

# The role of girls' clubs in challenging gender norms in Ethiopian primary education

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## Abstract

One of the key priorities of ongoing nationwide education reforms in Ethiopia is the promotion of girls' education through the establishment of Girls' Clubs. These Clubs aim to support girls' education by addressing restrictive socio-cultural practices and improving the accessibility and safety of schools. This paper explores the role of Girls' Clubs in challenging gender norms that influence girls' education in primary schools in Ethiopia. The paper draws on data from interviews with Girls' Club focal teachers and focus group discussions with student members across four regions. Findings reveal that while Girls' Clubs have made some progress in challenging restrictive gender norms, their impact is limited by financial, institutional, and structural constraints. Overcoming these constraints requires a collaborative approach involving school leadership, communities, and external governmental and funding organisations. We recommend that future national education reforms prioritise increased financial support for Girls' Clubs and integrate their initiatives into broader community-level strategies.

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## Introduction

Progress in girls' education has been substantial globally, with 22.5 million more girls in primary school in 2023 than in 2015, and their completion rates reaching 89 percent by 2023 (UNESCO, 2024). However, this progress has been uneven around the world. Primary school enrolments are getting closer to parity for girls and boys globally, but girls in sub-Saharan Africa are still less likely than boys to complete primary school (UNESCO, 2024). In Ethiopia, a focus on girls' education over the three decades prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

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has led to a remarkable rise in the national primary enrolment rates for girls, from 51 percent in 2003/04 to nearly 90 percent in the 2019/20 school year, with notable regional disparities (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, Ethiopian girls continue to face a number of challenges in terms of their completion of primary education and improving learning outcomes (Yorke, Rose & Pankhurst, 2021). In the 2019/2020 school year, for example, the primary grade completion rate for girls was 68 percent compared to 73 percent for boys (Ministry of Education, 2020). Although girls' academic achievement at lower grades usually matches that of boys, it often decreases as they progress through upper grade levels, and many girls complete primary education without achieving foundational learning (Ministry of Education, 2023). Ethiopian girls living in rural locations and in historically disadvantaged regions often face the greatest disadvantages, such as dropping out of school, repeating grades, and performing lower than their urban counterparts (Dom, 2017; Rossiter, Azubuike, & Rolleston, 2017).

Beyond parity in numbers, there is a long history of gender inequality in Ethiopia. Girls, especially from the lowest-income households and rural locations, confront harmful gender norms, such as child marriage, early pregnancy, high burden of domestic work, gender-based violence, and limited opportunity to realise their rights (Colclough, Rose & Tembon, 2000; Hailu, 2019; Parkes, 2017; World Bank, 2017). These gender norms continue to impact the education and opportunities of girls. Girls and young women are socialised to be submissive, to '*keep silent*' and have limited decision-making power both within the household and in the wider community (Chuta, 2017; Hailu, 2019; Yorke et al., 2021). These harmful gender norms have been shown to operate at multiple levels of society – including the household, school, labour market, and broader society – creating additional barriers for girls and underpinning the inequalities they face in accessing and benefiting from education. This often leads to girls dropping out of school and being married off early (Colclough et al., 2000; Chuta & Morrow, 2015).

Although norms around girls' education are shifting favourably in Ethiopia, girls still fail to complete primary and secondary education due to early marriage, gendered division of labour, and other harmful gender practices (Jones et al., 2014; Mjaaland, 2018; Yorke et al., 2021). Furthermore, the Ethiopian primary education system itself is not a gender-neutral space, and gender norms continue to shape the policies and strategies that are pursued, including those related to girls' education (Yorke et al., 2021).

A primary goal of the third phase of the General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP-E: 2018-2023) was to improve girls' education in Ethiopia, particularly in historically disadvantaged regions, including Afar, Benishangul Gumuz, and Somali. These regions, often referred to as 'emerging' regions, have significantly lagged behind in the proportion of girls attending primary school relative to boys (Ministry of Education, 2017). A key intervention of the GEQIP-E programme involved establishing and strengthening Girls' Clubs targeting girls in primary schools. The expectation has been that the Clubs could create safe spaces for girls to reflect on their experiences and enhance their interest to continue education, and to discuss issues that affect their education including child marriage, gender-based violence, and other harmful social norms (World Bank, 2017).

Drawing on qualitative data from the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia research programme, this paper examines the role of Girls' Clubs in selected

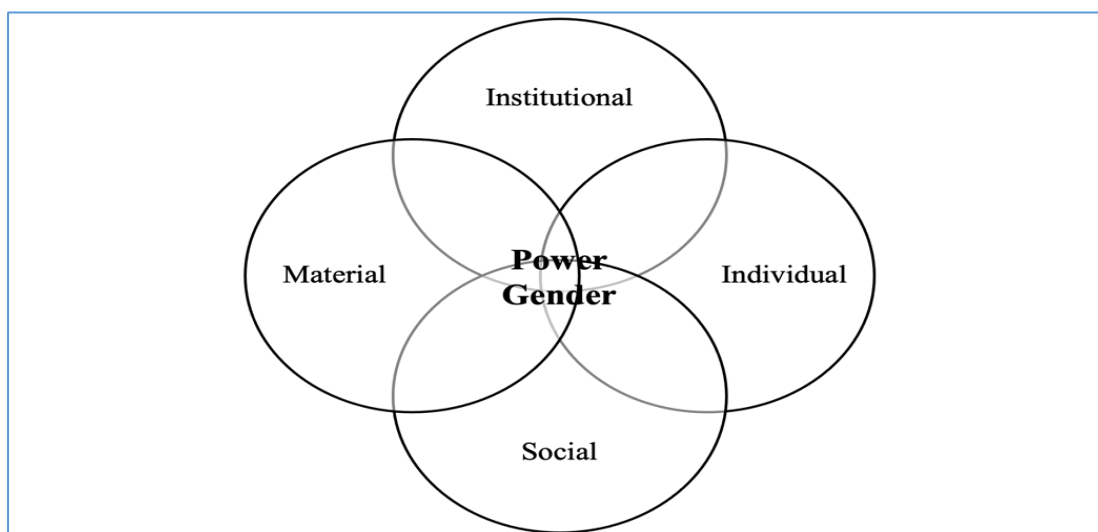
primary schools in addressing certain gender norms and supporting girls' education. Specifically, we aim to answer the following questions: (1) what gender-based challenges do primary school girls face within their schools and communities? (2) How do Girls' Clubs help challenge gender norms that hinder girls' participation in education?

### **Theoretical framework**

The application of a social norms perspective to address a variety of international development challenges has recently become more common in low- and middle-income countries (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). This has allowed an explanation of some of the 'social' reasons why individuals do what they do. Cislaghi and Heise (2020) argue that many social norms are related to gender as people hold beliefs about what is expected from them because of their sex and socially constructed rules of behaviour assigned to that sex. They explain gender norms as "social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society" (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 415).

With the recognition that gender norms interact with other determinants of behaviours that influence the success of gender-related social norms interventions, Cislaghi and Heise (2019) proposed a dynamic framework for social change. The framework encompasses four domains of influence: the individual, social, material and institutional factors. The framework illustrates how these four domains collectively influence individual behaviour and are crucial for challenging social norms (Figure 1). The individual domain includes all factors related to the person, such as beliefs, aspirations, skills, and attitudes. The material domain includes physical objects and resources such as money or services. The social domain includes factors such as the availability of different types of social support. The institutional domain includes the formal system of rules and regulations such as laws, policies or religious rules. Power and gender in the centre of the dynamic framework refer to the attempt to change the gender system by addressing discriminatory power relations. Cislaghi and Heise (2020) argue that gender norms are affected by power relations, and integrating a power analysis into gender-related social norms programming would largely benefit the design of relevant interventions by drawing attention to powerholders who may resist change. The dynamic framework identifies that changing individuals' beliefs is not enough to achieve norm change and eventually individuals' actions, but change in institutional policies, people's narrative, and power relations.

Overall, the dynamic framework for social change outlines that strategies to change discriminatory social norms that promote inequality require altering individual beliefs, changing how social norms are produced through social interactions, and transforming broader institutions. A strength of the dynamic framework is that it encourages researchers and practitioners to recognise the combined influence of various factors in each domain, suggesting that gender norms interventions should aim to achieve cooperation with other actors working at different points of influence (Cislaghi & Heise 2019).

**Figure 1***Cislaghi and Heise's (2019) dynamic framework for social change*

We employ Cislaghi and Heise's (2019) dynamic framework for social change to examine the role of Girls' Clubs in challenging gender norms and supporting girls' education in primary schools in Ethiopia. Given the deep-rooted influence of gender norms on girls' education in the Ethiopian education system, the dynamic framework offers a holistic approach to understand the contributions of Girls' Clubs in challenging gender norms by examining the interactions of social norms with the individual, social, material and institutional factors.

## Methods

This paper draws on qualitative data from the RISE Ethiopia research project. RISE Ethiopia is a longitudinal study that explores the design, implementation, and impact of the GEQIP programmes. The data, collected in February 2020 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), targets five purposely selected primary schools across four regional states: one school in Addis Ababa, one in both rural and urban Benishangul Gumuz, one in rural Oromia, and one in rural Tigray. These schools were chosen to reflect geographical diversity and rural-urban status because gender barriers are contextually specific and likely to vary across regions in Ethiopia. Security risks were also considered when selecting the sample schools. We could not include the experiences and roles of Girls' Clubs in predominantly pastoral communities due to security risks. Our study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the issues of Girls' Clubs rather than being representative of the country overall. While this means it is not appropriate to generalise from the findings based on schools in four regions, issues raised allow us to identify lessons that could have wider applicability for the country.

### Participants and instruments

A total of 28 fifth-grade girls were purposely selected from the five schools, along with Girls' Clubs focal teachers (Table 1). The girls were selected to represent low, medium,

and high achievers based on their beginning- and end-of-year mathematics test scores from the RISE Ethiopia 2018/19 quantitative survey. Fifth grade students were purposely targeted because this is the grade when primary school girls typically gain membership to Girls Clubs. The average age of the girls was 14 years, although one student in Tigray region was 11 years old. Two girls from the school in Addis Ababa were absent during the FGD. All the Girls' Club focal teachers in our sample were female.

**Table 1**

*School and community sites for the study and sample size*

Geographical area	Region	Number of Female Students	Number of Girls' Club Focal Teachers (all female)
Northern Regions	Tigray (Rural)	6	1
Southern Regions	Oromia (Rural)	6	1
Emerging Regions	Benishangul Gumuz (Rural)	6	1
Emerging Regions	Benishangul Gumuz (Urban)	6	1
Urban Capital	Addis Ababa	4	1
Total		28	5

Data were collected through focal group discussions (FGDs) with Girls' Club members and interviews with Girls' Club focal teachers, who were in charge of the Girls' Clubs in their respective schools. The FGDs with the girls allowed us to explore issues related to their educational aspirations and expectations, the factors impacting their education and participation in school activities, their relationships with other students and their teachers, and their involvement in domestic chores. The interviews with the Girls' Club focal teachers focused on their main roles and responsibilities in the Club, training opportunities for capacity building, the types of supports and trainings offered to members of the club, and collaboration opportunities with teachers and the leadership in the school and with the community outside the school.

## Procedures

A team of experienced fieldworkers were involved in the data collection, who also received a full-day training that covered the purpose of the research, detailed discussion on the interview questions including role playing, ethical considerations, and overall practical guidelines including safety. The fieldworkers signed a code of conduct prior to the data collection. Two fieldworkers were assigned in each school.

The interview protocols were validated through peer review and pilot test in three schools prior to the data collection. Prior to the interviews, the selected study participants were informed about the purpose and process of the interview. Informed consent was obtained directly from the Girls' Club focal teachers. Because our student participants were under the age of 18 years, we sought parent or guardian consent. In the event when we were unable to reach out to the parent or guardian, students were requested to nominate a trusted adult teacher to provide consent, which included either their room teacher or the school principal. Only those students who consented were included in the data collection. Interviews

were conducted in the participants' preferred language, which were audio-recorded with their consent, and later transcribed and translated into English language.

### Data analysis

The transcripts were cleaned, with personal identifiers anonymised according to the ethical guideline. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021) was employed to analyse the data. The analysis was facilitated by Atlas.ti software. We used both inductive and deductive approaches, in which patterns, themes and categories were identified using our theoretical framework, but attention was also paid to unanticipated themes. We first familiarised ourselves with the data by reading through the transcripts and noting initial ideas. We then generated initial codes and defined and named the codes, which were then collated into possible themes.

This study was conducted during the mid-implementation phase of the GEQIP-E programme. As such, further insights could be gained from assessing implementation at a later stage of the programme, although it should be noted that this was disrupted due to COVID-19.

## Findings

In this section, we present the main themes that were generated in relation to our two research questions. The first section presents the themes in relation to gender-based challenges girls experience in their communities that negatively influence their education (research question one). The second section presents the themes on the various services offered by the Girls' Clubs to their members to challenge gender norms in view of our theoretical framework (research question two).

### Gender norms and girls' education

As this section identifies, a range of gender-based challenges were identified in the study communities through the FGDs with the Girls' Club members, including gender-based violence and harassment, shaming during menstruation, harmful traditional practices, and involvement in domestic work (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Challenges to girls' education identified by Girls' Club members*

Region	Main Challenges
Addis Ababa, urban Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, Tigray	Gender based violence and harassment, heavy domestic work
Addis Ababa, Rural Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, Tigray	Menstruation (lack of information and material support) and heavy domestic work
Rural and urban Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia	Harmful cultural practices, including child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM)
Urban Benishangul Gumuz	Heavy domestic work

As shown in Table 2, the issue of gender-based violence and harassment was identified by Girls' Club members across all the four regions as one of the most significant challenges to girls' education. This ranged from verbal harassment by male students within and outside the school, to physical, and sexual harassment including risk of rape. For example, a Girls' Club member in the urban Benishangul Gumuz school explained the following incident of sexual harassment:

I come to this school every day from the nearby rural area. On my journey, I had to walk through an area where I sometimes see very aggressive young men gather. In one afternoon, I was walking back home with my friends, and two men followed us. They chased us for a few minutes. I escaped but one of my friends could not. She was sexually harassed by two men (Girls' Club member, urban Benishangul Gumuz).

In relation to menstruation, challenges reported included a lack of information and material support to enable girls to effectively manage their periods. Girls' Club members in rural Benishangul Gumuz spoke of how the lack of information and resources as well as cultural taboos around menstruation all interacted to disadvantage girls and negatively impact on their education:

We are told that sanitary pads are available in the school, but we are not given a room where we can change. When we are given the sanitary pads and take it home, other students especially the boys may see us and then mock and tease us publicly (FGD with Girls' Club members, rural Benishangul Gumuz).

Another Girls' Club member in rural Benishangul Gumuz stated the challenges in relation to menstruation as follows:

Girls feel ashamed during menstruation because the boys in the school mock them. The boys make a big issue when they notice a girl is menstruating. They tease her and speak about it publicly and ridicule her (FGD with Girls' Club members, rural Benishangul Gumuz).

Harmful traditional practices including female genital mutilation and child marriage were raised as challenges in Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz (Table 2). During an FGD in rural Benishangul Gumuz, a Girls' Club focal teacher explained the traditional practice of female circumcision as follows: "There are still families in this region who circumcise their daughters just about 40 to 45 days after their birth, and they believe that unless girls get circumcised, their menstruation will coagulate during its flow". In relation to child marriage, different types of forced marriage practices were identified including abduction, sister inheritance (a man marrying his deceased wife's sister) and transgenerational marriage (marriage between an older man and younger girl).

Heavy domestic work was noted as an important challenge in all the regions, and particularly in urban Benishangul Gumuz (Table 2). Girls' Club members in all the schools discussed how gender norms concerning the domestic work responsibility of girls and their restricted mobility within communities negatively impacted their education. Girls are often confined within the household and expected to complete heavy work burdens, while boys

have the relative freedom to play outside of the home and get time during the day to study. In Addis Ababa, the Girls' Club focal teacher discussed how the domestic chores that girls perform not only limited the time they had for studying outside the school hours but also impacted girls' ability to fully concentrate during lessons in the classroom:

Female students are overloaded with domestic tasks. And because of this, they usually come to school without having enough sleep. They become tired and cannot follow their lessons attentively (Girls' Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

In discussing these various challenges, Girls' Club members and focal teachers emphasised the interconnectedness of these challenges. For example, in Addis Ababa, the focal teacher explained that girls were often late to school due to their heavy domestic work burdens. As a result, they were sometimes denied entry upon arrival, forcing them to spend the rest of the day outside the school in the community, where they faced heightened risks of gender-based violence and harassment:

Girls are denied entry and kept outside the school when they come to school late. During this moment, they may be deceived and engage in sexual relationships with boys (Girls' Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

### **Girls' Clubs and their activities**

Given the afore-mentioned gender-based challenges that girls experience in their communities, this section explores the role of Girls' Clubs in challenging gender norms that hinder girls' participation in education. Girls' Club members in each sample school were asked to reflect on the services offered by the Girls' Clubs. The student members identified their Clubs as the most important sources of support for their education, particularly in providing information to address gender norms and practices, taking action to prevent and challenge gender norms and practices, and supporting them during menstruation.

### **The role of Girls' Clubs in addressing gender norms in view of the dynamic framework for social change**

#### ***Individual domain: Increasing knowledge and information and building confidence***

Across the schools included in our sample, the Girls' Club members and focal teachers worked to raise awareness about the rights of girls and women and the harmful effects of gender-based violence. The activities of the Girls' Clubs focused on equipping girls with information and skills, empowering them to understand their rights and stand up against inequalities, and address their needs. Information is provided on a range of topics including sexual reproductive health knowledge, menstrual hygiene managements, and strategies to combat harmful traditional practices, such as early marriage. In relation to menstruation, Girls' Club focal teachers stated how they provided information to girls and advice on how to manage their menstruation. The focal teacher in Addis Ababa explained:

I create awareness for the girls about secondary sexual characteristics and the challenges they face in the community regarding these changes. I teach them about the biological changes they experience while transitioning to puberty including how



they should manage the challenges they may face. And knowing about these changes helps them develop their confidence (Girls' Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

In Oromia, the Girls' Club focal teacher mentioned how she assisted the girls to manage their periods although she was unable to provide material support for them:

I may not give them sanitary pads, but I provide them with some tips on what they could do during periods. I try to create a conducive environment for them at school so that they don't stay at home during their periods (Girls' Club focal teacher, Oromia).

Providing them with such information helped to reduce their anxiety and encouraged them to seek support from their classmates and peers. Girls' Club members in urban Benishangul Gumuz stated how the information and support provided through the Girls' Club helped to address some of the social stigmas around menstruation: "... our understanding now is menstruation is not a curse, but a natural thing that can happen to girls" (Girls' Club FGDs, urban Benishangul Gumuz).

In Tigray, the individual level support extends to giving information on a range of similar topics:

I encourage girls participating in the Club to share any gender-based problems, any challenges with me. We talk about the importance of preventing early marriage, on how to manage their menstruation, about protecting themselves from underage marriage, HIV/AIDS, and so on (Girls' Club focal teacher, Tigray)

Girls' Club members and focal teachers mentioned the methods for building the confidence and self-esteem of female students through their activities. For example, in the Tigray school, the Girls' Club members were encouraged to exercise their communication skills, which in turn, helped them to have the confidence to speak up in class. In Benishangul Gumuz, the focal teacher discussed how female students were better able to reflect upon and articulate their concerns and had more confidence in the school environment because of their involvement in Girls' Clubs:

Now, female students are more actively participating in any activity at school. They now take up the position of a class representative. They also started expressing their feelings freely during the Club meetings. ... They started to show equal participation with males in any activities at school (Girls' Club focal teacher, urban Benishangul Gumuz).

During the FGDs, Girls' Club members shared that they felt more confident discussing personal and sensitive matters since joining the Club. Some girls even reported gaining the confidence to initiate changes both at school and at home, such as speaking up in class and negotiating the traditionally gendered division of household labour.

Providing female students with information about their rights and building their confidence also helped them to advise their families and community members to refrain from engaging in harmful traditional practices as discussed by the Girls' Club focal teacher in Oromia:

I teach the girls in the Club about traditional practices such as early marriage and forced marriage that may happen to them without their consent. There is also abduction, rape, and female circumcision practiced in the area. Such girls will in turn also advise their parents to refrain from practicing such harmful traditional practices on them. We also tell the girls to report such violence to us if it happens within the community (Girls' Club Focal Teacher, Oromia).

However, there are challenges reported in relation to the full participation of girls in the Girls' Clubs activities. For example, the focal teacher in urban Benishangul Gumuz indicated the lack of full participation as follows: "some girls don't regularly participate in the Club meetings although we have been encouraging them to attend as much as possible". Although we could not follow up with the members why they do not regularly attend Club meetings, this finding suggests that further encouragement is necessary to convince the members to attend regularly.

### ***Social domain: expanding social networks by involving boys and male teachers in the Girls' Clubs***

An important finding during the FGDs is that Girls' Clubs focal teachers started involving boys in the activities of the Girls' Clubs. In Tigray, for example, we found that the boys were sometimes invited to join the Girls' Club meetings where they got some lessons regarding the equal rights women have with men and the need to respect that right. Similarly, the FGDs in rural Benishangul Gumuz revealed boys get advice through the Girls' Clubs to stand against any form of gender-based violence in their schools and communities and support girls anywhere when they encounter any form of harassment. The boys are also informed of the school rules that any form of gender-based harassment results in suspension from the school. In Addis Ababa, the involvement of male students and male teachers in the Girls' Club was mentioned as having a great role in supporting the girls. While previously male students were verbally harassing girls during their menstruation, increasing their awareness through their participation in the Girls' Club has helped to address this issue, as stated during the FGD in Addis Ababa:

The main activity of the Club is benefiting the girls by improving boys' knowledge about the general challenges facing the girls. Some boys were belittling the girls when they knew they were using sanitary pads. The participation of boys was minimal last year and before last year. This year, more boys are joining the Club, and those who have already become members are actively participating in the Club's activities. They have started showing respect towards the girls (Girls' Club FGDs, Addis Ababa).

Similarly, the Girls' Club focal teacher in Addis Ababa indicated the importance of including male students so that they can help to counter gender-based violence:

We involve them in the Club because they contribute to protecting the girls from abuse. They can teach people and protect girls from gender-based abuse. Males may abuse girls at school, at home, and in the community. In such situations, the boys would become responsible and collaborate with us to participate in the fight against gender-based violence in different settings (Girls' Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

While some Girls' Clubs had successfully engaged male students and male teachers, others faced difficulties in doing so. One of the primary reasons that male teachers and students were excluded was because the issues that were discussed – such as sexual and reproductive health, menstruation, and child marriage - were viewed as issues that only concerned female students. The following quote by the Girls' Club focal teachers in Tigray region shows why efforts were not made to involve male students in the Girls' Clubs:

Most of the agenda in the Club is related to girls' life. ... If we have to talk about early marriage, it is a problem that girls face, not boys. Similarly, gender-based harassments affect girls more than boys. ... our agenda in the Club is girls' issues, such as the menstruation, early marriage, and gender-based violence. That is the reason we include only the girls (Girls' Club focal teacher, Tigray).

These perspectives show that the challenges girls face were seen as the responsibility of female students and do not concern male students, suggesting the need to challenge these views.

### ***Material domain: Girls' Clubs in providing material support***

The material support for female students was primarily through the provision of sanitary pads. Some but not all the Girls' Clubs were able to provide sanitary pads for students. Through the interviews with focal teachers and FGDs, we learned that financial support for these materials comes mostly from teachers and a few members of the Girls' Clubs, while in Addis Ababa, some non-governmental organisations also provide support. The Girls' Clubs focal teacher noted:

The Girls' Club doesn't have the resources to run the activities. No sufficient budget is allocated for it. I cannot get brochures and other teaching materials to use during our club meetings. Sometimes, I even run out of stationery papers (Girls' Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

In addition to the insufficient supply of sanitary pads, Girls' Club members mentioned challenges related to the lack of menstrual hygiene facilities:

There is no separate room for menstrual hygiene management. Female students do not have a water supply or separate room to wash and change their underwear and sanitary pads. Besides, the supply of sanitary pads is not consistent, and we have not received any this year (Girls' Club FGD, Tigray)

Another issue identified by Girls' Club focal teachers in all the schools is the lack of resources and facilities to run the activities of the Girls' Club. For example, not all the Girls' Clubs have separate rooms to conduct meetings with the members and as a result, forced to hold meetings under a shade of a tree in the school compound. Overall, while the Girls' Clubs tried to provide support for female students during their menstruation, and to undertake its activities, this was highly limited due to the lack of financial resources.

***Institutional domain: Girls' Clubs collaboration within and outside the school***

The Girls' Clubs focal teachers and student members discussed the benefits of the Girls' Clubs in supporting social networks for addressing gender norms and practices. The members identified the interventions they undertook to stop different forms of gender-based violence and harassment from taking place. In rural Benishangul Gumuz, the Girls' Club focal teacher stated the following on how she intervened to prevent planned forced marriages of two of her underage students:

During the last semester of the academic year, I cancelled the [planned] marriages of two female students. I heard about marriage planning from other people who knew the girls, and the girls were just 15 and 16 years old. Though there is no forced marriage in our community, once we had a case where a parent was planning to marry off his 16-year-old daughter without her interest. Then, we intervened, and the marriage was cancelled (Girls' Club focal teacher, rural Benishangul Gumuz).

Although the intervention of the focal teacher helped stop the planned marriage, it does not guarantee that girls can cope with family pressure for marriage and continue their education. One of the girls who were protected from marriage left the community to live in an urban area with her relatives. The focal teacher confirmed: "The girl left school and went to the regional capital to stay with her aunt. After that, I don't have [any] information whether she is married there or not." This suggests the capacity of the Girls' Club to ensure girls continue their schooling after protecting them from early marriage is limited.

During the FGD in urban Benishangul Gumuz, the Girls' Club members discussed how they supported a girl to continue her education after her marriage with an older man for her age was discontinued.

Yale-acha gabicha (marriage between younger girls and older men) is a big problem in our community. Girls usually do not marry a man of their age in this community. There was a girl in grade 8 who got married to an older man but could not live with him. The marriage was discontinued (reason unknown) and we subsequently supported the girl to resume her education. Now, she is attending her school with us. (Girls' Club FGD, urban Benishangul Gumuz)

In urban Benishangul Gumuz, the Girls' Club collaborated with other community stakeholders including the Regional Justice Office and the community's administrative officials to work on combating early marriage and to report cases of violence. The Girls' Club members reflected how a girl who was a student in the school but working as a domestic worker faced abuse from her employer, and the Girls' Club intervened to stop this abuse:

We received information that a girl, who lived with her employers - a wife and a husband, was sexually harassed. One day, the wife left for Addis Ababa, and the girl remained in the house with the husband. ... The husband attempted to harass the girl sexually. The girl told her friend at school about this incident and the friend encouraged her to report it to the Girls' Club, which she did. The Club in

collaboration with the school principal contacted the man (Girls' Club FGD, urban Benishangul Gumuz).

In Addis Ababa, the Girls' Club focal teacher mentioned how the school intervened to prevent the abuse of a female student who was living with her relatives:

A girl now attending in 4th grade came to live and attend her education with her aunt in Addis Ababa. I heard that she has been sexually harassed by the husband of her aunt every night. ... The school intervened, reported the abuse and the girl continued her school safely. Such cases happen in the community and neighbourhoods and not all female students are safe. The Girls' Club tries to intervene when we get such tips from anyone (Girls Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

As indicated above, the Girls' Clubs indicated that they had a role in reporting and preventing the abuse. It was noted that stopping some of these harmful gender-related violence requires collaboration and support among multiple stakeholders, including law enforcement and organisations programming around gender-based violence.

Another challenge was the Girls' Club focal teachers in all the schools had received limited or no training and support for their role. For example, in Addis Ababa the focal teacher discussed how the limited training that she received meant that she was not adequately prepared to support the Girls' Club.

I cannot support the girls in the Club as much as I want because I do not have enough knowledge about gender issues. I have not received adequate training to equip myself. Thus, I believe that teachers working in the Club and the students need training to have adequate awareness (Girls' Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

The Girls' Club focal teacher in urban Benishangul Gumuz also noted that she had not received training in relation to Girl's Clubs: "When I was at the woreda [district] school, I received training related to gender even though I have not received any training related to the Girls' Club when I moved to this school". The focal teachers across all the sample schools suggested that adequate training was necessary for them. They also raised the issue of limited coordination and collaboration amongst other stakeholders for the Girls' Clubs activities. The Girls' Club focal teacher in Addis Ababa underlined how the complexity of gender issues requires huge efforts and better collaboration amongst different stakeholders.

Dealing with gender issues needs enormous effort. It involves working with both boys and girls on a wider range of topics. ... No single person can manage all the work alone. Providing an array of skills and knowledge needs relevant training. Currently, we are not able to create adequate awareness for our students and the whole school community because we are not well-equipped and we are working alone (Girls' Club focal teacher, Addis Ababa).

The focal teacher noted in particular that the school principal did not give sufficient attention to this issue, which negatively impacted the Girls' Club: "I have repeatedly requested the school principal to come and observe when we run activities in our Club. He never showed up with a pretext that he is too busy. The school contacts us only to get the

reports.” It appears that the lack of support may have negatively affected the motivation of the focal teachers. Members of the Girls’ Club in Addis Ababa also indicated that the focal teachers do not come to the Club meetings regularly. Their absence during the meeting had reduced the interest of the girls to regularly participate in the Club meetings.

## Discussion

We found that a range of gender norms and practices, including gender-based violence and harassment, stigma around menstruation, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and heavy domestic work continue to negatively impact girls’ education in the schools we studied. Similarly, a recent study indicated that in rural areas and underserved regions in Ethiopia, girls continue to experience negative social norms, including marrying before 18 years old and other harmful practices, which are affecting girls’ education (Erulkar, 2022). In communities where social norms around child marriage is pervasive, girls have little or no agency in deciding whom or when to marry (Emirie et al., 2021).

Our findings also highlighted the significant role Girls’ Clubs play in supporting female students. The roles included raising awareness of and providing support to female students on gender-related issues, including menstrual hygiene management and dealing with gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage. The Girls’ Clubs were also engaged in fostering girls’ confidence to assert their rights in the school, family, and community settings. However, despite their progress in challenging restrictive gender norms, the capacity of Girls’ Clubs to provide comprehensive support remains limited. For example, financial constraints hindered the provision of adequate sanitary pads, and many schools lacked water and gender-separate toilets, limiting support for menstruation management. These resource shortages align with previous evidence that showed deficiencies in water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure in Ethiopian primary schools, which often fail to provide girls with access to clean water, hygienic toilets, and safe waste disposal (Sahiledengle et al., 2022; Deriba et al., 2022).

Moreover, the Girls’ Clubs were limited in their ability to address abuses girls faced outside of school. Although efforts to prevent early marriage were made, schools had minimal power or resources to support girls who left school after marriage plans were halted. Girls’ Club focal teachers and student members emphasised the importance of diverse social networks to address gender norms and harmful practices effectively. Collaboration with multiple stakeholders was identified as essential. Research shows that despite schools’ efforts to prevent child marriages, families in rural areas in Ethiopia often prioritise longstanding social norms around marriage and family honour (Jones et al., 2020). This underscores the need for future nationwide education reforms aimed at strengthening Girls’ Clubs in primary schools to include community-level interventions. Similar initiatives in countries including Malawi, Somalia, and Zimbabwe, which combined Girls’ Clubs activities with parent and community engagement, have shown promising results in challenging restrictive gender norms (Mills, 2023).

Lack of institutional support for Girls’ Clubs was another main finding. We revealed that in some regions, club meetings were infrequent due to a lack of encouragement from

school leadership. Girls' Club focal teachers received limited training and guidance from their schools and external organisations. These challenges, coupled with financial constraints, likely limited the clubs' effectiveness in supporting girls' education. It is important to note that merely establishing Girls' Clubs is insufficient to achieve meaningful outcome in relation to supporting girls' education. It is encouraging that all the Girls' Clubs focal teachers were highly motivated female teacher volunteers. However, they require adequate support and continuous training to design and deliver effective Girls' Club sessions. Research consistently shows that when facilitators for Girls' Clubs receive continuous training and coaching, they are highly effective in designing programmes that improved girls' awareness and confidence to engage with peers and family members (Mills, 2023).

We found that Girls' Club focal teachers in some of the sample schools mentioned exploring the possibility of mixed gender Girls' Clubs as a potential approach. With careful planning, this approach could create an environment where girls and boys share different perspectives and build mutual respect. In Ghana, for example, closely monitored mixed gender clubs have been shown to help girls and boys view each other as friends and equals (Mills, 2023). A similar study has indicated that including boys in some Girls' Club sessions can challenge discriminatory attitudes and practices, while reducing resentment associated with girl-only programmes (Marcus et al., 2017).

Finally, our engagement with student members and Girls' Club focal teachers revealed that Girls' Club membership was limited to currently enrolled students. Although we are aware of the logistical constraints, there is a need to explore methods either for school-based Girls' Clubs to include girls who have dropped out of school, or for establishing Girls' Clubs outside schools targeting out-of-school girls.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown the main challenges posed by restrictive gender norms and practices to girls' education in Ethiopian primary schools, as well as the key role that Girls' Clubs play in mitigating these barriers. While Girls' Clubs have demonstrated some potential, their impact remains limited by financial, institutional, and structural constraints. Addressing these constraints requires a more collaborative approach. Future national education reforms should prioritise increased financial support for Girls' Clubs and integrate their efforts into broader community-level initiatives. Strengthening the capacity of Girls' Club focal teachers through regular training and institutional backing is essential. In addition, fostering collaboration with the community, law enforcement, and organisations addressing gender-based violence can improve the support network available to girls. Finally, creating inclusive spaces that engage boys in Girls' Clubs, while prioritising girls' concerns, is key to maximise impact. These measures are likely to strengthen the effectiveness of Girls' Clubs in challenging the social norms that hinder girls' education and in creating an equitable and supportive educational environment for girls and boys. We hope the findings of this paper support government education officials, donors, and implementing partners in their efforts to strengthen Girls' Clubs in primary schools in Ethiopia.

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