

# ALiGN

**Advancing Learning and  
Innovation on Gender Norms**



**ALiGN Guide to girls' clubs, empowerment  
programmes and gender norm change**

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## Introduction and key concepts

Girls' clubs (and mixed-sex youth development clubs) are an increasingly common approach to building skills, knowledge, self-confidence and social networks. Typically, these groups provide non-formal education in small, often single-sex peer groups, most commonly in a community setting. They are generally led by a trained mentor and, in school settings, by teachers. Such mentors can act as role models to increase girls' aspirations. There is strong evidence that these clubs contribute to positive gains in knowledge, skills and self-confidence, and a smaller body of evidence suggests 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 their focus on individual empowerment limit their role in broader social norm change? What aspects of their programme design or implementation make the greatest contribution to their role as agents of change? These initiatives are very diverse, and this ALIGN Guide will unpack the evidence on the different factors that influence how far they contribute to changing gender norms.

## Programme design and activities

Clubs and development programmes to promote the development of adolescents, particularly girls, display varied design. Some are project-based and run for a few years as funded activities (providing the bulk of evidence on impact); others are longer-term and are run by schools, religious organisations or voluntary associations, without significant external funding. Social impact ventures are also emerging, setting up groups and clubs to enable girls to access their products and services while building skills, knowledge and self-efficacy.

Some clubs and empowerment programmes have a strong feminist outlook, often working only with girls and with an explicit empowerment agenda. Others run parallel groups for boys or mixed sessions to encourage dialogue between boys and girls on gender issues.

They also vary in the age groups targeted: some are open to all adolescents (aged 10–19), while others focus on a narrower age group. Those targeting older girls tend to emphasise sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and vocational training, while those for 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 focused on health (including information on puberty and bodily changes), SRH and hygiene. Most also offer opportunities to develop and practise communication skills, as well as content on gender equality, while some also cover legal rights and financial literacy. In addition to non-formal education, many programmes offer activities such as encouraging saving, vocational training, catch-up basic education and, in a few cases, sports. While most 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.

This thematic guide brings together the evidence on these varied initiatives to examine their role in changing gender norms, with sections covering:

- Girls' clubs and empowerment
- Girls' clubs and changing norms and attitudes

- What contributes most to changing norms?
- Case study: Nepal
- Useful resources

### Girls' clubs and empowerment

Girls' clubs and adolescent development programmes tend to conceptualise empowerment in broad terms, recognising a number of building blocks that contribute to an individual's developing agency. The most commonly measured are changes in self-confidence and knowledge. While these alone do not necessarily constitute changes in prevailing norms, they can enable individuals to challenge those norms.

Both school and community-based clubs aim to help young people – particularly girls – develop the confidence to speak out, by practising and honing their communication skills, through presentations, debates, dramas and role-play, or other fora that involve speaking in front of, and with, others.

Girls have sometimes used these skills to negotiate reduced workloads, continue or re-start education or to delay marriage, as noted by [Jones et al. \(2015\)](#). [Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al. \(2015\)](#) found that others have taken these skills out into the community, through awareness-raising dramas to change individual attitudes and community norms on issues such as child marriage and sexual harassment. In many contexts, girls speaking out – whether at home or in public – represents a challenge to accepted norms, of deference to older people in general and men in particular.

### Increasing knowledge

Community-based clubs and extra-curricular school clubs have a good track record in increasing participants' knowledge, particularly of SRH and girls' legal rights, as a review by [Marcus et al. \(2017\)](#) for the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme shows. Girls can draw on this increased knowledge to help them manage menstruation, sexual relationships, and recognise violations of their own rights or those of other people. This knowledge can also challenge taboos about what children (girls and boys) should know at different stages of their lives (such as the idea that unmarried girls should be ignorant about sex), and what can be discussed between parents and children, or between partners and spouses.

### Increasing communication with parents

Evaluations of several initiatives report greater parent-child communication on issues around puberty and SRH, including evaluations of: the Development Initiative Supporting Health Adolescents (DISHA) by [Kanesathasan et al. \(2008\)](#); Go Girls! by [Underwood and Schwandt \(2011\)](#), Learning Games by [Gray and Chanani \(2010\)](#), the Better Life Options (BLO) programme by [Acharya et al. \(2009\)](#), and Planning Ahead for Girls' Empowerment and Employability (PAGE) by [Nanda et al. \(2017\)](#). 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.

### Supporting education

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 number support girls to stay in, join or re-

join formal education. As many studies have shown, including [Marcus and Page \(2016\)](#) and [Sperling et al. \(2016\)](#), 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, they are likely to 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 of these clubs and of broader educational improvement programmes that include such clubs find positive changes in educational outcomes, in 'soft skills', such as increased aspirations, and in participants adopting more gender-egalitarian attitudes, as noted by [Marcus and Page \(2016\)](#).

Community-based programmes offering catch-up education to girls who have missed out on schooling as part of broader activities have also enabled out-of-school girls to obtain basic qualifications and, in some cases, to transition into the formal school system. The impact of these programmes on gender norms has not been examined, but it seems plausible that they contribute to norm change via the broader effects of education.

### **Enhancing financial self-reliance**

Community-based programmes that target older girls often include vocational training, while programmes for a range of age groups support financial literacy and savings. These aim to contribute to girls' wider empowerment by enhancing their financial self-reliance, and by boosting their status in their households as economic contributors. There is evidence – despite the mixed record of vocational training programmes – that they have achieved these aims when well-designed and implemented. Again, they provide 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, as noted by [Acharya et al. \(2009\)](#), [Rushdy \(2012\)](#), [Botea et al. \(2015\)](#), and [Erulkar et al. \(2006\)](#).

### **Supporting stronger social networks**

Club participation can help young people develop stronger social networks. These can be particularly important to girls who do not attend school and who have little exposure to the world outside their families. Such networks include role models and enhanced connections with supportive adults in the community, as well as peers. Strong social networks are also important for girls who need support to challenge gender norms, and a safety net if – for example, by refusing an unwanted marriage – they need a safe place to go. They can also provide a place where new ideas and practices become normalised.

This overview shows that despite their focus on individual girls' empowerment, there are many ways in which girls' clubs and youth clubs can underpin norm change. We now look at their more direct impact on norms and attitudes.

## **Girls' clubs and changing norms and attitudes**

Most studies generate evidence of changes in individual attitudes rather than evidence of shifting norms (in the sense of changes in shared expectations of how people should behave). 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 (or 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, can be seen as reasonable proxies for changing norms alongside any evidence of changing practices.

The attitudes of individual girls, perceptions of other people's views, and the prevalence of particular practices can all give an indication of gender norms. Here we outline key evidence and resources on girls' clubs and youth programmes that focus on changes in these three main areas: girls' attitudes, other people's attitudes, and changes in actual behaviour.

### **Evidence of 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 reveal strongly egalitarian attitudes. However, in keeping with prevailing gender norms, girls' views on specific practices are often less egalitarian. There is some evidence that girls who participate in clubs and related programmes develop more egalitarian views on specific practices. For example, they have been found to be less accepting of gender-based violence (GBV), report being less likely to circumcise future daughters, and are more likely to believe that young people should make their own decisions about when and whom to marry, as noted by [Brady et al. \(2007\)](#).

School-based and community-based clubs have both led girls to adopt 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 offer other activities, such as vocational training and 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 builds commitment to the programme and, therefore, increases 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) tend to support 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, the evaluation of the Ishraq programme in Upper Egypt by [Brady et al. \(2007\)](#) found that even after more than two years of participation, 78% of girls still approved of GBV in certain circumstances (compared with 90% in the control group). [Marcus et al.'s \(2017\)](#) review found that combination of non-formal education, community dialogue or awareness-raising events and mass media can reinforce positive messages and lead to greater changes in norms and attitudes.

### **Evidence of changes in other people's attitudes**

Although young people, and particularly girls, are the main target group for club-based programmes, there is growing recognition that programmes must also work with parents and community 'gatekeepers', given their power to make decisions that affect young people (and girls in particular). Programmes, therefore, increasingly hold outreach and education sessions for parents and other

community members and, in some cases, have provided classes. One example is the New Horizons curricula used by Ishraq with the brothers of participating girls in Egypt analysed by [Green et al. \(2004\)](#) and classes for husbands of girl participants held by Biruh Tesfa in Ethiopia evaluated by [Erulkar et al. \(2012\)](#). As well as building support for the programme through awareness-raising sessions, these classes and community events have promoted gender equality more broadly, including girls' right to education, to freedom from GBV, and to a more equal share of domestic duties.

Some programmes have also undertaken community dialogues or awareness-raising campaigns to change gender norms. Although activities with other stakeholders have not always led to significant changes in attitudes – one example being Ishraq, where girls' brothers hardly changed their views – they have, in general, 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 studied by [Samuels and Ghimire in 2015](#).

Mixed-sex clubs have often changed boys' attitudes significantly (sometimes more dramatically and sometimes less dramatically than among girls). For example, the Institute for Reproductive Health ([IRH, 2011](#)) finds that these clubs have helped to shift views on gender equality in general (towards valuing males and females equally), on GBV and on domestic divisions of labour. Because almost all clubs that focused on education were single sex (girls only), evaluations do not generally report shifts in boys' attitudes that can come from seeing girls performing as well as, or outperforming, boys as noted by [Unterhalter et al. \(2014\)](#) and by [Evans \(2014\)](#).

### **Evidence of changes in behaviour**

The key changes in behaviour measured by evaluations are: age at marriage and/ or prevalence of child marriage; changes in girls' mobility; reporting and experience of GBV; and (less commonly) changes in the domestic division of labour.

Clubs that help to reduce child marriage rates tend to be community-based and engage parents and other family members in classes or outreach activities, as well as helping girls develop the confidence to voice their views on the timing of marriage or potential partners. Examples include DISHA in India and BALIKA in Bangladesh, as examined by [Kanesathasan et al. \(2008\)](#) and [Amin et al. \(2016\)](#) respectively.

Community-based clubs have also contributed to positive changes in views about the places that girls are permitted to visit on their own or with others, which may reflect changing norms about the acceptability of their greater personal mobility. These changes appear to have come about through participation in clubs, which requires some 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 encourage girls' mobility directly via life-skills programme content or community awareness sessions, but norms seem to change as their participation in community-based clubs becomes more accepted. Examples include the Better Life Options (BLO) programme in

India examined by [Acharya et al. \(2009\)](#), and BRAC's Employment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) programme in Bangladesh, examined by [Shahnaz and Karim \(2008\)](#).

Evaluations of girls' clubs and adolescent programmes also show reduced acceptability of GBV, although some studies have found reported increases in such violence. In most cases this appears to be the result of increased awareness of what constitutes GBV, but there is also a small amount of evidence that some programmes – particularly those with economic empowerment components that target only girls – increase jealousy within the household, which can turn to violence.

Where programmes challenge the existing gender division of labour through club discussions or other participatory activities, this appears to lead to changes in attitudes and practices. Two positive examples with quite different target groups emerge from the CHOICES pilot programme in Nepal [IRH \(2011\)](#) (see case study section), which led to boys and girls reporting a more equal distribution of household chores, and from Biruh Tesfa in Ethiopia, where [Erulkar et al. \(2012\)](#) found that husbands of married girls who participated in husbands' classes started to do more domestic chores.

## What contributes most to changing norms?

When we look across the available evaluations, we see that, on the whole, participating in a club for a year or more is associated with greater change than participating for a shorter time, as is attending regularly. Definitions of 'attending regularly' vary but generally involve taking part in more than half to two-thirds of sessions. Engagement with other 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 in favour of girls' attendance at clubs and development programmes, and, therefore, to stronger direct effects on girls.

What is less clear is the extent to which a strong and sustained focus on gender equality is necessary for changes in norms, attitudes and empowerment. This warrants further investigation. While the general trend from the programmes examined in the GAGE review by [Marcus et al. \(2017\)](#) was that the greater the focus on gender equality the greater the 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 about public services and local infrastructure), without necessarily having a strong focus on gender equality.

### Resistance to norm change

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 factors that generate resistance:

1. girls' attendance at clubs
2. the actual or imagined content of the curricula and activities
3. clubs' actual or perceived links to foreign organisations, with fears that they have covert religious conversion agendas.

### Concerns about girls' attendance at clubs



Where parents or other family members are concerned about girls attending such clubs, it is often because they see it as a waste of time (as it stops girls carrying out their household duties or is just seen as a place to gossip), rather than having a positive value for girls. These concerns have been noted by studies on the BRAC ELA centres in Bangladesh by [Shahnaz and Karim \(2008\)](#) and the Population Council's Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI) in Kenya by [Muthengi et al. \(2016\)](#). A combination of outreach efforts and visible changes in girls' knowledge and behaviour has helped to neutralise these concerns.

### Concerns about content

Specific areas of content – particularly on sexual and reproductive health – can be controversial, leading to girls not being allowed to attend clubs, or to programmes removing some potentially useful content. The study by [Muthengi et al. \(2016\)](#) 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 negative reactions, particularly in contexts where girls and women are rarely seen being active in public spaces e.g. Moving the Goalposts in Kenya and BRAC in Bangladesh as noted by [Shahnaz and Karim \(2008\)](#), and CARE's multi-country Innovation through Sport: Promoting Leaders, Empowering Youth (ITSPLY) programme, explored by [Miske Witt and Associates \(2011\)](#). However, most programmes with a partial focus on sports persevere, and can shift attitudes to their participation as with the Ishraq programme in rural Upper Egypt ([Zibani and Brady, 2004](#)).

### Concerns about a club's 'agenda'

[Muthengi et al. \(2016\)](#) also report that the perception that externally-funded programmes have a religious conversion agenda can lead to scepticism and hostility towards some initiatives, which requires considerable outreach to overcome.

## 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 at existing children's clubs. These 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 how to realise aspirations. The evaluation used participatory techniques (such as the Photovoice approach, which uses photography to promote social change) 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 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 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 and that almost 60% had seen one of the gender equality posters, but less than one-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 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, most measures of gender norms, attitudes and behaviours became more gender equitable, suggesting the 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. In interviews, however, 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 \(2015\)](#). Also see article by [Lundgren \(2018\)](#).

## Key resources

### Toolkits

The [Population Council](#) has developed [Tools and Resources for Girl Centred Programming](#) 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). Its [Programme 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 information on 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). The Coalition also highlights life-skills curricula from various well-established programmes.

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

The [Very Young Adolescent \(VYA\) Sexual and Reproductive Health Library](#) compiled by Knowledge for Health (K4 Health) includes a section on gender norms. Its '[Program Implementation](#)' section contains project implementation guides, training manuals and other materials for use with young adolescents, as well as radio programme episodes and more.

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