



At a Glance

ROOM TO READ

Room to Read envisions a world free from illiteracy and gender inequality, where all children have room to read, learn and grow - creating lasting change. Through our literacy and gender equality programming, Room to Read nurtures foundational learning skills in children and supports communities experiencing deep educational, gender and economic inequities, where investments in education accelerate positive change.

Room to Read's Gender Equality Portfolio supports adolescents, particularly girls, to develop life skills that promote gender equality - enabling them to pursue lifelong learning and make informed decisions. Within our portfolio, Room to Read implements a Girls' Education Program through which girls build the skills they need to succeed in school and negotiate key life decisions, with resources including life skills classes, mentorship, peer support, and family and community engagement. Our curriculum focuses on helping girls develop life skills through which they learn to self-advocate and chart successful life paths; it also builds knowledge in specific areas that adolescents need to make informed decisions about their lives, such as sexual and reproductive health, financial literacy, climate change and gender norms.

Essential to our program are teachers and social mobilizers, local women role models from the community, who are trained to work with adolescents and their families to ensure that students stay in school, participate in life skills activities, and navigate the challenges of adolescence with the knowledge and ability to negotiate their own life choices, both personally and professionally.

We support young people of all genders to overcome gender biases and build the knowledge and skills to create a gender-equal world, and have begun testing life skills programming for boys in co-ed environments.

Our programming goes further as we partner with governments and other organizations who adapt our programming to respond to adolescents' needs across countries, regions and cultural contexts.

Founding Background

In 1998, then-Microsoft Executive John went on a trip to Nepal that would lay the foundation for Room to Read. After experiencing the limited resources in schools across the Himalayas, he returned home with a simple goal: to put more books into the hands of more children. Room to Read was founded in 2000 by John Wood, alongside co-founders Erin Ganju and Dinesh Shrestha, and officially recognized as a 501(c)(3). What started as a seemingly small project developed into a global movement to safeguard every child's right to learn and build more resilient prosperous futures. Today, Room to Read has benefited more than 52 million children across 29 countries under its belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children.®

Overview of Programs Offered

Girls Education Program

Room to Read's Girls' Education Program has been its signature gender equality program within its larger Gender Equality Portfolio. The GEP program includes a life skills education (LSE) curriculum, family and community engagement, targeted material support, and mentoring program for girls between grades 6-10 which aims to support them in developing five key life skills: collaboration, critical thinking, decision making, resilience and leadership. These are designated as skills that girls need in order to overcome the difficulties they encounter. Ultimately, the life skills seek to develop resilience within girls.

Target Population

Room to Read primarily serves adolescent girls between the ages of 12-18 years. Over the last several years, Room to Read has also developed programming for adolescent boys as part of its gender portfolio. RtR believes that social change at the community level is a critical part of gender

norms. Therefore, the organization's target population also includes parents, family members, educators, school officials and education policymakers.

Relationship to Formal Systems

Room to Read is committed to scalability and sustainability. As such, the organization collaborates with ministries of education to integrate literacy and gender equality programs into national curricula and teacher training systems. Room to Read aligns program content with government education standards and engages in policy advocacy to influence broader education systems to ensure life skills and gender-responsive education are adopted at scale. Programs are designed to complement and strengthen formal school systems rather than independent operation.

Curriculum

Room to Read's curriculum is a carefully designed program that integrates life skills such as resilience, leadership, collaboration, critical thinking, and decision making. Educators and professionals deliver structured lessons that incorporate examples, hands-on activities, and experiences. Participants have opportunities to learn about, discuss, and practice life skills. Gender is integrated into the curriculum especially through examples and discussions. Over the last several years, Room to Read has integrated

financial and climate literacy explicitly into its curriculum. Additionally, it piloted a life skills curriculum for boys to improve attitudes, behavior and knowledge around gender equality and support their own life skills and decision making abilities.

Program Delivery

The girls' education program (GEP) is delivered primarily in schools by trained teachers and local mentors called social mobilizers. In addition to structured sessions, social mobilizers provide individual and group mentorship to program participants. The program uses a combination of classroom instruction, workshops, community events, storytelling, and multimedia resources.

Geography and Reach

Committed to accelerating learning outcomes and gender equality, Room to Read has benefited 52 million children across 29 countries, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Canada, China, Grenada, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Laos, Lebanon, Malawi, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, United States, Vietnam and Zambia. By the end of 2027, Room to Read aims to double the number of children and communities they support each year.

For more information, see: roomtoread.org

OVERVIEW AND MISSION

Room to Read envisions a world free from illiteracy and gender inequality, where all children have room to read, learn and grow - creating lasting change. Room to Read develops children’s foundational literacy skills, as well as life skills that promote gender equality. Room to Read nurtures these essential skills in children by training and coaching educators, creating quality learning materials and spaces, strengthening education systems, and delivering programs directly and with partners – all while honoring the dignity of every child.

Approach to Shifting Adolescent Gender Norms

Room to Read’s approach to shifting gender norms carefully considers content knowledge, pedagogical methods, and systems change. The organization articulates four key dimensions as critical to their intervention: curriculum and content; educator training and coaches; delivery structures; and research and insights. Initially, Room to Read’s work included only scholarships and material support. However, the organization learned that individual scholarships for adolescent girls would not alter gender attitudes within schools and communities and academic support would not necessarily help girls overcome the gendered challenges. The organization therefore strengthened its programming and worked with schools to provide life skills curriculum and mentoring for girls to develop collaboration, critical thinking, decision making, resilience and leadership skills – skills the organization believes girls need to overcome the difficulties they encounter. Room to Read provides girls with positive role models, life skills classes, opportunities for mentorship and peer support, and

engages their communities to be champions of gender equality. Room to Read’s approach to shifting gender norms operates at multiple levels: empowering individual students, transforming schools into gender inclusive spaces, and influencing education systems through policy collaboration.

Knowledge & Pedagogy

As a research based organization, Room to Read’s curriculum has been evolving since its inception. The most current version of its life skills education program focuses on five key skills: collaboration, resilience, leadership, decision making and critical thinking—skills that have been identified as girls need to overcome the difficulties they encounter. The curriculum also includes thematic content knowledge in sexual and reproductive health, financial literacy, climate literacy and gender norms.

Over the last several years, Room to Read expanded its programmatic approach and began working with adolescent boys through a program called Life Skills of Equality Project (LSEP) with the recognition that gender norms change requires change in boys and men. LSEP is a two-year curriculum that has 34 sessions divided into

6 themes including gender roles & division of household roles, gender norms, masculinity and relationships. The curriculum seeks to promote boys' critical reflection on gender norms and stereotypes, support boys in redefining manhood in healthy and equal ways, and develop skills and determination to graduate, develop strong peer networks, and equal, respectful relationships.

Room to Read's educator training and coaching program enables improvements in pedagogy and program implementation. Room to Read trains and supports educators developing inclusive and sensitive teaching practices that encourage the development of self-worth and gender equality.

Community Level Change

Room to Read understands that gender norms change requires community education and enabling environments. For this reason, their life skills education program prepares educators in the role of social mobilizers who serve as mentors and educators, positive female role models, and enable community mobilization. Social mobilizers offer individualized advice and support to girls at risk of dropping out of school, including problem-solving with their families to ensure girls can complete their education. Room to Read works to train local educators to become mentors and gender equality advocates in the schools and communities in which it works.

Influencing Education Systems

Through partnership with schools and districts, and program evaluation, Room to Read demonstrated how its Girls Education

Program (GEP) effectively keeps girls in school and improves adolescents' life skills. Through this process, Room to Read has cultivated trusted relationships with governments and other partners around the world, which are inviting Room to Read to help shape national guidelines, resources and training to increase access to life skills and mentorship services in schools and promote more gender-transformative teaching practices. This work has included adapting Room to Read's life skills curriculum to be taught by teachers during the school day to all students instead of through extra-curricular clubs, developing teachers' guides and resources for providing effective life skills and mentorship support to students, training government education officers on implicit biases in education and how to guide teachers in implementing more gender-equitable teaching strategies, and working alongside program partners to broaden the use and accessibility of Room to Read resources as a part of their own program delivery. Through these approaches, Room to Read is working to systemically increase access to life skills education and mentorship, while also helping governments and other program implementers to create more equitable learning environments that help close gender gaps in educational outcomes.

THEORY OF CHANGE

How Room to Read's Approach Attempts to Shift Adolescent Gender Norms?

Room to Read's theory of change focuses on the intersection of education, gender equality, and pressing global issues. It is grounded in the idea that education, when inclusive and gender-responsive, can shift social norms and create long term equality. By equipping adolescents with life skills, mentorship, and supportive school environments, the organization aims to build girls' confidence and agency while encouraging boys and communities to adopt equitable attitudes. The approach operates at multiple levels: empowering individual students, transforming schools into gender inclusive spaces, and influencing education systems through policy collaboration. Room to Read supports adolescents in developing the foundational life skills they need to overcome gender based challenges in their families, communities and the world. Evidence generated through Room to Read's demonstration approach is used to collaborate with governments and partners and to improve practices in education systems.

To operationalize the theory of change, Room to Read: 1) leverages programmatic core competencies; 2) influences and strengthens learning systems (formal and non-formal education systems, multimedia systems, and evidence management systems) both directly and in collaboration with partners; and 3) executes through two operating models (Deliver and Accelerate). Room to Read's entry points to scale outcomes in a specific context considers the leveraging combination of competencies, partners' needs within learning systems and operating models.

Room to Read's programmatic core competencies, or areas of expertise, are continuously cultivated and guided by what children need to develop literacy skills, and life skills that promote gender equality. Room to Read develops and delivers quality programming directly, while also strengthening relevant policies and practices with partners focused on the areas of: curriculum and content, educator training and coaching, delivery structures, and research and insights. Room to Read works across learning systems within a broader learning ecosystem that impact children's development of life skills for gender equality including formal education systems; non-formal education systems or systems governing organizations working with children in thematic areas such as arts, sports, religion, community libraries, job training and home learning; multimedia or systems governing for-profit, nonprofit and government publishing; audio and video content producers, broadcasters and distributors; and education technology partners; and evidence management systems or systems created to collect and manage evidence in and across universities, think tanks, assessment companies, digital data collection, visualization partners, and government education management information systems (EMIS).

Finally, Room to Read has two operating models: Deliver and Accelerate. Under the Deliver model, Room to Read directly and through implementing partners designs and delivers programming in schools, communities or other educational settings. This model includes instances where the organization leads program design and implementation, or co-design and co-implement with key stakeholders. The primary use cases for this model include testing and evaluating program improvements and innovations, as well as showcasing and providing a proof of concept for potential system and program partners. The Accelerate model benefits more children more quickly. Under the Accelerate model, Room to Read and our implementing partners provide technical assistance or educational content to program and system partners as they (1) improve the implementation of their own programs, or (2) to achieve a defined set of programmatic outcomes, due to a funding arrangement or other strategic initiative.



Research and Program Evaluations

Research, monitoring and evaluation are an essential component of Room to Read’s approach to gender norms change.

Evaluations

Room to Read regularly monitors the implementation and evaluates the impact of its programs through consistent monitoring

and evaluation. Importantly, since 2018, the organization has developed and continues to refine its own tools to assess life skills, gender attitudes, long-term outcomes and agency., Room to Read continues to strengthen its program design and measure its lasting impact on education and gender equality.

A range of evaluations conducted between 2021-2025 illustrate that across contexts, Room to Read's programs boost adolescent life skills, particularly emotional resilience and decision-making. Participation in the GEP is also associated with a 22% increase in gender knowledge and attitudes. For instance, a study conducted in Bangladesh to examine GEP's impact on the development of life skills, gender knowledge and attitudes, and healthy and meaningful life aspirations found that participants show significant gains in domains of emotional resilience, collaboration, and developed progressive views on gender equality as they developed gender knowledge and more equitable gender attitudes compared to participants who received no GEP programming. Additionally, program participants cultivated higher educational aspirations, broader occupational aspirations, and the desire to marry later. An evaluation in Laos conducted between 2022-2024 illustrated changes in life skills levels, gender knowledge and attitudes, and aspirations for education, careers and marriage after three years of participating in the program. Results indicate improvements across all measured life skills – decision-making, collaboration, and gender knowledge and attitudes – with

all domains showing statistically significant changes. Similarly, a study in Vietnam conducted between 2019-2022 focused on life skills development, aspirations, and gender knowledge and attitudes. The evaluation showed positive gains in 7/10 life skills domains with a statistically significant improvement in decision-making skills, and moderate improvements in some areas of gender knowledge.

Room to Read's findings are consistent across evaluations using different designs. Recent experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations in India, Cambodia and Tanzania, show that the GEP impacts overall life skills and gender knowledge and attitudes. Particularly decision-making (India, Cambodia), gender knowledge and attitudes (Cambodia) and emotional resilience (Cambodia, Tanzania). These results are also consistent for thematic variations of the program. For example, a recent mixed-methods evaluation of Boys' Inclusion program (a.k.a. Life Skills for Equality - LSEP) shows that boys and girls gain significant gender knowledge and attitudes and emotional resilience, after two years of participating in the program. A recent mixed-methods evaluation of two-year Climate Justice Clubs in Nepal and Vietnam, show that program participants improve climate literacy, gender attitudes and life skills in statistically significant ways. In addition, students in the Climate Justice Clubs increase their engagement with climate topics and their intersection with gender justice in their communities. And evaluations of Room to Read's financial literacy program

in Tanzania show that primary and secondary school girls gain financial literacy and life skills on a yearly basis. In particular, girls who are also participating in Room to Read's GEP tend to benefit more from the Financial Education Initiatives, suggesting a positive interaction between gender, financial and life skills programming.

Continuous Monitoring

Room to Read continuously monitors program implementation and the gender-transformativeness of their sessions. In collaboration with local governments and schools, Room to Read monitors implementation and engagement every quarter. In addition, Room to Read engages in long-term monitoring to measure alumnae's agency in shaping their adult lives. Every year, Room to Read collects systematic data from their alumni and monitors long-term outcomes across several domains, as well as the ways in which they negotiate their adult decisions. These surveys show that most alumni enroll in higher education and/or begin working after graduation. These surveys are complemented with qualitative studies of long-term outcomes, which shed light onto the specific trajectories and challenges faced by alumni in their post-graduation lives, as well as the mechanisms through which they exert agency to achieve their intended life outcomes.

What Works

Room to Read is a leading organization dedicated to engaging life skills education to shift gender norms. The organization

combines mentorship, life skills education, community and systems level change in their work to shift gender norms through education.

First, Room to Read has carefully designed a comprehensive life skills education curriculum that teaches resilience, leadership, collaboration, critical thinking, and decision making to help adolescents challenge gender stereotypes and navigate hardship, develop creative solutions and advocate for themselves. In several countries, Room to Read is also exploring how boys can directly benefit from sessions that improve their attitudes, behavior and knowledge around supporting gender equality, as research has shown that adolescent boys are at increasing risk of dropout in many locations and that changing their gender attitudes is critical to strengthening our girls' education efforts and to promoting gender equality.

Second, Room to Read prepares educators to be mentors and advocates for gender equality. Room to Read employs local female mentors, known as social mobilizers, to support girls' education and personal growth. For girls especially, a positive female role model – such as a woman from the same community who has completed her education – can offer individualized advice and support to girls at risk of dropping out of school, including problem-solving with their families to ensure girls can complete their education. Social mobilizers are positioned to not only provide mentorship to adolescents, but also to become gender equality advocates within the communities and schools in which they serve.

Third, Room to Read partners with governments so that their programs are part of broader systems level changes. The organization works with ministries of education to integrate gender equality into national systems, ensuring sustainability. After it has consistently demonstrated that its GEP program effectively keeps girls in schools and improves adolescent life skills, Room to Read has worked to help shape national guidelines, resources, and training to increase access to life skills and mentorship services in schools. Country and state level offices have actively worked to build trusting relationships with governments and other partners. This work has included: professional development for government education officers on implicit biases and implementing more gender-equitable strategies, and working alongside program partners to broaden the use and accessibility of the organization's resources. Thus, Room to Read simultaneously is working to systemically increase access to life skills education and mentorship, while also helping governments and other program implementers to create more

equitable learning environments that help close gender gaps in educational outcomes.

Fourth, Room to Read's extensive and careful work within the area of research, monitoring and evaluation is a strength to the organization and the broader field. Room to Read works to continuously improve their own programming and assessment design through evaluation studies that examine program utility, limitations, and positive outcomes, which can subsequently be useful for the field as their learnings are shared. Further, for eight years, the organization has led measurement work around life skills, gender equality and agency, across the different programmatic cycles (primary school, secondary school, post-graduation). Most recently, the organization has updated its assessment framework for the ALSA (Adolescent Life Skills Assessment) in accordance with the new programmatic framework, and has enhanced cultural and contextual relevance through participatory methodologies that center knowledge and assumptions around girls' lived experiences.

