Young mothers and their children attending a SAGE session

**SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION (SAGE) PROGRAMME**

**UPDATED**

# GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION (GESI) TECHNICAL LEARNING PAPER

## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE) Learning Brief series is a collection of four papers produced by Plan International UK that capture lessons from an eight-year flagship education programme that was implemented between 2018 and 2026 in Zimbabwe. The papers in this series present learning related to each of the four core components of SAGE's programme presented on the right. The learning paper for each component can be read as a standalone piece, or together with its companion papers to form a more comprehensive picture of what worked well and what worked less well during the design and implementation of SAGE. A detailed appendix is attached to all papers describing the full SAGE model, and how it worked in practice.

**Learning paper one:** Lessons on Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL) from the SAGE programme

**Learning paper two:** Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP) in SAGE

**Learning paper three:** Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE) sessions in SAGE

**Learning paper four:** Safeguarding in SAGE

## PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

This Brief is the third paper in the SAGE Learning Brief Series. Its purpose is to share lessons from the design and implementation of the Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE) component, one of the four core components of SAGE. This Brief introduces the CoGE component, summarises its impact, and highlights key factors that both facilitated and hindered success. The Brief concludes with a set of recommendations targeted at practitioners and service providers across NGO, government and commercial sectors. This can aid in the adoption and replication of the success of SAGE.

## IMPACT OF SAGE

Full information on the SAGE programme impact and results can be found in the endline evaluation report of the first phase, which is available on the Girls Education website: sage-endline-evaluation-report__final-adj.pdf (girlseducationchallenge.org)

### OVERALL RESULTS

- Learning improved with over 70% of learners demonstrating Grade 5 competency in literacy and numeracy
- Over 70% of learners successfully transitioned into vocational traning, employment, or formal education on completion of the programme
- Strong support existed for SAGE at national and district levels of government as well as at community level to continue in some form

### RESULTS SPECIFIC TO GENDER EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

- **Self-efficacy:** Girls gained confidence and began participating in household decisons
- **SRHR**: Girls were able to better negotiate safe sex discussions and improved awareness of early pregnancy and contraception choices
- **Community support:** 92.8% girls felt they were supported to stay in learning environment
- **Safeguarding:** revitalised child protection structures and increased reporting of abuse

### SAGE II – OUTPUTS

- 413 girls enrolled for male dominated trades at TVET colleges
- 5,423 girls trained on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- 1,418 boys attended CoGE sessions
- 250 Peer Leaders trained in facilitating CoGE sessions and disability inclusion
- 2,562 girls completed ISOP demonstrating competence
- 3,448 girls have attended at least 80% of ATL sessions

## METHODOLOGY

This learning paper compiles lessons learnt and utilises a variety of data sources that tracked the progress and performance of SAGE over its project cycle. It reflects the views of thematic experts within the SAGE consortium of the factors that supported or hindered success based on their specialist knowledge of the area, their engagement in the SAGE programme and the varied data sources available on their thematic. The main data sources reviewed to produce this learning paper include:

### EVALUATIVE EVIDENCE

- Independent endline report including data from 600+ girls and caregivers and almost 250 stakeholders such as government officials and community members
- Internally led midline evaluation which utilised programme collected data including learning progress assessments, Most Significant Change Stories, girl to girl conversations and an external research study.

### MONITORING EVIDENCE

- Learning data from over 16000 girls•Transition data from over 11000 girls
- Quarterly monitoring data over 7 years including interviews, observations, and survey data

### SPECIAL STUDIES OR UNIQUE THEMATIC DATA SOURCES

- Outcome mapping exercises
- Commissioned research studies
- Girl to girl dialogues
- Case Studies

### EXPERT VIEWS

- Discussions with frontline team members
- Expertise of thematic lead at Plan International

# INTRODUCTION

Girls' access to education is not only a basic human right but it also has a huge positive impact by leading to increased national growth rates, lower maternal and infant mortality, improved child nutrition and health and an increase in girls lifetime earnings.[1] However, worldwide 129 million girls are out of school, including 32 million of primary school age and 97 million of secondary school age.[2] Barriers to girls' education are often rooted in deep seated and structural underlying gender and social norms which create and perpetuate gender inequality. These barriers include poverty, child marriage, gender-based violence, early and unwanted adolescent pregnancy, poor education standards, gender norms prioritising boys in education, violence against girls in schools, and multiple other intersecting factors.

Zimbabwe scores poorly on the Gender Inequality index with a score[5] which places the country 110 out of 149 countries.[6] Zimbabwe also has high levels of child marriage,[7] rates of sexual and physical violence[8] and low rates of women's political participation.[9] Barriers to girls' education in Zimbabwe include long distances and lack of safety when travelling to school, Gender Based Violence (GBV), early marriage and pregnancy, sexual exploitation and violence, lack of familial approval for girls, lack of access to SRHR education and low self-esteem.[10] Specific populations experience particularly high gender inequality, in particular women and girls in the Apostolic religious sect, and women and girls with disabilities. The Zimbabwe National Gender Policy 2022, seeks to advance four main gender equality priorities – women in politics and decision making, education and training for women, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women and women in the economy.[11]

The first phase of the Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE) programme was designed to respond to the challenges listed above. SAGE was an £11.9 million project funded by UK Aid through the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) within its Leave No Girls Behind funding window. The programme ran from 2018 to 2023 and was led by Plan International U.K., and its partners (Plan International Zimbabwe (PIZ), The Open University (OU), Christian Blind Mission (CBM) U.K., the Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET), ECONET, and under the oversight of the MoPSE[12]. The programme has supported more than 13,400 out-of-school, highly marginalised adolescent girls in 11 districts in Zimbabwe to improve their learning outcomes and assist their transition into formal education, vocational training, or employment. SAGE II (SAGE TEACH) is an extension of the SAGE I programme which was designed to ensure that all members of the cohorts within SAGE I, had the opportunity to complete their Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL), Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE) and Youth Economic Empowerment (YEE) pathways. This span 2 years 6 months, and included 5027 girls and 1140 boys in 93 hubs etc.

1   Girls' education | UNICEF
2   UNICEF Girls' education | UNICEF
3   UNICEF 2021, Zimbabwe-MICS-EAGLE-Education-fact-sheets-2021.pdf
4   Ibid
5   0.73 in 2022 – Zimbabwe Global gender gap index, 2006-2022 – knoema.com
6   Where we are : Eastern and Southern Africa : Zimbabwe | UN Women – Africa
7   33.7% of women aged 20-24 were married or in a union before age 18, Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub
8   In 2018, 18.2% of women aged 15-49 years reported that they had been subject to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, UN Women, Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub
9   35% of Parliament is made up of women – Where we are : Eastern and Southern Africa : Zimbabwe | UN Women – Africa
10  SAGE Gender Analysis
11  Microsoft Word – The national gender policy.rtf (uz.ac.zw) p.7
12  Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education

As a gender transformative education programme, SAGE works at multiple levels to promote and improve education for girls by tackling the root causes of gendered social and economic barriers and creating an enabling environment for transforming unequal gender norms.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

he SAGE programme applied both the GEC Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) framework and the Plan Gender Transformative programme criteria. The GEC GESI framework required the programme to integrate their GESI minimum standards, undertake self-assessments[13] and identify corrective actions which consistently showed SAGE to be actively engaging with and transforming gender and social inequalities to achieve sustainable change, gender equality and reverse social exclusion. SAGE was also scored Gender Transformative in accordance with the Plan International gender transformative approach. Plan's Gender Transformative Approach is cross-cutting and focuses on six key elements in the table below.

| PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH – 6 ELEMENTS |
| --- |
| 1. Address gender norms throughout the life course |
| 2. Strengthen girls and young women's agency |
| 3. Work with and support boys, young men and men |
| 4. Advance the position and condition of girls, women and young women |
| 5. Respond to the needs and interests of girls and boys in all their diversity |
| 6. Foster and enabling environment for gender equality and girls' rights |

The SAGE programme has incorporated all aspects of the Gender Transformative Approach to ensure that it not only meets the immediate needs of girls through improving access to education, but it also sought to address the long-term underlying structural gender norms and inequalities that were preventing access and retention for girls.

The gender transformative approach was embedded within SAGE through a two-pronged approach; 1) integrating gender mainstreaming 2) shifting gender unequal attitudes at an individual, household and community level through the Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE) model.

The CoGE model is derived from Plan International's global programme model called Champions of Change.[14] This model was designed to achieve long-term change in gender related attitudes and practice. It includes 13 modules15 focusing on a broad spectrum of topics including healthy relationships, reproduction, menstruation and advocacy for girls, and building allyship and positive masculinities for boys. The curriculum was delivered to girls and boys separately, but with intermittent collective sessions to allow for sharing of views and experiences. In Phase 1, CoGE sessions were delivered by CoGE Facilitators from the community, whereas in Phase 2, CoGE pivoted to utilise Peer Educators from within the cohort of learners who had previously undergone CoGE. This was to increase opportunity for sustainability of the approach, and will be discussed later in the document. CoGE also engaged widely with community members through intergenerational dialogue sessions. These brought together girls, boys, family members, partners and community members, to discuss challenges around girls' access to and retention within education and how they could be addressed as a community.

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13  https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/uhqpl52c/gesi_tool_external_october_2019.pdf
14  Champions of Change | Plan International (plan-international.org)
15  7 for girls, 5 for boys and 1 combined module

The Plan's Gender Equality Programme Criteria assesses programmes to be within one of four categories, which form a continuum:

**Gender Unaware:**
Gender-unaware projects do not recognise gender and exclusion issues and tend to aggravate gender and exclusion inequalities.

**Gender Neutral:**
Gender neutral projects recognise gender equality and inclusion issues but do not do anything about them, and so tend to reinforce gender inequalities.

**Gender Aware (Gender Sensitive):**
Gender-aware projects seek to improve the daily condition of diverse groups of women and girls by addressing practical gender and exclusion issues. They do not try to transform gender and power relations.

**Gender Transformative:**
There is an explicit intention to transform unequal power relations. The focus goes beyond improving the condition of diverse groups of women and girls and seeks to improve their social position (how they are valued in society) as well as the full realisation of their rights.


## GESI IN THE SAGE PROGRAMME

This section outlines interventions implemented within SAGE, using the six key elements of Plan's Gender transformative approach to show how this was embedded within the programme.


### 1. Address gender norms throughout the life course

By incorporating messaging on inequitable gender and social norms within the SAGE curriculum, as well as holding intergenerational dialogue with key stakeholders, the programme was able to shift some attitudes around girls' education and gender inequality within key influential groups. SAGE's learning materials were developed by the Open University and were intentionally centred on text and images that mirrored the lives of learners; thus, avoiding the perpetuation of gender-based stereotypes often reflected in the under-representation of women in textbooks. The stories also had a role in changing perceptions and behaviours towards young women with disabilities. Furthermore, messaging on gender norms was integrated into the Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL) component and delivered through Gender Responsive Pedagogy which itself tackled perceptions that boys have more of a right to education than girls.

Community members have noticed positive changes as more people are educated about the importance of equal opportunities for all genders. This includes encouraging parents to be involved in their children's education and ensuring equal education access for boys and girls. There is now a better understanding of consent and sexual violence. This has resulted in more respectful relationships and communities are embracing the idea of shared responsibilities and the benefits that come from gender equality, such as reducing abuse, empowering women, and fostering independence.

## 2. Strengthen girls and young women's agency

As a result of social stigma and negative stereotypes that marginalised girls face when seeking to access education, they are at greater risk of developing negative self-defeating attitudes, which limit their participation in education and livelihood opportunities. By increasing girls' access to education, learning and vocational skills, SAGE has also facilitated an increase in girls' agency, self-efficacy and confidence. CoGE included specific sessions on assertiveness, body confidence and gender awareness, as well as critical consciousness, and ability to speak out about issues, identify risks and self-protect, and engage in mobilising and influencing others. Furthermore, the shift towards CoGE being delivered by Peer Educators in Phase 2 has enabled some girls to increase their agency through taking on the facilitator role and leading their peers in their CoGE journey. SAGE also included targeted events aimed at building girls' agency including, for example, girls from ethnic minority communities in Bulilima featured in a national TV programme for young people called 'Young, Gifted and Talented' discussing the impact of Covid on girls' education.[16]

The endline survey found that 65.8% of SAGE girls reported high self-efficacy scores, with many learners taking up leadership positions, negotiating for better and safe sex, speaking out about child abuses, and defending the rights of girls with disabilities. Many learners have reported a significant shift in their attitudes and understanding of their roles as young women, mothers, wives, and partners at the community level. Many girls indicated they now know they are equal to their husbands/male counterparts.[17]

## 3. Work with and support boys, young men and men

The SAGE programme has engaged boys, husbands, partners and fathers, primarily through intergenerational dialogues, establishing male clubs in 88 hubs, and through the boys CoGE sessions. Men's clubs were a forum for SAGE to work with adult men, targeting fathers and husbands of participating adolescent girls and guiding them through a curriculum which explores positive masculine role models and challenges entrenched negative gender attitudes and practices. This has strongly impacted men, who now recognise the value of supporting women in their roles, whether in the workplace or domestic tasks and are increasingly participating more in household chores and childcare, breaking traditional gender norms. Furthermore, in Phase 2 , the project provided 194 boys with short-term TVET training, recognizing that achieving true gender equality requires the involvement of boys and men as advocates for change. This initiative aimed to equip boys with practical skills, supporting their economic empowerment while embedding values of positive masculinity, safeguarding, and gender equality. The boys' inclusion was carefully framed to complement girls' empowerment, with community dialogues emphasizing that their participation was not competitive, but rather supportive

A survey conducted with 117 adult men in October 2021 showed that 91% of respondents believed that young women should have the same opportunities to work outside the home as young men, and 85% disagreed that women should have to tolerate domestic violence.[18]

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16  Year 3 annual report, p29.
17  Endline report, p68.
18  Midline report, p19.

## 4. Advance the position and condition of girls, women and young women

SAGE responded to the daily needs (condition) that girls were facing in accessing education, through the creation of 'satellite' education hubs and the provision of bicycles for volunteers, which reduced the physical barriers to education, providing multiple, flexible channels through which learning could take place including phone calls, door-step sessions and small groups, and where possible providing childcare for young mothers. Alongside this, the programme has elevated the position of women and girls within the communities, through challenging existing gender stereotypes about the roles that girls should play, prioritising female Community Educators, and by holding graduation ceremonies in which learners are able to present their success as a graduate to their communities.

Girls overwhelmingly reported that SAGE positively supported them through flexibility of timing and location of sessions and childcare. SAGE has succeeded in accommodating the needs of young mothers as having a young child did not pose a barrier to their learning, and girls who had previously has to leave school due to early pregnancies were able to return to learning.[19]

## 5. Respond to the needs and interests of girls and boys in all their diversity

The SAGE programme employed an intentionally intersectional approach to 'Leave No Girl Behind,' by targeting seven subgroups who were deemed to be the most vulnerable or marginalised within the context;

**1.** Girls from ethnic minorities
**2.** Girls from the apostolic community
**3.** Young mothers
**4.** Married girls
**5.** Girls who have never been to school
**6.** Girls Engaged in Labour
**7.** Girls with disabilities

This approach was also integrated into wider operational aspects such as monitoring, where all programme data was disaggregated and analysed by sub-group, hence enabling the programme team to reflect on data such as enrolment, attendance, learning progress and transition and review which groups of girls are doing well, which are not and what additional support do we need to provide them.

The SAGE multi-modal model demonstrates how learning spaces and education services can fit around the lives of educationally marginalised girls. This included single and mixed sex discussion groups, multiple methods of facilitation, varying content or messaging depending on age and capacity and translation of CoGE modules into 3 local languages. Furthermore, SAGE disability inclusion partner Christian Blind Mission (CBM), identified 689 Girls with Disabilities (GWDs) as having an impairment of these, 357 were provided with assistive devices including wheelchairs, crutches, spectacles and hearing aids and rehabilitated community-based learning hubs including grab rails in toilets and font enlargement of modules. Furthermore, volunteers were trained on disability inclusion conducted in partnership with teacher training Colleges. These intentionally inclusive approaches resulted in girls with disabilities improving their numeracy, literacy and social skills and joining the ISOP component.

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19  Endline report, p.29.

> **"Yes, she would explain till you understand, she has a passion for teaching, so she does it wholeheartedly. I remember my first days before I got eyeglasses. I could not see the board clearly. She would always ensure that I sat in the front row, and patiently explained a concept until I understood."**

SAGE Learner (GWD), Changazi.

### 6. Foster and enabling environment for gender equality and girls' rights

The SAGE programme created a supportive and enabling environment at family, school, community and structural levels. At a family, school and community level, this was achieved through inter-generational dialogue which delved into detail on the challenges and barriers to girls' education and enabled groups to work together on common solutions. At a structural level, SAGE engaged with the Zimbabwean government through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development (MWAGCSMED) which resulted in community-led graduation ceremonies and market linkage events inviting local businesspeople, which opened up opportunities for SAGE girls and boys to obtain apprenticeship support and identify markets to sell their produce/trades.[20] This structural level engagement ensured a wider enabling environment and greater sustainability of the programme.

In communities with high levels of community support for SAGE, girls' self-reported attendance was higher than those without. Amongst girls who reported attending SAGE sessions regularly, the common factor mentioned across the hubs was strong community support based on appreciation of the benefits that the SAGE programme would bring to the girls.[21]

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the success of the SAGE programme. Some of these were intentionally built into the design, and others have evolved into success factors through a process of learning. There have been other factors, contextual and environmental, which have hindered the progress. We seek to interrogate these factors below.

## FACTORS ENABLING SUCCESS

### 1. To meet the needs of young women and girls in an inclusive way, the programme approach must be informed, flexible and evolving.

Understanding the needs of girls forms the core of the programme. SAGE undertook a Gender Analysis in its first year, which examined how gender and social inequalities may impact the activities and outcomes of the SAGE programme. Furthermore, the study aimed to fill in gaps in knowledge and evidence regarding the experience and perspectives of specific subgroups within SAGE communities. These included younger adolescent girls aged 10–14; girls within Apostolic communities; young mothers; girls with disabilities; and adolescent boys and young men. Findings from the analysis generated recommendations for supporting gender-sensitive project implementation, including SAGE curricula, strategies and approaches.

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20 Year 4 annual report, p14.
21 Alternative midline, p15.

By utilising an adaptive approach, responding to the changing and emerging needs of the girls, as well as contextual changes, the SAGE programme ensured a high level of inclusion and has improved the conditions faced by girls. For example, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the findings of needs assessments, the programme shifted delivery modalities for both learning sessions and CoGE. When the restrictions changed, the programme continued with a multi-modal and flexible delivery model based on girls' feedback that they preferred to exercise control over how they accessed learning content, depending on their individual circumstances. SAGE also responded to the increased economic needs of communities by introducing the Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP) component and utilising this approach to shift norms and perceptions about women's role in economic activities.

A further adaptation in Phase 2 was to integrate climate change resilience and financial literacy into CoGE modules so that the young people in the programme could learn about and discuss ways in which they could support their communities to be more resilient to climate change shocks, and how they can ensure financial literacy goes hand-in-hand with the gains of the ISOP component. As a result of this, Peer Leaders are now helping other young people discuss climate-related risks, strengthening community-level awareness. Communities also noted that girls are now more vocal about preparing for climate shocks, contributing to better household readiness for extreme weather such as heatwaves and floods. Financial literacy sessions further enhanced the girls' ability to manage resources during drought or food shortages, with several girls sharing that they can now budget, save and support income activities at home. Peer Leaders have continued spreading these messages in their communities, strengthening sustainability beyond the lifespan of the project.

## 2. Engaging and involving boys

In the first phase, adult male and female CoGE Facilitators were recruited from the communities to lead separate boy and girls' sessions. The target applicants already demonstrated a commitment to girls' rights and gender equality and were young, engaging, and relatable role models for participating adolescents. Facilitators received initial and refresher training to ensure continued understanding, and the project ensured a high quality of delivery through monitoring and guidance by Community Educators. Community Educators are qualified teachers who led the accelerated teaching and learning (ATL) component but also attended CoGE trainings so they could understand the CoGE modules and hence provide coaching and pedagogical support to facilitators. In the second phase, the evolution of training female and male Peer Educators (aged between 18 and 24years) meant that the project could empower girls and boys in a different way as they could become leaders and trainers, as well as embedding sustainability and supporting the youth ownership of the programme. Learners also benefitted from being trained by one of their peers. Also, within Phase 2, we listened to feedback from communities that the boys who were taking part in CoGE sessions were also not in education or employment and would benefit from TVET, and therefore we included 194 boys.

Including boys in the TVET component delivers significant benefits essential for sustainable development. It actively promotes gender equality by tackling root causes of discrimination and violence through transformative engagement. Integrating boys fosters essential empathy and understanding between genders, creating a more supportive social environment. Crucially, this inclusion enhances the effectiveness of girls' empowerment programs by cultivating boys as vital allies and partners, not bystanders or adversaries.

3. **Engaging husbands, partners and parents of learners from the start is vital to ensuring their engagement, and to break down gender norms and roles inhibiting access to education.**

Apostolic communities often have traditional norms and regressive views about women's roles in communities and in the home.[22] With 66% of the girls enrolled in the programme coming from Apostolic communities, the challenge to engage and shift attitudes within these communities was crucial to the success of the project. Partner organisation Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET) were involved in the programme from the design, supporting programme staff to hold periodic consultations with communities and to come to a shared agreement about how to respond to challenges for example, adapting the SRHR content within CoGE modules.[23] As a result, many Apostolic communities have shunned child marriages, establishing GBV Rapid Response Committees and leaders encouraging young girls and women to enrol in school and receive an education.[24]

4. **Engaging husbands, partners and parents of learners from the start is vital to ensuring their engagement, and to break down gender norms and roles inhibiting access to education.**

Through intergenerational dialogue and targeted men's groups, the programme succeeded in gaining the support of husbands, partners and parents mobilising them to actively enable the girls to access ATL, ISOP and CoGE components. A total of 1,140 boys have also been involved in CoGE sessions covering 5 modules including Showing Solidarity, Being a Young Man, Championing Girls' Education and Being non-violent in personal relationships, and have recently had TVET sessions extended to them. The benefits have been seen in men aiding recruitment of girls, encouraging consistent attendance, providing start-up cash as part of independently established savings groups and then contributing additional ingredients, materials and tools.

Qualitative evidence indicates that levels of support for SAGE have changed over time as husbands have begun to realise the benefits that their wives' participation in SAGE could bring to their households.[25] In communities with high levels of community support for SAGE, girls' self-reported attendance was higher than those without. Amongst girls who reported attending SAGE sessions regularly, the common factor mentioned across the hubs was strong community support based on appreciation of the benefits that the SAGE programme would bring to the girls.[26] Again, including boys in the SAGE TVET programme has helped shift community and male attitudes toward gender equality and girls' right to education. As boys train alongside girls, they begin to see them as capable partners rather than competitors, and they take these positive attitudes back into their homes and communities. Their behaviour challenges long-standing stereotypes and encourages men and boys to accept girls in non-traditional trades, support their education, and speak out against harmful practices like child marriage. Because these messages come from boys, not just girls or project staff, communities take them more seriously. This has created a stronger, more supportive environment for girls' learning, safety, and empowerment.

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22 67% of girls from Apostolic communities reported a lack of voice and ability to speak up, Baseline report, ADD PAGE
23 Endline report, p 93.
24 Endline report p65.
25 Midline report, p7.
26 Alternative midline, p15.

5. **Building girls agency and self-confidence has multiplier effects and positively impacts the programme and the community.**

When girls learn about their rights relating to GBV and SRHR, they share these messages within their households and communities, creating a ripple effect that contributes to positive changes in attitudes and behaviours. Girls became educators by sharing their knowledge and experience with their partners and husbands, which had a positive influence on their inter-personal relationships.[27] Young mothers have more capacity to support their children and siblings with foundational literacy and numeracy skills and homework and some girls transferred vocational skills to other SAGE learners by becoming Master Craftspeople. There is also greater solidarity among the girls, as they supported one another in continuing their education, speaking out about early marriage, and pursuing income-generating work outside of the home.

Peer Educators have played a particularly powerful role in this transformation. Their leadership in hubs created safe, relatable spaces where girls could openly discuss challenges and learn from one another. Because peer educators are trusted by their fellow learners, their messages on rights, wellbeing, and gender equality are more readily accepted. Many girls reported that seeing peers take on leadership roles inspired them to participate more actively, challenge harmful norms, and build confidence in their own voices.

> **At first, I doubted myself, but each session I led made me stronger. Today, I am confident to speak to parents, teachers, and even community leaders.**
>
> Peer Leader, Chimanimani District.

SAGE learners are also actively participating in public discourse about issues that affect them and advocating for gender equality, girls' education, and girls' rights in their communities.

> **As a young mother, I am now a secretary for a political party. Through SAGE, I learned to challenge myself for positions in our community structures. Through these positions, I can now push for the needs of other women in our community.**
>
> SAGE Learner, Mutoko.[28]

6. **Vocational training and access to skills is a means of improving girls' self-efficacy, resilience, and confidence levels, particularly for girls with disabilities.**

Many girls had previously had to withdraw from income generating activities because of marriage, children, household chores and gender norms and therefore, saw vocational training as an opportunity to gain skills that would enable them to make a living and become independent. Girls felt that they were treated better by their communities because of their improved incomes and new income-generating power. This was also seen in girls with disabilities, who mentioned that they were previously viewed as a social and financial burden to their communities but that their engagement in income-generating activities had encouraged people to treat them with respect and dignity.[29]

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27  Midline report, p23.
28  Endline report, p79.
29  Endline report, p12.

> **" I can now decide on whatever to do to make money like brick making. I used to look down upon it, saying it was meant for boys and men, but now I can do it; that's where I raised money to start the business of selling stationery that I am doing currently. "**
>
> SAGE Learner who had never been to school, Mafararikwa.[30]

### 7. To achieve truly gender transformational change, a programme requires both a mainstreamed and targeted approach as part of a GESI strategic approach.

The programme conducted a thorough gender review in advance of the baseline and utilised that to refine the design of the programme according to needs and challenges raised. The SAGE programme established a GESI strategy which laid out its mainstreaming approach through learner-centred, active, inclusive and gender-sensitive teaching methods, as well as a targeted approach using a CoGE curriculum that centred on gender equality and girls' rights. Community Educators actively encouraged learners to challenge perceptions that boys were better performers than girls, as well as showing girls in successful positions and venturing into male-dominated business fields, to encourage girls to break the gender ceiling. The SAGE programme had dedicated Gender technical staff at Plan UK and Zimbabwe, as well as two specialised partners (CBM and AWET). It also expanded its organisational ability to deliver this by delivering staff trainings on gender, establishing an internal GESI group and integrated GESI into its monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems.

### 8. Engaging with the relevant Government Ministries is essential to creating long term change.

SAGE engaged with multiple Ministries including Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Recreation, MWACSMED, Department of Social Development and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The SAGE CoGE component is aligned with the government's School Health Policy, as well as being positioned to address the national priority of achieving gender equality through removing underlying negative gender norms which create barriers for girls to access education.[31] Staff from the MWAGCSMED provided Ward Facilitators to support with the facilitation of the inter-generational dialogue sessions, and provided additional Human Resources to CoGE sessions once the Community Educators were no longer covered by the overall budget, thus enhancing sustainability.

Importantly in phase 2, two CoGE session cards comprising of 15 stories each were co-developed with technical officers from MWACSMED and MoPSE. These Ministries participated in reviewing the content, validating messages, and ensuring that the sessions reflected national guidelines on safeguarding, gender equality, and positive masculinities. Their input strengthened the cultural relevance and accuracy of the materials, making them suitable for long-term use in schools and community structures beyond the life of the project.

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30  Endline report, p45.
31  Endline report, p83.

9.  **An intersectional approach is expensive, time consuming and difficult but it is essential if we are to meet the multiple intersecting needs of girls and create lasting change.**

The SAGE programme adopted an intersectional approach from the outset, with the intentional targeting of seven marginalised and disadvantaged sub-groups. This approach required additional investment throughout the programme including conducting a gender analysis to further understand the multiple intersecting factors that were inhibiting girls' access to education, investment in reaching and actively recruiting girls from each sub-group and ensuring their continued involvement. This approach, for example the creation of satellite learning hubs to reduce or remove the distance barrier to education, was often more expensive. The programme moved away from a one size fits all approach to mobilisation by targeting sub-groups in different ways including door to door, community meetings, roadshows, MoPSE outreach, church meetings and health centre events. As mentioned above, the programme invested in disability inclusion through assistive devices and training, and supported childcare for young mothers. Furthermore, the monitoring and evaluation throughout the programme required significant investment to track learning and transition for each sub-group separately through attendance data, learning observations, tracking and adapting progress.

10. **Investment in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and embedding into existing programme structures, is vital to ensuring sustainability, inclusion and resilience.**

SAGE worked with partner organisation Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI), to build staff and volunteer's capacity on Psychological First Aid training and to aid the integration of psychosocial support (PSS) activities into existing CoGE modules and support boys and girls to adopt positive coping mechanisms. This was a reaction to reports of increased levels of GBV and household chore obligations for women during the Covid-19 pandemic. This enabled volunteers to better recognise Psychosocial support (PSS) needs and refer to local specialised services for further support. SAGE learners also received wellbeing checks from volunteers and monthly SMSs with messaging related to safeguarding and well-being. As a result, 94% of learners confirmed that they know someone to talk to if they are hurt.[32] Embedding wellbeing checks, PSS activities, and safeguarding messages into CoGE sessions and the SMS platform made support continuous and not dependent on separate project activities. This increased sustainability because the skills became part of routine practice. SAGE's collaboration with local clinics, social workers, and community-based organisations strengthened referral pathways. This ensured that when volunteers identified learners needing deeper psychosocial support, they could access appropriate specialised services quickly.

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32  Year 3 annual report, p9.

# FACTORS HINDERING SUCCESS

1. **Despite significant changes in some gender norms, others are persistent and are more difficult to change.**

Certain persistent, 'sticky' gender and social norms have been challenging to shift, despite considerable progress in shifting some attitudes and behaviours. There are still persistent patriarchal beliefs around the role of women and girls in the household, with household chore burden being cited as the biggest barrier to girls' attendance at both ATL sessions (51%) and CoGE (49.7%), especially amongst older girls, with some even facing a backlash to attending.[33] Patriarchal norms around a women's status and position within society have also been shown to be entrenched with some married women and young mothers, particularly in rural areas, facing resistance to attending SAGE due to a stigma that men felt about their wife becoming educated, a fear that wives would challenge their power or might engage in extra-marital affairs.

Broader negative attitudes around gender continue to prevail with 56% of the male respondents in the midline believing that a wife should always obey her husband.[34] Perceptions related to SRHR have also proved difficult to shift, with some parents believing that teaching children about contraception methods will encourage promiscuity and some CoGE facilitators voicing concern that some content contravened their beliefs.[35] The programme responded by utilising local clinic staff, Guidance and Counselling teachers and Community Health Workers to deliver SRHR sessions where possible. Shifting social norms is a long process, and it has been challenging to measure the progression from improved knowledge and attitudes to positive practice. The programme has strengthened its M&E framework and introduced new methodologies to harvest outcomes and impact, for example quarterly outcome mapping to aid the gathering of evidence on behavioural change. Quarterly outcome monitoring helped SAGE track progress in real time and quickly identify what was working well and what needed to improve. It allowed the team to pick up early warning signs such as drops in attendance, increases in GBV risks, or challenges with learning, and respond immediately rather than waiting until the end of the project. This made the programme more flexible and able to meet the real needs of girls. In essence, quarterly outcome monitoring supported better decision-making, stronger safeguarding responses, and more evidence-driven adaptations, which helped SAGE achieve lasting positive results for learners and communities.

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33 Endline report, p71.
34 Midline report, p19.
35 Endline report, p65.

2. **Despite intentional approaches to ensure inclusion of girls with disabilities, long term structural discrimination continues to create challenges for their education.**

In SAGE I, despite significant progress being seen in literacy and numeracy learning, girls with disabilities were reported at endline evaluation stage, to demonstrate the lowest mean self-efficacy score.[36] Furthermore, GWDs displayed the lowest satisfaction levels of the seven subgroups – 89% compared with 95% of the other subgroups.[37] This might stem from the issue of volunteer capacity to adequately support girls with disabilities being lower than their capacity to support the other subgroups, potentially as a result of their lack of lived experience of disability. Only 0.28% of girls with a disability transitioned back into education compared with 12.97% of girls who have never been to school.[38] This is not surprising when we reflect on the lack of disability inclusive infrastructure and skilled personnel who can support girls with disabilities within schools. In SAGE II the project ensured that learning material for learners with disabilities was further adapted, for example, 300 sets of Learners Workbooks were printed in large fonts and audios were distributed. The project also co-developed COGE session cards using an inclusion lens and utilising the expertise of CBM.

3. **Using life skills modules which are not developed in collaboration with government ministries can impact on the sustainability of interventions**

Unlike the ATL modules, in Phase 1, the CoGE modules were not developed in close collaboration with the MWAGSMED but were derived from an existing Plan model – Champions of Change. As such, CoGE materials were initially not adopted widely by the MWAGSMED in the same way that the ATL curriculum was adopted by the MoE. However, as mentioned above, in Phase 2 of the programme, CoGE session cards were developed with input from a wide range of actors from the MWAGSMED and MoE as well as partner organisations, which has ensured that the materials are being utilised widely.

4. **Despite significant efforts and flexibility on behalf of the programme, the impact of Covid-19 still disrupted the implementation of the first phase of the programme in multiple ways.**

The challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, saw Zimbabwe, and rest of the world, slide back on almost all indicators related to women's agency and self-efficacy and lockdowns and school/hub closures put more girls at risk of GBV[39], early unplanned or unwanted pregnancies and early marriages.[40] SAGE experienced a negative impact on the progress towards gender equality and shifting traditional gender roles. The situation presented challenges for the CoGE facilitators to intervene, as in some cases, service providers were closed or operating at skeleton levels during lockdown periods.

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36    Endline report, p184.
37    Year 3 annual report, p9.
38    Programme transition data used in the endline evaluation, Endline evaluation p.39
39    In 2020, Covid-19 lockdowns led to a 90% increase in calls to the national GBV hotline – https://zimbabwe.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/rapid-gender-assessment-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-in-zimbabwe
40    WRO Musasa recorded 1550 GBV incidents between August – October 2020 – Quarter 9 report.

Adaptations made to delivery methods and tools were not always conducive to CoGE materials and content. The programme adapted the delivery methods and redesigned the training tools using vignettes to illustrate value-based situations. However, this was not appropriate for some sensitive topics such as reproduction, and therefore certain topics were not covered at all during this time. Others were difficult to explain over the phone or could have led the girl to feel uncomfortable if there were other people around for example menstruation, and therefore weren't covered. Besides COVID- 19 disrupting learning, climate crises such as dry spells were also a threat to SAGE's success. When families face, crop failure, and food shortages, many girls were pulled out of learning hubs so they can help with household chores, search for water, or engage in small informal jobs to support the family. Climate shocks also reduce household ability to buy basic supplies like sanitary pads, leading to exclusion or irregular attendance.

## 5. Creating a sustainable CoGE model which can be led by communities without INGO support can be challenging

The SAGE programme identified within its sustainability plan for the recognition and support of community level girls' leadership and life-skills development platforms by linking them to MWAGSMECD structures. However, this and ensuring community leadership should be factored into the initial programme design and is challenging in practice.

The first phase of the SAGE programme founded the delivery of CoGE sessions with volunteer CoGE Facilitators who received a small stipend. However, in the last six months of the programme, to aid handover of SAGE activities to communities and reflecting a drastically reduced programme budget, these stipends were removed and instead a volunteer incentive scheme was piloted where Plan International supported hub volunteers to start their own income-generating activities. This pilot has had mixed results, with some hubs reporting maintained volunteer participation while others have seen reduced provision of CoGE sessions. To mitigate this, Community Educators who also received CoGE training integrated some CoGE elements into ATL sessions.

The second phase of the programme created a girl-led CoGE model which was first piloted and then rolled out in all hubs, in which girls were trained on reduced content session cards which they then trained their peers on within CoGE sessions. Initial feedback from the girls involved in the pilot has been positive, with girls expressing that they feel empowered to speak and learn because they are learning from peers that they know and trust and that they felt more confident raising issues with their families.[41]

With a peer-led model there are greater safeguarding risks in terms of protecting the girls, particularly after the project end. The programme has engaged the school guidance and counselling teachers to ensure their continued support to this component and for them to ensure that the peer-led sessions are held in a safe space and provided safeguarding briefings to peer facilitators so that they can identify and report safeguarding concerns.

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41   Semi interview guide for club members, 2023

6. **A deteriorating economic environment and continued high levels of poverty can hinder programme participation**

It remained a challenge throughout the programme to attract and retain community members to join the inter-generational dialogue sessions because of financial priorities as people prioritised financial survival ahead of SAGE. This was particularly acute for men joining the men's groups. The programme staff tried to mitigate this by making use of existing platforms such as churches or community meetings to enlist attendees and using community leaders to promote the programme. The inclusion of boys within TVET in the second phase was also a reaction to the continued levels of poverty among families and an attempt to ensure that the poorest groups could access the services that SAGE provides.

7. **Meeting the diverse needs of marginalised girls should be fully considered and factored into programme budgets in short and long-term interventions**

The highest proportion of girls who cited childcare as a barrier to attendance was in the 18-22 age group, reflecting the likelihood of older girls bearing greater domestic responsibilities and is linked to known entrenched gendered norms which expect girls and young women to fulfil a particular role within the household

As a short-term measure, SAGE sought to meet the daily needs of the girls by offering childcare at the hubs so that young mothers could still join and not be hindered by the need for childcare. Initially Community Educators were fulfilling this role but this was difficult to sustain and therefore a rotating system was designed in which Learning Assistants would rotate who was providing childcare and who was leading the session. This flexible and evolving approach ensured maximum inclusion but also required regular and consistent engagement and participation of target groups to ensure that the programme was responding to their needs. However, Learning Assistant roles were phased out in Year 3.

As a longer-term intervention, CoGE's social norm shifting focus sought to challenge the gendered norms held by husbands, partners and families on childcare responsibilities.

> **Yes, our views have changed because now as a man I can go to the borehole and fetch water whilst my wife is cooking or washing the dishes, or I can go and sell tomatoes whilst my wife is doing something else so that we share responsibilities rather than overburdening one side saying I'm the man I only do this and this. I can even sweep the house.**
>
> Young Men FGD, Changazi.

## 8. Programmes aiming to shift community norms should set realistic targets as part of a long-term and context-relevant approach

Despite the progress reported in SAGE, the endline evaluation demonstrated that empowerment-related targets for self-efficacy and for empowerment to make informed choices for transition were not reached, with the external evaluator concluding that one reason SAGE may have missed its target is due to the benchmark being set too high. For self-efficacy, one reason for this could be that the baseline report noted that the self-efficacy score observed at the baseline was exceptionally high and contradicted the findings of the Gender analysis. Given this, there is a possibility that the self-efficacy scores observed at the baseline did not sufficiently represent the actual status of self-efficacy and gender and SRHR norms.42

The SAGE consortium approach was ambitious and acknowledged that social norms and cultural practices that drive self-efficacy take a long time to change. However, it is important to recognize that persistent economic and political challenges in Zimbabwe combined with the pandemic posed a particularly challenging context in which to expect that 90% of girls would continue to demonstrate high levels of self-efficacy. Across the globe, research is showing the adverse effects the pandemic has had on the mental health of school-going children as well as that these effects have disproportionately been felt by women and girls. The above highlights how important a focus on target setting and revisions is and in taking a long-term and context-relevant approach.

## LESSONS LEARNED – HOW WE HAVE IMPLEMENTED RECOMMENDATIONS

**1** **Consider incorporating Plan International's tried and tested global model of 'Champions of Change' into future education-focused programmes to enhance gender transformation as an effective and valued mechanism for improving girls' confidence, self-efficacy and agency.**
The SAGE CoGE modules are currently being repositioned to be used in a World Bank funded programme Liberia Women's Empowerment project. The modules will be utilised in 60 schools targeting 600 students over a period of 3 years. They will be rolled out within a holistic 'One club' Model which is similar to the CoGE component of SAGE, and aims to build life skills, commitment to gender equality and awareness of SRHR within young people in Liberia.

**2** **Ensure that all programme modules are co-created with the relevant Ministry to maximise their buy-in and leadership from the start of the programme. This will also increase the likelihood of the key programme tools to being adopted by the government and hence a wider rollout. Ministerial staff can then provide support to communities as sessions are led by community members, as part of a sustainable approach.**
The SAGE team acted upon this recommendation by ensuring that a wide group of relevant actors contributed to the design of the CoGE session cards for Peer Educators. The first workshop included representatives from MOPSE and MoWCSMED , and the second included the same as well as six Peer Leaders who could then speak from experience on their experience of the cards and provided further recommendations of ensuring that the session cards are translated into three local languages to further enhance understanding. This ensured maximum buy-in from each actor and led to the session cards being reviewed and approved by MoPSE.

**3** **A multi-pronged and adaptive approach is the most effective when seeking to create long lasting change to tackle underlying negative gender norms.**
Climate change resilience was integrated into COGE session cards and community dialogues, helping girls and families understand how climate crises affect education, child marriage risk, and household decision-making. Moreover, financial literacy, including savings, budgeting and basic entrepreneurship was incorporated into peer-led sessions, enabling girls to build confidence, contribute to household income, and gain greater bargaining power within their families and communities.

**4** Include a commitment to advocacy to the Government to provide trained facilitators to support the intergenerational dialogue sessions from the start of the programme to ensure that these sessions are being led by people with authority but who are based within the communities.

The Government provided trained facilitators through the MoWACSMED's Community Development Coordinators who are based in the community to roll out the adult curriculum and intergenerational dialogues. Working with Community Development Coordinators was a major advantage for the programme because they are trusted community-based government workers who understand local norms, power dynamics, and sensitivities. Their permanent presence in the communities helped build credibility for the intergenerational dialogue sessions, ensured consistent follow-up with families, and strengthened community ownership. CDCs also helped bridge the gap between SAGE and local leadership structures, making it easier to address resistance, mobilise participants, and sustain the work even after project staff exited. Their involvement increased the likelihood that the conversations and behaviour changes would continue beyond the lifespan of SAGE.

## FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

**5** Ensure that the programme adequately budgets for the additional resources required to apply a truly intersectional approach.

**6** Prioritise partnerships with national partner organisations and ensure that they have the lived experience of the issue or group that they are representing.

**7** Continuously expose communities to disability related information to seek to reduce stigma. It is also useful to work with ministerial departments responsible for social welfare to challenge structural discrimination.

**8** Utilise a framework such as Plan International's Gender Transformative Marker, to ensure that all aspects of gender transformative programming are committed to and executed, acknowledging that some changes will take longer than others.

Members of Apostolic Communities gathered to participate in discussions

# ANNEX 1:
# THE SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION (SAGE) PROGRAMME MODEL

Plan International's global approach to ensuring Inclusive Quality Education aims to help overcome the barriers that prevent the most vulnerable and excluded children, particularly girls, from accessing and completing education, from pre-primary through to secondary level. It champions children's and young people's education, and that of girls, as a human right, a global development priority and a core humanitarian need.

Inclusive Quality Education is integrated with wider intervention areas to actualise children and young people's sexual reproductive health and rights, protection from violence, supporting girls, boys and youth as active drivers of change and ensuring that education contributes to the development of skills and opportunities for youth employment and entrepreneurship.

The SAGE programme model is an innovative, intersectional and gender transformative programme model, which has been tested across five years of implementation funded by UK Aid through the Girls Education Challenge (GEC) between 2018-2023. Implemented under the oversight of the Government of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the programme operationalised the national Non-Formal Education (NFE) Policy which promotes alternative pathways to increasing access to quality education for marginalised learners.

SAGE's Theory of Change assumes that reducing barriers at the household, learning-space, community, and system-levels will improve girls' access to high-quality education and skills acquisition, improve their confidence to learn, identify and proceed into positive transition pathways, as well as create sustainable supportive and enabling environments at the community, district, and national-level.

SAGE's overarching programme outcomes are:

1. **Learning:** the improvement in foundational literacy and numeracy performance of out-of-school girls and their increased self-efficacy and life skills.

2. **Transition:** an increase in the likelihood of highly marginalised adolescent girls transitioning through non-formal education or back into formal education, into vocational or life skills training or into fully paid employment which could be self-employment.

3. **Sustainability:** the expectation that the changes brought about through SAGE are sustainable following the end of the programme due to fundamental shifts in social norms, practices, behaviours or attitudes in the programme communities and through the continued efforts and increased capacity of local stakeholders and by relevant government stakeholders including the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development (MWACSMED).

To achieve this a multi-component and holistic model is utilised in which four components intersect with one another to maximise impact at the girl, hub, community, district and national level. By being a gender-transformative model, SAGE seeks to work at multiple levels to promote and improve education for girls and young women by tackling the root causes of gendered social and economic barriers and creating an enabling environment for transforming unequal gender norms.

Results have evidenced the testing of the model's ability to successfully integrate high-quality interventions, leading to significantly improved learning outcomes for over 13,400 educationally marginalised adolescent girls in Zimbabwe.

Evaluation results for the SAGE model can be found here: https://girlseducationchallenge.org/projects/project/supporting-adolescent-girls-education-sage/

## Key SAGE Programme Components

| Programme components | Details |
| --- | --- |
| **Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL)** | Providing out-of-school girls with high-quality, accelerated learning in Community Based Learning Hubs and eliminating barriers to education through free, accessible, inclusive, and flexible learning opportunities. |
| | A multi-modal delivery model enables volunteers to support girls via phone, at the household (door-to-door) and in small community groups. |
| | Leading continuous professional development (CPD) of community educators (CEs) to enhance their capacity to deliver inclusive, gender-responsive pedagogy through a range of methods, including creating mentoring linkages with the support of district-level education officials, virtual and in-person training and establishing communities of reflective practice (CORP). |
| **Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE) sessions** | Supporting adolescent girls and boys to improve their self-esteem and life skills through Plan International's Champions of Change Model, where community-based sessions encouraged the exploration of issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender rights and economic empowerment. |
| | Establishing men's clubs and intergenerational dialogues, whereby community members, including men, boys, and local leaders, are mobilised to adopt more positive gender attitudes and support and protect girls and young women through intergenerational dialogue and to act as champions of positive masculinity. |
| **Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP)** | Improving access to skills training through an integrated skills outreach programme whereby girls are mentored and trained by local master craft people in a community-based vocational training programme to increase livelihood opportunities for the girls and their families. |
| **Safeguarding** | Delivery of direct activities complemented with mainstreaming of good practice across all SAGE project activities to create a safe and inclusive environment where all programme participants, staff, volunteers, partners, and associates could thrive and feel secure. It also aims to support people to understand and exercise their rights and report any concerns. |
| | Activities include safe recruitment practices, capacity development, awareness raising, strengthening of child protection structures, service mapping and referrals to specialised services, case management and monitoring well-being and safety in hubs. |

Celebrating SAGE learners success at graduation events

**PLAN** INTERNATIONAL

**For children and equality for girls**

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