



CASE STUDY

PAKISTAN

ABOUT

The Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP) in Pakistan, funded by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and implemented between 2022 and 2024, addressed critical barriers that girls face in accessing and continuing education, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. The MYRP, implemented in the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, focused on providing inclusive and equitable quality education for marginalised boys, girls and refugee populations. The programme integrated approaches with the potential to drive gender transformation, such as Education Champions and the adapted “Sister-to-Sister” model. These approaches aim to empower girls, engage communities and create safe learning environments that promote equitable access to education. Through these approaches, the programme has also developed and implemented the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) strategy to address the unique challenges faced by adolescent girls.

THE PROBLEM

Despite Pakistan’s efforts to improve education access, girls still face numerous barriers. Social norms often prioritise boys’ education over girls’, with the latter frequently expected to assume caregiving and household responsibilities. In some areas, these norms are so entrenched that families consider it a waste to invest in a girl’s education, as they are expected to get married and relocate to their husband’s home.

Security concerns, mobility restrictions and a lack of support from families further compound the challenges faced by girls. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, for example, concerns over safety during school commutes deter many families from sending their daughters to school, especially once they reach puberty. One project leader in the region described how in some places, parents do not allow girls to participate in education **“...because when the girl is permitted to participate or go to school, they face a lot of security challenges because they’re out in the public domain. A lot of parents are not ready to take that challenge as well.”**

These barriers worsen significantly during puberty, as menstruation introduces a new set of social and physical challenges that hinder girls’ education. In many schools, inadequate or non-existent gender responsive hygiene and sanitation facilities – such as private toilets, access to water and safe spaces for adequate menstrual hygiene management – make it difficult for girls to attend regularly. According to one interviewee, in most of the schools where girls attend, **“...the girls’ washrooms are not isolated, and they are somehow mixed washrooms or the washroom facilities are not...safe as well in terms of their boundary wall”**. The interviewee said that as a result, parents remove the girls from school **“just because of the fact they don’t feel comfortable”**.

The taboo nature of menstruation in these communities also prevents open discussions. This leaves girls unprepared to manage their menstrual cycles and leads to discomfort, embarrassment and absenteeism. An interviewee added that **“girls don’t talk about menstruation issues and challenges with their elderly women. So, most of the time, they enter the menstruation period without knowing it at all. Sometimes, it comes completely uninformed. It’s a completely new area for them.”**

The reliance on unhygienic materials, like reused clothes, due to limited access to sanitary products, further contributes to health issues, absenteeism and eventual dropout. A lack of awareness about proper hygiene practices compounds this challenge. **“There is little awareness of how to keep yourself clean. There are a lot of myths about not taking a bath and not keeping yourself clean... So that creates problems, issues, fear [and] psychosocial issues among young girls,”** explained one interviewee. These misconceptions and the resulting fear exacerbate the difficulties that young girls face, impacting their health and education.



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Such cultural stigmas perpetuate misinformation and fear, often resulting in families withdrawing girls from school once they reach puberty. For instance, families in Balochistan frequently express concerns that continuing education post-puberty increases the risk of harassment, thus threatening a girl’s honour and the family’s reputation. One interviewee explained how, *“once a girl hits puberty age”*, she is considered no longer to need a male guardian. This increases the risk of getting harassed and increases fear of harassment: *“so that decreases their right to access education”*.

As a result, menstruation remains a critical and overlooked barrier to girls’ education, disproportionately affecting their ability to access and continue learning in safe and supportive environments.

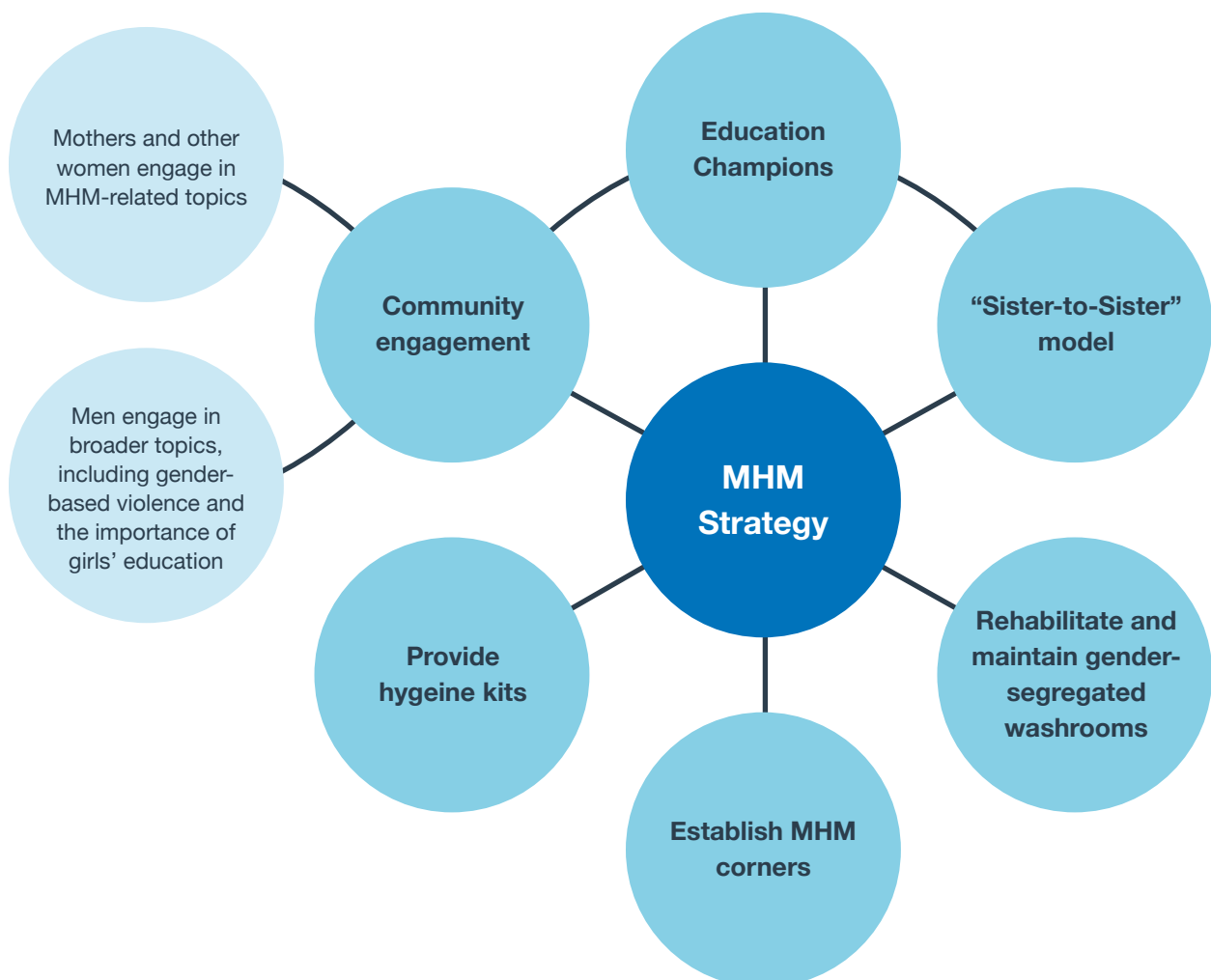
THE RESPONSE

The strategy

To address the critical barriers that hinder girls’ education in Pakistan, the programme has employed a multifaceted approach designed to foster inclusion, improve access to education and promote gender equality. Among these strategies, the **Menstrual Hygiene Management strategy** stands out as a key intervention with significant potential for driving gender transformation.

The MHM strategy is implemented through Education Champions – trained local women who are responsible for running community-based catch-up learning centres, where they serve as educators. In addition to their teaching role, they also facilitate activities for both girls and boys, and engage with community members to promote gender equality and menstrual health awareness.

Key components of the MHM Strategy



As part of the MHM strategy, Education Champions implement the “Sister-to-Sister” model, a peer mentoring approach in which they guide younger girls (“Little Sisters”) on menstrual hygiene management and personal development. Beyond mentorship, they also engage with mothers and community members to foster open discussions on menstruation and gender norms, further strengthening community support for girls’ education.

To complement these efforts, the programme integrates practical interventions, such as the distribution of hygiene kits, the establishment of MHM corners, and the rehabilitation of gender-segregated washrooms, ensuring that girls have access to essential hygiene resources and safe sanitation facilities. The following sections explore each of these components in detail.

Education Champions: The pillars of the MHM strategy

Education Champions play a crucial role in the MHM strategy by supporting girls’ education and leading interventions in both **community-based catch-up learning centres** and at the community level.

Community-based catch-up learning centres are safe and flexible learning spaces that operate in informal learning spaces established within Education Champions’ homes or those of other community members. The community and partner organisations validate these centres to ensure they are safe, accessible and secure for girls and boys. Partner organisations also continuously monitor the process within the communities to ensure the effectiveness and safety of these initiatives.

The centres primarily serve out-of-school children, helping them to catch up on missed education before transitioning into formal schools. This model provides flexibility and allows for innovative approaches, such as the MHM strategy, to be implemented in a culturally sensitive and locally relevant manner.

They are primarily women, though some men also participate. All are selected from the local community. These champions are often young women under 29 years, aligning with Pakistan’s definition of youth, with 20 per cent representing the refugee population.

To qualify as an Education Champion, candidates must be from the local or refugee community, have at least a 12th-grade education (the highest school-level grade), and possess a minimum of one year of teaching experience. Strong communication skills and a commitment to working with marginalised groups – including refugees, transgender individuals and children with disabilities – are also required.

Before assuming their roles, Education Champions receive extensive training in teaching methodologies, life skills, safeguarding and MHM. Their role is multifaceted, encompassing education, mentorship and community engagement. It includes:

- Facilitating learning sessions in community-based Catch-up Learning Centres.
- Conducting outreach to identify out-of-school girls and support their reintegration into the education system, ensuring that no child is left behind.
- Mentoring girls who attend the community-based Catch-up Learning Centres through the Sister-to-Sister Model.
- Engaging community members to raise awareness about girls’ education and menstrual health, challenging harmful social norms.

Their deep connection to the community allows them to build trust, making them particularly effective in addressing sensitive topics such as menstrual hygiene. In regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Education Champions are recognised as trusted figures, using their social standing to advocate for girls’ education and health.

To support their work, Education Champions receive a monthly payment, compensating them for their roles as facilitators and mentors, and for the use of their homes as community-based Catch-up Learning Centres. This financial support not only sustains their work but also empowers the women economically, enabling them to challenge traditional gender roles within their communities.

Sister to Sister model: Peer mentoring for adolescent girls

Another key component of the MHM strategy is the Sister-to-Sister model, a peer mentoring initiative led by Education Champions to help adolescent girls navigate personal and academic challenges. At its core, this model fosters learning and empowerment through positive female role models within the community.

As “Big Sisters”, Education Champions mentor younger girls (“Little Sisters”) who attend the community-based Catch-up Learning Centres. The Big Sisters provide guidance on MHM, support self-confidence and offer strategies for staying in school. By creating a safe and supportive peer environment, this model allows Little Sisters to openly share concerns, ask questions and receive guidance on topics they may feel uncomfortable discussing with adults.

One interviewee highlighted the impact of this trust-based approach: ***“The entire classroom comes from their neighbourhood. They know each other, speak the same language, and have a relationship of trust. So, these Education Champions mentor and counsel within their classrooms. They raise awareness about health and hygiene and, when needed, address menstrual health concerns and dispel myths.”***

Beyond direct mentoring, the Sister-to-Sister Model extends into the broader community, reinforcing the role of Education Champions not just as mentors but as advocates for social change. Through their engagement with mothers and female community members, Big Sisters help to normalise conversations about menstruation and girls’ education, breaking long-standing taboos. Their work ensures that support systems are in place at home and within the community, reinforcing girls’ ability to stay in school.

Community engagement: Raising awareness and breaking taboos

The impact of the Education Champions extends beyond individual mentoring sessions, as they take on a broader role in shifting social perceptions within their communities. Recognising that menstruation is often a taboo topic, the Education Champions expand their efforts beyond the classroom, engaging mothers and female community members in conversations about menstrual health, education and gender norms.

To facilitate these conversations, Education Champions lead informal awareness-raising activities with mothers and other women. These sessions, which are not structured courses, are held quarterly or as needed. In addition, they conduct one-on-one conversations with mothers, leveraging their trusted relationships within the community to address specific challenges or concerns related to menstruation and school retention. This approach ensures that discussions about menstruation and its impact on education are handled sensitively and effectively. When specialised support is needed, such as for medical or psychosocial issues, Education Champions refer individuals to project partners or education offices through established mechanisms.

“MHM work is exclusively handled by female champions. It is challenging to involve male champions in this area; however, we engage men in discussions on gender-based violence, child protection and safeguarding.

“[An] education champion has that kind of connection where she can even hold one-on-one sessions with mothers because it’s her own neighbourhood, where she is trusted and socially known. This gives her the outreach needed to conduct these sessions.

“How do we engage with fathers? In Pakistan, the areas where MYRP is working are highly culturally conservative. In some parts of the country, bringing men and women together is easier, but in regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, interactions must be separate. How do we engage with men – whether fathers, male family members, or community influencers – on women’s rights, girls’ education, protection or gender-based violence? We do have male Education Champions, and we also have village support groups around each non-formal school. We raise awareness, participate in the 16 Days of Activism, and conduct campaigns on gender-based violence.”

Pakistan MYRP member interview

While much of their community engagement focuses on women, Education Champions also recognise the importance of involving men in these discussions. In culturally conservative areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, reaching male community members requires a tailored approach. Discussions focus on the importance of girls' education, the role of fathers in creating safe spaces for girls and addressing community-level barriers. These culturally sensitive discussions with male community members enables the programme to foster an inclusive support system, ensuring that both men and women contribute to an environment that prioritises girls' education and wellbeing.

Complementary interventions: Strengthening MHM

Apart from the work with Education Champions, the Sister-to-Sister model and community engagement, the MHM strategy also includes the **provision of hygiene kits** containing menstrual health products, such as reusable and disposable pads, that are distributed to adolescent girls. These kits enable girls to manage their hygiene safely and comfortably. They help to reduce absenteeism caused by a lack of proper resources during girls' menstrual cycles. Informational sessions accompany distribution to dispel myths and promote healthy practices related to menstruation. Accompanying these distributions are awareness sessions that address prevalent myths, such as the belief that girls should avoid bathing during menstruation.

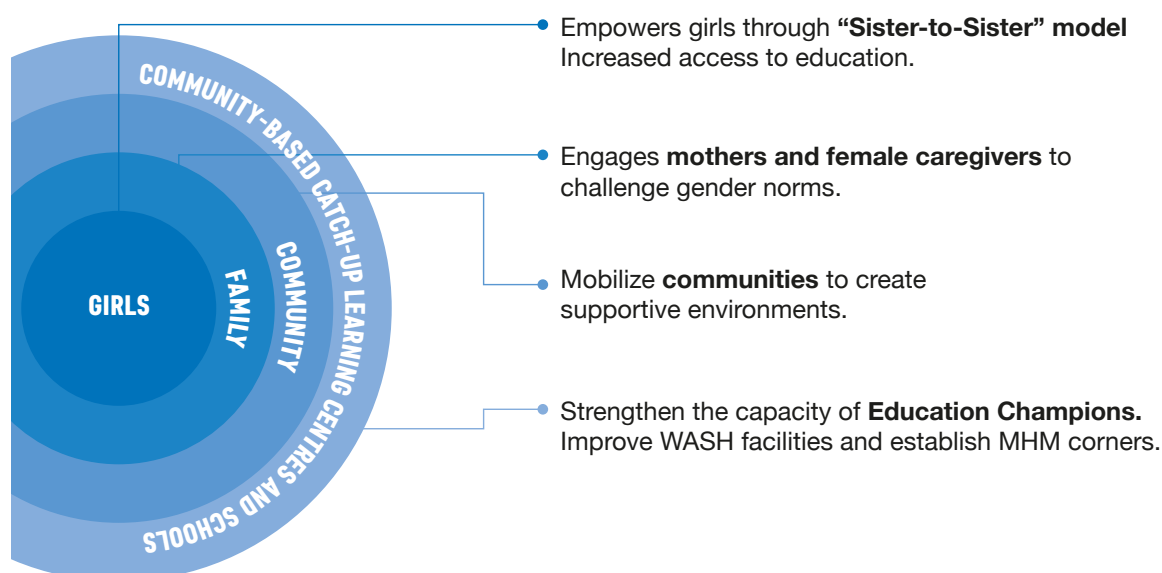
The strategy also establishes private, well-equipped **MHM corners** in schools to provide girls with a safe space to manage their hygiene during school hours. These spaces, often located within girls-only sections of schools, include sanitary products, disposal bins and access to water, ensuring dignity and privacy. Additionally, a trained focal teacher is available to guide and provide support, ensuring that this sensitive topic is addressed appropriately.

In addition, the programme prioritised rehabilitating and maintaining **gender-segregated washrooms** in schools. Together, these measures addressed critical barriers to girls' education, fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

THE RESULTS

The programme's interventions have brought meaningful improvements to educational access, daily conditions and the social positions of adolescent girls and young women. Key achievements include enhancing leadership opportunities and challenging societal norms, but sustainability challenges remain a concern. Establishing community-based catch-up learning centres, MHM corners, gender-segregated washrooms and access to essential hygiene kits significantly improved educational access while addressing the immediate needs of marginalised girls.

IMPACT AT EVERY LEVEL



Beyond meeting practical needs, the programme actively worked to elevate the **social position** of girls and young women within their communities. It built parents' confidence in sending their daughters to school by addressing critical barriers, such as unsafe facilities. The programme fostered an environment where girls were recognised as equal contributors to their families and communities by challenging entrenched societal norms and promoting the value of girls' education. One interviewee highlighted how this approach – in particular the fact that the young women Education Champions were from the refugee community – inspired that community to send their children to school.

Additionally, infrastructure improvements not only supported access but also facilitated the **retention** of girls in the education system. Another interviewee said that school enrolment had significantly improved, particularly among girls. The work on providing WASH facilities within schools helped significantly in mainstreaming girls back into education, according to the interviewee.

Despite these achievements, sustaining the impact remains a challenge. The potential cessation of funding for Education Champions poses a serious risk to the continuity of these efforts. Additionally, transitioning girls from informal to formal schools remains a significant challenge, particularly as they reach adolescence. Child marriage, dropout rates and ensuring sustained attendance are ongoing concerns. One interviewee explained: **“To ensure that the goals are mainstreamed into schools, formal schools, but to ensure ...some mechanism that they stay in school, that's a bit of challenging at the moment... especially when the girls are above the age of 13, you know when they enter their teenage [years].”**

A crucial achievement of the programme has been **strengthening the agency of the female Education Champions**, fostering leadership, respect and agency within their communities.

This has had a transformative effect within their communities. Through earning an income and gaining professional recognition, these women enhanced their decision-making power within their families and took on leadership roles in local matters. Their financial independence both supported their personal growth and shifted community perceptions about the roles and capabilities of women.

Education Champions have not only become role models for adolescent girls but have also driven broader social change. By mentoring girls and advocating for education, they encouraged families to prioritise schooling and challenge cultural stigmas, including those surrounding menstruation. However, the financial independence of the Education Champions was directly tied to the programme's funding. If the funding ceases, payments to Education Champions will likely end, jeopardising the sustainability of this impact and the progress made in supporting women and fostering community change.

“ Education Champions' lives are turned around. They are getting jobs within their homes in a safe environment. They are earning, and that earning has helped them increase their voice and agency [...] their leadership positions in the community, which further inspires the community to send children to school because these girls are from the refugee community itself [...] when the community sees that these girls are getting paid while they are doing something within their homes.

“ Education Champions inspire other girls to join, and they, you know, the girls want to become teachers or the families want their daughters to come across too. So ... what I strongly feel is that this model has not only helped the students but the teachers [education champions] as well. ”

Pakistan MYRP member interview

Furthermore, through the Sister-to-Sister Model, the programme **strengthened the agency of adolescent girls** by equipping them with the knowledge and skills to manage their menstrual hygiene confidently. It also enhanced their leadership abilities, decision-making power and self-confidence. These initiatives created a supportive environment where girls could openly discuss their challenges, seek guidance and develop the skills needed to navigate barriers to education. Many girls participating in the programme expressed ambitions to pursue leadership roles, inspired by the Education Champions.

In addition, the programme explicitly **addressed the role of gender norms** in limiting girls' access to education and their ability to manage menstruation with dignity. It did so by identifying harmful social norms, such as the prioritisation of boys' education over that of girls and the stigmatisation of menstruation, as critical barriers to be addressed. These norms were challenged through targeted education and awareness campaigns to foster an environment where girls' education was equally valued and supported. Open dialogues about menstruation, a previously taboo topic, were initiated, helping to normalise the subject within communities. These discussions encouraged girls to ask questions, seek support and overcome stigma. One interviewee described how tackling the myths about menstruation ***“has been surprising that it has been received very well. [They start] to speak about it, but even then, it has really created an impact, and the girls are coming out asking questions ... if they've had any experiences of any physical problems or anything they also come out to the Education Champions.”***

Community mothers and women are also recognised as key stakeholders in shaping household attitudes towards menstruation and education. Through training and awareness sessions, women are encouraged to view menstruation as a natural process and to support girls in continuing their education during puberty, fostering a culture of understanding and encouragement.

Moreover, the programme also actively engaged boys and men in conversations about gender equality, highlighting the importance of girls' education and their role in creating supportive environments for girls. Nevertheless, limited resources and space to conduct comprehensive community mobilisation remained a challenge.

“ We need to have, you know, comprehensive resourcing around community mobilisation and also on social norm change because the communities we are working [with] are coming from a very strong patchy local mindset. Unfortunately, there was no dedicated budget for that. So that's kind of kind of somehow restricted our scope and scale of work in that area. ”

Pakistan MYRP member interview



Ria, 17, and Shifla, 15, in front of the new school wash block

Box 1. Linkages with INEE Minimum Standard domains

The implementation of the MHM strategy involved the application of specific INEE minimum standards. Below is a brief overview of how these domains and standards are reflected in the actions carried out as part of this strategy. In certain domains, the foundational elements that informed the design of the strategy are given.

Domain 1: Foundational standards for a quality response

The programme enhances **Standards 2, 5 and 6** by implementing a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

For **Standard 2: Resources**, the programme identifies and mobilises community assets such as Education Champions, local spaces for catch-up learning centres, and Village Support Groups. These resources are strategically used to create safe and inclusive learning environments, while also incorporating MHM practices. This ensures sustainability and local ownership by leveraging existing community strengths.

In line with **Standard 5: Response Strategies**, the programme's MHM strategy addresses barriers to girls' education, such as cultural taboos, inadequate menstrual hygiene facilities, and safety concerns. By integrating practices like gender-segregated washrooms and the distribution of hygiene kits, the programme ensures that girls have access to safe and hygienic facilities. Additionally, awareness sessions challenge societal norms that marginalise girls, fostering equitable access to education in a culturally sensitive manner.

To fulfil **Standard 6: Monitoring**, the programme conducts regular assessments of MHM-related activities, including the distribution of dignity kits and the effectiveness of MHM corners, ensuring responsiveness to evolving needs. Education Champions also play a key role in monitoring participation at community-based catch-up centres, ensuring that no child is excluded and that programme objectives are met effectively.

Foundation stones: The strategies implemented in the project were deeply rooted in leveraging **pre-existing structures and partnerships**, which provided a strong foundation for its success. One of the key enablers was the collaboration with organisations such as the Pakistan Alliance for Girls' Education (PAGE) and other local NGOs that already had established and trusted relationships within the communities. These connections allowed the programme to build credibility, gain access and foster effective outreach and engagement.

The project further leveraged the influence of **key community members**, such as grandmothers and women leaders, who played significant roles in family decision-making. By engaging these trusted figures, the programme was able to influence behaviours, challenge existing norms and encourage families to prioritise girls' education. These stakeholders were instrumental in convincing families to send their daughters to school, thereby creating a more enabling and supportive environment. The programme also capitalised on **community structures**, such as village support groups and parent-teacher committees (PTCs). These groups, already active in some areas, served as platforms for mobilising and engaging both male and female community members.

Domain 2: Access and learning environment

The programme aligns with **Standards 8, 9 and 10** to improve access and create a safe learning environment.

For **Standard 8: Equal and Equitable Access**, it prioritises interventions that address gender-based barriers, such as the establishment of community-based catch-up centres. These spaces were carefully chosen in collaboration with the community to ensure safety and proximity to children's homes.

In compliance with **Standard 9: Protection and Wellbeing**, the programme ensures that catch-up centres are safe and approved by the community and partner organisations. These centres are located near children's homes to minimise safety risks. Additionally, Education Champions are trained in safeguarding, reporting and following up on protection violations, and addressing gender-based violence. The rehabilitation and maintenance of gender-segregated washrooms and the establishment of MHM corners further enhance the safety and wellbeing of students.

For **Standard 10: Facilities and Services**, the programme rehabilitated washrooms, ensuring they are gender-segregated, hygienic and well-maintained. These efforts directly address critical barriers to education for girls, providing them with safe and private facilities.

Domain 3: Teaching and learning

The programme strengthens **Standards 12 and 14** through targeted training and resources.

For **Standard 12: Teaching and Learning Processes**, Education Champions were equipped with methodologies and materials developed collaboratively by partner organisations. These tools enable them to deliver effective and culturally sensitive educational activities within community-based catch-up centres.

Under **Standard 14: Training, Professional Development, and Support**, Education Champions participated in comprehensive training sessions before implementing activities. These trainings covered menstrual health management, life skills, safeguarding, teaching methodologies and inclusion strategies for children with disabilities. Champions also developed monitoring and administrative skills to manage their centres effectively, ensuring a high-quality learning environment that promotes gender transformative education.

Domain 4: Teachers and other education personnel

The programme supports **Standards 15 and 16** by ensuring fair recruitment and supportive working conditions.

For **Standard 15: Recruitment and Selection**, Education Champions – primarily young women from local communities – were selected through inclusive processes that reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, as detailed in the selection criteria.

For **Standard 16: Conditions of Work**, Champions received compensation for their work, with clearly defined roles that recognise their contributions as facilitators, mentors and community leaders. This support not only reinforced their commitment but also empowered women to challenge traditional gender roles and assume leadership positions within their communities.

CONCLUSION

The Pakistan MYRP demonstrates how a programme that was not initially designed to be gender transformative can effectively incorporate promising gender transformative strategies. From the outset, Education Cannot Wait prioritised the inclusion of gender equality and inclusion within the MYRP, providing policies and guidance to ensure that these principles were embedded throughout the programme. However, the highly conservative context of the communities and limited understanding or resistance from certain stakeholders meant that the programme was framed as gender responsive rather than fully gender transformative.

Despite these challenges, the programme successfully integrated approaches with significant potential to drive gender transformation, such as the Education Champions and Sister-to-Sister models. These approaches were supported by key design elements, including the appointment of a Gender Lead Organisation (GLO) within the consortium. The GLO played a vital role in assessing gender responsiveness, driving course corrections and ensuring gender considerations were central to programme implementation.

Although the programme was not explicitly framed as gender transformative, it was designed with a strong gender focus that informed every aspect of its implementation. For example, Outcome 5 of the programme expressly targeted girls and adolescent girls, focusing on improving their enrolment, retention and learning outcomes.

A dedicated output and budget for the MHM strategy further demonstrated the programme's prioritisation of girls' needs. Output 5.4, which provided girls and adolescent girls with menstrual health and products, directly addressed a key educational barrier, ensuring that they felt safe and supported both at school and at home. The explicit budget allocation for this output reinforced the importance of MHM as a central component of the programme and enabled the mobilisation of necessary resources for its successful implementation.

While these initiatives achieved notable results, transforming deeply rooted cultural and societal norms in highly conservative communities requires time and sustained effort. Challenges such as norms that prioritise boys' education over that of girls and confine girls to domestic roles are not easily overcome. As one interviewee noted, even some partners resisted these shifts, highlighting the need for continued advocacy and collaboration to promote gender equality.

While notable progress has been achieved, the journey towards systemic gender transformation remains a complex and ongoing challenge. Achieving meaningful and lasting change requires sustained commitment, innovative strategies, and strong collaboration and partnerships across all sectors to address the structural and cultural barriers that continue to hinder gender equality.

“I think it's a long process. It's a huge effort because it's somehow there in the belief system, in the norms and, you know, prioritising boys over girls. Then... considering girls as only something who have to get married and then, ...no need to get into education, no need to take part in decision-making, no need to have their own careers. So, I think this is embedded even... in our very educated societies as well. So, on the partners' front, I think we really, really face that.”

Pakistan MYRP member interview