

Programmatic approaches to the gender-related impacts of COVID-19 on education: Lessons from 2020

Case study: Improving Gender
Attitudes, Transition and
Education Outcomes (IGATE)
Zimbabwe

By Janelle Zwier-Marongedza, IGATE Programme
Director, World Vision Zimbabwe



World Vision

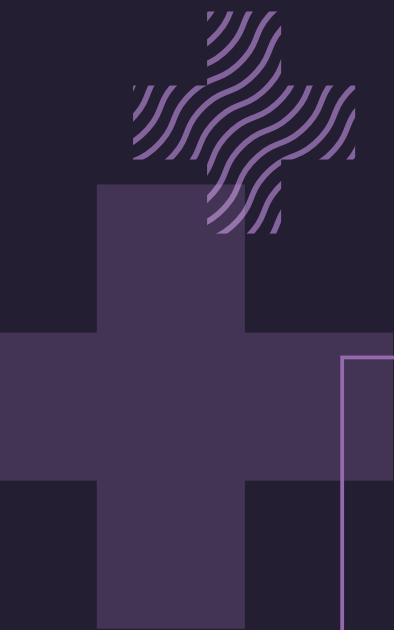


Girls'
Education
Challenge




Case Study: Improving Gender Attitudes, Transition and Education Outcomes (IGATE) Zimbabwe

Activating champions for girls' learning in response to COVID-19 education disruptions and their aftershocks in Zimbabwe



About the programme

Improving Gender Attitudes, Transition and Education Outcomes (IGATE-T), a World Vision-led project is funded through DFID UK's Girls Education Challenge and implemented in partnership with the Union for the Development of the Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe Africa, Open University, World Bicycle Relief, the Emthonjeni Women's Forum, SNV, and CARE International. It seeks to improve learning outcomes and positive transitions for 30,550 marginalized girls in rural communities of Zimbabwe. The programme began in 2017 using a whole school development approach, community engagement on social and religious norms, girls' leadership development and a community-based education pathway to improve the transition back to school or skill-building options for girls and boys who dropped out of school.



COVID-19 context

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe, schools closed and a nationwide lockdown started in late March. Mobility was restricted into early August, and the second of three school terms ticked by without scaled distance learning strategies reaching rural marginalized learners. Out-of-school girls in vocational training were set back as training centers were closed. School reopening was deferred from July to late September, and commenced in phases starting with exam classes. Widespread teacher incapacitation meant that even as schools reopened, teaching and learning was limited. Health and safety protocols in schools led to 'hot-seating' and schools naturally prioritized examination classes, while many other learners had little to no instruction.

COVID-19 restrictions exacerbated an already complex humanitarian situation. Impacts on marginalized girls and boys include lost learning and protective effects of school attendance, increased burdens of economic activity and care, increased exposure to abuse, pregnancy and early forced marriages, and psychological and mental health risks due to increasing social isolation, economic pressures and loss of support mechanisms with peers and in school environments¹.

Programme response to the gender-related impacts of COVID-19 on education

As the COVID crisis unfolded, the project rapidly adapted strategies focused on keeping girls safe and learning. Programme delivery relied on a capacity development approach supporting local stakeholders at the community and school level. Relationships built became key to activating local responses. Whatsapp had always been used for mobilization and communication with various volunteers including Community-Based Education (CBE) facilitators reaching out-of-school learners, mentors who ran weekend and holiday leadership clubs, as well as a growing number of 'champions' who took on more actions in support of marginalized girls and boys at the community level. These champions were rapidly recruited into groups using a snowballing approach.

Mobilizing WhatsApp networks to reach remote rural learners

In early April, with offices closed and field teams demobilized, a group of staff working remotely with the UK's Open University (OU) began exploring how these WhatsApp networks could be used to reach remote rural learners, knowing that radio, television and online options to access lessons and learning material was extremely limited. 'Learning Champions' were then invited to seek how alternative 'daily learning activities' could be dispatched to reach learners in small groups or at home. Text-based literacy and numeracy exercises were posted to groups, and champions were invited into the challenge of reaching the marginalized.

Champions found multiple routes, including relaying WhatsApp messages into locally formed groups, facilitating local learning circles, copying, delivering or posting activities on papers and supporting learners door-to-door. As one Learning Champion explains, "Some parents cannot read or write, and hence they can't even assist their own children...I would drop children's work [to their homestead]... using my bicycle to do door-to-door delivery...door-to-door delivery takes long, but at least I get time to explain to my learners before leaving".

¹ [COVID-19 AFTERSHOCKS: ACCESS DENIED](#) (2020) World Vision

Delivering remote safeguarding and psychosocial support to girls

A second set of WhatsApp groups including community case care workers, religious leaders and school and community mentors was formed for those mandated or taking on the role of championing girls' safety. These groups were oriented on reporting of suspected cases of abuse and remotely supported on protocols, service delivery maps and referral pathways. Some who reported cases were coached on psychological first aid as they had become the frontline of services that were not reaching survivors. IGATE convened case conferencing sessions with service providers and provided personal protective equipment and transport to ensure essential services to survivors.

Continuing professional development for teachers online

Before school closures, in-school teacher professional development was contributing to improved teaching quality and strong practices among teachers to address the challenge of weak foundational literacy and numeracy skills across primary and secondary learners (midline, 2019). As schools closed, many teachers, except those residing in local areas, departed from schools. Already strained by 'incapacitation', sustaining engagement with teachers for when schools reopen was a concern, and IGATE turned to WhatsApp to deliver a modified set of courses on foundational literacy and numeracy.



Programme outcomes

By August 2020, hundreds of volunteers were reaching thousands of learners. The demand for learning activities and materials also ignited the rapid development of additional self-study guides in English and Mathematics targeting Grade 7 learners covering some revision and the full syllabus. Select teachers who had journeyed through IGATE-led professional development were paired with technical teams who supplied frameworks and coaching for content development, again, almost exclusively via WhatsApp. The self-study guides were ultimately launched jointly with the Ministry of Education and are being reproduced as part of the Education Cluster response. Additional sets of levelled 'reading cards' – double-sided laminated sheets with stories and comprehension questions – which had been developed pre-pandemic, plus new 'numeracy cards' with simple numeracy practice exercises and games were also reproduced and dispatched to community learning centers.

Over 800 primary and secondary school teachers participated in WhatsApp courses and over 400 community champions were supporting learning centers, reaching at least 10,000 learners. Ninety-five abuse survivors were supported through joint efforts of champions from the start of lockdown through September 2020. As schools reopened in late 2020, a survey of learners revealed that 6 in 10 primary learners participated in learning circles and gained on average 72 additional learning days during the school closure. As stated below by a learner, girls shared that they appreciated learning circles as they were able to learn in an informal way and felt it was fair that all learners, including those who could not afford or access other alternative learning could participate. Learning circles were also a safe space away from household chores (Learner profile report, 2020).

“Being in the [learning] circle has helped me greatly, I only started to understand multiplication and division when we did it together during our meetings 5 times a week. In class they all just seemed like numbers to me and I would be too shy to tell the teacher I don’t understand. The leadership trainings have given me confidence in many ways. I am pushing myself to be better since I am now a peer leader and need to set the example for others and also I want to be a nurse!”

Female learner, Grade 6

Learnings and challenges

IGATE activated champions to keep girls learning and safe, and communities became the frontline of education. While some girls were reached, many were not, as coverage was dependent on willing champions, their networks, support and ‘foot-power’. Formative qualitative research led by the Open University (OU) was undertaken and key findings include; the strength of existing active community volunteers had enabled their own innovative solutions to the open-ended challenge of reaching learners and were able to adapt to changing circumstances. Furthermore, learning activities deployed using mobile phones but not dependent on technology at the point of learning enabled reach, and networks of support and affirming identities motivated champions. Finally, such approaches have the potential to enhance learning beyond the immediate crisis².

Many learning circles were particularly accommodative, reaching disabled learners and pre-COVID 19 drop-outs in some areas. Secondary-level girls participated, but this subgroup was not initially well represented, triggering deliberate strategies to reach them. Barriers such as household responsibilities and perceptions that volunteers were not suitable facilitators for secondary-level learners were further explored, as well as opportunities like forming peer-led study groups with more learning content pitched to secondary grades. Community-Based Education (CBE) learners were reached with rapidly developed self-study material for progressing their financial literacy skills. Few were able to work through this independently. As small group gathering is allowed, CBE groups are reconvening in order to be supported to use material.

As a crisis response, the daily learning activities were developed in ‘just in time’ fashion, and a more structured set of activities has been deployed since. IGATE midline evidence from 2019³ affirmed that a majority of learners continue to lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills, thus learning activities focus on building and reinforcing these skills, while demand from parents and schools is often for grade level or curriculum content.



- 2 Explore the full report on the EdTech Hub here: [Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development \(CHILD\)](#). The summary report from the Open University is also available here: [Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development \(CHILD\) Research Findings](#) (2020).
- 3 [IGATE-T: 2017 - 2021](#) (2020) Limestone Analytics

Looking beyond the immediate COVID-19 crisis

As schools are reopening, the impacts of the crisis on marginalized girls and boys is increasingly clear and alarming with high rates of drop-out being recorded, particularly among older girls. A recent World Vision survey found that out of 361 girls previously surveyed in their schools in 2019, only 139 (39%) have returned to school at the time of reopening.

In Zimbabwe, the education system remains fragile, especially in remote rural schools where meeting COVID-19 adaptations is a strain on already scarce resources. Keeping girls safe and learning remain urgent priorities and community-school partnerships will be key to catch-up and recovery. At the start of 2021, schools were closed again. Thus, IGATE continues to strengthen the Learning Champion network, advocating for strong learning circles and study group models while demonstrating this approach to the Education Cluster as both a suitable response to school closures for marginalized learners and a strategy to leverage for catch-up learning for formal and non-formal education. A peer leader network, currently 500 strong, is also being mobilized to identify and refer at-risk girls and boys and establish and expand study circles. These grassroots actors are also promoting key messages of the Education Act amendment⁴ that pregnant or married girls cannot be turned away from schools.

Those already in the Community-Based Education (CBE) track will be supported through positive transitions, while CBE learning material is being consolidated as a non-formal education solution to scale nationally. IGATE is supporting the use of diagnostic tools to assess learner competencies in school, reinvigorating literacy and numeracy support to teachers and capacity to address gaps in catch-up and remediation. As the programme will close in mid-2021, evaluation will focus on the resilience of girls, communities and schools and contributions made to system-strengthening.



4 [Zimbabwe Removes Barriers to Education](#) (2020) Human Rights Watch

More resources to explore:

[Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development \(CHILD\) Research Findings](#) (2020) The Open University

[COVID-19 AFTERSHOCKS: ACCESS DENIED](#) (2020) World Vision

[IGATE: Improving Girls' Access through Transforming Education](#) World Vision

[Celebrating girls who are overcoming assorted challenges to continue learning and growing](#) (2021) World Vision

Contact the author:

Janelle Zwier-Marongedza, janelle_zwier@wvi.org
IGATE Programme Director, World Vision Zimbabwe

Photo credits/captions:

Page 5 - © Rumbidzai Marime/World Vision. Peer learning in action: a Community Learning Champion looks to Whatsapp for shared learning activities and support.

Page 7 - © Rumbidzai Marime/World Vision. In a community learning circle session support visit, a peer leader shares information on COVID-19 safety.

Page 8 - © Rumbidzai Marime/World Vision. During peer leadership training, peer leaders and community mentors meet to talk about life skills.



United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI)
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

 /UNGEI

 /UNGEI

 /ungei

 /ungirlseducation

 ungei.org

 info@ungei.org

