



Technical Brief

September 2019

Safe Schools for Girls (SS4G): An Innovative Approach towards Improving School Retention among Adolescent Girls in Rwanda

Overview

The Government of Rwanda provides free education to all children up to twelfth grade and progress has been made in reducing dropouts and increasing transition for both boys and girls. The average transition rate between primary and secondary school reached 75% (73.7% for girls) in 2016; high repetition and dropout rates at primary level result in a low secondary gross enrolment rate (38%; 40% for girls). At primary level, girls have higher promotion and lower repetition and dropout rates compared to boys. After transitioning into secondary school, however, girls' repetition and dropout rates surpass those of boys¹. Rwandan women who do not attend secondary school are likely to have higher fertility rates; adolescent pregnancy is a concern, with 2% of the girls becoming pregnant at age 17, 6% at age 18 and 12% by age 19².

CARE Rwanda's **Safe Schools for Girls (SS4G)** program is part of a 5-year (2015 – 2020) **multi-country initiative** aimed at improving the quality of education for marginalized adolescents in Cambodia, Kenya, Mali, India, Nepal, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. More specifically, SS4G aims to enable **97,564 students (50,797 girls and 46,767 boys) aged 11 – 18 years**, who come from low socio-economic backgrounds to pursue their education by



¹ 2017 Education Statistical Year Book

² Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, 2018-2024 Strategic Plan, p.17

reducing school drop-out and increasing transition from lower to upper secondary education for adolescent girls. The SS4G program is currently implemented in **320 schools across 9 districts of the Southern and Western Provinces of Rwanda**, in partnership with local partners, Africa Evangelical Enterprise (AEE) and Rwandan Association of Trauma Counsellors (ARCT-Ruhuka).

The SS4G Approach to keeping adolescent girls in school

Research carried out by SS4G indicated that 64% of the students had repeated a class and 29% had been absent during the past month. An analysis of knowledge and practices on adolescent sexual and reproductive health (SRH) indicated that girls have limited access to health services: 20% of the girls did not know how to access contraceptives if they needed it, compared to 12% of the boys. Additionally, traditional perceptions of gender affect girls' ability to negotiate for safe sex:

- 57% strongly agreed that that if they refused sex, their partner would be angry;
- 26% of the girls believe that 'real men do not use condoms';
- 10% are not confident that they can convince partners to use condoms;
- 33% consider that girls are responsible for protecting themselves.

Thirty-five percent of the girls strongly agreed that it is normal for girls to drop out of school and get married, while 22% believed the same about boys.

SS4G also assessed adolescents' practices towards financial empowerment. Only 36% of the girls were engaged in income-generation activities, compared to 47% of the boys. Twenty-eight percent of the girls had saved money during the past year, compared to 42% of the boys; the average amount saved by girls was 51% lower than boys' average savings.

The results strongly indicate the need to develop girls' leadership skills; ability to negotiate for their rights within a relationship; and skills and practices for future financial empowerment. The SS4G approach is designed to address these barriers, enhancing girls' ability to stay in school and to engage into economic activities after completing secondary education.

Mentorship and school-based clubs

The program trained 1314 teachers (687 females and 627 males) as mentors to provide financial literacy and life skills training as well as individual mentoring sessions to address risk patterns (absenteeism, lateness, disruptive behaviour, disconnection from peers and poor academic performance). The clubs build upon CARE's leadership skills development model while also incorporating sessions in SRH, financial literacy and savings. The mentors also provide referrals to health services and connect with families to support cases of violence, child abuse and early pregnancy.

Adolescents- led Savings and Loans

The SS4G program has adapted CARE's signature Village Savings and Loans ³(VSLA) methodology to support students to form savings and loans groups. VSLA provides students with an avenue to build and practice financial skills such as saving, budgeting, and entrepreneurship. Thereafter, students are coached on how to invest in small income-generating activities, taking care not to divert their attention from schooling. The income generated is used to help girls to take care of their immediate needs such as school and hygiene materials hence enabling them to stay in school.

Participatory Accountability: School Score Card

The school score card brings together students, teachers and school leaders to assess the level of girl-friendliness of schools, empowering girls to voice concerns, identifying potential solutions, and engaging the school management to address issues such as sexual harassment, sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response, or a lack of adequate sanitation facilities in schools (particularly for dignified menstrual hygiene management). The score card fosters accountability among decision makers, local officials, parents and students towards good governance that creates a better environment for learning. This is also a platform for adolescent-led advocacy, enabling them to influence decision makers towards a policy direction that helps to retain girls and boys in school.

Referral mechanism for SGBV

To strengthen the link between schools and the existing referral mechanisms for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), the SS4G project provides training to student clubs, parent-teacher committees, and school mentors on prevention, rights and response, and subsequently links clubs and schools with existing structures and mechanisms from the government for a better documented, safe and accessible process for referrals and support for cases.

Boys' engagement

The SS4G project engages male students to support girls' education and to become advocates of girls' education in their families and in the community. Boys are involved in both the student-led savings and loans groups as well as the school-based clubs. Through these activities, boys are encouraged to be leaders for gender equality and promote behaviour change among peers.

What has SS4G achieved so far?

✓ Economic empowerment as a lever for student retention

4,000 school-based clubs have been formed, focusing on skills related to building savings, financial literacy and entrepreneurship;

³ <https://www.care.org/vsla>

The SS4G mid-term evaluation⁴ found that the proportion of adolescents that had saved some money over the past twelve months increased from 40% at baseline to 73% at midline. Girls experienced a much larger increase in the savings rate than boys. The proportion of girls that had saved some money over the past twelve months increased from 28% to 69%. Access to basic needs—and in particular money for school-related costs – was found to be one of the strongest predictors of educational outcomes. Students who were confident in their ability to find money for school fees were found to be:

- 12 percentage points less likely to have dropped out of school;
- 13 percentage points more likely to say that if they needed money for schooling fees they would be able to find these fees
- 17.5 percentage points less likely to have missed class over the past month.



The clubs are perceived as particularly successful in making girls and boys aspire towards increased self-reliance and economic empowerment - a shift from a 'day by day' mindset, in which boys and girls consume the little money they have on sweets and doughnuts to a more 'future oriented' one, in which consistent saving of even the little money they have becomes the path to follow in order to reach their goal of financial security. The program has resulted in more students are saving and taking loans to become entrepreneurs and meeting basic schooling needs.

⁴ The evaluation used a mixed methods design. Enumerators from Laterite conducted face-to-face surveys with 498 adolescent students. Laterite also led 18 focus group discussions, one each with female and male students in all of the nine districts where the program is active. Interviews and focus groups with students were complemented by data collection with teachers. Laterite enumerators interviewed teachers in SS4G schools only and conducted five mixed-gender focus group discussion with 66 teachers.

“What I liked is the way they taught children about saving. She started asking me for two hundred for saving and I gave it to her regularly and then it was a time of sharing. They shared and everyone took her savings and she said that she is going to buy a chicken from that money. I gave her the permission, she bought a chicken and for now, her chicken laid eggs and what made me happy is that she said we will not eat eggs but she will sell them and later she will buy two chickens or ten! This has made me happy; that good habit of saving which helps the child to improve when still young.”

Father, Ruhango

✓ **Improved access to ASRH information and services**

1,670 teacher mentors trained to deliver a comprehensive package of sexual and reproductive health, self-confidence and life skills for girls and boys;

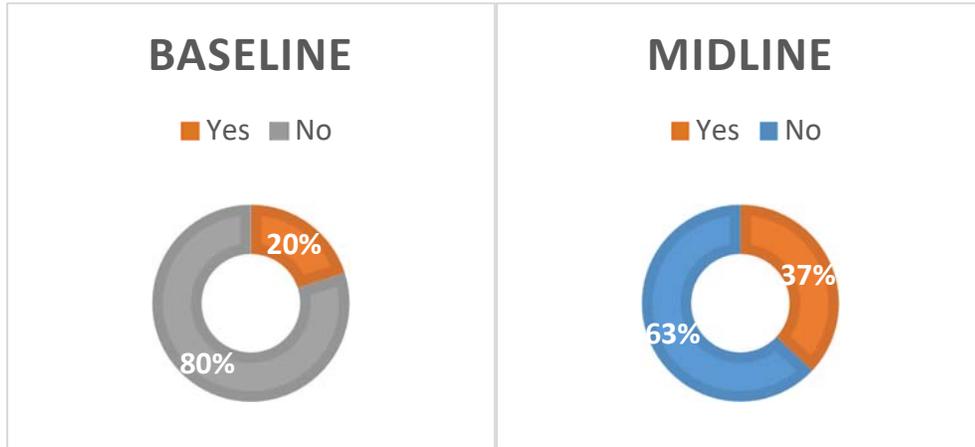
Both mentors and students have reported a stronger relationship – particularly that there is more trust between them. Mentors also report that they feel more empowered in teaching - contributing to better performances for both students and teachers. The proportion of respondents that felt they knew who to reach out to increased from 86% at baseline to 92% at midline. At midline, respondents were significantly more confident that they could acquire condoms if needed, that their parents would support them if they went to a health facility for SHR services and that even if their parents did not support them, they would still be able to seek care without difficulty.

The SS4G program has increased access to accurate and comprehensive reproductive health lessons as well as access to healthcare providers who can answer questions, strengthened gender-based violence (GBV) reporting, and created an environment of accountability, awareness, and action to address GBV. A code of conduct is signed for all mentors and staff as part of safe guarding and child protection. All of these efforts are helping girls stay in and complete school.

✓ **Expanded leadership competencies and extracurricular participation**

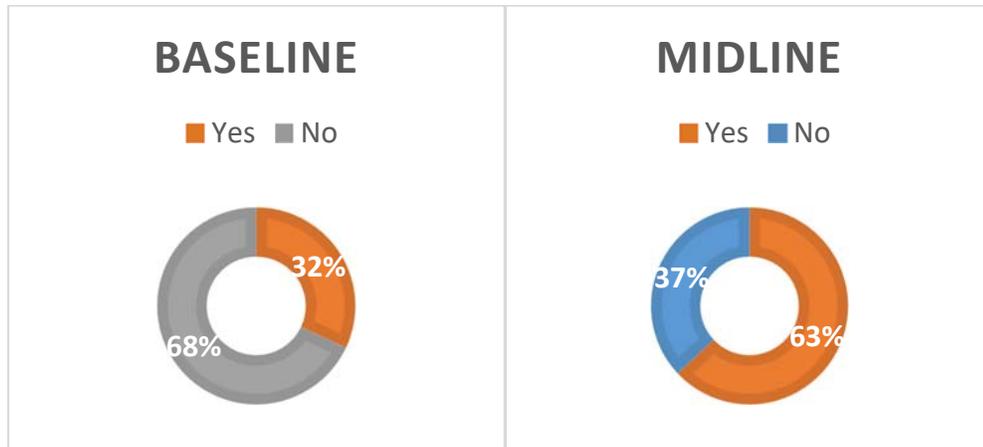
Girls have more confidence and have gained leadership skills; attendance rates are up as are graduation rates. From the data collected from a representative sample of 180 students from all the project participants, 40 percent of the initial project beneficiaries have graduated to upper secondary with girls performing better. At midline, more respondents held leadership positions at home or at school and more respondents were involved in youth organizations. This increase was almost entirely due to CARE, with 93% of respondents who were part of a youth organization identifying CARE clubs as the group/organization they belonged to.

Students that held leadership positions at home or in school*



(*Leadership roles that students in program schools hold include holding officer positions in their savings groups, being elected to represent children and youth in the cell, and leading dance troupes or sports teams.)

Students involved in youth organisations



The program is also deliberately developing the skills and support of boys, as well as their perceptions of girls, so that both girls and boys have access to the same quality education, and supportive environments - fully engaging boys in supporting girls' education, helping them to become champions and defenders of girls' rights. For instance, boys from the program report doing the same home chores as girls – thus helping to challenge gender stereotypes and norms with their parents. The SS4G program is building key leadership competencies among girls and boys so they have the skills needed to make decisions that positively impact their lives.

Making the case for scale up

CARE works where there is the greatest need, working with families, communities, and local governments to achieve equality and social justice. Over the years, CARE Rwanda has been actively engaging and partnering with a wide spectrum of partners including local NGOs and government through programming aimed at improving the educational outcomes for adolescent girls as well as adolescent empowerment more broadly. More specifically, the Safe Schools for Girls program is using a combination of approaches to reduce school drop-out and improve retention of adolescent girls in Rwanda.

CARE continues to package and use evidence emanating from interventions such as SS4G to influence policy conversations as well as practice in the education sector in Rwanda and beyond. As a result, the government has expressed interest in replicating the SS4G model in all Rwandan schools – drawing from CARE’s experiences and adopting lessons from this program to various contexts. CARE will continue to explore opportunities which will build on this work as part ensuring that adolescent girls are able to achieve their life aspirations.

CARE is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty. CARE places a special focus on working alongside poor girls and women because, equipped with the proper resources, they have the power to lift whole families and entire communities out of poverty. Last year CARE worked in 95 countries and reached more than 56 million people around the world. CARE Rwanda’s Country Program is focused on achieving gender justice for vulnerable women and girls aged 10–59 years. The *one-program strategy* (adopted in 2017) enables CARE Rwanda to develop interventions and models that complement one another *across generations*, thereby achieving greater impact. Since 2003, CARE has been implementing education programs in Rwanda, with an initial focus on addressing the emotional and psychological needs of vulnerable children after the genocide in 1994.

For more information on the **Safe Schools for Girls (SS4G) Program**, please contact:

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