



What Influences Girls' Learning Journeys in Somalia?

Learning Brief

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Girls'
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Challenge





Background

What drives improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes in extreme contexts?

Some factors have been repeatedly identified as affecting literacy outcomes across different contexts: Teacher training; time on task; access to relevant reading materials; the language of instruction.¹ Are those drivers sufficient to shift learning outcomes for ultra-marginalised girls in conflict-affected contexts though? What other factors are affecting their learning journey? And are there differences between the factors influencing the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills?

Realizing SDG4's promise of 'relevant and effective learning outcomes for all girls and boys' requires a deeper understanding of the factors affecting girls' learning, particularly in the contexts where the largest gender learning gaps are observed. With a persistent gender gap in both access and learning, Somalia remains one of the world's most challenging contexts for advancing girls' education. The combination of conflict, a large nomadic population, limited service provision and teacher capacity, aggravated by traditional gender norms negatively affecting girls, results in major challenges for development practitioners and Ministries of Education (MOEs) to implement impactful programs.

In this scenario, the *Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition* (SOMGEP-T) project, a large-scale initiative funded by FCDO's Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) and USAID in 2017-2022, conducted a longitudinal study to better understand drivers of education marginalization and learning. Operating on contested areas severely affected by drought and displacement in Northern-Central Somalia, SOMGEP-T sought to understand the combination of factors affecting adolescent girls' access, learning and transition, using the findings to design and progressively adapt a complex intervention responsive to their needs.

SOMGEP-T's research helped the project to understand the differences between subgroups of marginalised girls: pastoralists, girls with disabilities, older adolescents who had never attended

¹ Gove, A. and Cvelich, P. 2011. Early Reading: Igniting Education for All. A report by the Early Grade Learning Community of Practice. Revised Edition. Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute, p.15-16

school before. This brief will reflect on the findings of SOMGEP-T's research and on their implications for programming in Somalia and contexts with a similar history of conflict and/or pastoralism.

SOMGEP's impact on learning outcomes

As SOMGEP-T was being implemented, a quasi-experimental evaluation assessed the impact of its intervention vis-à-vis a comparison group with similar characteristics. The evaluation has also assessed if the exposure to specific components of the intervention was associated to changes in learning outcomes over time. Evaluation results indicated that SOMGEP-T's intervention led to sharp improvements in literacy and numeracy skills among the most disadvantaged girls in rural and remote areas, in relation to the comparison group.

After two years of programming – immediately before the COVID crisis - the poorest girls participating in SOMGEP-T had significantly higher gains in numeracy in relation to the comparison group.² The project's final evaluation indicated that girls who had zero scores or very low scores at the baseline in SOMGEP-T schools had much higher gains than comparison girls performing at the same levels at the baseline. **For the group who had scored zero at the baseline, the gains in Somali literacy scores were 6 percentage points higher among SOMGEP-T girls, in relation to those in the comparison group.**³ Among the group with scores below 15% at the baseline, the gains in Somali literacy were 9 percentage points higher among SOMGEP-T students, in relation to the comparison group.⁴

SOMGEP-T's intervention had an outsized impact among girls from marginalised subgroups. Pastoralist students who were out-of-school at the baseline increased their literacy scores by an average of 24.5 percentage points, compared to 14 percentage points among the comparison group.⁵ Among pastoralist girls, the numeracy scores of SOMGEP-T students increased by 21 percentage points, compared to 17 percentage points among the comparison group.⁶ SOMGEP-T students with disabilities increased their literacy scores by 30 percentage points – twice as much as the 15 point gain among the comparison group.⁷ In a similar manner, SOMGEP-T students with disabilities increased their numeracy scores by an average of 20 percentage points, compared to 15 points among the comparison group.⁸

What is contributing to improve Somali girls' learning outcomes?

Factor 1: Boosting girls' confidence and social networks

Among the components of SOMGEP-T's intervention, the development of girls' social-emotional skills has had the largest impact on girls' learning outcomes. Female students participating in Girls' Empowerment Forums (GEFs) were linked to mentors trained by the MOEs' Gender Focal Points and participated in activities designed to develop their leadership skills, growing their voice, vision, self-confidence, organisational and decision-making skills. Girls had access to psychosocial first aid and worked collectively to design and implement activities to address issues affecting girls in their school/community.

After two years of programming, girls participating in Empowerment Forums had increased their overall learning score by **16 percentage points over and above the comparison group.**⁹ At the

² Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.69; p.71; p.79

³ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.72

⁴ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.72

⁵ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.292

⁶ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.290

⁷ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.287

⁸ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.286

⁹ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.123

final evaluation, girls participating in Empowerment Forums had increased their overall learning score by 7 percentage points over and above the comparison group, despite facing the combined impact of COVID-19 school closures, conflict and drought.¹⁰



The participation in Empowerment Forums was associated to increased self-perceptions of leadership (measured through the Youth Leadership Index) and “learning to learn” skills.¹¹ It was also associated to **higher attendance levels – a seven percentage point difference.**¹²

Despite having similar socio-economic characteristics in relation to non-participants, Empowerment Forum members seemed to have acquired skills that enabled

them to break traditional norms restricting girls’ aspirations and voice. Girls participating in Empowerment Forums also seem to have increased their social capital within the community by engaging in activities that supported other girls, including coaching struggling peers and following up on cases of absenteeism and dropout.¹³

These results demonstrate the major return on investment of social-emotional skills development in girls’ education interventions. This is particularly true in settings where traditional gender norms restrict girls’ participation in class and expected roles in society. It is likely that the implementation of similar activities at scale in Somalia would maximise learning outcomes for marginalised girls at a relatively low cost and in a sustainable manner, given the already existing capacity at the Ministries of Education and regional/ district levels. The development of social-emotional skills is particularly crucial to boost learning outcomes among historically marginalised subgroups, such as pastoralist girls and girls with disabilities, for whom limited agency and the lack of support networks pose major barriers to learning and retention.

Factor 2: Community-led shifts towards supportive social norms for girls

At the project’s baseline, findings indicated that mothers were the key decision-makers on their daughters’ education. The prioritisation of household investment on boys’ education and of household chores over girls’ attendance were identified as major underlying causes of girls’ non-enrolment, absenteeism and poor learning outcomes. The negative impact was particularly high among girls whose mothers had never attended school. In response to the findings, the project worked extensively with mothers, using literacy courses and savings groups as platforms for discussions on girls’ education. The project has also supported religious and community leaders to facilitate dialogues on girls’ right to education from an Islamic perspective.

At the final evaluation, the proportion of girls who ‘agreed a lot’ that they receive the necessary support to stay at school and learn had increased by 20 percentage points.¹⁴ The proportion of caregivers

¹⁰ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls’ Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.79

¹¹ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls’ Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.250; p.255

¹² Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls’ Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.124

¹³ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls’ Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.123-124

¹⁴ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls’ Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.253

who considered girls' education worth investing on increased by 12 percentage points, compared to 6 percentage points among the comparison group.¹⁵ Positive attitudes from caregivers – investment in girls' education, perceptions of equal value of education for girls and boys and listening to girls when making decisions about their education – were associated to higher learning scores for girls.

Implementers working in this space may therefore consider embedding activities to facilitate social norm change into programming from the start. In addition, social norm change activities should be linked to practical interventions to empower mothers socially and economically, boosting their capacity to envision different roles for girls, reduce household workload and offset the opportunity cost of having girls attending school. SOMGEP-T's final evaluation demonstrated that girls whose mothers had participated in savings groups as a platform for social change had higher learning gains than the comparison group.¹⁶

Factor 3: Supporting participatory school management

Attending a school where the Community Education Committee (CEC)¹⁷ was active was associated with higher learning scores for girls. In particular, having a CEC that monitors teaching quality and having a school management plan were associated to higher average learning scores (5-8 percentage points above average).¹⁸ The final evaluation showed that the presence of a CEC tracking student and teacher attendance was linked to higher learning outcomes for girls.¹⁹

SOMGEP-T worked extensively with schools to mobilize CECs where those did not exist. In locations where the CEC already existed, SOMGEP-T provided extensive training to members to prepare school management plans fostering gender equity and social inclusion; address child protection issues; follow up on attendance and dropout; and improve recordkeeping. After two years of project implementation, 53% of the schools supported by SOMGEP-T had CECs monitoring teaching quality, compared to only 36% of the comparison schools.²⁰ Among the schools supported by SOMGEP-T, 73% had a school management plan, while only 41% of the comparison schools had one.²¹

SOMGEP-T's results reflect the power of participatory accountability mechanisms in schools, particularly when having a focus on enhancing equity and inclusion. With relatively limited investment, CECs are not only improving accountability and effectiveness in the education system, but also serving as advocates for girls' education and inclusive practices in their communities and addressing negative social norms affecting enrolment and attendance. System-level investments to continue to build CEC capacity are likely to have similar positive impacts at a minimum cost and in a sustainable manner.

Factor 4: Making schools more girl-friendly

The project's baseline identified a number of school-level factors affecting girls' enrolment, attendance and learning outcomes, including the extremely low number of female teachers, lack of adequate WASH facilities, menstruation-related absenteeism, harassment and discriminatory classroom practices.

SOMGEP-T has worked extensively with CECs, education officials and religious leaders to promote

¹⁵ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.267

¹⁶ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.78

¹⁷ Community Education Committees are a participatory management structure recognized by the Ministries of Education in Somalia. Formed by parents, community leaders and school staff, and in some cases with the participation of religious leaders, CECs are responsible for the day-to-day management of the school; for monitoring the quality of education and addressing issues related to teacher and student absenteeism; facilitating the enrolment of out-of-school children; and raise funds for the school.

¹⁸ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.125

¹⁹ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.77

²⁰ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.200

²¹ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.200

the recruitment of female teachers; and during its first phase (2013-2017) supported pre-service training for female teachers. Evaluation findings showed that girls attending schools with female teachers had much higher gains in numeracy (a 7.4 percentage point gain over and above the comparison group) and financial literacy (a 15.1 percentage point gain over and above the comparison group) scores.²² The presence of female teachers was also associated to a gain of 3.3 percentage points over and above the comparison group on Somali literacy.²³

SOMGEP has also supported Gender Focal Points at the Ministries of Education in Somaliland, Puntland and Galmudug to review policies related to teacher employment and development from a gender perspective, identifying and addressing issues preventing/ limiting the recruitment and retention of female teachers. While the number of female teachers in the Somali education system remains dramatically low, CECs have paid the salaries of female teachers in 22% of the schools supported by SOMGEP-T, while only 10% of the comparison schools reported the same, showing a clear shift in support for recruiting women.²⁴



SOMGEP-T has not only improved school infrastructure, but also worked with CECs, GEF mentors and Gender Focal Points to address girls' harassment and improve menstrual hygiene management. Having toilets for girls was associated with larger improvements in financial literacy, numeracy and Somali literacy scores. Those gains were exacerbated in locations where privacy walls had been constructed around girls' toilets, resulting in gains in financial literacy scores 13.3 percentage points over and above comparison schools; 5.5 percentage points over and above comparison schools for numeracy; and 3.7 percentage points over and above comparison schools for Somali literacy.²⁵

The results illustrate how the investment in girl-friendly environments in schools has a direct impact on learning outcomes. Large scale investments in hiring female teachers and making schools safer and more welcoming to girls are likely to have a transformative impact on their

enrolment, retention and learning outcomes, particularly in conflict-affected contexts where traditional gender norms often pose a major barrier to girls' education.

Factor 5: Teacher skills and positive classroom practices

Teacher training, focused on inclusion and student-centered practices, seems to have positively impacted ultimate learning outcomes, especially as the use of child-centered practices was associated to higher learning outcomes.²⁶

²² Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.91

²³ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.91

²⁴ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.155

²⁵ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.91

²⁶ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.125

In SOMGEP-T schools, teachers were provided with a comprehensive training package which included areas such as included student-centered practices; gender-transformative and inclusive classroom management; child protection; identification and support of different types of disabilities; and psychosocial first aid. Following each training, the project provided on-site coaching, working with Regional and District Education Officers and MOEs' Gender Focal Points. The final evaluation showed that during the last two years of intervention, coached teachers had increased the use of active teaching methods 6.4% over and above comparison teachers.²⁷ The use of formative assessments was also associated to marginally higher learning outcomes that could be attributed to project intervention.²⁸ After two years of intervention, 39% of the teachers in the schools supported by SOMGEP-T could show evidence of use of formative assessments, while only 24% of the teachers in comparison schools did the same.²⁹



SOMGEP-T also supported teachers through subject-specific trainings on numeracy skills development, literacy teaching and English as a second language. In particular, teachers received extensive coaching on how to support struggling students to address gaps in literacy and numeracy skills. As described above, the final evaluation showed that the project had a major impact on improving learning outcomes for the worst performing girls at the baseline, demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach.

On the other hand, the results also show that teachers continue to struggle to deliver more advanced content in numeracy and English. The finding illustrates the challenges faced by rural and remote schools, which often hire teachers with limited or no formal training. The results highlight the need for system-level interventions to expand the number of minimally qualified teachers and operationalise the use of qualification frameworks, in addition to investments in in-service training.

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Recommendations for future programming

SOMGEP-T's results demonstrate how targeted investments in addressing the specific barriers faced by marginalised girls can have a transformative impact on learning for the most vulnerable students, even in conflict-affected contexts facing multiple crises. In the Somali context, only 28% of the rural girls and 1.7% of the pastoralist girls are attending class³⁰, and the education system is faced with the daunting task of quickly expanding enrolment with limited resources to support a large number of first-generation learners to succeed in school. The SOMGEP-T model offers an effective pathway to include marginalised students, particularly girls, boosting their likelihood of learning and transitioning into upper grades or dignified employment.

Most importantly, SOMGEP-T's results show the importance of associating 'traditional' education programming, such as improving teaching skills and classroom environments, with interventions to address underlying causes of poor learning outcomes among girls - boosting girls' agency and shifting negative social and gender norms contributing to exclusion and educational failure. 'Soft' interventions, such as the development of social-emotional skills and boosting equity and inclusion through CEC actions, are having an outsized impact on girls' learning outcomes, illustrating the potential for their incorporation as a standard practice within the Somali education system. These interventions are not only effective in the short-term, but also hold the potential for building a critical mass of advocates for equal, inclusive education within their communities – in other words, the foundations of sustainable change.

²⁷ Consilient (2022) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Endline Evaluation Report, p.212

²⁸ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.125

²⁹ Miettunen, J., Peterson, B. & Robert, S. (2020) Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project – Transition: Midline Evaluation, Round 2, p.224

³⁰ Directorate of National Statistics, Federal Government of Somalia. The Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020, p.38



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