

Contents

ALIGN download - Girls' clubs, empowerment, programmes and gender norm change.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Empowerment through participating in clubs.....	1
Attitudes and norms.....	3
Toolkits.....	6
Bibliography.....	8

ALIGN download – Girls' clubs, empowerment programmes and gender norm change

Introduction

Girls' clubs (and mixed-sex youth development clubs) are becoming increasingly common as a route to girls' empowerment, as they help young people build skills, knowledge, self-confidence and social networks. These groups typically aim to achieve these goals by providing non-formal education in small, often single-sex peer groups, most commonly in a community setting. The groups are led by a trained mentor and, increasingly, in schools settings, by teachers. In both cases, it is hoped that the mentor can act as a role model to encourage girls to envision a better future. There is strong evidence that these clubs contribute to positive gains in knowledge, skills and self-confidence, and a smaller body of evidence that they contribute to leadership skills and can be a springboard for civic action.

But how far do they contribute to gender norm change? Does the focus on individual empowerment limit their contribution to broader norm change in society? What aspects of programme design or implementation contribute most to these clubs becoming agents of change? There is considerable diversity among girls' clubs and youth development clubs, and this thematic guide will unpack the evidence on different types of clubs, different programme designs, and different activities and approaches to engaging with the wider community. It will also outline what is known about running programmes of this kind at scale, and about whether they are cost-effective.

Types of programme design and activities

Clubs and development programmes that aim to promote girls' or adolescents' development are varied in form. Some are project-based and run for a few years as funded activities (this is the group about which most evidence is available); others are longer-term initiatives, run by schools, religious organisations or voluntary associations, without significant external funding. More recently, social impact ventures hoping to benefit adolescent girls or youth more broadly have set up groups and clubs to enable girls to access their products and services, but also to build skills, knowledge and self-efficacy. Some have a strong feminist outlook, working only with girls and with an explicit empowerment agenda; others run parallel groups for boys, or mixed sessions to promote dialogue between boys and girls on gender issues. There is also significant variation in the age groups targeted: some are open to all adolescents while others focus on a narrower age group (older or younger). Those targeting older girls typically focus on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and vocational training, while those targeting younger girls focus on understanding puberty and menstruation, and (in some cases) on financial literacy and helping girls to save.

Almost all programmes provide life skills education, focusing on health (including information on puberty and bodily changes), SRH and hygiene. Most also include opportunities to develop and practise communication skills, as well as content on gender equality, while some also cover legal rights and financial literacy. As well as non-formal education, many programmes offer other activities such as encouraging savings, vocational training, catch-up basic education and, in a few cases, sports. While most programmes focus on participants' personal development, some – either by design or on the initiative of the young people involved – lead to community outreach activities such as street theatre.

Empowerment through participating in clubs

Girls' clubs and adolescent development programmes generally conceptualise empowerment in broad terms, recognising that there are a number of building blocks that contribute to individuals developing

agency. The most commonly measured of these are changes in self-confidence and changes in knowledge. Although these do not of themselves necessarily constitute changes in norms, they lead to changes that can have substantial impacts on gender norms.

School and community-based clubs both aim to help young people, and girls in particular, develop the confidence to speak out, through opportunities to practise and hone communication skills. This can take the form of presentations, debates, dramas and role-plays, or other fora that involve speaking in front of others and engaging others in discussions. In some cases, girls have used these skills to negotiate for reductions in their workloads, to continue or re-start education or to delay marriage (Jones et al., 2015). Others have taken these skills to a community stage, through awareness-raising dramas intended to change individual attitudes and community norms on issues such as child marriage and sexual harassment (Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2015). In many contexts, girls speaking out – whether in their families or in public – represents a challenge to accepted norms, of deference to older people in general and men in particular.

Community-based clubs and extra-curricular school clubs have a good track record in increasing participants' knowledge, particularly of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and girls' legal rights, as a review by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme (Marcus et al., 2017) shows. This increased knowledge is a building block that girls can draw on to help them manage menstruation, in their sexual relationships, and when facing challenges to realising their own rights or other people's. This knowledge can also challenge taboos about what children (girls and boys) should know at different stages of their lives (e.g. the idea that unmarried girls should be ignorant about sex), and what can be discussed between parents and children, or between partners and spouses. Several evaluations – of Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents (DISHA) (Kanesathasan et al., 2008), Go Girls! (Underwood and Schwandt, 2011), Learning Games (Gray and Chanani, 2010), Better Life Options (BLO) (Acharya et al., 2009), and Planning Ahead for Girls' Empowerment and Employability (PAGE) (Nanda et al., 2017) – report greater parent-child communication on issues around puberty and SRH. It is also clear from qualitative studies that parents and children alike see this improved communication (on these and other topics) as a positive outcome of programme participation.

While non-formal education on topics such as bodily change, SRH, gender equality, legal rights and financial literacy is common to most programmes, a smaller group of clubs support girls to continue in, and/or join (or re-join) formal education. As numerous studies have shown (Marcus and Page, 2016; Sperling and Winthrop, 2016), secondary education is the single most important factor contributing to gender norm change. Although the mechanisms through which this takes place have not been fully unpacked, it is likely that they include increased knowledge, exposure to new ideas, role models and peers from other backgrounds, and increased economic opportunities after leaving school.

School-based clubs have the potential to contribute to academic attainment, exposure to new ideas, increased aspirations and strengthening of peer networks. Evaluations tend to focus on broader educational improvement programmes, of which these clubs are a part, but find positive changes in educational outcomes, non-cognitive outcomes such as aspirations, and in participants adopting more gender-egalitarian attitudes (Marcus and Page, 2016). Community-based programmes offering catch-up education to girls who had missed out on schooling, as part of the broader set of activities offered by clubs, have also been successful in enabling out-of-school girls to get basic qualifications and, in some cases, to transition into the formal school system. The effects of these programmes on gender norms have not been examined, but it is plausible that they may contribute to norm change via the broader effects of education.

Community-based programmes targeting older girls often include vocational training components, while programmes across a range of age groups support financial literacy and savings. These activities aim to contribute to girls' overall empowerment by enhancing their financial self-reliance, and by boosting their status in their households as economic contributors. There is also evidence – despite the overall mixed record of vocational training programmes – that when well designed and implemented, they have been

successful in achieving those aims. As with other outcomes, these programmes provide some building blocks for independent economic activity, which can challenge stereotypes and norms about girls' and women's economic activity. There is also some evidence of reduced reliance on risky practices such as transactional sex (Acharya et al., 2009; Rushdy, 2012; Botea et al., 2015; Erulkar et al., 2006).

Finally, club participation can help young people develop stronger social networks. These can be particularly important to girls who do not attend school and thus have little exposure to the world outside their families; importantly, these networks include role models and increased connections with supportive adults in the community, as well as peers. Strengthened social networks can be important for girls who need support to challenge gender norms, and a safety net to fall back on if – for example, by refusing an unwanted marriage – they need a safe place to go to. They can also provide a context in which new ideas and practices become normalised.

This brief overview of evidence has shown that despite their focus on individual girls' empowerment, there are a number of ways in which girls' clubs and youth clubs can contribute to norm change. We now look at their more direct effects on attitudes and norms.

How participating in clubs can change attitudes and norms

Most studies generate evidence of changes in individual attitudes rather than evidence of shifting norms, in the sense of shared expectations about what people should do and think. This is probably because it is easier to ask about and record changes in individual attitudes than in people's perceptions of what others in their community think is acceptable (and is not). That said, evidence of changes in what girls think and do, and in what other people or groups in their community think and do, alongside evidence of changing practices, can be seen as reasonable proxies for changing norms.

Individuals' attitudes, perceptions of other people's views, and the prevalence of particular practices can all give an indication of gender norms. We therefore outline key evidence and resources on girls' clubs and youth clubs that focus on change in these three main areas.

1. Evidence on changes in girls' attitudes

Studies that probe girls' views of gender equality in the abstract, with questions such as 'are men/women boy/girls of equal value?' or 'when resources are scarce, should families prioritise boys' education or girls' education?' generally find strongly egalitarian attitudes. Evaluations of girls' clubs and related programmes have found that participants tend to be less accepting of gender-based violence, less likely to circumcise future daughters, and more likely to believe that young people themselves should decide when and whom to marry (Marcus et al, 2017).

School-based and community-based clubs have both led to girls adopting more gender-egalitarian views, with some evidence of more consistent changes in school-based clubs, though the sample is notably smaller. In community-based clubs, changes in attitudes have generally been stronger in programmes that offered other activities (e.g. vocational training, catch-up education) alongside gender awareness education. Why this should be the case is not entirely clear, but it may be that the wider range of activities on offer built commitment to the programme and thus increased girls' exposure to more egalitarian views. The strongly positive responses from girls and parents to activities they perceive as useful (such as vocational training or learning about issues such as hygiene or legal rights) provides some support for this view.

Where particular practices are strongly entrenched – in many cases, upheld by religious or cultural traditions – changes are less marked, indicating the limitations of a single-strand approach to changing attitudes and norms. For example, an evaluation of the Ishraq programme in Upper Egypt found that even after more than two years of participation, 78% of girls still approved of gender-based violence in certain circumstances (compared with 90% in the control group) (Brady et al., 2007). A combination of non-formal education, community dialogue or awareness-raising events and mass media can reinforce messages and lead to greater changes in attitudes and norms (Marcus et al, 2017).

2. Evidence on changes in other people's attitudes

Although young people, and particularly girls, are the primary target group for club-based programmes, it is increasingly recognised that unless programmes also work with parents and community 'gatekeepers', changes are likely to be limited, reflecting the power other people have to make decisions that affect young people's lives (and girls in particular). Programmes thus increasingly hold outreach and education sessions for parents and other community members and, in some cases, have provided a series of classes (for example, the New Horizons curricula that Ishraq used with the brothers of participating girls in Egypt, and classes for husbands of girl participants held by Biruh Tesfa in Ethiopia (Sieverding and Elbadawy, 2016; Erulkar et al, 2013). As well as building support for the programme through awareness-raising sessions, these classes and community events have focused on promoting gender equality more broadly, including girls' right to education and to freedom from gender-based violence, and a more equal share of domestic duties.

Some programmes have also undertaken community dialogues or awareness-raising campaigns to change gender norms. Although these activities with other stakeholders have not always led to significant changes in attitudes – one example being Ishraq, where girls' brothers hardly changed their views – in the main, they have contributed to more gender-egalitarian attitudes. Examples include the community dialogue and planning processes, radio programmes and links to reproductive health services undertaken by the GREAT (Gender Roles, Equality and Transformation) project in Uganda (GREAT Project, n.d.) and the community awareness dramas on child marriage developed by participants in girls' clubs in Nepal.

Clubs attended by girls and boys have often led to significant changes in boys' attitudes (sometimes more dramatic and sometimes less dramatic than among girls). In particular, these clubs have helped shift views on gender equality in general (towards valuing males and females equally), on gender-based violence and on domestic divisions of labour (IRH, 2011). Because almost all the education-focused clubs were single sex (girls only), they did not report on changes in boys' attitudes and behaviour.

3. Evidence on changes in practices linked to club participation

The key areas of changes in practice (what people do) that evaluations measure are: age at marriage and/ or prevalence of child marriage; changes in girls' mobility; reporting and experience of gender-based violence; and (less commonly) changes in the domestic division of labour.

Clubs that contribute to lower child marriage rates are typically community-based and engage parents and other family members in classes or outreach activities, as well as helping girls develop the self-confidence to speak out and voice their wishes about the timing of marriage or potential partners. Examples include DISHA in India and BALIKA in Bangladesh (Kanesathasan et al., 2008; Amin et al., 2016).

Community-based clubs have also contributed to changes in where girls are permitted to go (on their own or with others), which may reflect changing norms about the acceptability of girls' greater personal mobility. These changes appear to have come about through participation in clubs, which requires a certain degree of mobility in the community, but also through exposure visits to community facilities (such as banks and health care centres) and, in some programmes, supported access to health services. Few programmes seem to directly encourage girls' mobility via life skills programme content or community awareness sessions, but norms seem to change as girls' participation in community-based clubs becomes more accepted. Examples include the Better Life Options programme in India (Acharya et al., 2009) and BRAC's ELA (Employment and Livelihood for Adolescents) programme in Bangladesh (Shahnaz and Karim, 2008).

Evaluations of girls' clubs and youth clubs also show reduced acceptability of gender-based violence, although some interventions have been associated with increased reporting of experiences of gender-based violence. Although in most cases this appears to be the result of increased awareness of what

constitutes gender-based violence, there is also a small amount of evidence that some programmes – particularly those with economic empowerment components targeted only at girls – lead to increased jealousy within the household, which can be manifested in increased violence.

Where programmes challenge the existing gender division of labour through club discussions or other participatory activities, such as Photovoice (a participatory photo-based research method), this appears to lead to changes in attitudes and practices. Two positive examples with quite different target groups come from the CHOICES pilot programme in Nepal (See Case Study Box), which led to boys and girls reporting a more equal distribution of household chores, and from Biruh Tesfa in Ethiopia, where husbands of married girls who participated in classes started to do more domestic chores (IRH, 2011).

What contributes to the greatest changes in norms and attitudes?

Synthesis of evaluations suggests that on the whole, participating in a club for longer (a year or more) is associated with greater change, as is attending regularly. Definitions of 'attending regularly' vary but generally involve taking part in more than half to two-thirds of sessions. Engaging with multiple stakeholders (parents, the wider community, spouses/partners of married girls, in-laws, and employers of girls doing domestic work) all led to changes in attitudes among these groups, but also to greater support for girls' attendance at clubs and development programmes, and thus stronger direct effects on girls.

What is less clear is the extent to which a strong and sustained focus on gender equality is necessary to deliver changes in attitudes and norms and for empowerment outcomes. This clearly warrants further investigation. Although the general trend from the programmes examined in the GAGE review was that a greater focus on gender equality led to greater change in outcomes, there was some variation. In particular, programmes with a specific focus – such as economic empowerment or promoting involvement in civic action – achieved clear positive outcomes (some of which defied prevailing gender norms, as when 14-year-old girls lobbied local officials over public services and local infrastructure), without necessarily having a strong focus on gender equality.

Resistance

A few studies provide insights on resistance to changes in gender norms associated with girls' clubs and youth development programmes. There appear to be three things that generate resistance: (1) attendance at clubs; (2) the actual or imagined content of the curricula/activities; and (3) clubs' actual or perceived links to foreign organisations, who are feared to have covert religious conversion agendas. Where parents or other family members are concerned about girls attending such clubs, this is typically because they see it as a waste of time (as it stops girls carrying out their household duties or is just a place to gossip), rather than having a positive value for girls (Shahnaz and Karim, 2008; Muthengi et al., 2016). A combination of outreach efforts and visible changes in girls' knowledge, behaviour, and (in some cases) relationships with other family members have helped neutralise these concerns.

Muthengi et al. (2016) also discuss how the perceived religious conversion agenda of these types of programme can lead to scepticism and hostility towards some initiatives, which requires considerable outreach to overcome. Sustained spreading of rumours or disinformation campaigns can also undermine evaluations (Menon and de Hoop, 2013).

Finally, specific areas of content – particularly related to sexual and reproductive health – can be controversial and can lead to girls not being allowed to attend clubs. Muthengi et al.'s (2016) study of the AGI in Kenya explores some of these issues in more detail. Some programmes that encourage girls to take part in sports also appear to evoke resistance – e.g. Moving the Goalposts, Kenya, BRAC in Bangladesh (Shahnaz and Karim, 2008), and CARE's multi-country Innovation through Sport: Promoting Leaders, Empowering Youth (ITSPLY) programme (Miske and Boardman, 2011). However, programmes in other areas (such as Ishraq in rural Upper Egypt) have successfully managed to engage girls in sport by persisting in encouraging it, despite gender norms that discourage girls' participation in outdoor sport (Zibani and Brady, 2004).

Toolkits

Programme toolkits and curricula

The Population Council has developed a set of [toolkits](#) for designing and implementing programmes to benefit adolescent girls and to tackle the factors that constrain their development (including lack of knowledge, self-confidence and restrictions linked to discriminatory norms) (Population Council, 2018b). Its [curricula](#) are also available online, covering areas such as gender equality, financial literacy, leadership and health.

The Coalition for Adolescent Girls has curated a set of [toolkits, curricula and guides on working with adolescent girls](#). These include how to ensure girl-centred programme design across a variety of sectors (including adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and financial literacy and savings) and in different settings (such as humanitarian and emergency contexts). They also highlight life skills curricula from various well-established programmes.

GAGE's [review of girls' clubs](#) (Marcus et al., 2017) also includes a listing of the curricula for the projects examined.

Knowledge for Health (K4Health)'s [Very Young Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Library](#) has a section on gender norms. The 'programme implementation' tab leads to a collection of project implementation guides, training manuals and other materials for use with young adolescents, as well as radio programme episodes, etc. (K4Health, n.d.).



Case Study

Changing gender norms by working with young adolescents: CHOICES in Nepal

The CHOICES programme worked with boys and girls aged 10–14 in Nepal to challenge prevailing gender norms through a short, participatory series of life skills sessions held at existing children's clubs. The sessions were facilitated by children's club graduates using the CHOICES curriculum developed by Save the Children and evaluated by the Institute of Reproductive Health (IRH) at Georgetown University. The sessions covered issues such as gender inequalities and power, the constraining impacts of gender norms on boys and girls, practical actions that challenge gender norms, and realising aspirations. The evaluation used participatory techniques (such as Photovoice) and questionnaires, and generated both statistically robust quantitative data and insights from qualitative data.

CHOICES led to statistically significant shifts towards more egalitarian attitudes on gender issues among participants. These included views on boys' and girls' right to study, aspirations for their futures and views on child marriage and domestic divisions of labour. Qualitative evidence also shows changed practices with greater sharing of household chores.

Building on the success of this programme, Save the Children has developed two complementary curricula: Voices and Promises. Voices is aimed at parents of young adolescents, and comprises six short videos and facilitated discussions aiming to change norms around domestic divisions of labour, education, child marriage and equal treatment of boys and girls within the household. Promises aims to shift community norms related to gender and child marriage. It consists of six posters that are unveiled sequentially in public places. Community activists lead discussion about these posters and bring them to the attention of others in their social networks. An evaluation found that almost 70% of parents had watched the videos, almost 60% had seen one of the gender equality posters, but less than a third had participated in any public events. An evaluation of the Promises approach in Nepal found that it had increased community-level understanding of the importance of being physically mature before marriage. Respondents also felt it had contributed to improved relationships between parents and children.

The impact of implementing the entire set of individual, family and community interventions was recently evaluated in rural Nepal. Two communities received the individual-level Choices intervention as well the family and community Voices and Promises interventions. Two comparison communities received only Choices. Samples of 1,200 young people aged 10–14 and 600 parents were interviewed at baseline before implementation and at endline one year later. In both study samples, the majority of measures of gender norms, attitudes and behaviours became more gender equitable, suggesting a positive effect of the individual-level intervention. The increase in gender-equitable norms, attitudes and behaviours reported by young adolescents was generally greater in the communities that received Voices and Promises as compared to the Choices-only areas, suggesting an added benefit from the family and community interventions. Parent-reported quantitative measures did not demonstrate any change through Voices or Promises. However, in interviews, parents mentioned what they had learned, and also how their children's participation in Choices had started to change their views on issues such as the desirable age of marriage, girls' education and domestic divisions of labour. While overall findings are encouraging, uneven results, particularly among parents, may reflect implementation challenges, including the 2015 earthquakes and subsequent political unrest.

Sources : IRH (2011) ; Save the Children and IRH (2017) ; Save the Children (2015)

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