EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS THROUGH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

A comparative analysis of comprehensive sexuality education, life skills education and protective asset-building approaches

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"There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world".

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed [1]

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INTRODUCTION

UNFPA has adolescents and youth at the core of its mandate. UNFPA recognizes that young people – particularly adolescent girls marginalized by poverty, living in rural areas, being out of school, or coming from indigenous backgrounds – are often overlooked by policies and programmes. They need targeted interventions to support their right to education and well-being.

Since 2012, UNFPA has been sharpening its programmatic focus on adolescent girls to ensure that they get the resources they need and to close the gap between what is legally promised to them and what is achieved in practice. [2]

BOX 1

Looking to the future requires looking first to the present – and that calls for making adolescent girls visible every day

"At age 10, a girl arrives at a vulnerable point in her life. She must negotiate a tricky transition to adulthood, with its rapid changes in body and brain, and dramatic shifts in family and social expectations. Although risks abound for both girls and boys, gender discrimination makes these worse for girls in almost every way. Public policies often focus on young children or older adolescents, failing to adequately manage the potential risks 10-year-old girls might face. If her rights are not well protected, through appropriate laws, services and investments, the chance to bloom in adolescence and become a fully-fledged adult forever slips away. The world has already done well in many ways for the 10-year-old boy. It is past time to do equally well for the 10-year-old girl." [3]

Girls have the right to education. Yet that right may not always be upheld through formal schooling. The reasons involve the purpose and quality of formal education, as well as girls' individual needs. Guaranteeing girls' right to education, and empowering the most marginalized girls through effective, evidence-based programmes in out-of-school settings, can contribute to transforming their lives. This is especially so when human-rights and gender-transformative approaches are used to challenge unequal power relations.

MY LIFE

UNFPA's Action for Adolescent Girls and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage both prioritize support to select countries to reach the most marginalized adolescent girls. The programmes emphasize places where girls are forced into marriage or are living in other forms of unions before the age of 18. In collaboration with the Population Council and several other partners, effective interventions have been implemented for health, social, cognitive and economic asset-building with adolescent girls. The interventions focus on reaching the most marginalized adolescent girls through out-of-school programming combined with community outreach and youth participation. They often engage young women as mentors and alternative models for girls. UNFPA's programmes on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for out of school populations also recognize the need for reaching young people, including girls, with CSE in a range of settings and through diverse platforms.

When adolescent girl-centred programming is implemented using the protective asset-building approach, and combined with comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and life-skills education (LSE) in non-formal education (NFE), it has the potential to generate a virtuous circle – one that addresses both the immediate and strategic needs of adolescent girls, so that they can navigate their transition from adolescence to adulthood in a safe, healthy and fulfilled way.

These programmes use safe spaces for girls (girl-only spaces provided by communities) for group education sessions. These become community platforms, providing the opportunity to connect nonformal education with other services and systems such as health, education and social protection. In this way, non-formal education programmes become a doorway to exercising other human rights.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ADOLESCENT GIRL-CENTRED PROGRAMMING USING THE PROTECTIVE ASSET-BUILDING APPROACH, COMBINED WITH COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND LIFE-SKILLS EDUCATION IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION, HAS THE POTENTIAL TO GENERATE A VIRTUOUS CIRCLE THAT ADDRESSES BOTH THE IMMEDIATE AND THE STRATEGIC NEEDS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS.

THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 26 that "Everyone has the right to education […] this shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms". [4]

Three decades later, the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women applied the human rights principle of progressiveness and called upon States Parties to "take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education". The convention goes on to call for equal conditions for men and women in career and vocational guidance, access to the same educational features, the elimination of gender stereotypes, the reduction of female drop-out rates, and access to sports and physical education. It also calls for access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning. [5]

This human right was explicitly recognized for children by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 28 says that "States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity", and it calls for commitments to guarantee primary, secondary and higher education opportunities. Article 29 notes that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of "the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" and "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms", "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples" and "the development of respect for the natural environment". [6]

Subsequent United Nations and Human Rights Mechanisms have underscored the urgent need to enhance access for the girl child to education to achieve gender equality and human development worldwide. [4-12] Yet, every day, adolescent girls face barriers to education caused by poverty, patriarchal gender norms and harmful practices such as child marriage, poor infrastructure, violence and fragility. According to UNESCO, about 263 million children and youth are out of school. Girls are still more likely than boys to never go to school, 130 million girls between the age of 6 and 17 are out of school and 15 million girls of primary-school age – half of them in sub-Saharan Africa – will never enter a classroom. Poverty and conflict are additional major barriers to accessing education. In addition, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is estimated that 11 million girls may not return to school. [13-16]

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NON-FORMAL EDUCATION TO TRANSFORM OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

NFE is part of lifelong learning, covers all ages and is delivered through different means and modalities. Although there are various definitions of NFE, the Global Forum on Non-Formal Education (NFE), co-convened by UNFPA in 2019, endorsed the Council of Europe's definition in the Forum's Rio Declaration on Non-Formal Education. According to this definition, non-formal education refers to "planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum." The Declaration notes that NFE provides foundational, transferable and job-specific skills along with supporting young people to become active global citizens, and that organizations committed to NFE should aim to support young people to become autonomous, supportive, responsible, committed and inclusive. [17]

There is thus a strategic need to increase efforts to attain universal access to education for adolescent girls, particularly for those furthest behind. Non-formal education is crucial to offer accessible education opportunities for adolescent girls in out-of-school settings. This particular dimension of education can reach the most marginalized girls in their environments closest to the family and community level, where day-to-day life occurs. It brings a transformative potential for improving their knowledge, capacities and critical thinking, as well as their decision-making over their bodies, their lives and the world they live in. [18]

MY LIFE

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EFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS THROUGH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

BOX 2 Defining adolescent girls' empowerment

Empowerment is the process through which we actively work to get in touch with the essential power that we all carry within us. When we connect this inner power —the power within—with the power that lies within others, we can build the social power that collectively can dismantle and transform seemingly unchangeable power structures.

Adapted from CREA and Srilatha Batliwala [19]

"Empowerment is the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. This implies having material, social and human resources to make strategic choices, and the ability to exercise agency, participation, voice and negotiation in decision-making, in order to gain achievements or meaningful improvements in life and well-being."

UNFPA, UNICEF and Naila Kabeer [20]

Education is a key to adolescent girls' empowerment, since it contributes to making informed choices about their bodies, their lives and their participation to change their world.

Evidence has shown the effectiveness of three approaches that are already being implemented around the world to empower adolescent girls, and young people more broadly, both in and out of school settings: 1) protective asset-building, 2) comprehensive sexuality education and 3) life-skills education.

The protective asset-building approach provides guidance on designing and implementing girl-centred programmes. It focuses on improving coverage of the most marginalized adolescent girls. The approach aims to shape intensive programmes that can equip them with social, health, human and economic assets for decision-making. According to the Population Council:

"An asset is a person's own store of value, which shapes what they can do or be. Assets can be categorized as human/health, social, economic, and cognitive, and can include resources, knowledge, and skills that girls can draw upon to shape their lives and contend with emergencies on their own and others' behalf". [21]

Social

Health-Human

Cognitive

Economic
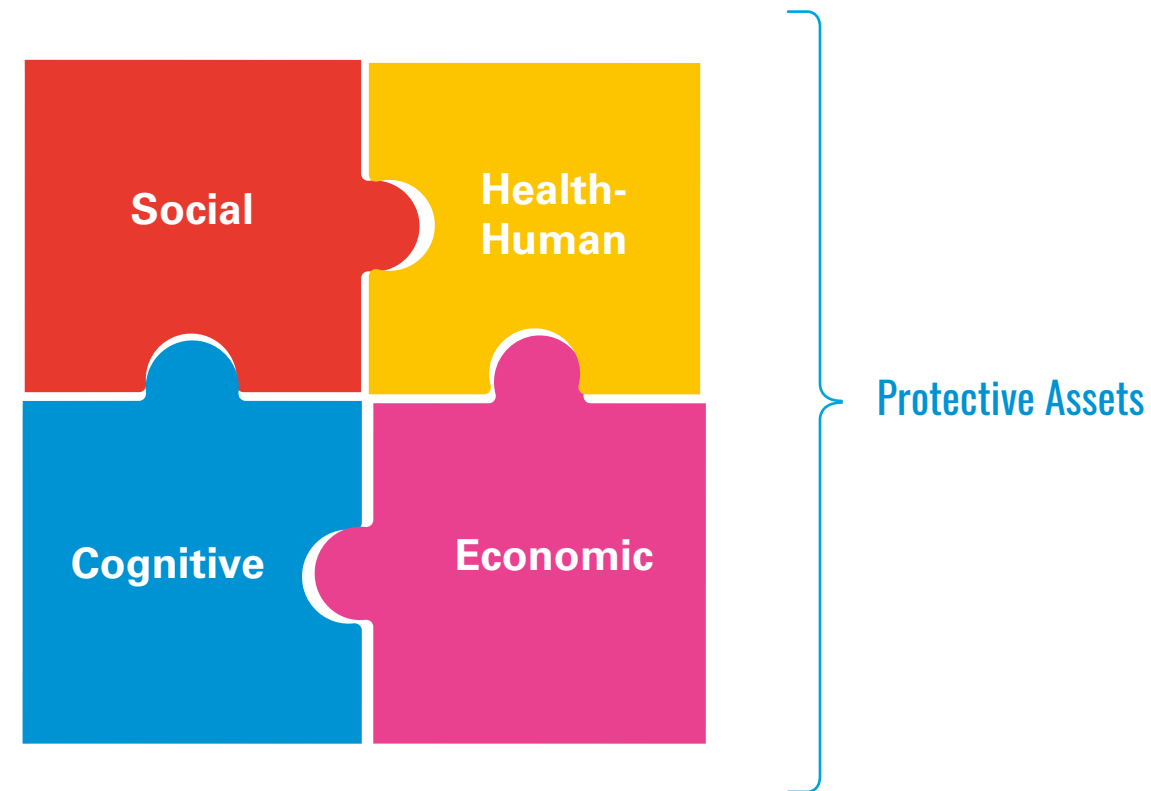
Protective Assets

Evidence shows that the protective asset-building approach is effective at improving girls' school enrolment, delaying the age at marriage, and increasing reproductive health knowledge and contraceptive use, particularly among the youngest adolescent girls aged 10-14. [22] Emerging evidence from nine rigorous impact evaluations conducted by the Population Council around the world indicates that "empowerment and asset-building interventions targeting multiple levels of girls' socioecological environment can improve education, health, economic, social capital, gender-equitable attitudes, and violence outcomes for girls". [23]

Somewhat similar to the asset-building approach, **comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)** is integral to the right to education. CSE is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights, such as the right to health, the right to information, and sexual and reproductive health. [24] The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations partners define CSE as:

1. Relationships

2. Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality

3. Understading Gender

4. Violence and Staying Safe

5. Skills for Health and Well-being

6. The Human Body and Development

7. Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour

8. Sexual and Reproductive Health

International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, 2018.[25]

"a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives". [25]

CSE aims to equip children and young people with three main domains and capacities, as follows:

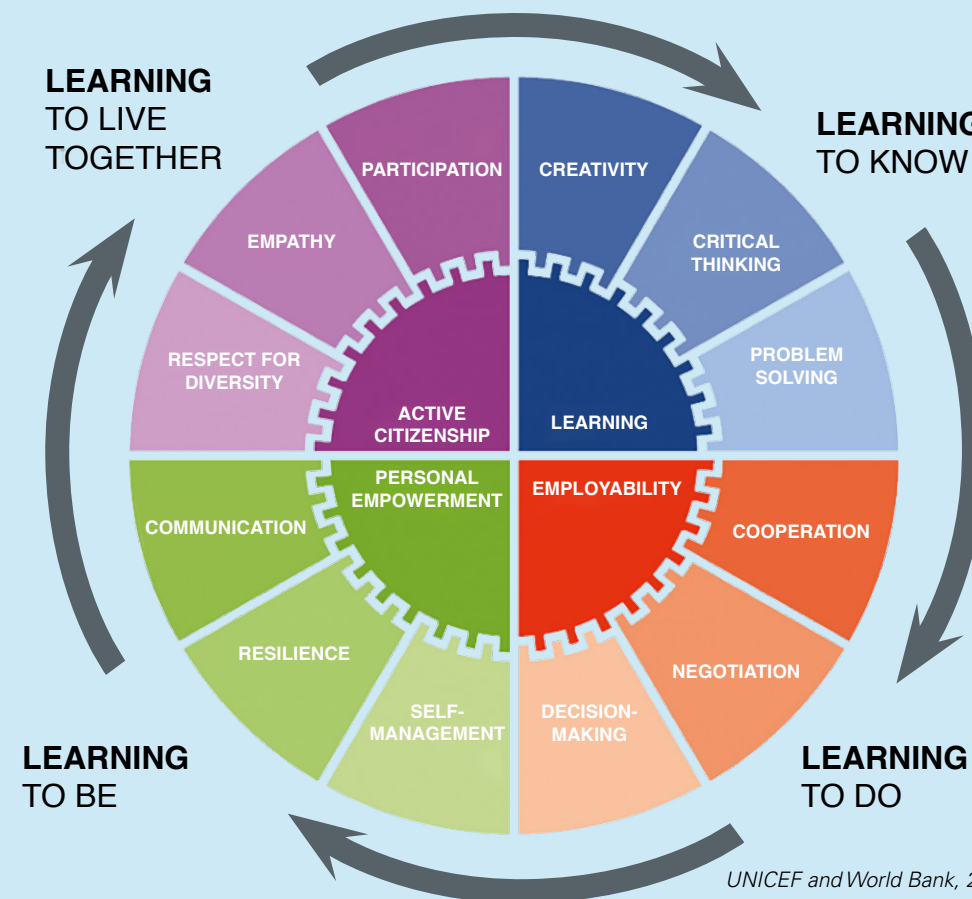**CSE** → **Knowledge** → **Skills** → **Attitudes**

There is an important body of evidence demonstrating that CSE in or out of school does not increase sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behaviour or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. The 2016 evidence review conducted by UNESCO concluded that CSE has positive effects, including increasing knowledge about different aspects of sexuality, behaviours and risks of pregnancy or HIV and other STIs. Strong evidence also concludes that CSE improves attitudes related to sexual and reproductive health. [26]

A systematic review carried out analysing curriculum-based sexuality and HIV prevention programmes showed that:

"Programs that addressed gender or power were five times as likely to be effective as those that did not; fully 80% of them were associated with a significantly lower rate of STIs or unintended pregnancy. In contrast, among the programs that did not address gender or power, only 17% had such an association. Addressing gender and power should be considered a key characteristic of effective sexuality and HIV education programs." [27]

CSE is a core area of programming on adolescents and youth at UNFPA and a key area of a comprehensive package of sexual and reproductive health and rights.[28] In 2020, UNFPA launched the first-ever *International Technical and Programmatic Guidance on Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education* as an evidence-informed approach for non-formal, out-of-school CSE programmes that aim to reach young people from left-behind populations. [29] This guidance complements the *International Technical Guidance on Comprehensive Sexuality Education* launched in 2018, and it is currently the most relevant technical tool for CSE programming in non-formal education settings.

The third approach is **life skills education (LSE)**. Even though, there is no globally accepted definition of life skills or of LSE, this approach has been widely promoted both in and out of school settings by civil society organizations and international development agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

WHO defines life skills as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." [30]

UNICEF and World Bank, 2019 [93]

UNICEF defines life skills as:

"transferable skills that enable individuals to deal with everyday life, and to progress and succeed in school, work and societal life. They are comprised of skills, attitudes, values, behaviours and domain-based knowledge which need to be applied in harmony with each other. Life skill performances should be replicable across diverse settings. They are understood to be able to be learnt throughout the life cycle and in widely different contexts and learning pathways such as formal and non-formal education, vocational education and training, the workplace and more generally during daily life in the home and local community." [31]

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LSE is defined as:

"a structured programme of needs- and outcomes-based participatory learning that aims to increase positive and adaptive behaviour by assisting individuals to develop and practise psycho-social skills that minimize risk factors and maximize protective factors. Life skills education programmes are theory- and evidence-based, learner-focused, delivered by competent facilitators, and appropriately evaluated to ensure continuous improvement of documented results." [32]

A recent systematic review conducted by CMI and Brookings on life skills in non-formal contexts for adolescent girls in developing countries has shown that "the few existing rigorous evaluations of life skills programs benefiting young women conclude that these programs generally positively influence psycho-social and attitudinal outcomes, health, and relationships. They can help to prevent early marriage, and they help to develop important economic and cognitive skills." [33] However, the review also notes that "There is a lack of systematic documentation across countries on what kinds of life skills programs are being offered to girls across developing countries and by whom, how these programs are designed, and what outcomes they intend to achieve." It recommends that LSE programmes transform the recruitment process to ensure that programmes are reaching the most marginalized girls.

During the last decade, various LSE resources have emerged at the global and regional level. For example, the Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative in the Middle East and North Africa region has developed a Conceptual and Programmatic Framework. This embraces life skills and citizenship education as its core elements and identifies 12 core skills for the region.[34] In Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF and UNFPA developed a regional synopsis on life skills programmes implemented in countries across the region to end child marriage.[35] In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNFPA designed the Boys on the Move Package to implement life skills programmes for unaccompanied male adolescents, promoting positive masculinities.[36] In 2019, UNICEF launched its Global Framework on Transferable Skills to help countries integrate transferable skills at scale within different education and learning systems, including in formal, non-formal and community settings.[37] Additionally, as a global resource, the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage issued a Technical Note for Practitioners on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls based on the evidence of what works. [38]

BOX 3

BOX 3 The power of emotions in learning, decision-making and action

Robert Plutchik's "Wheel of emotions" cited in Boys on the Move (UNFPA, 2017)
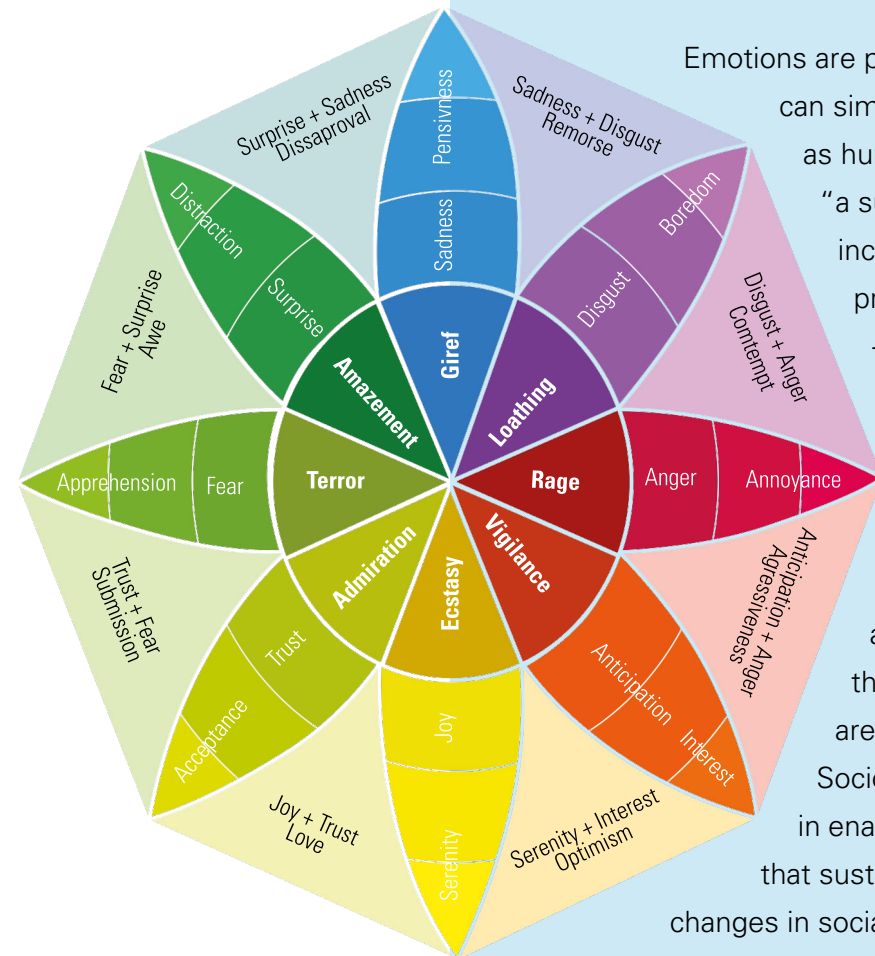
Emotions are powerful. They can be protective in dangerous situations, or can simply help us to connect, communicate and interact with others as human beings in societies. There is evidence that emotions have "a substantial influence on the cognitive processes in humans, including perception, attention, learning, memory, reasoning, and problem solving." [39] Neuroscience has also proven that emotions – especially social emotions such as empathy, admiration, spite and jealousy – are pivotal to social decision-making. [40] According to biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana, education should be understood in the complexity of the biological matrix of human existence. Hence, regardless of the discipline or level, the problems of humanity should be addressed using interventions that integrate emotions and thoughts and assign them equal priority. [41] Finally, emotions are powerful resources in movement-building and participation. Sociological research has shown that "emotions play pivotal roles in enabling or inhibiting mobilization and providing the resources that sustain commitment through various endogenous and exogenous changes in social movements." [42] Taken together, these insights suggest that working on emotions as part of non-formal education programmes could contribute to better learning outcomes, participation and action.

EMOTIONS ARE POWERFUL. WORKING ON EMOTIONS AS PART OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMES COULD CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER LEARNING OUTCOMES, PARTICIPATION AND ACTION.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Comparative analysis of effective approaches for empowering adolescent girls

The table below is based on the international standards and evidence available, including a review of technical documents and global standards produced by international organizations and evaluations of effective programmes. (21-27, 29-38, 43-46)

Comprehensive Sexuality Education	Life-Skills Education	Protective Asset-Building
Curriculum-based	Curriculum-based	Curriculum-based
Evidence-based	Evidence-based	Evidence-based
Standards-based	Standards-based	Standards-based
Human rights-centred	Psychosocial-centred	Human rights-centred
Gender-based	Some programmes are gender-based	Gender-based
Age-appropriate	Some programmes are age-appropriate	Age-targeted
Empowerment-centred and addresses power relations	Empowerment-centred	Empowerment-centred
May be tailored to girl-centred programming in out-of-school settings	May be tailored to girl-centred programming	Girl-centred
Some programmes may tackle economic empowerment	Some programmes may include transferable skills for jobs	Includes financial components

Comprehensive Sexuality Education	Life-Skills Education	Protective Asset-Building
Culturally relevant	Culturally relevant	Culturally relevant
Life skills-, knowledge- and attitude-building	Life skills-building	Asset-building
May be tailored to reach the most marginalized	May be tailored to reach the most marginalized	Reaches the most marginalized
May be community-based	May be community-based	Community-based
May be tailored to use girl-only safe spaces	May be tailored to use girl-only safe spaces	Uses girl-only safe spaces
Includes youth participation	Includes children's participation	Includes young female mentors
Could be adapted to humanitarian settings	Core intervention implemented in humanitarian settings as part of mental health and psychosocial support programming	Could be adapted to humanitarian settings

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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT – A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Non-formal education provides a unique space for empowering adolescent girls. Flexibility and autonomy are core characteristics of NFE. These features make it feasible to implement a holistic approach to adolescent girls' empowerment that integrates the different benefits of the three proven approaches presented in in this document – protective asset-building, CSE and LSE. This holistic approach can enable countries to reach the most marginalized adolescent girls in out-of-school settings and accelerate the promise of the SDGs to leave no one behind.

A holistic approach to girls' empowerment would implement gender-transformative, girl-centred programmes that strongly address human rights, gender and power. They would do this through curriculum-based interventions that equip the most marginalized adolescent girls with social, health, cognitive and economic assets and skills for self-efficacy, autonomy, critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making. This would be implemented within the socioecological model, i.e. at the individual, family, community and societal levels. The outcome of this holistic approach would be to empower them for the fulfilment of their personal and collective potential, the enjoyment of their human rights, the exercise of agency and bodily autonomy, and the prevention of and protection from risks, discrimination and harmful practices.

Such an approach can integrate the key themes and skills of the CSE curriculums with the key elements of the asset-building approach to programme design, particularly centring girls and making programmes age-appropriate. At the same time it would include participatory methodologies, LSE's psychosocial dimension of problem-solving, and its economic dimension through transferable skills. Finally, tackling the affective and emotional perspectives of human development would make the learning process relevant, meaningful and memorable.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

1. Ensuring the right to education for adolescent girls is essential to achieving the SDGs, particularly those related to gender equality, quality education and health and well-being. Non-formal education has the potential to reach the most marginalized adolescent girls in out-of-school settings in order to leave no one behind. It provides a potent, flexible, autonomous and transformative platform to implement adolescent girl-centred programming. Targeted intervensions can empower and equip the most marginalized adolescent girls with knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and assets that enable them to take power and to make free and informed decisions over their bodies, their lives and their world.

2. The three main approaches analysed in this paper – protective asset-building, CSE and LSE – are widely used to empower adolescent girls. They have documented positive outcomes related to health, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, psychosocial and attitudinal outcomes, and relationships. These programmes also help to prevent child marriage as well as developing important economic, cognitive and transferable skills for adolescent girls.

3. Each approach has varied benefits for empowering adolescent girls in out-of-school settings, but all of them could be applied in non-formal education for evidence-based, gender-transformative and human rights-centred interventions. Some approaches overlap or have been combined as a result of historical and contextual processes. For example, many countries are currently building on earlier "life skills education" programmes – which were primarily established with an HIV prevention or population reduction focus – to create more comprehensive approaches. [45] Likewise, in some countries, life skills programmes adhere to CSE curriculums. [46]

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4. Taking a holistic approach to empowering adolescent girls in non-formal education means that programmes are able to integrate the added value of each approach. This includes the asset-building approach, particularly the girl-centred perspective to reach the most marginalized, and the financial dimension. Second, there is the added value of CSE related to its key thematic areas, skills and attitudes, curriculum and standards, and its strong focus on human rights, gender and power. Third, there is the added value of LSE, above all its potential to bring psychosocial perspectives to improve agency, self-efficacy, autonomy, decision-making and transferable skills in development and humanitarian settings.

5. Non-formal education provides a platform for empowerment through adolescent girl-centred programming approaches. Through a combination of protective asset-building, CSE and LSE, girls and young people can access safe spaces to learn to know, learn to do, learn to be and learn to live together. These are foundational elements for citizenship in the 21st century. This holistic approach in non-formal education can help build the human capital of adolescent girls and provide them opportunities for exercising agency, choices, decision-making, bodily autonomy, managing emotions and participation in social movements.

6. A holistic approach to adolescent girls' empowerment can contribute to redistributing resources and power to the most marginalized girls. It also creates a space for improving the quality of education as a life-long continuum. It does this by promoting pedagogies based on collaboration, cooperation and solidarity as well as curricula emphasizing ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning and critical-thinking perspectives. [47]

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