CASE STUDY

NIGERIA

ABOUT

The Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP) in Nigeria, funded by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and implemented between 2021 and 2024, addressed critical barriers to education for girls and boys in crisis-affected areas. Combining teacher training, community engagement, student-centred activities and policy-level advocacy, the programme aimed to increase access to quality and inclusive basic education, provide mental health and psychosocial support, and create vocational opportunities for crisis-affected girls and boys in safe learning environments in northeast Nigeria.

The actions highlighted in this case study share a common objective: promoting access, continuity and quality of education, particularly for girls who face disproportionate challenges. The programme specifically targeted Borno State (Jere Local Government Area, or LGA), Adamawa State (Michika LGA), and Yobe State (Fika and Bade LGA).

THE PROBLEM

In Nigeria, girls face significant barriers to accessing and remaining in school due to deeply entrenched cultural and gender norms. In many communities, cultural practices prioritise boys' education, often excluding girls from formal learning opportunities. Families struggling with financial constraints are more likely to invest in their sons' education, while daughters are kept at home to assist with household chores or to prepare for early marriage – thus reinforcing cycles of gender inequality.

Beyond access, the quality of education that girls receive is often compromised by gender biases in teaching practices and materials. Textbooks and curricula frequently reflect traditional gender roles, perpetuating stereotypes that limit girls' aspirations. Inside the classroom, girls may experience discrimination that discourages active participation and weakens their academic performance, further diminishing their chances of continuing their education.

Harmful norms place additional burdens on girls, expecting them to balance school with household responsibilities. Many are withdrawn from school to fulfil domestic duties or are forced into early marriage, which disproportionately affects their ability to pursue education. These expectations reinforce the perception that a girl's primary role is within the home, making long-term schooling for girls a lower priority for families.

> **"The girls are sometimes denied access or are discriminated against in terms of getting access in terms of quality: the way the teachers handle children in class in terms of teaching, in terms of teaching and learning materials provided to boys and girls. All of that, it is it tends to promote some of those stereotypes, those harmful practices in the communities."**
> *Nigeria MYRP member interview*

Security concerns further exacerbate these challenges, as girls often face risks related to their safety and wellbeing in both school and community settings. A significant safety risk, especially for girls, comes from attacks on schools and the threat of kidnapping from the jihadist militant group Boko Haram. The high-profile abduction of schoolgirls in Dapchi, Yobe State, in 2018, along with ongoing threats of violence, has intensified fears among families, discouraging many parents from allowing their daughters to attend school.

While girls face unique challenges in accessing education, boys are not exempt from risks and pressures that hinder their ability to stay in school. One of the most pressing concerns is the risk of recruitment into non-state armed groups, such as Boko Haram, which affects both boys and girls across northeast Nigeria. Many boys, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are vulnerable to being coerced or lured into joining armed groups, either through abduction, ideological influencing, or economic desperation. This further destabilises communities and exacerbates gender disparities in education.

Teachers, who often come from the same communities, are shaped and socialised by these norms, and can perpetuate inequality in classrooms and communities.

> **“There is still the issue of … people in the communities who … believe that they should prioritise boys over girls in terms of education. There are parents that … due to some of our campaigns … have been able to release their girl childhood to their girls to go to schools.”**
> Nigeria MYRP member interview

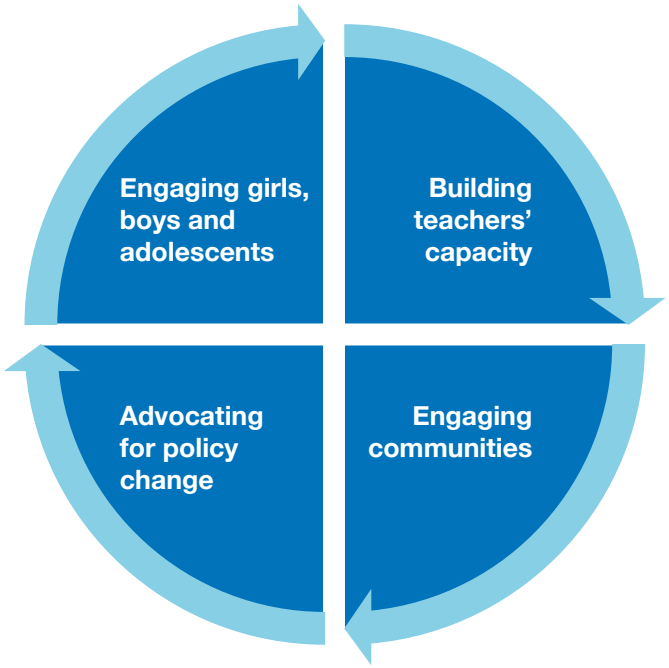
The crisis in northeast Nigeria, which has persisted for more than a decade, has had a devastating impact on education. Learning institutions have been systematically targeted. Many schools remain closed due to insecurity, while students and teachers continue to require psychosocial support to cope with the trauma of displacement and conflict.

The MYRP recognised the necessity of targeting these structural barriers and the underlying attitudes that sustain gender inequality. It approached these issues holistically, involving households, teachers and community leaders – such as traditional and religious rulers – who hold influential positions in upholding or dismantling these beliefs. ***“So, addressing some of these specific stereotypes in training allows us to be able to speak about them. Most times, we do not get to speak about them, and the moment we do not speak about issues like this, they continue to happen,”*** explained one interviewee.

THE RESPONSE

The strategy

Part of the MYRP actions addressed these challenges through a comprehensive, multi-level approach that targeted teachers, communities, girls, boys, adolescents, households and government stakeholders. Although the programme had a gender responsive approach, it is not fully gender transformative. However, some of its actions can potentially contribute to gender transformation in education during emergencies and protracted crises.



As part of the response to the previously mentioned problems, the programme had tailored interventions for each group, contributing to addressing the root causes of gender inequality and exclusion. While the programme did not have a single strategy that simultaneously engaged all groups, an analysis of its different interventions revealed how, when combined, these created a comprehensive approach that had the potential to drive gender transformation.

Dialogue sessions targeted community leaders, parents and schools, based on polling of children in the schools and parents, according to an interviewee. Life skills sessions were aimed at children at school, particularly girls. ***"The result is when their children come back, the communication they receive in school is also the same communication that the parents are receiving at home and in the community, so it makes it a lot easier when the child begins to say 'I need to continue my education', the parents understand why that child is saying so,"*** noted the interviewee.

While the programme encompasses a range of actions and strategies, this case study highlights a selection of them to demonstrate how their integration contributes to gender transformative change. The following key areas will be examined: building teachers' capacity, engaging communities, engaging girls, boys and adolescents, and advocating for policy change.

Area 1: Building teachers' capacity

The programme implemented a series of targeted interventions to equip teachers with the necessary skills to foster gender equitable and inclusive classrooms. These interventions transformed teaching practices and shifted long-standing gender biases.

One of the key strategies was conducting training workshops on gender responsive pedagogy, ensuring that teachers could actively promote gender equality in their classrooms. These workshops were complemented by teacher learning cycles, which provided ongoing support and reinforced sustainable gender responsive practices.

> **"We conducted gender responsive pedagogy teacher training, and we did not just conduct the training but also formed a teacher learning cycle to ensure sustainable practice among teachers in the community. The target was to ensure that teachers have become drivers of gender responsive practices in their communities."**
> Nigeria MYRP member interview

Recognising the importance of female representation in education roles, the programme placed a strong emphasis on female teacher participation. Additionally, the programme undertook advocacy to increase the number of female teachers. One interviewee observed: ***"We found only less than 10 per cent of female teachers. So, we made an appointment with the local education chairman in that area and then the Education Secretary to discuss this and how they can really help. So, they also sought our opinion. We told them, and then they picked it up and said 'OK, we are going to start doing affirmative action'."***

Additionally, customised training materials were developed to address gender equality in teaching and learning, ensuring that teachers had context-specific tools to implement inclusive practices in their schools.

A critical component of the training involved challenging deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and biases. Teachers were encouraged to reflect on their own socialisation and how it influenced their interactions with students. This process included open dialogues on cultural norms and collaborative discussions with the communities where teachers were raised, helping them to unlearn restrictive gender beliefs.

> **"We trained the teachers on gender responsive pedagogy, and we taught them how to bring the issues around and how to address the issues around gender in the classroom. For instance, girls and boys in the classroom learned how to provide support to each group in the class.**

> **"The training allowed us to address some of these issues because some are attitudinal issues. They get rooted in beliefs, both personal and collective. So now addressing this, in this training, helped us – but that was not enough; we had to work with the teachers to do this, and then we also tried to work with the communities to do this because teachers are from communities."**
> Nigeria MYRP member interview

In response to the persistent issue of gender-based violence and school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), the programme integrated training sessions to raise awareness and equip teachers with tools to address these issues within school environments.

Area 2: Engaging communities

To challenge harmful gender norms and build community support for girls' education, the programme engaged with key community stakeholders through training sessions, advocacy initiatives and interactive discussions. These interventions were designed to shift attitudes, dismantle deeply rooted biases, and create a more supportive environment for girls to access and remain in school.

A central aspect of the programme was training school-based and community-based management committees (SBMCs/CBMCs), equipping these with the knowledge and skills to advocate for gender equality in education. These committees included community heads, women leaders and youth leaders, ensuring that diverse perspectives were represented and that influential voices within the community were actively involved in the dialogue.

> **"We extended the same training of gender responsibilities, training some content of it because of this community perspective, to the community members. This is because we understand their role in creating change that will be lasting in the community."**
> Nigeria MYRP member interview

Beyond structured training, the programme also organised large-scale community-wide campaigns, using rallies, speeches and interactive discussions to raise awareness about the importance of girls' education. These events provided a platform for community members to openly discuss the barriers that prevent girls from attending school and to explore ways to address these barriers collectively. The outreach efforts specifically targeted fathers and male community leaders, as their perspectives and decisions often determine whether girls are permitted to continue their education. ***"So, we had in mind to create some form of change agents among the community members themselves. That was a goal in mind. And then linking it to the school. We also want to ensure that these people do not sabotage the effort of the teachers in school to create a gender responsive school environment. But they also support it because if they understand what is happening, they stand a better chance of supporting it,"*** noted a programme specialist.

To facilitate meaningful participation, special attention was given to ensuring that workshops and advocacy sessions were held in neutral, accessible venues, encouraging the attendance of women and girls who might otherwise face restrictions in public spaces. This approach allowed for a broader, more inclusive dialogue on the value of girls' education and the structural changes needed to support it.

Area 3: Families and caregivers

To address attitudes and practices that perpetuate gender inequality, the programme worked closely with caregivers, parents and guardians, recognising their central role in shaping girls' and boys' educational opportunities. By engaging key family members – particularly fathers, mothers and extended relatives – the initiative aimed to foster a more supportive home environment for girls' education and to challenge traditional norms that often prevent girls from attending or completing school.

One of the primary approaches involved regular parenting sessions, conducted either weekly or bi-monthly, to promote positive parenting practices. These sessions provided a platform for open dialogue on critical issues such as the value of girls' education, gender roles within households, child marriage and gender-based violence. Facilitators encouraged parents to reflect on how their decisions and beliefs influenced their daughters' future and provided practical strategies for prioritising their education.

Recognising the influence of community leaders in shaping social norms, the programme also extended its outreach to traditional and religious leaders. Through dedicated meetings and dialogue sessions, these leaders – who often act as custodians of cultural traditions – were encouraged to reconsider harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and restrictive gender norms, and to advocate against these.

> **"There is a need for a community dialogue; this dialogue is with the parents as well as the community influencers, to address the norm that gives rise to early marriage."**
> Nigeria MYRP member interview

Area 4: Engaging girls, boys and adolescents

To support girls and boys to advocate for gender equality in education, the programme implemented a series of interactive activities aimed at challenging gender norms, increasing awareness and fostering confidence among students. By engaging both girls and boys in discussions about education, leadership and rights, the initiative sought to shift perceptions and encourage equal participation in learning environments.

A key strategy involved role-playing sessions in schools, allowing students to explore and reflect on gender-related issues through interactive storytelling and discussions. These sessions helped boys and girls to identify and question harmful stereotypes while reinforcing the importance of mutual respect and collaboration. Through these activities, students gained a deeper understanding of gender bias and the societal expectations that often limit girls' education. ***"We have conducted some role plays, we have conducted back-to-school campaigns together with the children to emphasise the importance of girl-child education in the communities,"*** explained one interviewee.

To reinforce these messages further, the programme organised back-to-school campaigns, featuring rallies and community discussions that directly involved students. These campaigns highlighted the significance of girls' education and encouraged both boys and girls to advocate for gender equality actively. The initiative also recognised the pivotal role of female teachers in shaping girls' confidence and aspirations. Female educators facilitated school-based activities designed to build self-esteem, leadership skills and a sense of agency among girls.

Additionally, life skills sessions specifically for girls were integrated into the programme to equip them with knowledge on critical issues such as child marriage, gender-based violence and self-advocacy. These sessions provided a safe space for girls to discuss challenges they faced and explore strategies for overcoming them.

Area 5: Advocating for policy change

To drive systemic change and ensure long-term sustainability, the programme focused on integrating gender responsive practices into education policies at the state level. By engaging with key government stakeholders and decision-makers, the initiative sought to address gaps in gender integration within the education system and to embed gender equity into policy frameworks and sector planning.

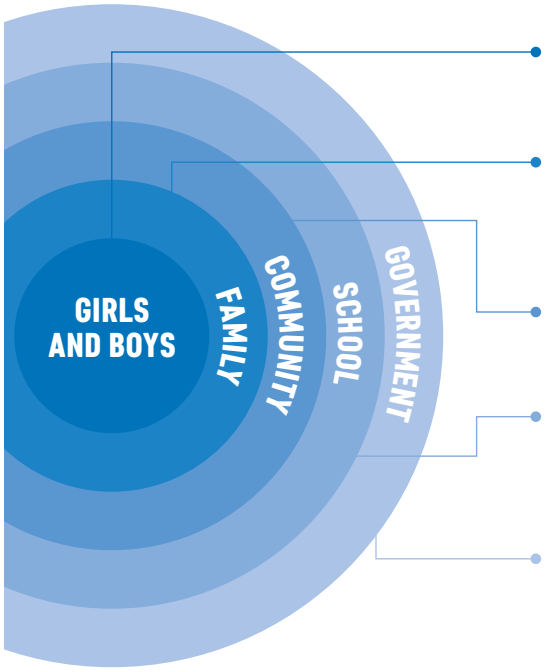
A key aspect of this approach involved advocating for the inclusion of gender considerations in state education policies. The programme collaborated closely with local authorities and education sector stakeholders to facilitate discussions on gender equity and to provide technical support for policy development processes. This engagement ensured that government decision-makers had the necessary knowledge and tools to implement gender responsive reforms within the education system. For instance, through its engagement with the Education Emergency Working Group and the Ministry of Education, the programme contributed to policy discussions on gender responsive curricula, the need for more female teachers, and the provision of infrastructure improvements such as gender-segregated toilets and disability-accessible classrooms.

Beyond policy advocacy, the programme also leveraged its involvement in sector-wide planning processes to embed gender responsive principles into broader education strategies. This included building the capacity of both local and government partners to prioritise gender equity in education reform.

THE RESULTS

The programme's multi-level approach has contributed to the initial shifts in attitudes, practices and policies, demonstrating the significant potential to drive gender transformation. By working with teachers, communities, families, students and policy makers, the initiative fostered greater awareness, participation and commitment to gender equity in education. While deep-rooted cultural beliefs and systemic barriers cannot be dismantled overnight, the programme's interventions laid the groundwork for sustainable change, helping to create a more inclusive educational environment for girls and boys alike.

IMPACT AT EVERY LEVEL



- Equip them as advocates for gender equity through life skills training, role-playing sessions, and back-to-school campaigns.
- Address attitudes and practices that perpetuate gender inequality through parenting sessions and dialogue on issues such as child marriage, gender-based violence, and the value of girls' education.
- Challenge cultural norms, suppart education, and foster a collective shift toward valuing gender equity.
- Equip teachers with gender-responsive teaching methods and challenge biases rooted in cultural norms, enabling them to create equitable and inclusive classrooms.
- Ensure the integration of gender-responsive practices into education policies and foster systemic change through capacity building and collaboration in policy development.

One of the most significant changes identified by UNICEF during the scoping mission in-country in May 2024 was the shift in attitudes towards girls' education. Additionally, the programme transformed classroom dynamics with teachers, equipping educators with the skills and confidence to create gender inclusive learning spaces. Teachers became active agents of change, ensuring that girls had equal opportunities to participate and take on leadership roles. The programme also led to a cultural shift in teaching practices as educators became more intentional about promoting gender equality.

> **"With the gender responsive pedagogy teacher training, we were able to provide a group of individuals in the communities who have within them that capacity and desire to see a change in the communities."**
> *Nigeria MYRP member interview*

At the community level, advocacy efforts started to shift long-standing beliefs about girls' education. Parents and local leaders, who had previously resisted the idea of sending girls to school, began to reconsider their views. Some even enrolled their daughters in school due to the programme's awareness-raising initiatives. For example, a father who was a community leader initially refused to send his daughters to school, but after participating in awareness sessions, he allowed two of them to enrol in non-formal education, and they are now attending school (see "Story of change" below). By engaging key community figures, such as traditional and religious leaders, the programme set a precedent for lasting change, demonstrating that education for girls was beneficial and essential for community development.

Among families and caregivers, gradual but meaningful changes in attitudes and behaviours were observed. Through parenting sessions and dialogue forums, more parents recognised the value of educating their daughters. While cultural norms take time to change, tangible progress was documented, with parents increasingly enrolling their daughters in school and participating in discussions on gender equity. In the words of an interviewee, ***"We want to break these barriers. We want to break these norms … so that we create equal access for boys and girls".*** By engaging families at multiple levels and involving respected community figures, the programme contributed to a broader cultural shift towards supporting girls' education and addressing gender inequality in the home.

With the school students, the programme saw increased awareness and advocacy among both girls and boys. Girls gained greater confidence to speak up in classrooms and actively participate in academic activities. At the same time, boys became more engaged in conversations about gender equality and their role in supporting their female peers. The combination of role-playing exercises, back-to-school campaigns and life skills sessions fostered a culture of shared responsibility, ensuring that both boys and girls contributed to creating a more equitable learning environment.

Additionally, the programme successfully mainstreamed 3,340 learners (2,007 females and 1,333 males) into formal schools after completing the nine-month Accelerated Education Programme (AEP), providing a pathway for continued learning, and reducing dropout rates among crisis-affected children.

At the policy level, one of the most significant achievements was the adoption of gender-specific provisions within education frameworks. In Adamawa State, an education policy under development incorporated a dedicated section on gender in education, marking a systemic shift towards gender responsive practices. While these policy advancements cannot be solely attributed to the ECW programme, Plan International's strong emphasis on gender transformative programming influenced these developments. This was widely recognised among government stakeholders, contributing to the prioritisation of gender equity within education policies and strategies.

Across all intervention levels, the programme's actions fostered long-term changes in attitudes, behaviours and systems. Although structural challenges remain, the initiative helped to establish the foundation for a more gender equitable education system by equipping teachers, mobilising communities, engaging families, empowering students and influencing policy decisions.

Fatima takes part in gender-based violence workshop in Gombe state

Plan International

Story of change: a community leader's journey to supporting girls' education

As part of the MYRP in Nigeria, a notable story of change emerged from a community leader who overcame entrenched gender norms to support his daughter's education. Like many in his community, this father did not initially allow his daughters to attend school, adhering to traditional beliefs that prioritised boys' education and undervalued the role of girls in formal learning.

The turning point came when the leader attended one of the programme's community engagement events. Expecting a typical gathering of men, he found a diverse group that included women, girls and boys actively participating in discussions about education and gender equality. The presence of school-aged girls and the inclusive environment challenged his preconceptions, sparking a shift in his thinking. During the event, he was invited to speak, prompting him to reflect on his role as a father and community leader in shaping attitudes towards education.

Subsequent visits by community mobilisers provided further opportunities for dialogue. These conversations reinforced the value of education for girls and the broader benefits of gender equity for families and communities. Inspired by these interactions, the leader enrolled his two daughters in the programme's non-formal education activities. This marked the beginning of their educational journey.

Today, both daughters are enrolled in formal school, continuing their education with the support of their father. His decision has not only transformed his daughters' lives but has also influenced attitudes within the community. As a respected leader, his actions have inspired other families to reconsider their beliefs and practices, contributing to a broader shift towards valuing girls' education.

This story underscores the importance of engaging community leaders in addressing structural barriers to education. By fostering dialogue and creating inclusive spaces, the MYRP programme empowered this leader to challenge harmful norms and become a champion for gender equity in his community.

Box 1. Linkages with INEE Minimum Standard domains

The Nigeria programme aligns with several **INEE Minimum Standards.** Below is an overview of how the programme reflects key INEE domains and standards, with concrete examples from implementation.

Domain 1: Foundational standards for a quality response

The programme reflects **Standards 1 and 5** by fostering community participation and designing gender responsive strategies.

For **Standard 1: Participation,** the programme mobilised local education committees, including SBMCs/CBMCs, to advocate for girls' education and gender equity. These structures played a key role in challenging restrictive gender norms and promoting inclusive education.

In line with **Standard 5: Response Strategies,** the programme developed gender responsive interventions to address barriers such as child, early and forced marriage and unions, gender-based violence and cultural norms that discourage girls' education. Activities included positive parenting sessions, teacher training in gender responsive pedagogy, and engagement with religious and community leaders to shift harmful social norms.

Domain 2: Access and learning environment

The programme aligns with **Standards 8, 9 and 10** by ensuring equal and equitable access to education, integrating protective measures and improving school facilities and services.

For **Standard 8: Equal and Equitable Access,** the programme launched back-to-school campaigns targeting out-of-school girls who had left due to economic constraints, early marriage, or security concerns. These campaigns encouraged families to re-enrol their daughters in school, while flexible learning opportunities were provided for those unable to attend formal education full-time.

For **Standard 9: Protection and Wellbeing,** the programme integrated SRGBV training to ensure safe learning environments for girls. Teachers were trained to recognise and address GBV in schools, and psychosocial support was introduced for students affected by conflict and displacement. Additionally, teachers were equipped with mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) training, allowing them to create safer and more supportive classroom environments.

The integration of MHPSS training strengthened teacher and student resilience, particularly in protracted crisis settings, ensuring that schools provided not only academic instruction but also emotional and psychological support.

For **Standard 10: Facilities and Services,** the programme contributed to enhancing student safety and hygiene through WASH sector initiatives. Schools implemented measures to secure sanitation facilities, particularly in schools which lack perimeter fencing, where passers-by had unrestricted access. By installing locks on toilets, schools improved students' sense of security, particularly for girls, fostering a safer, more inclusive learning environment.

Domain 3: Teaching and learning

The programme demonstrates **Standards 12 and 14** by improving teaching methodologies and providing continuous professional development for educators.

For **Standard 12: Teaching and Learning Processes,** the programme trained teachers in gender responsive pedagogy, helping them to integrate inclusive teaching methods into the classroom. Teachers reflected on how their own socialisation influenced classroom dynamics, allowing them to challenge gender biases and create equitable learning spaces.

For **Standard 14: Training, Professional Development, and Support,** the programme established teacher learning cycles to ensure ongoing professional development. These cycles reinforced training on gender responsive pedagogy and provided mentorship opportunities, ensuring that teachers could continuously improve their practice.

Domain 5: Education policy

The programme aligns with **Standards 18 and 19** by embedding gender responsive considerations into education policy frameworks and collaborating with government stakeholders.

For **Standard 18: Law and Policy Formulation** the programme advocated for gender responsive education policies that prioritised equity and inclusion. In Adamawa State, an education policy under development incorporated a dedicated section on gender in education, marking a systemic shift towards institutionalising gender responsive practices.

For **Standard 19: Planning and Implementation,** the programme collaborated with local authorities to integrate gender equity considerations into education sector plans, ensuring alignment with national and international frameworks. These efforts reinforced the need for sustainable financing and accountability to maintain long-term progress on gender equality in education.

CONCLUSION

The MYRP in Nigeria exemplifies a gender responsive approach to addressing systemic barriers to girls' education. Through teacher training, community engagement and student activities, it supported stakeholders to challenge harmful norms and improve educational outcomes for girls. These efforts, while impactful, highlight the need for continued investments in gender transformative practices to ensure equitable education for all.

From the outset, ECW prioritised gender equality and inclusion within the MYRP, ensuring these principles were embedded throughout programme implementation. This focus was further strengthened by setting a defined percentage of female participants within the target population, ensuring that gender parity was embedded at the project design stage.

A key factor that strengthened the programme's gender integration was its participatory and context-driven design process. The intervention strategies were developed based on consultations across various locations, allowing for localised and needs-based solutions that reflected the realities of each community. This ensured that the programme was not only technically sound but also socially and culturally relevant, increasing its acceptance and sustainability.

Despite these achievements, transforming deeply ingrained societal norms requires time and sustained effort. Barriers such as prioritising boys' education, restricting girls to domestic roles, and perpetuating harmful gender norms within communities remain significant challenges. Resistance from certain stakeholders underscores the need for continued advocacy, community engagement and policy-driven reforms to ensure that progress towards gender equality is both meaningful and sustainable.

While notable advancements have been made, achieving systemic gender transformation remains an ongoing and complex challenge. Sustained commitment, innovative programming and multi-sectoral collaboration are essential to addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit girls' access to education. Moving forward, efforts must focus on deepening engagement with communities, strengthening policy frameworks and ensuring that gender transformative strategies are institutionalised within education systems to create lasting and impactful change.