

CBM UK Project Evidence Brief #5

Meeting the Education Needs of Girls with Disabilities

Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE), Zimbabwe



Consortia partners:



Funder: UK International Development



Overview

The Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE) project in Zimbabwe supported 13,460 girls to go to school over a five-year period. The initiative emphasised both girl-focused and community-focused interventions within a cost-effective and gender transformative approach to inclusive education for marginalised girls in Zimbabwe (see red Box for detail).

SAGE included specific and multidimensional support to meet the learning needs of girls with disabilities. Targeted efforts to identify and address disability-specific barriers were fundamental to success. These included ensuring learning spaces and learning materials were accessible, meeting individual needs for assistive technology and other reasonable accommodations, working to develop teachers' skills in inclusive teaching methods, and ensuring appropriate sensitisation of communities and families.

These simultaneously addressed learning barriers for girls with disabilities alongside engaging communities and other education stakeholders to value inclusive girls' education, and created a more supportive learning environment for girls with (and without) disabilities. SAGE understood the importance of meaningful engagement with organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and strong alignment to government policy and structures to maximise sustainability.

Introduction

Girls face many challenges in accessing an education worldwide. For girls with disabilities, gender barriers to education are compounded by additional disability-related discrimination and stigma. Long term exposure to multiple layers of discrimination and stigma impacts self-esteem and girls with disabilities are vulnerable to an internalised set of negative beliefs about their own abilities and potential. In Zimbabwe, girls with disabilities, alongside married girls, young mothers, and individuals belonging to certain

Title: Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE)

Location: Zimbabwe

Timeframe: 2018 - 2023

Partnership between: PLAN International, CBM Global Disability Inclusion, Open University, AWET and ECONET

SAGE focused on seven sub-groups of the most marginalised girls in Zimbabwe, aged 10-19, including young mothers, girls with disabilities, and members of the Apostolic community.

SAGE created 88 community-based learning hubs, trained 697 volunteer community educators across 11 districts in 6 Provinces, and reached 13,460 girls in total, of which 689 (5.14%) were girls with disabilities.

Girls were provided with a weekly programme of accelerated learning in literacy, numeracy and English, and support in essential life skills (with boys). Teaching was delivered using gender responsive pedagogy. Bespoke, contextualised curriculum, learning materials and a formative assessment model were key elements in meeting girls learning needs.

Skills training (fencing, hairdressing, furniture making, brick moulding etc.) were delivered by local craftspeople.

Community-focused interventions maintained wider community engagement throughout the project.

Together, these girl-focused and community-focused components created a conducive and inclusive learning environment for the girls.

religious and ethnic minorities, are more prone to dropping out of school, achieving limited learning gains, and realising poor school and life transitions¹. It is particularly challenging for girls with disabilities to access disability-inclusive settings within formal education, employment and skills training.

The project was therefore designed - in alignment with the Government of Zimbabwe's Non-Formal Education Policy (2015) - to tackle gender and disability barriers to learning. The SAGE learning model was developed around four interlinked, multidimensional components:

- **Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL):** out-of-school girls were provided with high-quality, accelerated learning in literacy and numeracy, in Community Based Learning Hubs (Hubs) by (volunteer) community educators trained to use inclusive, gender-responsive pedagogies.
- **Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE):** CoGE facilitators, trained in disability inclusion, delivered regular sessions which supported girls and boys to improve their self-esteem and life skills in the Hubs. Community-based men's clubs and intergenerational dialogues supported this work.
- **Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP):** enabled access to skills training in which girls were trained by local skilled crafts people in a community-based vocational training programme to increase livelihood opportunities for the girls, including in traditionally male dominated trades.
- **Safeguarding:** activities to create safe and inclusive learning environments.

Girls' attendance rates were susceptible to fluctuation, affected by multiple external contextual challenges (the Covid19 pandemic, cyclone Anna, as well as high inflationary economic shocks), with the potential to impact across all four components. However, SAGE was commended for its ability to navigate and adapt to these wider contextual challenges, for example by setting up satellite hubs which were situated closer to the girls' homes and therefore more accessible and safer for girls to travel to. These smaller hubs also highlighted the importance of peer support and brought closer integration e.g. students would notice when their peers were not attending and could check on them, bring them their homework etc. This Brief should be read with this challenging context in mind to fully appreciate the impressive results achieved for girls with disabilities in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

This Project Evidence Brief summarises the SAGE Endline Evaluation, supplemented by reflections from CBM Global Zimbabwe. The Brief presents outcomes specifically related to girls with disabilities and the interventions related to meeting their learning needs. The evaluation drew from a range of data sources and analytical approaches, qualitative and quantitative data from both primary and secondary sources, including SAGE learning assessment data, transition monitoring data and research, plus surveys, key informant interviews and focus groups with SAGE girls, heads of households, parents and caregivers.

¹ Genesis Analytics Limited (2023)

What the evidence tells us

1. SAGE successfully improved learning outcomes for girls with disabilities, as well as their life skills and confidence, but the picture is complex.

- Girls with disabilities achieved significant improvements in both literacy and numeracy.

The greatest **improvements** included girls with disabilities alongside those who had never been to school, married girls and young mothers. SAGE enabled these girls to rise above the barriers placed in the way of their education to significantly improve their literacy and numeracy.

However, average learning **outcomes** for girls with disabilities were not as strong as those for girls without disabilities². This was partly due to lower starting points and driven by specific disability sub-groups. Meeting the learning needs of a wide range of disabilities, from learners with physical and visual impairment to those with speech impairment, intellectual impairment and learning disabilities, or multiple disabilities, was complex. Nonetheless great strides were achieved in learning progression³ and the individual, girl-level impacts should not be underestimated - for a girl that could perhaps not even hold a pen previously to be attending regularly, have established friendships and be able to write her name, these are significant successes.

- Targeted support enhanced girls' self-efficacy, their understanding of their gender rights, as well as confidence and ambition for their own futures.

Self-efficacy is complex for girls with disabilities for whom years of discrimination and stigma have generated low self-esteem and internalised negative beliefs about their abilities and potential. 60% of the girls with disabilities also came from within the Apostolic community, some of whose beliefs further intersect with disability-related stigma and discrimination to deepen the girls' sense of dependence on others.

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"I can now speak English better, numeracy I can now add and subtract, or even multiply, which helps me as I would want to count money or change from the shops, which is a good thing"
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SAGE learner with disabilities, Mutare Rural District.

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"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"
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SAGE learner with disabilities, Mutare Rural District.

² At the end of the project, being a girl with a disability is associated with achieving a literacy score that is 10.06 points lower than not being a girl with a disability (p.152).

³ A 102.68% Literacy Score improvement and a 67.89% Numeracy Score improvement was achieved among girls with disabilities from baseline to end point assessment.

Measures of empowerment showed signs of improvement although remained low⁴, while gender knowledge attitudes and practices significantly improved among girls with disabilities⁵ – from a very low starting point. Girls enthusiastically reported the positive impacts of this on their lives.

- **Girls with disabilities acquired skills and knowledge to transition into non/formal education, skills training, better-paying, dignified income-generating activities including employment or self-employment.**

Girls with disabilities reported a high transition rate (73%). SAGE successfully supported these girls to acquire further skills training and employment upon graduation including employment traditionally associated with men (e.g. carpentry).

Transitions such as these can never be divorced from wider contextual factors. Evidence of a limited transition into formal schooling potentially reflects past ill-treatment or a lack of disability-specific support available within the formal education system as well as having to cover the cost of school fees, uniform etc. Other contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Zimbabwe’s challenging economic context likely impacted the success or depth of girls’ transition. For example, limited finance available to the girls remained a hurdle to putting their new skills to use to earn a decent living from self-employment.

2. Group-based learning was effective, alongside targeted disability-specific learning support

Learner-centred, active, inclusive and gender-sensitive teaching methods – including group work (cooperative learning), role play, discussions and peer to peer learning, were greatly appreciated and helped learners, including girls with disabilities to

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“The issues of sexual violence and gender-based violence - these are issues we would always face in the community but without the knowledge of where we would report but now, we have been enlightened we now know how to deal with these issues.”

SAGE learner with disabilities, Chimanimani District
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“This led me to choose upholstery since it is a male-dominated industry, and I am managing it now.” SAGE learner with disabilities, Mutare Rural District.
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“They were using simple examples that we could understand easily, for example if they ask 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 - they could just rush things - but at SAGE they were taking us step by step.” SAGE learner with disabilities, Hotsprings, Chimanimani District.
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⁴ Girls with disabilities show the lowest mean self-efficacy score and the lowest proportion of girls that score high on the Self-Efficacy Index.

⁵ Girls with disabilities have shown a significant increase (60%) in the Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (SRHR KAP) scores, married girls (-8%) and young mothers (-6%) have shown a slight decrease in the SRHR KAP scores. (p.66)

significantly improve their learning and skills. Targeted interventions included securing supportive equipment like wheelchairs and other assistive devices, adaptations to hub spaces to ensure accessibility, and linking hubs with organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), who were able to support these activities.

SAGE supported the professional development of volunteer Community Educators (CEs) to explicitly respond to the learning needs of girls with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. This guidance and inclusive pedagogy training were particularly valued by CEs. They credited this professional development with helping them reach and support diverse learners with disabilities, including providing targeted support for girls with hearing and cognitive impairments.

3. Adapted learning materials enabled access for disabled learners.

Teaching and learning materials were adapted into Braille and enlarged print to support girls with disabilities. Over 80% of the girls with disabilities surveyed, felt the learning materials utilised during learning sessions were adapted to their needs.

A few girls requiring braille support reported a lack of CEs' confidence in supporting braille users which somewhat limited the effectiveness of these adapted learning materials in ATL lessons.

Materials were developed to also dispel long-held negative perceptions of learners with disabilities and gender roles and norms for girls and young women. These impactful learning materials included stories that showcased girls with disabilities who had gone on to acquire skills and consequently attain employment upon graduation or girls who had gone on to acquire employment in jobs traditionally associated with men.

**“Those girls who have never been to school they enjoyed the games, and some activities linked them together with those who had disabilities - they liked those activities.”
Community Educator, Mutoko District.**

“I could not see the board clearly. She would always ensure that I sat in the front row, and patiently explained a concept until I understood.” SAGE learner with disabilities, Chimanimani District.

**“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.”
SAGE Community Educator, Chimanimani District.**

“These helped a lot as it made our learning easier, and we felt much loved as girls with disabilities.” SAGE learner with disabilities, Chimanimani District.

4. Community attitudes towards girls with disabilities have improved.

Girls with disabilities reported a shift in community attitudes to better recognise their contributions to their own households and communities. Neighbours, for example, sought their advice on enrolling their daughters in SAGE, and even on possible career paths for daughters.

Locating learning hubs within the community allowed community members to directly witness the programme's progress, and initiatives such as community graduations enabled communities to celebrate achievements and positive outcomes for learners traditionally side-lined, like girls with disabilities.

Through Men's Clubs and Intergenerational Dialogues, men were encouraged to adopt more positive gender attitudes and mobilised to support and protect girls including those with disabilities. Topics covered included girls' rights, gender roles and responsibilities within households, disability inclusion and rights, decision making at household and community level, harmful practices, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, among others.

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"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, Chimanmani District
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"They have accepted that it is also important to send the girl child to school as she is equal to the boy child. However, the problem is with the elderly, who still feel it's not worth sending a girl child to school. This generation still feels that the boy child cannot be seen doing household chores. When they see a man helping his wife with chores, they will say, "Oh, my son has been bewitched." There is a need to educate them further regarding these issues."
SAGE learner with disabilities, Chimanmani District.
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Lessons from SAGE

- **A multi-dimensional approach is essential to tackle the barriers that keep marginalised children out of school**

Recognising and responding to complex learning needs among children with disabilities and other marginalised groups requires strategies specifically tailored to their learning needs as well as broader characteristics, such as their religious identity, disability, motherhood, age and ethnicity.

Creating the right learning environments is essential. Girls with disabilities need to feel safe to learn, ask questions and share information to further their learning outcomes.

Training teachers (or in the case of SAGE, volunteer community educators) to confidently deliver gender-sensitive, **disability inclusive pedagogy** is a key priority.

Tailored disability support, such as adapting spaces to be more accessible, providing assistive devices, and ensuring learning materials are appropriate for learners' needs, make it possible to open up access to learning opportunities.

Underlying issues such as discrimination, deep-seated negative beliefs and stigma which hold back girls with disabilities' learning must be tackled head on.

Community sensitisation and disability awareness is instrumental in creating positive and enabling learning environments for marginalised girls. SAGE showed the importance of also including men and intergenerational discussions to drive societal shifts of this kind.

- **Inclusive pedagogy is a vital component of teachers' continued professional development.**

Volunteer Community Educators (CEs) were at the core of the SAGE success in accelerated teaching and learning. In conjunction with teacher training colleges SAGE trained over 200 CEs on child-centred learning pedagogy. They were provided with practical training on how to apply inclusive and participatory learning methods within the community-based learning hubs. This gave them the tools required to reach and engage learners with different educational backgrounds and learning levels.

Many CEs were already trained teachers, yet the disability inclusion training was new to them and an extremely valued component. Lesson observations confirmed that more than 90% of CEs employed these approaches. They credited their ability to effectively reach girls with disabilities in teaching sessions to this combination of professional training and support.

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"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, Hotsprings, Chimanimani District.

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"She 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, Chimanimani District.
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- **Sustainability is achieved through strong government ownership, and alignment with the wider education system.**

SAGE aligned with and complemented the Government of Zimbabwe's policies and priorities, notably the national Non-formal Education (NFE) policy (2015). Co-creation at design stage, and collaborative development of learning materials with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) helped alignment with the Government of Zimbabwe's guidelines whilst also incorporating learning from previous MoPSE programmes. This helped ensure materials were contextualised and easy to understand. The Ministry of Youth (MoY) formalised the ISOP component, conducted vocational competency assessments at the end of ISOP and provided certificates to successful participants. The certificates were recognised by the labour market and as a result, many girls reported being able to apply for jobs that required vocational certifications.

SAGE provided important implementation evidence and contributed to government dialogues to refine policy, where tested materials and teaching approach could be rolled-out across the country through current or future NFE interventions.

Recommendations

For inclusive education programmes:

- **Meaningfully engage persons with disabilities and their representative organisations from the design phase and through the whole project cycle.**

Systematic and early engagement of OPDs is important for inclusive education programming. Inputs from people with disabilities during the programme's design phase should be intentionally prioritised. For example, improved learning outcomes for girls with intellectual and learning disabilities would be better supported through their inclusion in the design phase and in Community Educator (CE) training. OPDs taking an active role throughout the project can be transformative by providing peer-led approaches. Options include training people with disabilities to be CEs, facilitators, or champions - role modelling leadership and wider opportunities for inclusion. SAGE made a concerted effort to forge partnerships with OPDs to help sustain support for the girls with disabilities after the programme ended (e.g. wheelchair maintenance).

- **Skills training must be fully inclusive and incorporate business and financial lessons.**

Each girl received 32 hours training in the integrated skills and outreach programme (ISOP), but feedback showed that this needed to be doubled for girls with disabilities. Girls should be facilitated to take forward their learning in vocational training colleges but for that to happen, these should be adapted to improve accessibility.

In addition, the skills training component should align with wider economic, employment and environmental contexts. Business and financial lessons, for example, would deepen market relevance and better enable girls' successful progress into jobs and productive livelihoods. The subsequent phase of SAGE will equip girls with climate change and health awareness sessions to build their resilience to potential shocks.

- **Stronger support is needed for girls with disabilities wanting to transition back into the formal education system.**

Girls with disabilities faced challenges in transitioning back to school, despite eligibility for government Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) which provided some financial support. Although community attitudes towards educating disabled children improved, limited support for them within the formal school environment remained a barrier (lack of adapted materials, limited teacher capacity in inclusive pedagogy, peer bullying, costs of fees, uniforms and stationery, etc.) and remain unsolved problems that need consideration.

For scaling of the SAGE model:

- **Finance is needed to scale up a successful inclusive education model.**

SAGE provided a strong evidence base and proof-of concept for the implementation of almost all provisions of the Zimbabwe NFE policy. SAGE also demonstrated excellent value for money across most areas. In principle, this makes it easier for government to now identify the financing requirements and find the resources to continue delivery of this

successful community-based model. A clear path to financing is needed, either internally or with development partners, to scale up and achieve full NFE policy implementation.

Conclusions

Inclusive education requires a comprehensive approach. This means a combination of targeted efforts to address disability specific barriers and a broader strategy for embedding disability awareness and community support to address stigma and discrimination. The creation of inclusive learning environments with trained teachers enables girls with disabilities to access learning. Collectively these initiatives help build the self-belief needed for girls to thrive and to transition into the next stage of their lives.

References

Genesis Analytics Limited (2023) "[Endline Evaluation of the Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education \(SAGE\) Programme in Zimbabwe](#)", part of the Girls Education Challenge, Leave No Girl Behind window, May 2023.

Supplementary evidence from girls with disabilities themselves: [Girls in school: five years of disability inclusive education in Zimbabwe - CBM \(cbmuk.org.uk\)](#)

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This evidence brief summarises the findings of the Endline Evaluation as well as learnings from CBM Global Disability Inclusion over the course of the project. The Endline Evaluation was conducted by Genesis Analytics and Research Methods International between October 2022 and May 2023. The core consultant team was supported by a team of 25 enumerators and 2 field managers in Zimbabwe and we would like to express sincere gratitude to all participants in this evaluation who gave their valuable contributions and time.

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Finally and most importantly we would like to thank all the girls who participated in SAGE.

For further information please contact Advocacy@cbmuk.org.uk

[Picture description: SAGE learner reads using Braille learning materials, Zimbabwe]