was crucial to ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of the GEM clubs. Teachers, trained as club patrons, played a central role in facilitating GEM club activities. Each club was led by one male and one female teacher, carefully selected by the head teacher based on their passion for the programme and their ability to mobilise learners.

These teachers are not chosen for their seniority or workload. In fact, an interviewee explained that senior teachers often have too many responsibilities at school: ***“instead, other teachers who can commit time and energy to the club's activities are preferred”***. The main objective of having a male and a female teacher is to foster a gender balance and model equal involvement. The teachers help to organise and structure the club's activities, ensuring the members are actively engaged in the sessions, such as guiding discussions on assertive communication, menstrual hygiene management, and other gender-related topics.

“ For example, when discussing assertive communication, the patrons work with the learners to plan activities like songs, poems, or assemblies that can be presented to the wider school community. ”

Uganda MYRP member interview

The role of the teachers went beyond the meetings. They were responsible for coordinating the quarterly action plans for the clubs, ensuring that the activities align with the educational goals and that any necessary external support is provided. ***“If a topic, such as sexual and reproductive health, requires specialised knowledge, the patrons work with MYRP partners to bring in experts to guide the students through the topic,”*** said an interviewee. This collaboration with external partners ensures that the club sessions are well-rounded and informative, providing students with the most accurate and relevant information.

Patrons also played a key role in connecting club members to broader community initiatives. They coordinated awareness campaigns, such as back-to-school initiatives, and ensured parental consent was obtained when necessary. Additionally, they oversaw the production of materials needed for activities, such as flip charts or markers, by liaising with MYRP partners to ensure the club had the necessary resources to succeed.

At the heart of their duties, these teachers ensured that the club remains focused on its mission – empowering girls, challenging gender stereotypes and promoting equal education for all. As one interviewee explained, ***“the role of the patrons is to ensure the club members are progressing, keeping track of what has been achieved, the challenges they face, and how they contribute to the broader goal of gender equality in education”***.

Once selected, teachers participate in a Training of Trainers (TOT) workshop, where they are introduced to the GEM club guidelines, equipped with the skills to implement the curriculum, and guided on how to lead club sessions on topics such as reproductive health, assertive communication, life skills and gender equality.

The process does not end with the initial training. Ongoing support and follow-ups were essential to ensure that teachers were equipped to overcome any challenges that arise and to keep the clubs on track. At the end of each quarter, a review process was conducted to evaluate the programme's overall progress. Gathering teachers for an in-person review meeting could be expensive and not sustainable, so the review process is adapted to be more cost-effective.

“ We mobilise teachers from different schools and bring them together in one room.

During this training, we take them through the entire GEM club guideline, explaining how the club operates, its objectives, and the topics that need to be covered. We also walk them through the specific sessions they will deliver, emphasising how to handle each topic effectively.

“ Occasionally, we follow up with the teachers to check on their progress. We ask them what session they are currently working on, what challenges they are facing, and what achievements they have made. This continuous support helps to ensure that the GEM clubs remain effective and aligned with their goals, [but] we realised that bringing all the teachers together for a review meeting is costly due to transport and other logistics, so we shifted to conducting reviews on a case-by-case basis. When we visit a school, we listen to their feedback, discuss their needs, and provide them with targeted advice. ”

Uganda MYRP member interview

These reviews are done both at the school level and at the consortium level. The consortium-level reviews are conducted online to ensure cost efficiency. Partners involved in the programme participate in these reviews, discussing the progress of the GEM clubs and identifying areas for improvement. Feedback is given on the activities. **“If cross-learning is needed between schools, we organise that and send the right partner to support them,”** an interviewee added.

Policy makers

Although GEM clubs did not directly engage with policymakers, they were essential in influencing policy through indirect channels. During club sessions, learners identified key issues affecting their education, such as child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and inadequate school infrastructure. Teachers and school administrators documented and presented these issues during teacher learning cycles and district education forums. This process ensured that learners' voices were heard at higher levels of decision-making.

For example, learners' concerns about child marriage and adolescent pregnancy were escalated to district coordination meetings, where policymakers developed strategies and policies to address these challenges.

At the macro level, the MYRP contributed to policy formation by working alongside partners who advocate for systemic change. For example, the programme supported the review of Uganda's policy on ending child marriage and adolescent pregnancy by providing data, assessments and strategies aimed at curbing harmful norms. Partners also developed a policy paper addressing adolescent pregnancy and child marriage, which was presented to district officials and policymakers for review.

THE RESULTS

The Multi-Year Resilience Programme began its implementation in Uganda in 2023. At the time of interviews and secondary source reviews, no impact evaluation had been conducted because the implementation process was ongoing. Therefore, the results expressed are partial and reflect progress made thus far.

The programme's interventions brought meaningful improvements to education access and continuity. As an interviewee noted, **“We feel the GEM club is contributing a lot in terms of mobilising girls to attain education”**. Through the actions led by GEM club members, including awareness-raising and outreach efforts such as back-to-school campaigns that engage parents and communities, the clubs have demonstrated a tangible impact on school attendance.

The clubs have proven particularly impactful in addressing harmful **gender norms**, such as child marriage, the prioritisation of boys' education, and the burden of domestic work on girls. Boys comprise one-third of the clubs' members and have been trained as allies to promote girls' education, shared responsibilities and gender equality. An interviewee added that having boys in the GEM clubs helped them to *“**appreciate that education is for both girls and boys**”*. As such, the boys become *“**a mobilisation tool or channel for the girls to enrol in school**”*. According to the interviewee, *“**the boys took it seriously and made it their mission to mobilise the girls, including those who were pregnant, to return to school. One boy said: ‘If I can mobilise my sisters and neighbours to come to school, other boys will appreciate that girl-child education is also very important’.**”*

In addition to addressing societal norms, according to the perception of one interviewee, the programme has **strengthened girls' agency** by building their confidence, leadership skills, and ability to make decisions affecting their lives. Activities such as assertive communication training, peer-led discussions and advocacy have equipped girls to challenge barriers to education. *“**We really feel we have contributed to building the agency of the girls, and then we really see their active participation and challenging the barriers to education, and then we see them take up the roles, a position within the school, their leadership,**”* noted one interviewee.

The programme adopts an **intersectional approach** by addressing the needs of girls and boys in all their diversity, including learners with disabilities. The disaggregated membership tracking ensures inclusion, while tailored activities and content meet the unique needs of different age groups. Working with a partner organisation that specialises in disability inclusion has supported these efforts. This collaboration has helped overcome certain challenges that may arise when including learners with disabilities, such as when activities are not fully accessible or require support through an interpreter. An interviewee described how they were *“**exploring ways to incorporate topics into the curriculum that specifically cater to the needs of girls and boys with disabilities, including using visual materials to support learning, particularly for learners with hearing impairments. This remains a work in progress, but we are making strides in developing resources and including appropriate support mechanisms to ensure full participation.**”*

The clubs have contributed significantly to fostering a culture of safety and accountability. This has been achieved partly through the inclusive nature of the GEM clubs' curriculum, with specific lessons on **creating a supportive and inclusive environment** for girls and boys with disabilities. It also arises from the strong emphasis placed on **protection**, which equips learners with knowledge of reporting mechanisms and empowers them to speak out about protection issues.

Finally, the initiative fostered a **supportive environment** by engaging teachers, parents and community members. One of the interviewees noted, *“**We are seeing how the clubs are really influencing through the assemblies, parents are really happy. We see the girls' agency being improved nowadays when we have meetings, the girls come out, and they are really able to articulate the issues that are affecting them in terms of education**”*. Advocacy efforts also indirectly influence policymakers to address systemic barriers to education, such as child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

Advocacy efforts have also been an integral part of the programme's development. As part of these efforts, the policy paper on child marriage and teenage pregnancies was developed and presented to district officials and policymakers. Formal responses were still pending. By documenting these issues and contributing to advocacy efforts, GEM clubs indirectly shaped policies that address the systemic barriers affecting girls' education, creating an enabling environment for long-term change.

The GEM club initiative integrates with other sectors to ensure a holistic approach to improving education and addressing gender-related challenges.

Box 1. Linkages with INEE Minimum Standard domains

The implementation of the GEM Club initiative aligns with multiple INEE Minimum Standards domains, ensuring a holistic and inclusive approach to education in emergencies. Below is an overview of how these domains and standards are reflected in the strategy's design and implementation.

Domain 1: Foundational standards for a quality response

The programme enhances **Standards 1, 2 and 3** by fostering meaningful community participation, mobilising local resources and strengthening coordination to ensure an effective education response.

In line with **Standard 1: Community participation**, GEM clubs actively engage parents, caregivers and community members in awareness campaigns and decision-making processes. Additionally, the strategy was designed based on consultations with children, community members and education sector representatives to ensure relevance and inclusivity.

In line with **Standard 2: Resources**, the programme mobilises local resources such as teachers to enhance learning opportunities, leveraging existing community structures to sustain interventions.

In compliance with **Standard 3: Coordination**, the strategy integrates health and protection services into education initiatives, ensuring a more comprehensive and sustainable response that addresses learners' diverse needs.

Foundation stones: The programme identified teachers who were already part of the schools, trained them and entrusted them with the implementation of the GEM clubs' strategy.

Domain 2: Access and learning environment

The programme aligns with **Standards 8, 9 and 10** to promote equal access, ensure learner protection and improve school facilities.

In compliance with **Standard 8: Equal and equitable access**, GEM clubs address the unique educational needs of girls, boys and learners with disabilities. The initiative actively contributes to a more inclusive learning environment by ensuring that all girls and boys can access quality education.

In compliance with **Standard 9: Protection and wellbeing**, the initiative strengthens safe and supportive learning environments by addressing gender-based violence and providing referral pathways for protection and psychosocial support. These efforts help to create a school culture where learners feel safe and supported in their educational journey.

In line with **Standard 10: Facilities and services**, integrating gender responsive WASH facilities ensures the safety, health and dignity of learners, particularly girls. This approach addresses hygiene-related barriers to education and promotes a more enabling school environment.

Domain 3: Teaching and learning

The programme supports **Standards 11, 12 and 14** by adopting participatory learning approaches and strengthening teacher capacity.

In line with **Standard 11: Curricula**, the GEM club curriculum incorporates culturally and contextually relevant topics, including menstrual hygiene, gender equality and life skills. This ensures that the content addresses the specific needs of diverse learners and promotes gender transformative education.

In line with **Standard 12: Teaching and learning processes**, GEM club activities are participatory, learner-centred and tailored to meet the needs of girls and boys across different age groups. In some cases, groups are separated by age range to ensure that topics are addressed according to each stage of development.

In compliance with **Standard 14: Training, professional development and support**, teachers undergo a structured TOT process, equipping them with the skills needed to facilitate sessions effectively and mentor learners. This continuous professional development ensures high-quality instruction and sustained learner engagement.

Foundation stones: The programme drew inspiration from and adapted existing methodologies, such as Champions of Change, to design the methodology for the GEM clubs.

Domain 4: Teachers and other education personnel

The programme strengthens **Standard 17** by providing ongoing support and supervision for educators.

In line with **Standard 17: Support and supervision**, regular follow-ups and capacity-strengthening mechanisms ensure that teachers remain equipped to lead GEM clubs effectively. These support structures help to address challenges faced by educators and enhance their ability to meet the diverse needs of learners.

Domain 5: Education policy

The programme contributes to **Standards 18 and 19** by fostering policy engagement and aligning activities with national education frameworks.

In compliance with **Standard 18: Law and policy formulation**, GEM clubs contribute to discussions on critical education-related issues such as child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. By amplifying community voices, the initiative supports national efforts to align education policies with gender equality objectives.

Girls take part in GEMS club meeting at school in Kamuli District



CONCLUSION

The GEM club in Uganda highlighted a promising gender transformative strategy. By addressing barriers to access, continuity and quality of education, particularly for girls, the programme challenged harmful social norms, strengthened girls' agency and advocacy skills, and created an enabling environment through the active engagement of boys as allies, teacher training and community involvement.

The participatory design and thorough needs assessments conducted were critical enablers of the strategy's success. As one interviewee noted, ***"They say nothing for us without us"***. This participatory approach ensured local ownership and relevance, with learners, teachers and communities actively shaping the strategy. Tools such as the *ECW General Kit* and the *EIE-Genkit* supported implementation and assessments, helping to identify gaps and providing targeted support for learners and teachers. Regular evaluations, including gender audits and knowledge intake assessments, allowed the programme to adapt and evolve effectively: as one interviewee noted, ***"I connected the gender audits of all the partners to realise where they are in terms of knowledge of gender. What do they know and what do they need to be able to contribute to general transformation"***.

The Uganda Education Response Plan, developed and launched by the Ministry of Education and Sports with ECW support under the MYRP, was a foundational document guiding the initiative, focusing on improving access, quality and assistance. This agenda and its policy frameworks ensured that content delivery aligns with age-appropriate standards and includes diverse needs and backgrounds. Although the programme was not explicitly framed as gender transformative, it was designed with a strong focus on gender equality that informed every aspect of its implementation. The MYRP II built on the learning from MYRP I and strengthened areas such as early childhood development, gender responsiveness, girls' education and inclusive education. These improvements ensured that gender-related considerations remained central to the programme's design and implementation, addressing key barriers to education access and retention.

A dedicated focus on gender transformative approaches demonstrated the programme's commitment to this priority. This was reflected in the inclusion of a specific outcome and allocated budget to improve access and retention in inclusive and gender transformative learning and training opportunities.

The programme's success was also underpinned by the strong commitment of stakeholders, particularly learners and teachers, who actively embraced the GEM clubs. As one interviewee explained, ***"first of all, the will of the owners themselves [the learners and teachers] to promote [the GEM Clubs] was very key [...] They take pride in [the GEM clubs], they are part of it, and they feel respected"***.

Community validation further demonstrated the programme's effectiveness. Testimonies from both GEM club members and non-members highlighted the initiative's ability to address gender inequalities and build confidence among stakeholders.

However, the initiative faced significant challenges. While many girls have accepted and embraced education, deeply ingrained social norms continue to pose barriers. Sustainability problems persisted. Limited resources, particularly the lack of food at schools, fully affected students' ability to engage in extracurricular activities, including GEM club meetings: **“...a child comes from morning up to four without eating, and you still expect that child to participate in the ...GEM club, and learn. Sometimes they lose concentration, and they do not want to stay,”** an interviewee said. The programme decided not to provide food, as this would make the strategy unsustainable once the MYRP ended. Instead, the programme reduced the frequency of sessions while ensuring that each one was meaningful and impactful.

“In one of the schools, one of the leaders of the GEM club got pregnant. So that was a huge setback for the club. It was a massive show to the entire GEM club fraternity. But like we say, we give everybody a second chance. There is room to thrive even after that has happened. We cannot judge; we do not know what happened.

“So, the partner within the consortium of MYRP in charge of that school went to the girl and talked to her. We now let her apply what she teaches others – that being pregnant is not the end of education. She can return to school and continue with her education, which she is actually doing right now. She is facing a lot of ridicule and judgment from others, but that does not stop her because her agency has already been built. She kept telling them ‘this was not my wish’, but it had happened, and life had to continue. She has inspired the girls who got pregnant and did not return to school for fear of being judged. She is one of the lights to those who have been at home. ”

Uganda MYRP member interview

While the programme achieved notable progress, systemic gender transformation in conservative contexts requires sustained effort, resources and collaboration. The GEM club initiative demonstrated that meaningful change is possible when strategies are holistic, participatory and grounded in local realities. The initiative aligned itself with national goals while addressing local challenges by leveraging strong policy frameworks like the Uganda Education Response Plan and maintaining its commitment to diversity and inclusion. With continued dedication, the GEM clubs offered a scalable model for advancing gender equality in education during crises and beyond.