



CASE STUDY:

Aga Khan Foundation Girls' Education Support Program — Flexible Response Fund

By Parveen Roy and the AKF Afghanistan Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning Unit



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KEY FINDINGS:

This case study on the Girls' Education Support Program's Flexible Response Fund underscores the importance of a flexible, participatory, multifaceted and inclusive approach to address barriers to girls' education. Evidences suggest that:

- Effectiveness of interventions to support girls' education depends on openness and flexibility to engage with communities and respond to contextual needs identified by the communities.
- Working with communities, including both women and men, religious leaders, civil society organizations, government agencies, and the private sector, seems promising for increasing rates of enrollment, graduation and seeking further education as well as reducing dropout rates.
- Interventions that are multifaceted, including providing resources, improving infrastructure and institutions, developing capacity and pursuing societal change, seem to contribute to addressing stigma around girls and girls' education.
- In communities where both girls and boys are educationally disadvantaged, interventions that focus on all children (boys and girls) may help avoid a reverse gender gap.

Introduction

After decades of war, Afghanistan is now on a path toward development and stabilization by working on fundamental sectors such as education. Both the government and the international community have made extensive efforts to revive the education sector and have achieved significant progress in constructing schools and increasing students' enrolment. However, Afghan students still face various challenges with regard to education. Typical challenges are a lack of educational facilities, increasing insecurity, the harsh climate and gender discrimination. The situation for the education of girls is particularly difficult. Although the gender gap in literacy is narrowing and showing continuous improvement at the primary education level, educational opportunities are limited for girls and women. A recent survey by the Asia Foundation found that 74.2 percent of women surveyed have had no formal education (Warren 2014).

Considering these challenges, local and international organizations are working through different initiatives to support the government to make sure all children in Afghanistan can access quality education. Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) Afghanistan is a non-governmental organization that has initiated several programs and projects to promote educational access and quality learning opportunities for all children, particularly girls. At present the coverage area for AKF includes many districts where there are no other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on girls' education.

Intervention

AKF Afghanistan is working in 53 districts through a Multi-input Area Development (MIAD) approach, aiming to improve the quality of life of the people in the coverage area. The main focus of AKF is on community development in governance, civil society, market development, natural resource management, infrastructure, health and education. Working under the government's qualification framework, AKF's education programs mostly concentrate on school-based education from kindergarten through twelfth grade. It has supported 216 government schools, 70 early childhood development centers, and nearly 300 community-based education classes in partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Education (MoE).

The Girls' Education Support Program (GESP) funded by the Government of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD) provided support for AKF's existing education programs. The program started with the coordination of the District Education Department (DED) where AKF identified remote schools where girls' enrolment was low and needed GESP's support. The main goal of the program was to increase girls' access to school and create an encouraging environment to keep them in school, both in terms of more supportive teaching practices and the commitment of their communities and the school system to further their education. Additionally, the program's immediate purpose was to develop and demonstrate a replicable approach to increasing and improving girls' education within and beyond the provinces where it was initiated.

GESP was implemented in selected districts of Bamyan, Baghlan and Badakhshan provinces, with additional activities in two districts of Parwan province. GESP is estimated to have directly benefited more than 175,000 students, including 70,000 girls; 5,000 teachers, head teachers, Provincial Education Department (PED) and DED staff, including 1,500 women; and more than 3,000 parent-teacher association



(PTAs) and school management committee (SMC) members. Furthermore, 600 PED and DED staff from other districts within the provinces have benefited from GESP initiatives, along with MoE staff from several other provinces. Though girls make up less than one third of the direct beneficiaries of the GESP, reaching this number of girls was a significant achievement because of the low numbers of girls attending school at the start of the program.

The Flexible Response Fund (FRF) was a component of the GESP designed to address an array of barriers preventing Afghan girls from entry and retention in upper grades. As the needs in the community vary from context to context, the fund was kept flexible to address contextual needs. In order to understand the variations in the program areas, a mechanism for needs-based analysis with communities and local education authorities was created to identify specific activities. Based on the needs analysis, the FRF has been used to:

- Provide incentive payments for female teachers to relocate to remote areas and to compensate for their living costs and necessities;
- Hire boys' school teachers to teach girls in the afternoon, where communities allow;
- Assist with transportation for female teachers, students, and student teachers; and
- Assist with accommodation where students must travel a particularly long way to school.



Because the fund was allocated separately from the budgeted program, AKF staff were able to modify or add to the program to address local needs while involving local communities and education officials. It also empowered staff on the ground to think strategically and to take the local context into account when making programming decisions. Staff members worked closely with the communities not only to increase awareness of girls' education but also to appraise the existing situation, identify issues, work out solutions and rationalize their choices. This process provided them with a chance to improve their communication, planning, and budgeting skills, as well as an opportunity to work closely with the communities through a context-specific approach.

The fund has primarily been used for transportation, accommodation, hiring of teachers, and improving the physical environment for both girls and teachers, allowing them to access and complete schools that would otherwise be too remote or inaccessible. In five years, 629 physical rehabilitation or improvement projects have been carried out in schools, 178 qualified teachers (including 70 women) have received an incentive bonus to teach in remote communities, and transportation has been provided for 334 qualified teachers (229 women) to teach in girls' schools and to 743 girl students to return back to school. In addition, FRF helped 2,215 students (1,799 girl students) prepare for the Kankor exam, a university entry exam taken after Grade 12.

Funds were allocated by local communities, schools, and AKF offices and administered in partnership with AKF's Education and Human and Institutional Development (HID) departments, the departments of education at the provincial and district levels (PEDs and DEDs), parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs) and community development councils (CDCs). On average, FRF supported 10 communities (CDCs) in each region and allocated between \$500 and \$5,000 per annum depending on the needs of the community.

AKF also conducted regular programmatic monitoring, evaluation and data collection on students' enrollment, transition, dropouts, graduation, teacher profiles and school profiles. In addition, qualitative data and case studies were highlighted in periodic GESP reports to capture the narrative impact of the FRF.

The efficiency and effectiveness of FRF stemmed from the multifaceted approach through which it strategically addressed barriers to girls' education. The approach:

- a) Provided transportation, accommodation and transportation facilities for students to attend and complete their school education;
- b) Improved the physical infrastructure and resources of schools to provide students with a safe environment conducive to learning;
- c) Hired and paid incentives for teachers and stipends for students, and trained the teachers in pedagogical content to improve students' educational attainments;
- d) Moved beyond the terrain of secondary school education and offered Kankor preparatory classes for graduates to support them to pursue higher studies; and
- e) To ensure efficiency and effectiveness, AKF signed memoranda of understanding with the PEDs outlining the terms and conditions of the partnership, and the roles and responsibilities of the PEDs, DEDs, teacher training colleges (TTCs), school administrations, school Shuras and community members.

Impact

A study of the FRF shows that it helped address an array of barriers that were preventing girls from accessing school and completing their educations. These impacts can be divided into two categories: 1) generating outcomes such as enhancing rates of enrolment, graduation, sitting and success in the university entrance exam and discouraging school dropout; and 2) reducing barriers through improved infrastructure (e.g. well-resourced classrooms and schools), increased numbers of teachers (e.g. by recruiting alumni as teachers), strengthened teacher capacity (e.g. engaged teachers and students) and an improved learning environment for gender equality in education (e.g. discouraging early marriage and addressing stigma related to girls' education). These impacts are briefly discussed below.

Increased girls' enrollment: The study's findings show that student enrolment increased by approximately 59,000, including 28,998 girls, from 2009 to 2013 in grades 7-12

and FRF is responsible for almost half of this improvement. The main factor that encouraged girls to enroll was the growing presence of female teachers in the schools supported by AKF. One of the issues in rural and remote areas is lack of qualified female teachers, so FRF focused on providing incentive payments, free transportation for teachers and students, and teacher training for female school graduates in remote areas.

Decreased dropout rates: Data shows that between 2009 and 2013, the dropout rate decreased by 8 percent for boys and 1 percent for girls. The main reasons for the decreases were the workshop awareness campaigns conducted by AKF and the establishment of PTAs in order to improve communities' responsiveness towards girls' education. Parents were not only sensitized about children's right to education and the importance of girls' education, but they were also reached through PTAs to encourage their children to attend school and be contacted in the case of girls' absences from classes.

Increased graduation rates: The impact of FRF on girls' enrolment and dropouts meant that many girls continued their education up to high school level and progressively graduated. For example, at the start of the program the number of girls graduating from 192 supported schools was only 225. In 2013, 2,313 girls graduated from 216 schools.

Increased attendance at and success in the Kankor exam: Data shows that a lack of professional teachers during past years, particularly in science and mathematics, caused difficulties for students in sitting for and passing the Kankor exam. AKF conducted Kankor preparation courses under the FRF program that provided supplementary support for students in grades 7-12 in subjects such as mathematics, science, and language and familiarized them with the Kankor syllabus and exam-writing skills. As a result, 1,219 students, including 850 girls, who might have never tried sat for the Kankor exam and many of them were successful and able to continue their higher education at TTCs and universities.

Increased number of female teachers: With the help of the Directorate of Education, FRF transferred teachers from urban to remote areas where the lack of female teachers is a big challenge and provided them incentives to teach. For example, in the Khinjan district of Baghlan, AKF brought qualified female teachers from Puli Khomri (in the center of Baghlan province) to teach female students and mentor other teachers. Girl students who graduated from



the schools and were willing to take up teaching positions were supported to attend TTCs and teach in the schools under the mentorship of the transferred teachers. These alumni students have now graduated either from TTC or university and have started teaching in local schools. The data show that around 500 girl graduates have returned after training to teach in local schools.

Better equipped and resourced schools and classrooms: In some districts the communities claimed that one of the reasons for not sending their daughters to school was the lack of classrooms, toilets, boundary walls and furniture for students. Responding to this issue, FRF was spent on physical improvement such as building more classrooms, toilets and boundary walls, which resulted in students having access to schools and classrooms that were more equipped and better resourced.

Engaged teachers and students: Data show that schools under FRF support are doing well in teaching and learning because teachers spend considerable time planning their lessons, developing low-cost or no-cost materials, and using hands-on and minds-on activities in their classrooms. The teachers are also using a child-centered approach that allows children to learn through interaction, asking questions, participating in discussions and debates, and engaging in group and pair work.

Addressing stigmas related to girls' education: FRF campaigns to sensitize parents towards children's right to education and the importance of girls' education seem to have had an impact on the behavior of parents towards girls' education, since parents are more willing for their daughters to attend and complete school.



Capacity development of local human resources: AKF learned that increasing the capacity of local teachers is more effective than bringing teachers from other areas, because outsourced teachers may stay for a period of time but they will leave at the end of a project or program. Therefore it is important to focus on building the capacity of the community and local teachers as well as bringing in new human resources as needed. This realization came during the interim evaluation, after which the original plan was modified to induct graduating students of GESP schools as assistant teachers to be mentored by full-time teachers. They were also provided with financial assistance to continue their studies in the teacher training colleges. The project's life span was short but not too short, allowing AKF to learn, adapt, and improve. The learning process involved situation analysis, evaluating the processes and procedures involved in FRF, and analyzing the suitability of the FRF activities to address and avoid failures.

Multifaceted approach: AKF learned that girls' education should be approached in a multifaceted way because the issue itself is multifaceted in nature. AKF uses a Multi-input Area Development Approach to improving overall community quality of life. AKF's added value is working with sister agencies to contribute to health, education, civil society development, good governance, improved livelihoods, and access to markets. This has a synergistic effect different from focusing only in one sector. In addition, AKF works in partnership with the government to strengthen systems, which is more effective and sustainable than developing parallel service delivery mechanisms. AKF believes embedding the FRF in such an approach has added value and demonstrated positive results because of the enabling environment.

Inclusiveness: AKF has learned that in communities where boys and girls are both at an educational disadvantage, working on behalf of both genders is very important. This approach does not discriminate against girls but recognizes that boys should have equal opportunities and avoids counter-productivity in the future. For instance, Afghanistan has dealt with war for decades and still faces issues of extremism and terrorism. Evidence shows that young boys have been trained and used to fight these wars. Although it is difficult to establish a direct linkage, young boys being influenced by the extremists or warlords and getting involved in violence and extremism appears to be both a cause and impact of their educational disadvantages. To avoid such grave consequences in the future, it is important to have an inclusive approach towards education.

Decreased early marriage for girls: Often linked to social stigmas, early marriage of teenage girls is a widespread practice in these communities. But as a result of the FRF program and increased retention of girl students, the instances of early marriage have decreased. By conducting awareness workshops for community members on child rights and making sure that the participants understand the disadvantages of early marriage for girls, the FRF program decreased the rate of early marriage of girls.

Lessons learned

The lessons learned from the FRF program and the study can be summarized as follows:

Participatory implementation: AKF learned about the importance of participatory implementation and how it can determine the effectiveness of an approach or initiative. Since the FRF was dealing with the issue of girls' education, which is quite sensitive because of religious and cultural taboos in Afghanistan, it confronted resistance from communities, particularly from religious groups. However, careful planning, effective communication with the community, and partnership with the government to gain support and buy-in significantly contributed to the program's success. The community awareness programs on education, particularly girls' education, convinced parents to allow and encourage their daughters to attend school. Their involvement, participation, and contribution throughout the project cycle not only built a sense of ownership but also increased the sustainability of the project. In rural areas, for example, community elders such as mullahs and CDC heads had an influential role on others, involving them in the program implementation as members of the PTSA. This was effective in increasing student enrolment and reducing absenteeism and dropouts.

Sustainability and replicability: The FRF program is considered sustainable for several reasons. First and foremost, the return of graduates to their schools as teachers resolved the human resource scarcity issue in the region and the program does not have to hire teachers from other regions to serve these communities. Secondly, the participatory implementation of the program built a sense of ownership amongst the community members and the communities are now making a significant contribution to sustaining the activities initiated through the FRF, including providing transportation for students, contributing cash and in kind to improve the infrastructure, and advocating with the PED to recruit local teachers. Thirdly, government involvement throughout the life of the project has paved the way for sustainability, as the government is not only consistently supporting the initiative but is also initiating similar efforts and approaches across the regions.

Since the FRF approach was planned and implemented in a participatory way with officials from the PEDs, DEDs, TTCs, school Shuras, school administrations, CLDs and community members, it opens the way for replication within the initial regions. Moreover, donors and institutional officials showed their appreciation for the approach and its impacts through recognitions such as the Canadian Council for International Cooperation's Civil Society Innovation Award and an appreciation certificate from the Bamyan PED. It is possible that donors and officials will help in promoting replication in other contexts as well.



For replication outside the initial regions and the country, it will be important to: a) choose the appropriate replication approach; b) be prepared for resistance or a conservative response to change; and c) regard replication as a learning process.

Conclusion

Despite challenges, the FRF has been an effective program for addressing barriers to girls' education in AKF program areas within Afghanistan. The effectiveness of the program can be clearly seen in the increase in girls' enrolment, decrease in dropouts, increase in the graduation rate, improvement in Kankor exam results, reduction of stigma around girls' education, and decrease in early marriages within focus communities. The flexible nature of the program, coupled with its positive impact, also suggests that such a program can be implemented in other contexts. ■

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