

Gender Norms Change and System Capacity

A Reflection on the Legacy of the AGES Program in Somalia

September 2024

The **Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia (AGES)** program, funded by FCDO and USAID through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), was implemented in conflict-affected areas of South Somalia in 2018-2024. During this period, AGES enabled 90,698 extremely vulnerable girls to access education through enrolment in formal primary school, accelerated basic education (ABE), and a non-formal education program (NFE). The program resulted in major gains in learning outcomes, with the proportion of girls reading with comprehension¹ increasing by 27-45 percentage points² in 2019-2024. Among those enrolled in formal education, 75% remained in school; out of those enrolling in ABE, 47% have transitioned into formal education, higher ABE levels, or training; and among NFE graduates, 26-47% have continued their education in formal or accelerated courses.³

The AGES' impact is particularly remarkable given the magnitude of the barriers to education and gender gaps in the Somali context. The combination of conflict, natural disasters, and resulting displacement hinders access and retention, with a disproportionate impact on adolescent girls due to the prevalence of traditional gender norms. As of 2022, the primary Gross Enrolment Rate for girls stood at 28% in Somalia, with a Gender Parity Index of 0.84.⁴ Enrolment rates drop dramatically among those living in rural and remote areas: for instance, 8.5% of the pastoralist girls are attending school.⁵ 2020 data shows that once enrolled, the average Somali child stayed in school for a mere 1.62 years – 1.48 years among girls.⁶ At secondary level, the Gross Enrolment Rate drops to 24% (19% for girls).⁷

¹ Defined as scoring 40% and above in reading comprehension in the Early Grade Reading Assessment/EGRA.

² Formal primary students: 45 percentage points; non-formal education/NFE: 27-36 percentage points (cohorts 4-5, respectively). Sources: Machova, Z., Miettunen, J., and Peterson, B.D. (2020), *AGES Baseline Evaluation*, pg.99; Consilient (2024), *AGES Final Evaluation*, pgs.145-146; pg.247-248.

³ Consilient (2024), *AGES Final Evaluation*, pgs. 61-63; pg.161

⁴ Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education of Somalia, *Annual Education Statistics Report 2021-2022*, pg.23

⁵ National Bureau of Statistics, *2022 Somali Integrated Household Budget Survey*, pg.20

⁶ Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education of Somalia (2022) *Education Sector Analysis*, pg.69

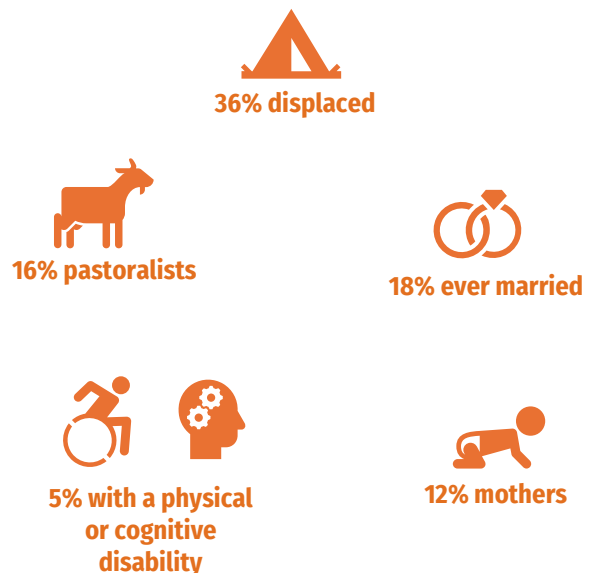
⁷ Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education of Somalia, *Annual Education Statistics Report 2021-2022*, pg.42

In the Somali context, conflict and natural disasters coexist in a cyclic process, with [competition for scarce resources fueling disputes](#). The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative Index (ND-GAIN) places Somalia as [the world's most vulnerable country to climate change](#). In 2021-2023, Somalia faced the worst drought in 40 years, displacing 1.35M people⁸ and breaking the famine threshold in Baidoa, one of AGES' implementation areas.⁹ In late 2023, unprecedented floods devastated riverine areas, destroying schools and livelihoods and displacing 1.2M people.¹⁰ In the areas where AGES was implemented in South Somalia, recurrent attacks by armed militia, clan conflict, and the occupation of schools by armed forces resulted in intermittent closures and exacerbated risks for students, particularly girls.

This brief identifies and discusses the critical elements driving and sustaining learning and transition gains in AGES, drawing upon evaluation findings and monitoring data. In doing so, we also discuss the program's legacy at community, school, and system levels, focusing on two domains: (i) Gender and social norms change and (ii) system strengthening processes.

Gender and social norms change

AGES sought not only to enroll girls, but to create educational opportunities for those facing multiple levels of vulnerability and stigmatization, using an intersectional approach. To do so, AGES was purposively designed as a gender and social norms change program, challenging ideas about who should attend school and could succeed in education. Among the 90,698 AGES-supported girls, 19,018 are from a minority group¹¹; 14,131 are from pastoralist households; and 4,526 have physical and/or cognitive disabilities, out of whom 1,244 required access to special needs education. At the time of enrolment, 32,783 AGES participants were living in displacement. In a country where early marriage often marks the end of a girl's education journey, AGES participants included 11,316 married and 5,196 divorced girls, out of whom 10,826 were young mothers.



Drivers of change at community level

The enrolment of girls from ultra-vulnerable groups and subsequent retention/ transition into higher education levels are a testament to the strength of the changes in gender and social norms at community and school levels. To do so, AGES worked with Gender Focal Points at Federal Member States' Ministries of Education (FMS MOEs) and religious scholars to shift perceptions among members of Community Education Committees (CECs), teachers, and girls and boys participating in clubs known as Empowerment Forums. Overall, 264 CECs and 1,022 teachers had participated in gender and social norms change dialogues. By the end of the program, 86% of the CECs were tracking student attendance (compared to 47% at baseline); 75% sought to enroll out-of-school children, compared to 64% at the baseline; 66% were following up on dropout cases (compared 50% at baseline); and 46% took action to address child protection issues (compared 19% at

⁸ IOM/UNOCHA/UNHCR, Somalia: Drought and Famine Displacement Monitoring Dashboard (November 2022)

⁹ IPC Alert, [Issue 69](#), September 12, 2022

¹⁰ UNOCHA, [Somalia: 2023 Deyr Season Floods Situation Report No.5](#), 24 December 2023

¹¹ Including occupational and ethnic minorities. For further information, please refer to Hill, M. (2010) *No Redress: Somalia's Forgotten Minorities*.

baseline).¹² The proportion of CECs contributing to female teachers' salaries has increased from 2% to 11%.¹³

In parallel, 911 Girls' Empowerment Forums and 147 Boys' Empowerment Forums were formed by mentors trained by Gender Focal Points and AGES staff, bringing together 9,110 girls and 1,470 boys who led civic action in their communities. The Empowerment Forums were connected through 18 district-level networks linked to health facilities, youth centers implemented by the Ministry of Youth, and Justice Committees. Among the Girls' Empowerment Forums, 100% were conducting some form of youth-led action¹⁴. An assessment conducted with NFE students indicated that 47% of them were participating in actions organized by Empowerment Forums.¹⁵ Among those who participated, 48% attended awareness-raising activities on girls' education and other gender-related issues; 44% followed up on dropout cases; 29% participated in actions to prevent early marriage; and 14% engaged in school management through CEC participation.¹⁶

The profound changes in gender norms in AGES-supported communities are particularly visible in the decline in early marriage rates; the positive transition rates among married girls; and the transition of older girls into primary education.

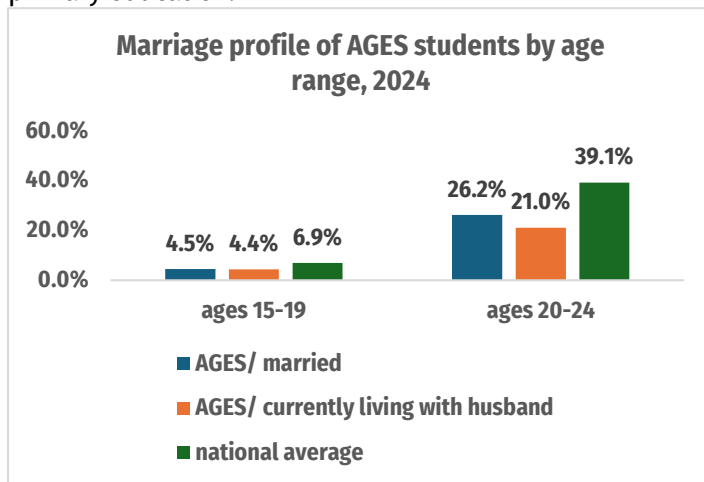


Figure 1: Marriage status of AGES participants at the 2024 final evaluation, compared to national averages

Shifts in early marriage

Nationally, 6.9% of the Somali girls ages 15-19 and 39% of the female youth ages 20-24 are married.¹⁷ Those without formal education are most likely to be married.¹⁸ Conversely, only 4.5% of the AGES participants ages 15-19 were married at the end of the program.¹⁹ Among those ages 20-24, 26.2% were ever married²⁰ – a 13-percentage point difference in relation to the national average. Moreover, girls' perceptions about potential life opportunities shifted dramatically after engaging in the program. Among NFE participants, the preferred pathway after graduation declined from 20% to 1% following exposure to the program, which included career guidance,

participation in savings groups, and apprenticeship opportunities.²¹

¹² Consilient (2024), *AGES Final Evaluation*, pg.103

¹³ Ibid, pg.103

¹⁴ CARE (2024) *AGES Quarterly Monitoring Report – May 2024*, pg.20

¹⁵ Ibid, pg.12

¹⁶ Ibid, pg.12

¹⁷ National Bureau of Statistics, *2022 Somali Integrated Household Budget Survey*, pg.11

¹⁸ Ibid

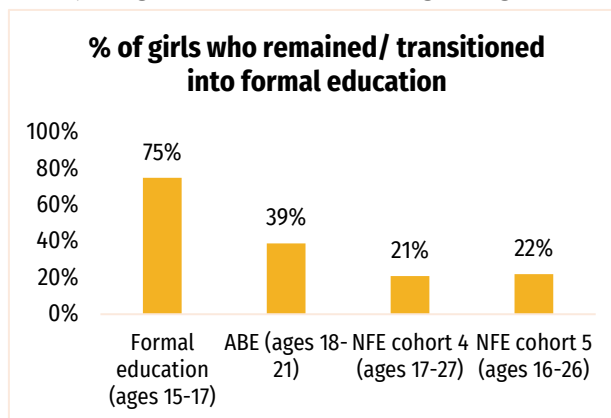
¹⁹ Secondary analysis of final evaluation data, AGES

²⁰ Secondary analysis of final evaluation data, AGES

²¹ CARE (2024) *AGES Quarterly Monitoring Report – May 2024*, pg.25

Transition rates among married girls participating in the NFE program were higher than average. At the final evaluation, the average positive transition rate among NFE students who were already married at the baseline was 67%, compared to a 59% total average among all assessed NFE students.²² Comparatively, among a benchmark group identified at the baseline, only 7.8% of the young women at the same age range were in education, employment, or training.²³

Transitions into formal primary education. Among the older girls enrolled by AGES, 21% of those enrolled in the 4th NFE cohort (ages 17-27 as of 2024) and 22% of those in the 5th NFE cohort (ages 16-26 as of 2024) have enrolled back in formal education.²⁴ Additionally, 39.1% of those enrolled in ABE – aged 18-21 in 2024 – transitioned into formal primary school and remained in school two years after the end of the intervention.²⁵ The enrolment in primary school at a much older age represents a major shift in gender and social norms. It does require households to invest substantial economic resources into girls to pay school fees, in a context where resources are systematically prioritized for boys' use. It also requires families to support girls to invest substantial amounts of time in school instead of the traditional prioritization of chores and childcare.



System-level Changes

Adult Education Policy. Enhancing access, equity, and completion of primary education is a key priority in Somalia's 2022-2026 [Education Sector Strategic Plan](#).²⁶ One of the key strategies for the achievement of this national goal is increasing access to and opportunities for adult education.²⁷ To achieve this result, the Federal Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education (MOECHE) developed the Adult Education Policy and Curriculum Framework with AGES' technical assistance. The Curriculum Framework builds upon the evidence from AGES' NFE approach, expanding it from an 11-month course into a three-level course which will enable transitions into formal education upon completion. The Adult Education Policy was approved in July 2023. Once rolled out, it holds enormous potential to create opportunities for the large proportion of Somali youth who never attended school or dropped out in early grades. Nationally, 54% of the young women aged 20-24 and 37% of the men in the same age range have never attended school, thus lacking foundational literacy and numeracy skills critical for engagement in employment, business, and access to basic information and services.²⁸



Adult Education Policy & Curriculum Framework approved



Decentralized capacity strengthening of education staff



Safeguarding Policy developed

Safeguarding. The evidence from AGES' research highlighted the critical need for safeguarding mechanisms in Somali schools. At the baseline, 42% of the teachers were observed using physical punishment against students,²⁹ and 68% of the girls affirmed that their teacher punished students who got things wrong.³⁰ During risk mapping exercises, girls described harassment as common, particularly on the way to school and at toilets. AGES worked with

²² Consilient (2024), *AGES Final Evaluation*, pg.164

²³ Machova, Z., Miettunen, J., and Peterson, B.D. (2020), *AGES Baseline Evaluation*, pg.125

²⁴ Consilient (2024), *AGES Final Evaluation*, pg.156

²⁵ Ibid, pg.61

²⁶ Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education, 2022-2026 Education Sector Strategic Plan, pg.36

²⁷ Ibid, pg.39

²⁸ National Bureau of Statistics, 2022 Somali Integrated Household Budget Survey, pgs.18-19

²⁹ Consilient (2024), *AGES Final Evaluation*, pg.90

³⁰ Machova, Z., Miettunen, J., and Peterson, B.D. (2020), *AGES Baseline Evaluation*, pg.162

Gender Focal Points, District Education Officers (DEOs), and CECs to set up response mechanisms at school, while also training beacon teachers³¹ to support reporting of safeguarding cases and working with Girls' and Boys' Empowerment Forums to raise awareness about gender-based violence. The program has made significant strides in strengthening safeguarding in targeted schools, reducing the use of corporal punishment by 43 percentage points between the baseline and final evaluation.³² To sustain and expand results, AGES supported MOECHE to develop a school-level Safeguarding Policy, which was submitted for approval in July 2024. The newly launched Girls' Education Accelerator program, funded by the Global Partnership for Education and implemented by the MOECHE/FMS MOEs, will support the rollout of the Safeguarding Policy by developing implementation guidelines and training teachers on their use.

Strengthened staff capacity. AGES implemented its interventions through FMS MOEs staff, including Gender Focal Points (now known as Gender and Inclusion Focal Points), DEOs, Quality Assurance Officers (QAOs), and teacher coaches. This partnership resulted in Gender Focal Points playing a crucial role in training teachers on gender, inclusion, and safeguarding; forming a large cadre of 944 adult mentors (of which 700 female) and 10,580 student peer mentors (of which 9,110 female); and supporting district-level networks of Girls' Empowerment Forums. These activities had a direct impact on student learning outcomes and positive transitions: the participation in Girls' Empowerment Forums was linked to increases of 15 percentage points in literacy scores and 16 percentage points in numeracy scores³³ and to an increase of 11 percentage points in positive transitions at the third evaluation round.³⁴ Under the upcoming Girls' Education Accelerator, the Gender and Inclusion Focal Points will play a pivotal role in training teachers nationwide on gender and inclusion, and in rolling out the upcoming Safeguarding Policy implementation guidelines.

DEOs and QAOs played a critical role in tracking attendance and learning outcomes among AGES NFE participants. AGES has also worked with QAOs to pilot a system to track the transition of ABE graduates into primary school. These activities have contributed to strengthening system capacity for data management and data-driven decision-making processes. DEOs were also instrumental in supporting CECs to roll out early warning systems to identify and manage cases of systematic absenteeism, thus preventing dropout. The high retention rates observed in AGES – including 75% among longitudinally tracked formal education students, two years after the intervention ended, despite major shocks – clearly demonstrate the value add of this approach. These processes will continue to be strengthened through the newly launched USAID-funded Accelerated Education Activity.

Conclusions

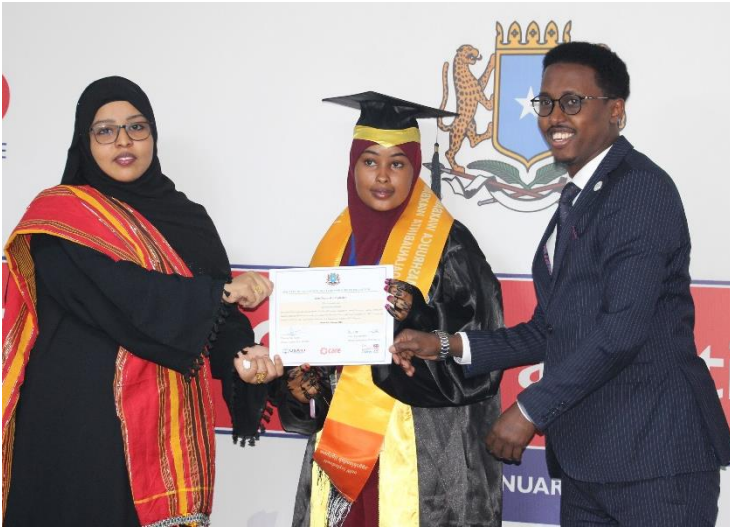
The results discussed in this paper showcase the extent to which gender and social norms change processes can be sustained and continue to evolve after programmatic interventions end. This is particularly true when the same program has also strengthened the capacity of education staff to continue to support gender and inclusion-focused coaching of school personnel and participatory governance mechanisms such as CECs. The results also highlight to what extent transformational change in gender and social norms can occur and be sustained in fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as Somalia.

³¹ "Beacon teachers" are teachers trained to observe student behavior, identifying those who are showing signs of distress or withdrawal from peers/ classroom activities and supporting case management. Beacon teachers were trained to mitigate barriers with disclosure of safeguarding cases, considering the taboos and social discrimination preventing girls from speaking out about those.

³² Consilient (2024), *AGES Final Evaluation*, pg.90

³³ Consilient (2023), *AGES Midline Evaluation – Round 2*, pg.140

³⁴ *Ibid*, pg.72



AGES' results also highlight the importance of sequencing programs to continue to strengthen system capacity in areas that require long-term support, including but not limited to safeguarding and tracking systems. The direct sequencing between AGES, the GPE-funded Girls' Education Accelerator, and the new USAID-funded Accelerated Education Activity will enable the rollout of key policies on safeguarding and adult education, maximizing impact.

Want to find out more?

For more information on AGES, please contact: Abdifarhan Farah Gure, CARE Somalia, Deputy Country Director, Gure.Farah@care.org.

