



Briefing note

Gender-transformative approaches to education: Insights from Irish Aid programmes

Rachel Marcus
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Abstract

This brief outlines a gender-transformative approach to education looking at the role a donor such as Irish Aid can play through bi- and multi-lateral funding and through donor coordination and policy dialogue activities. It discusses actions in five key areas: enhancing equitable access to education; strengthening teachers' capacity; supporting implementation of gender-equitable curricula and learning materials; promoting safe learning environments; and hardwiring gender into education policy, planning and governance. The brief concludes with insights on overcoming resistance and monitoring transformative change.



Irish Aid
An Roinn Gnóthai Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

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About the author

Rachel Marcus is a Senior Research Fellow in ODI's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team.



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Context

Recent years have seen considerable narrowing of gender inequalities in access to education and increased enrolment rates. However, enrolment rates are still low and large gender gaps persist at secondary level, particularly in the poorest countries, and for the poorest children, those in rural areas and in contexts affected by conflict (UNESCO, 2023). The full legacy of Covid-19 in terms of lost learning, and on gender inequalities in enrolment and education outcomes, is not yet clear, but often existing inequalities have been exacerbated.

Educational institutions are often not safe spaces; violence (including gender-based violence (GBV)) both deters participation and undermines learning (GPE, 2023). In many countries there is an increasingly documented ‘learning crisis’,¹ which calls for substantial, targeted investment in enhancing the quality of education (World Bank et al., 2022).

Education has unique potential to contribute to greater gender equality and prosperity. In response to continued inequalities, there is renewed global commitment to transformative, gender-equitable education (UN, 2022; GPE, 2023). Increasingly an agenda is coalescing around strengthening action on the factors that underpin gender disparities, sometimes referred to as a gender transformative approach.

Organised backlash against gender equality in education is growing, however. At one end of the spectrum this involves outright resistance to girls’ education (as with the Taliban and Boko Haram). Resistance to efforts to mainstream gender in education systems is also on the rise (Gender at the Centre, UNGEI and Cambridge Education, 2023). A key element of this is backlash around comprehensive sexuality education, which is variously presented as undermining parents’ rights, imposing western values, or sexualising children at a young age. Organised campaigns against sexuality education have taken place in many countries where Irish Aid works (Khan et al., forthcoming).

1 This refers to students not developing foundational skills such as numeracy and literacy. Learning poverty is often measured in terms of the proportion of 10 year olds who are not able to read and understand a simple text (World Bank, 2022).

Box 1: What does a gender-transformative approach to education mean?

Gender-transformative education unlocks the potential of learners in all their diversity, contributes to ending harmful gender norms, attitudes and practices, and transforms institutions to achieve just, equal and inclusive societies (UNESCO, 2023).

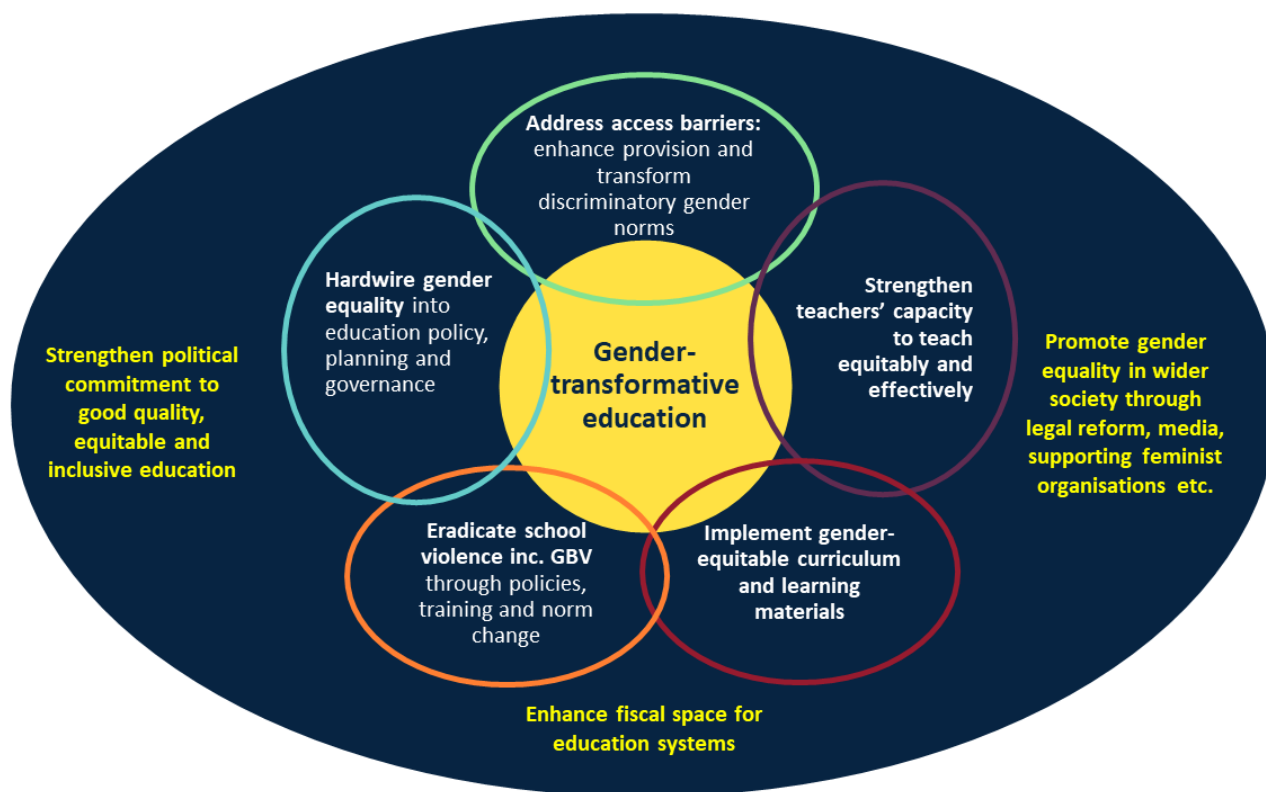
This differs from ‘business as usual’ through:

- Greater attention to the deep-seated material, system-level and norm-based factors that uphold gender inequalities in education.
- Emphasis on educational content and practices that help dismantle discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes.
- Commitment to action at scale and at system-level, including learning from small-scale initiatives with a view to scaling.
- Emphasis on sustaining change, recognising that deep-seated change requires long-term commitment and investment.

Ireland’s commitments

Ireland’s international development cooperation policy, *A Better World* highlights the need for significant efforts to retain girls at secondary level and to provide ‘second-chance’ education for girls and young women caught up in humanitarian and protracted crises. Over the period 2019-2024 Ireland committed to scale up funding for education with a focus on improving access to quality education especially for girls, and access to education in emergencies.

This brief outlines how Irish Aid (IA) has worked to strengthen action to promote gender equality in education through supporting key initiatives in the countries where it works, its role in national policy dialogue and donor coordination activities, and its support to multilateral initiatives and funds. It presents learning from experience in five key areas of action outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Action to promote transformative change towards gender equality

Five approaches to tackle gender inequality in education

1. Tackle access barriers through enhancing provision and transforming discriminatory gender norms

Table 1 outlines examples from Irish Aid's experience. These combine:

- **supply-side measures** to increase the provision of educational institutions (including accelerated learning programmes), and reduce cost- and distance-related barriers to attendance, and
- **demand-side actions** such as incentivising attendance via cash transfers and shifting discriminatory norms that limit both girls' and boys' opportunities in different ways in different contexts.

Insights from programme experience suggest it is the combination of these measures that is often most effective in strengthening all children's access to education.

Table 1 Tackling access barriers

Approach	Example
Enhancing provision	<p data-bbox="448 409 558 443">Facilities</p> <ul data-bbox="448 450 1401 797" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="448 450 1401 551">● In Mozambique, construction of boarding houses and renovation of school sanitation facilities, distribution of bicycles, supporting construction of schools close to communities. <li data-bbox="448 557 1401 689">● Contributions to the Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of Education to strengthen the quality and accessibility of the education system (via the Joint Financing Arrangement and Global Programme of Education); and to UNRWA for provision of health and education services. <li data-bbox="448 696 1401 797">● In Uganda, IA has supported the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) to construct 21 fully-equipped primary schools with gender-segregated water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. <p data-bbox="448 837 558 871">Teachers</p> <ul data-bbox="448 878 1401 1048" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="448 878 1401 938">● In Mozambique promoting female candidates for teacher training to redress disparities and provide role models for girls. <li data-bbox="448 945 1401 1048">● In Sierra Leone, increasing the number of teachers in isolated rural areas through Teach for Sierra Leone; supporting non-formal education and catch-up classes to facilitate the return to school after Covid-19.
Reducing or removing cost barriers	<ul data-bbox="448 1059 1401 1722" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="448 1059 1401 1169">● IA has supported Sierra Leone’s Free Quality Education Programme (which helps implement the government’s Radical Inclusion policy²), including through support for distribution of learning materials and menstrual hygiene kits. <li data-bbox="448 1176 1401 1413">● In Uganda, IA has provided bursaries to support vulnerable students’ with access to secondary, vocational and higher education in Karamoja – an area affected by conflict and displacement. IA support focuses on girls and young women, while still supporting some boys and young men in need. This programme may be contributing to higher rates of transition between levels and completion than national averages. IA supported cost-benefit analysis helped the government make evidence-based decisions on scale-up options. <li data-bbox="448 1420 1401 1585">● In Zambia, contributions to the Girls Education and Women’s Empowerment and Livelihoods (GEWEL) programme, which includes school bursaries, have helped the government honour its commitments to people who are ‘furthest behind’ by targeting vulnerable girls, in households receiving social cash transfers, to access secondary education. <li data-bbox="448 1592 1401 1722">● In Mozambique, through FASE (the sector education pooled fund), IA supports provision of free basic education (providing free text books at primary level, school grants, construction of schools close to communities to reduce distance-related barriers).

2 The Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools seeks to ensure that schools are accessible to, and inclusive of, all. The policy focuses on four excluded and marginalised groups: children with disabilities; children from low-income families; children in rural and underserved areas; and girls - especially girls who are currently pregnant and in school or are parent learners.

Addressing adolescent pregnancy and FGM

- In Sierra Leone and Uganda, IA has supported community-based prevention activities, and national programmes/initiatives for adolescent mothers to return to education or take up vocational training. In both countries community mobilisation has involved engagement with elders, parents and other community stakeholders to support girls' return to school.
- In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sport's Gender Unit – financially supported by IA – has conducted studies and assisted MoES to develop policies, guidelines and strategies to address gender barriers and issues of under-age pregnancies and the treatment of pregnant students and new mothers by educational institutions. It has also supported communication campaigns to encourage adolescent mothers to re-enrol. IA is also supporting a local NGO (National Association of Women Organization Uganda) to prevent female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) (a major reason for girls' drop-out) in Karamoja and to help survivors to develop skills to build their livelihoods.
- In Mozambique IA has supported the roll-out of the government's multisector child protection strategy, which addresses early pregnancy and marriages. A policy reform, which arose in part from donors and civil society policy dialogue, now allows pregnant girls to continue education in the day shift (previously they had to enrol in night classes).

Increasing girls' and women's representation in STEM and TVET

- In Mozambique, IA has supported improved quality of teaching material for STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects.
 - In Uganda, IA has co-financed Enabel's programme to enhance access and quality of TVET (technical and vocational education and training) in Karamoja. Targets for enrolment of women and under-represented ethnic groups have helped diversify the profile of trainees; 75% of trainees obtained employment. A key challenge was the relatively small number of trainees supported and the need to scale-up (Jennings, 2022).
 - In Zambia IA has partnered with Build It International for training in construction skills. Efforts to encourage gender-equal enrolment have proved effective; 52% of trainees over 2016-2022 were female. Experience from this partnership suggests that combining skills training with support for entrepreneurship and life skills has greater long-term impacts. Male trainees, however, were much more likely than female trainees to be working in construction at least 10 days per month (52% vs 19%) highlighting the need for parallel efforts to make the construction industry more woman-friendly.
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2. Strengthen teachers' capacity to teach effectively and equitably

Improving the quality of education can indirectly be gender transformative if it shifts perceptions about the value of both girls' and boys' attendance, or enables children to learn more and achieve qualifications. This, in turn, can lead to more women in better paid roles. Sensitising teachers directly on gender issues, and integrating new awareness into their practice is another important aspect of gender-transformative education. Integrating gender-sensitisation (often including GBV prevention) into broader teacher professional development initiatives can show how gender-equitable approaches enhance learning outcomes and help overcome any resistance. Irish Aid has supported both overall teacher development and more direct gender-sensitisation. Table 2 highlights examples. Further evaluated examples of good practice can be found in UNGEI (2023).

Table 2 Strengthening teachers' capacity to teach effectively and equitably

Approach	Example
Support to teacher professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Sierra Leone, strengthening teacher capacity in literacy (via Safe Learning Model) led to improved literacy outcomes for girls and boys. • In Uganda, IA has provided support to enhance the quality of teaching in primary and secondary schools in Karamoja, and to address gender-based barriers. • In the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), various teachers' and principals' capacity building and education training programmes, including in gender-related issues, have been implemented under the Joint Funding Arrangement for the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Education, supported by IA. • In Uganda, to support the MoES's National Teacher policy and the Teachers Incentive Framework, IA is financing a programme of awards for outstanding teachers working in challenging environments and/or using minimal resources (who are disproportionately women).
Gender sensitisation of senior teachers and education leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Uganda (Karamoja region), via funding to UNICEF, IA has supported training of senior teachers and district official to understand gender dynamics and integrate this understanding in action plans. It has also supported the MoES to train teachers to use and assess learning through the competence-based curriculum at lower secondary level. This curriculum was reviewed prior to implementation and gender-based barriers identified, and covered in teacher training.
Increased use of mother-tongue/ bilingual learning materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Mozambique, the government is expanding mother-tongue and bilingual education through a pooled sector support fund (FASE), to which IA contributes. Impacts on girls are often disproportionately positive as their fluency in national languages is often lower.

3. Support implementation of gender-equitable curriculum and learning materials

Periodic reforms of school curricula provide an opportunity to embed gender-equitable values and remove sexist stereotypes in learning materials. Life skills, sexuality, and social and relationships education programmes are another key entry point for challenging gender stereotypes and norms that underpin inequalities. These may be integrated into the curriculum or provided through extra-curricular clubs and /or non-formal initiatives. Table 3 provides examples from IA experience; UNGEI (2023) provides case studies of further evaluated examples.

Table 3 Promoting gender-equitable values through curriculum and learning materials

Approach	Example
Support to Comprehensive Sexuality Education/health and life skills programmes	<p>IA has supported CSE through both country strategies and multilateral initiatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for the first and second phases of UNESCO’s Our Rights Our Lives Our Future (O3) programme. This aims to improve adolescents’ access to education and information on sexual and reproductive health. The programme aims to empower adolescents and young people and build agency, while developing the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and competencies required for preventing HIV, reducing early and unintended pregnancies, and eliminating GBV. • In Sierra Leone, IA has supported training of teachers to pilot the child and adolescent health and life skills curriculum. It has also supported non-formal sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education through girls’ clubs and IRC’s Engaging Boys for Accountable Practices programme (see 4 below). • In Uganda, through UNICEF and the Gender Unit of MoES, IA supported the development and roll out of the Adolescent Life Skills toolkit, which contains 10 sets of manuals for various life skills. Teachers in Karamoja were trained and supported to implement the toolkit. • In Zambia, IA supports UNESCO through a joint programme managed by the Resident Coordinator’s Office for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)-LSHE (Life Skills and Health Education), Prevention of GBV/SGBV and keeping girls in schools in selected schools in Eastern Province.
Combatting gender stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Uganda, the National Strategy for Girls’ Education led to the revision of curriculum and learning materials to remove gender stereotypes (Mott Macdonald/ GoU, 2019). The Gender Unit in the MoES, which IA finances, played a key role in this process. • In the oPt, under the Joint Funding Arrangement (JFA), to which IA contributes, the Gender Unit runs awareness raising activities and workshops for students and Ministry of Education staff. • IA supports the Global Programme for Education, both through general contributions and through support for the Girls’ Education Accelerator mechanism. Among the initiatives financed was a grant in El Salvador to remove harmful gender stereotypes within learning assessments, curriculum and materials across early childhood, primary and lower-secondary education (GPE, 2023).

4. Promote safe school environments

Approaches to promoting safe school environments, free from all forms of violence, including GBV include: training for both school staff and students to raise awareness and promote new norms; engagement with communities, parents and other stakeholders (e.g. police) to end violence en route to/from school; and instituting reporting and response mechanisms.

Table 4 Promoting safe school environments

Approach	Example
School and community-level prevention and response activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Sierra Leone, the Engaging Boys in Accountable Practices and Engaging Men in Accountable Practices programmes sensitise boys and men to gender equality and GBV issues and promote behaviour change. The boys component targets boys both in and out of school aged 11-15 years to strengthen gender equitable values. • In Sierra Leone, the Safe Learning Model programme raised awareness and instituted structures to prevent and respond to violence against children in schools. Reported instances of violence against children increased, possibly reflecting increased awareness (Concern, 2023). • In Uganda, IA's programme of support to education in Karamoja has led to the agreement of school standards on violence against children (VAC) with monitoring and reporting systems (Jennings, 2022). It has also involved school clubs to raise children's awareness of VAC, their rights and responses. Child- and adolescent-friendly materials on VAC are produced by the MoES Gender Technical Unit, supported by IA. • In the oPt, hygiene kits were distributed to school children in marginalised areas, and protection equipment, such as CCTV, gates, alarm systems, was provided to schools in high conflict areas with funding from the Joint Financing Arrangement (JFA).
Development of toolkit and training materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Uganda, IA supported the Good Schools Toolkit. An evaluation found the toolkit has reduced physical and sexual violence against boys and girls in Ugandan primary schools with a specific additional positive impact on children with disabilities (Raising Voices and LSHTM, 2017). • In Sierra Leone, IA worked with UNICEF to support the development of a manual on school-related gender-based violence.

5. Hardwire gender equality into education policy, planning and governance

'Installing gender equality as a foundational principle within education systems can deliver transformative education for children and young people globally' (GPE, 2023: 6).

'Hardwiring' capacity and commitment to gender equality into education policy and practice increases the sustainability of the approaches outlined above. This can involve support for gender-sensitive policy, planning, budgeting and financial management; and strengthening capacity in

central or sub-national Ministries of Education, for example through gender champions or units. In several countries Irish Aid has led donor coordination efforts supporting national education strategies with strong gender-equality elements, see Table 5.

Table 5 Hardwiring gender equality into education policy, planning and governance

Approach	Example
Coordinating donor support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In Sierra Leone, IA has coordinated donor support (via the Global Programme for Education) to the government’s Radical Inclusion Policy and Implementation Plan (MBSSE, Sierra Leone, 2021), which seeks to ensure schools are accessible to all children, and strategy for Out-of-School Children (Irish Aid and UNICEF, 2022). Both have a strong gender equality emphasis. ● In Mozambique, IA plays a lead role in the Ministry of Education’s Gender group. This consists of government, donors and CSOs and focuses on policy and implementation. ● In the oPt, in its capacity as the co-chair of the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG), IA is taking the lead on sector and stakeholder coordination of working groups that sit below the ESWG. These groups address gender as part of their mandate.
Strengthening specialist gender equality capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In Uganda, IA has been the main external provider of financial and technical support to the MoES’s Gender Technical Unit (GTU) (Jennings, 2022). The GTU has provided technical input to education sector plans, the Education Compact, Education Response Plan and GPE 2 programme and thus contributed to gender-responsive policy and practice. It also guides Gender Focal Points in the MoES’s 12 departments to support implementation of policies and strategies. The GTU, and IA partners are actively involved in various gender-focused policy platforms; i.e. the Inter-ministerial Working Group and Gender Technical Working Group.
Improved public financial management (PFM) for education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In Mozambique, IA co-chairs the PFM Working Group with the Government. This has helped manage resources received via the FASE (Education Sector Support Fund) and has maximised the external funding transferred to sub-national education authorities and schools (GPE, 2022). This has supported implementation of the Strategic Education Plan (GPE 2020), which prioritises girls’ education, among other emphases. ● In Uganda, support to the Gender Technical Unit has helped strengthen capacity at national and district level to mainstream gender in education sector budgets. This has led to the MoES consistently being rated one of the best performing ministries in gender-based budgeting by the Equal Opportunity Commission of Uganda, a parliament instituted body. ● In the oPt, through the JFA, IA has strengthened the capacity of the Ministry of Education to manage and report on education finances. IA also supports civil society organisations to strengthen government-wide gender-responsive budgeting and planning.

Overcoming resistance

‘Keep bringing stakeholders together and don’t impose solutions.’

Key insights from IA Uganda on reducing backlash to gender-transformative approaches.

Gender-transformative approaches seek to challenge hierarchies and entrenched privileges. Some of the key areas of concern have been gender-targeting of initiatives, rather than merit or need-based bursaries, and/or a perception that channelling resources principally to girls’ education overlooks the very high level of need and educational deprivation that boys from disadvantaged backgrounds also face. Combined experience from Irish Aid education programmes suggest the following are particularly important in helping prevent or overcome resistance:

Committed leadership at different levels: political leaders, Ministry officials, and individual schools. The Ministers of Education of at least five countries where Irish Aid works are signatories to the Freetown Declaration on Gender-Transformative Leadership (GPE, 2022), which emphasises their commitment to *‘leadership on empowering girls through education while seeking to achieve gender equality in and through education’*, and to *‘transforming our systems, pedagogies, institutions and indeed our own mindsets so that we can end harmful gender norms and stereotypes and help each child achieve the freedom they need to dream and grow without barriers’*. Commitments such as these can help set agendas and frameworks, and crucially mandate action, backed up by budgets.

Respectful processes with stakeholder dialogue and informed engagement. For example, in Sierra Leone the process of development of the child and adolescent health and life skills curriculum has involved a multi-year process of consultations with key stakeholders including religious and traditional leaders. This involved both face-to-face discussions, and during the Covid-19 pandemic, radio-based discussions. This has helped build commitment to the new curriculum.

Long-term engagement and continued funding. Recognition that changes take time to embed, and that ongoing dialogue, discussion and repeat training are needed, particularly in contexts with high staff turnover. This has included repeated dissemination of relevant policy documents and strategies, peer to peer support, mentorship of teachers, and strengthening institutional linkages, including through study tours, twinning etc. to deepen learning.

Monitoring transformational change

A key part of the commitment to transformational change for gender equality is accountability for progress. Many countries have strengthened reporting on gender equality aspects of education as part of SDG4 reporting, with a particular focus on gender-disaggregated data on access and completion at different levels. Some relevant Irish Aid-supported initiatives to strengthen reporting on gender equality in education include:

- The Gender Technical Unit in Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports has spearheaded mainstreaming of gender-disaggregated indicators within the country's Education Management Information System (EMIS).
- In Mozambique, through the Gender Group, Irish Aid has successfully advocated for the inclusion of a monitoring indicator on female primary school teachers' access to training.

Issues such as safe schools, gender-equitable curricula and capacity to implement gender-sensitive policies are less frequently monitored. Integrating monitoring of all these issues may be beyond the scope of education systems, particularly in low-income countries. Support from Irish Aid and/other donors may enable focused, strategic monitoring of additional issues, as relevant in each country context. Annex 1 outlines some possible indicators.

Conclusion

This brief has illustrated learning from some of the wide range of activities Irish Aid supports to promote gender-equitable education. It shows how a relatively small donor can make a tangible difference by working at policy and institutional level, and through funding education sector budgets and civil society initiatives that seek to catalyse change.

In many countries Irish Aid's portfolio support spans several or all of the five areas of action discussed in this brief. This makes it possible to build synergies across different approaches and increases the likelihood of transformative change. Irish Aid-financed programmes support gender-transformative change both directly, through challenging inequitable norms, practices and curriculum content, and also through the longer route of enabling more girls to attend and complete education. This, in turn, is likely to contribute greater overall gender equality in society more broadly as more women enter the labour market and are equipped to take up better paid work and positions of power.

Shifting entrenched gender inequalities takes time and continued commitment, and Irish Aid support to education responds to this. Gender-equitable education has been a priority across successive country strategies. Long-term funding support has enabled entities such as gender units in Uganda's and the oPt's Ministries of Education to become an effective champion of gender equality, mainstreaming gender equality across education budgeting and planning, and strengthening the capacity of those charged with delivery, from education sector officials through to teachers. In a similar vein, Irish Aid participation in sector working groups likewise helps keep commitments to gender equality firmly on the table, and ensures that they are reflected in sector plans, priorities and budgets. Finally, Irish Aid experience points to some ways to counter backlash against gender equality in education, an ever-more pressing priority.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Possible indicators for monitoring progress towards gender-equitable education

Domain	Possible indicators
Access	Enrolment rates (or out-of-school rates) among both girls and boys at different levels of education. Proportion of adolescent mothers in education or training. Conclusion rates at different levels of education.
Teacher capacity to teach effectively and equitably	Proportion of girls and boys achieving minimum competency levels in literacy and numeracy or end-of-primary/lower secondary school certificates. Gender ratio of students in selected STEM studies/ technical training. Proportion of female teachers and of teachers accessing training.
Curriculum and learning materials	Content on gender equality is included in school curricula at different levels. Learning materials are free from gender stereotypes. Proportion of teachers who have undertaken gender sensitisation/ gender-responsive pedagogy training. Gender equality forms part of teacher training curriculum
Safe schools	Proportion of children who report feeling safe at school. Proportion of schools where a) teachers b) students have taken part in sensitisation on violence against children (including GBV). Proportion of schools with code of conduct/reporting framework for violent incidents.
System capacity	Education sector plans/ policies include actions to address gender inequalities. Education sector budgets include allocations to address gender inequalities.