

Disability Voices paper (June 2024)

Disability Inclusive Education

“Disability is not inability”: Listening to adolescent girls with disabilities in Zimbabwe



Consortia partners:



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Disability-inclusive education for marginalised girls

Worldwide, girls face many challenges in accessing an education. For girls with disabilities, gender barriers to education are even more amplified by disability-related discrimination and stigma. Often, the long-term exposure to layers of marginalisation heavily impacts their self-esteem and leaves them vulnerable to an internalised set of negative beliefs about their own abilities and potential. This means girls with disabilities are more prone to dropping out of school, achieving limited learning gains, and making poor school and life transitions.

The **Supporting Adolescent Girl's Education (SAGE)** project in Zimbabwe supported 13,460 marginalised adolescent girls (10-19 years old) to go to school, including 689 girls with disabilities alongside married girls, young mothers, and individuals belonging to certain religious and ethnic minorities. This five-year project targeted multidimensional support to meet the girls' learning needs alongside facilitating engagement with their wider community to improve awareness and understanding of the benefits of an inclusive education for all.

The SAGE learning model was developed around three interlinked components: (1) providing high-quality **accelerated teaching and learning (ATL)** in literacy and numeracy, (2) **champions of girls' education (GoGE)**, and (3) enabling access to an integrated **skills outreach training programme (ISOP)**, all provided within **safe and inclusive learning environments**.

In this paper, we hear from girls and young women with disabilities who participated in SAGE. They describe the positive impact the programme has had not only on their learning outcomes and skills development but also on their self-efficacy, confidence, and their sense of place within the community.

1. Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL)

The Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL) component focused on providing out-of-school girls with high-quality, accelerated learning in literacy and numeracy through 88 Community-Based Learning Hubs (Hubs). Community educators received training in disability inclusive, gender-responsive pedagogy. Over the course of the project, more than 75% of SAGE learners improved their literacy and numeracy scores, with an average SAGE learner showing 3 to 4 grade levels of improvement in their foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Inclusive Learning

Participants valued the inclusive and supportive learning environment created through SAGE, and the use of learning materials that met their needs. Girls with disabilities reported the positive effects of inclusive teaching methods and how the non-discriminatory approach enabled them to progress in their learning:

"She [Community Educator] was very accommodating; she would make sure that everyone in the class understood what she would be teaching before moving forward." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"We were taught that when we teach girls with disabilities, we mustn't discriminate against them but treat them the way we teach the rest of the learners." – Community Educator

"I could not see the board clearly. She [the Community Educator] would always ensure that I sat in the front row, and patiently explained a concept until I understood." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"These (inclusive learning materials) helped a lot as it made our learning easier, and we felt much loved as girls with disabilities." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"I have also learned how to read Braille. I can now use my fingers to read since I am blind." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"It was easy because they [the instructors] were using simple examples that we could understand easily; for example, if they asked us to do a poultry project, they could explain every stage until the final stage of selling the chickens, which was different from formal schools [where] they could just rush things, but at SAGE they were taking us step-by-step." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"At SAGE they were very patient with us and no one was beating or laughing at us when we failed to answer or pronounce something like what happens in formal schools." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"Let's say we have a child with disability, we were taught on how to handle the child, for instance we have a blind child, what are we expected to do especially when the child comes to school for the first time, what are we supposed to do so that the child feels welcome and learn together with others and these include orientation and show the child where the toilets are, the offices and everything." – Community Educator

Assistive Technology

Girls with disabilities also received assistive technology and reported the positive impacts this had on their attendance as well as their day-to-day activities:

"They (CBM) assessed Florence's needs and prescribed special shoes. We have already observed improvement in how she walks. Now that she has these shoes life is going to change. Florence will be able to walk to school with other children." – Grandmother of SAGE learner with disabilities

"At SAGE I received assistance with regard to wheelchairs. My damaged wheelchair was repaired. This was a great help because there was a time when my wheelchair was in a state of disrepair. At that time I could no longer attend SAGE classes. When it was repaired I continued with my classes. If I have any difficulties with my wheelchair I inform the people at SAGE and they assist me." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"Life became easier after enrolling in SAGE as I now walk using a cane. I can make my way to school and go to the well on my own. Using my stick, I am able to go wherever I wish to go on my own without assistance." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"I received a wheelchair from SAGE. I needed a wheelchair because my feet would hurt when I walked long distances. I was incapacitated. SAGE also gave me a pair of spectacles. I can now read what is written on the chalkboard. And I can complete all my written work in my exercise book." – SAGE learner with disabilities

2. Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE)

Girls and boys participated together in community-based support sessions to improve their self-esteem and life skills. Together, they explored issues such as Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), gender rights, and economic empowerment. The activities also included the facilitation of a men's group and intergenerational dialogues to foster community support for girl's education.

Confidence Building and Stigma Reduction

Participants reported increased confidence and self-efficacy, but SAGE also successfully decreased the wider stigma girls with disabilities faced within their communities:

"CoGE sessions opened my eyes, and now I can even see a brighter future ahead." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"Before SAGE I would separate myself from others. I felt that I wouldn't fit in with others. At SAGE, I learned that I did fit in with others. I did not experience any discrimination." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"Now that I have attended SAGE, people in the community and in my family view me differently. Some thought I could not achieve anything in life. SAGE has given me a hand up. Through SAGE people now see that I can achieve anything in life." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"Even the community values me for the beadwork that I do. People from the community come to buy my bags and chickens from the chicken project that I started." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"I realised that Kudzai was a hearing-impaired girl who managed to re-enrol in school via SAGE since she now had a sign language assistant. She also got determined to open up her own hairdressing shop to help fellow people with various disabilities proving that "disability is not inability". – SAGE learner

"People from around the neighbouring village were laughing at me, saying you're going to learn Grade 1 stuff; SAGE won't get you anywhere you are better off getting married than wasting your time going to learn silly things. They would say nothing will come out of it. Now they want their daughter to come and join, they realised that SAGE was actually impacting us with knowledge and skill." – SAGE learner with disabilities.

Gender Rights and Empowerment

Girls with disabilities also powerfully described how the SAGE programme brought discussion of gender rights and gender-based violence into the open, resulting in an improved sense of empowerment and self-determination:

"I didn't know about sexual abuse; the sessions opened my eyes, and now I can tell my husband if he is abusing me. CoGE educated me." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"As a girl with disability, I learned that some people would try to take advantage of me. I was told that I shouldn't remain silent or have low self-esteem and to stand up for myself. I learned that I was an equal human being." – Martha, SAGE learner with disabilities

"Now I know my rights will not be abused, or my rights cannot be violated because I know where to report if there are cases of abuse, for example, sexual violence." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"When I mean that saying as a girl child I can stand up I mean that I can fight for myself. For my rights." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"Also, the issues of sexual violence and gender-based violence – these are the issues we would always face in the community but without knowledge of where we would report but now, we have been enlightened we now know how to deal with these issues, thanks to SAGE." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"I can share the knowledge I have gained through the sessions and help them understand their rights and how to report any abuses or violations." – SAGE learner with disabilities

3. Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP)

Through the Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP) girls were given access to skills training by local master craftspeople. The community-based vocational training programme not only increased livelihood opportunities for the girls, but 86% of surveyed girls also found ISOP to be the most useful part of SAGE and 55% reported an increase in income after participating in ISOP, even in a poor economic climate.

Income-generating activities

Girls with disabilities who participated in ISOP described how skills acquired in the ISOP training helped them start small businesses and enabled them to generate income:

"I can now braid hair and earn an income." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"I learned how to make bags at ISOP. I make bags using beads then I sell the bags. Sometimes I swap the bags for chickens with which I started a poultry business." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"My dream is to use the cooking skills that I have learned and start a catering business." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"They (the sessions) were very easy to follow; even the skills training they could take us step-by-step and everyone managed to make her own skirt and even those who couldn't bake, when they completed the course, they could do it well." – SAGE learner with disabilities

"Within the modules, we were reading about women who were drivers, and we were actually amazed that even women can be drivers though they did not bring that course during the skills training. This led me to choose upholstery since it is a male-dominated industry, and I am managing it now." – SAGE learner with disabilities

Box 1: Transition Experience of a Girl with Disability

Winnet resides in a rural community in the Manicaland region's Mutasa District in the village of Chikuku. She continues to live with her parents and her three brothers. She participated in the SAGE project and had the chance to participate in the Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP). She spends most of her time in the carpentry shop, completing her apprenticeship under the guidance of a reputable and experienced carpenter in her community. Winnet had difficulties interacting with others because of her extreme stammering; people frequently didn't listen to her. When she first heard about SAGE, she was concerned about how her peers would accommodate her. **“When I started attending ATL and CoGE lessons, my life started to change for the better,”** said Winnet. She was grateful for the chance to participate in the SAGE project. She was unable to read and write effectively before SAGE. She found it challenging to read texts, especially those written in English. She said that after taking ATL lessons, she can now read anything, including text messages written in English. She emphasised that ATL lessons helped to develop her literacy and numeracy skills.

In addition, Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP) has strengthened her household income, improving their livelihoods at the household level. She said, **“Life was so difficult for me before SAGE; I could not afford to buy basic things, lotion, and even sanitary pads, but now I can buy my toiletries and help around the house due to carpentry skills obtained through SAGE. Since finishing ISOP, I have produced a bed and kitchen unit and sold them; the money was useful for supporting my household. I thank SAGE and teachers for their patience and support.”** She is currently attached for six months at a local carpentry shop, and after her attachment, she expressed her interest in opening her own carpentry shop. Her supervisor at the carpentry shop indicated that she is dedicated to her work, and they have appealed to CBM to buy her a tool kit comprising of an electrical circular saw, plain, rotor, jigsaw, and grinder.

Source: SAGE Most Significant Change Stories, Plan International

Conclusion

SAGE Zimbabwe successfully used a multidimensional approach to tackle the barriers that kept girls with disabilities out of school and developed strategies specifically tailored to improve the learning outcomes and confidence of marginalised girls. This included training teachers in disability-inclusive pedagogy to foster inclusive and safe learning environments. It integrated skills and vocational training alongside literacy and numeracy, to further girls' self-efficacy, and open up improved livelihood options. It also tackled stigma head-on and sought community engagement both with boys, and across generations, to shift attitudinal barriers and foster a more conducive social environment for girls to stand up for themselves and take their place within their community.

Listening to girls and others who participated in the programme, we heard strong testimony to the inherent value of creating inclusive learning environments, where girls with

disabilities feel safe to learn, ask questions, and share information, to improve their education and life opportunities.

"Before I joined SAGE, I had no aspiration, no hope, especially as a girl with disabilities who had dropped out of school in Form 1. I never thought I would do something or become someone better. Now I have dreams and hopes, and I believe I can achieve them. In terms of communication, I have greatly improved. I can now speak English better, numeracy I can now add, subtract, or even multiply, which now helps me even as I would want to count money or change from the shops, which is a good thing." – SAGE Learner with disabilities

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Additional quotes are taken from a series of videos funded by CBM UK, that showcased the experiences of girls with disabilities involved in the SAGE project. This video series can be viewed on the CBM UK website at [Girls in school: five years of disability inclusive education in Zimbabwe - CBM \(cbmuk.org.uk\)](https://www.cbmuk.org.uk/girls-in-school-five-years-of-disability-inclusive-education-in-zimbabwe)

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[Picture description: SAGE learner sitting in her wheelchair working at a computer, Zimbabwe]

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