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Policy paper

Leaving no girl behind

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The UK government aims for all children with disabilities to get the skills they need to lead fulfilling lives. Children with disabilities in lower-income countries are least likely to be in school and learning. They are the last to enter school, and more likely to leave before completing primary or secondary education. Children with disabilities often face challenges including negative attitudes toward disability, inaccessible schools, and low-quality teaching that does not meet their needs.

For girls with disabilities, these challenges are intensified by additional gender-related barriers, including higher risks of sexual violence. Girls with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to child marriage, enabling parents to ‘pass the burden’ to another family.

Case study: Mimi in Ethiopia

Mimi, from Ethiopia, was unable to attend school due to her disability. With the support of the CHANGE project she is joining an Accelerated Basic Education programme to get her into the classroom and making friends. Mimi is one of the 152,000 girls with disabilities supported by the Girls’ Education Challenge programme.

People In Need’s CHANGE project aims to support up to 31,000 girls at school over 5 years. The project increases enrolment, attendance and learning by providing safe and inclusive alternative learning programmes, and training teachers in child and gender sensitive education.

Fifteen-year-old Mimi lives in Belaya Kebele. Mimi is the youngest child in her family. After she was born, she became paralysed and is unable to walk. She was unable to attend school because of her disability.

“ I was always curious about the outside world. The only friends I had were my family. My peers didn’t want me to be their friend. Yet, all these things hadn’t kept me from dreaming about school. I daydreamed about going to school and becoming a successful, educated businesswoman.”

People with disabilities often face more challenges in rural areas than urban areas. They are less likely to attend school, be employed or get better health services. The

CHANGE project works to bring vulnerable girls back to school. Mimi was one of the girls that the project supported. The CHANGE project arranged for a qualified teacher to teach and provide psychological support for Mimi and girls with similar conditions. Community Action Groups also worked to change the community's attitude toward girls' education, including towards those who live with a disability.

“ Now, I have received a crutch and solar lamps from the CHANGE project. In the coming year, I'll join the level one Accelerated Basic Education programme. I'm so excited to make friends and attend my education in the classroom like any other girl.”

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Girls with crutches provided by the Girls' Education Challenge CHANGE project in Ethiopia. Credit: People in Need.

Programme case study: Syria Education Programme

The UK's Syria Education Programme supports girls like Lily, who has Down's Syndrome, and missed out on school due to conflict and instability in Syria. Between

July 2022 and June 2023, the Syria Education Programme supported 392 students with severe disabilities with special education support.

Lily, 9, from Idleb, has Down's Syndrome and mental health needs. She missed out on her early school years due to issues exacerbated by conflict and instability. Lily's mother credits staff at the Manahel Special Education Centre for the transformation in her daughter who is impressing everyone with her academic and social progress after a year at the school.

"I am proud of her achievements so far. Together, with her remarkable capabilities, we will achieve what others believe is impossible." – Lily's teacher.

Case study: Boke in Kenya

As a young mother with a disability, Boke's prospects were limited. However, through the support of Leonard Cheshire's Girls' Education Challenge project, Boke did not have to drop out of school. This gave her with greater opportunities for a more independent future, providing for her family.

Leonard Cheshire's project increased the educational and vocational opportunities of 2,260 girls with disabilities in Kenya. The girls were helped to transition through primary into secondary school, vocational training and self-employment, or adult education and home learning programmes. The project also built positive attitudes and community support for children with disabilities.

Aged 17, Boke was considering dropping out of school forever. Not only did she face barriers and stigma in her community because of her visual impairment, but she was also pregnant. Her community was shunning her. At the time, Boke's education had already been disrupted by the COVID-19 school closures. The Leonard Cheshire project provided vital support for her to continue learning at home, including learning materials, reading glasses, and regular home visits for psycho-social support.

At a time when Boke was very vulnerable to leaving the education system forever, the project played an important role in helping her back into school while raising a young child. The project team facilitated counselling and psycho-social support for Boke throughout her pregnancy and following the birth of her son. And, after they had helped Boke manage these massive changes, Boke was convinced that she could return to school.

Now, Boke is back in school and keeping her dreams alive. She shares parenting duties with her mother, and the school has given her permission to go back home at lunch and break time to breastfeed her son. And she believes that neither being a child with a disability nor a young mother should prevent anyone from accessing an education.

“ It was very hard to face my fellow learners. But after getting support, I saw sense in going back to school and not putting my life on hold.”

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Boke catching up with her friends breaktime at school. Credit: Leonard Cheshire.

Country case study: Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, the UK supported reforms to legislation to protect every girl's right to education, including if they are pregnant or have become young mothers.

Community attitudes play an important role in many countries, especially toward pregnant girls or young mothers. UK programmes like Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) in Sierra Leone ensure men and boys are included in conversations about gender-related barriers to education. EAGER

developed a national and local radio programme and drama series with BBC Media Action. Over 100 radio episodes were created that show the world through the eyes and experiences of adolescent girls and discuss issues and barriers affecting girls. One male caregiver who listened to the radio series said:

“ The drama teaches us that some parents push their daughters into early marriage because they want financial support ... This is the norm in most areas, but it is not right.[\[footnote 1\]](#)”

Programme case study: Leh Wi Lan

School interventions to improve the quality of teaching and school safety have come together with good impact in the Leh Wi Lan Programme in Sierra Leone.

Watch a video about this programme:

[Imagine a girl in 2015 \(YouTube\)](#)

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1. [Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient \(EAGER\)](#) (Accessed 11 July 2023) ↵

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