

Organizational information

Organization name: Street Child US

Project title: Breaking the Bonds

Grant amount: \$49,180

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Project overview

In 2018 Street Child launched a combined intervention of accelerated learning, livelihoods, and life skills support to 3,000 young women and girls aged 15-18 of Nepal's Musahar caste, a population which is among the world's most marginalized. 'Untouchable' even among Dalits, Musahars have little access to socio-economic or legal structures such as education, the economy, healthcare, or citizenship. Doubly marginalized by their sex, Musahar women suffer lower life outcomes than Musahar men. 99% are landless and born into bonded labor, 100% are out-of-school by age 10, almost all are married with children by age 15, and only 4% can read or write even their own name.

The program, which is still running, aims to break the bonds of slavery and poverty for these young women by helping them achieve foundational literacy and numeracy; access enterprise or employment; help them understand their rights and how to access them, and build the confidence to do so; and reduce prejudice among external stakeholders, such as employers or teachers, via community advocacy. The Dining for Women grant supported 187 young women aged 15-18 to access the full program.

Accomplishments and changes

In this grant period, which began January 2020, Street Child planned to put 187 Dining for Women-funded Musahar girls aged 15-18 through a nine-month accelerated learning program, followed by six months of enterprise and employment. Underpinning these elements would be 15 months of concurrent life skills

learning, in the form of facilitated ‘safe space’ workshops where girls would learn about their rights and how to access them, and develop confidence. While our core objectives have not changed, and we have met our education, life skills, and income generation goals for the 187 girls funded by Dining for Women, due to the COVID-19 crisis our delivery methods have changed significantly, as has the timeline of activities. We have also altered the budget quite significantly, although almost all within the boundaries of the original program; the only new item added was \$4,348 for food distribution (9% of the original budget), to ensure the survival of our beneficiaries in direct response to the devastation that COVID-19 has wrought.

COVID-19 response

In-person activities took place between January to mid-March, but learning was then halted for four months in response to a national lockdown. As described above, between April and August 2020 Street Child repurposed Dining for Women grant funds from the Gender Equality Training budget line to carry out urgent COVID-19 response work. We reached 1,579 Musahar families with food relief; provided protection-related information to vulnerable Musahar girls across 153 communities, including important information on accessing support services and reporting incidents; and in total reached more than 80,000 Musahar individuals with health and hygiene education and supplies, focusing on communities for whom social distancing is not feasible and running water not accessible.

Accelerated learning

The first five months were also spent urgently developing a remote, offline learning model. The new remote instruction methodology was designed to incorporate accelerated learning and life skills, and a five-week pilot – part-funded by Dining for Women – began in August 2020, reaching 560 girls, including the 187 supported by Dining for Women (who had begun but not completed their learning in early 2020). Despite the disruption, results of the remote accelerated learning and life skills learning are excellent, and the program received A+ rating by core funder the UK Government’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO, formerly DfID) – the only one of their programs to receive this highest rating. Results after just five weeks of instruction were:

- 27% of girls could read stories fluently and 27% could read paragraphs fluently, compared to 8% and 14% at baseline.
- 48% were able to recognize 3-digit numbers compared to 24% at baseline.
- 85% could perform subtraction compared to 52% at baseline.
- 87% could perform division compared to 4% at baseline.
- 54% reported an increased ability to resist human trafficking.
- 81% demonstrated understanding of gender-based violence versus 2% at baseline.

These increases were comparable to – and in some instances better than – results of a demographically similar cohort which underwent accelerated learning and life skills in-person in 2019:

Indicator	In-person gains	Remote gains
Proportion reading fluently at/beyond story level	5% to 20%	8% to 28%
Proportion reading fluently at/beyond word level	27% to 75%	59% to 87%
Proportion recognizing 3-digit numbers	11% to 40%	24% to 48%
Proportion able to perform multiplication	8% to 44%	17% to 75%
Proportion able to perform division	5% to 23%	4% to 87%

The pilot took place over five weeks, while the in-person comparison lasted 24 weeks. Given the similarity of results, it is clear that we have developed an extremely promising model that could have a huge impact going forward on the learning of children chronically unable to access school for all kinds of reasons, including, but not exclusively, diseases like COVID-19. This province of operation has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Nepal and risk of recurrence is high, so the region anticipates repeat school closures for years. We have therefore decided to pivot to remote education for the remainder of the program, to reduce disruption and associated learning losses, and are in the process of adapting the model for use across all our regions of operation.

Life skills

The increase in life skills awareness despite the remote modalities, as illustrated by the above evaluation, is a significant finding for Street Child. The pandemic has been very hard on the Musahar, and lockdown has caused huge economic shocks, with complete loss of livelihoods and income. As always, girls are doubly disadvantaged by their sex; deprioritized for food, they are also at increased risk of child marriage and commodification into forced transactional sex / sex trafficking as households struggle to make ends meet. There have been several beneficiary suicides due to the starvation and increased domestic violence and exploitation girls are experiencing. It was vitally important for us to find a way to continue helping these girls to develop coping mechanisms and resist harm; and since July we have stopped three child marriages, due to girls' own courage in reporting relatives to social workers.

Livelihoods

The inability to deliver in-person instruction severely affected the enterprise and employment strand because vocational training was impossible, so training and the disbursement of cash grants were on hold until July, when we were first able to go back into the communities for longer periods. This was extremely concerning for us, because our own rapid assessment of 12,000 families found that 100% of Musahar families have experienced a loss of income due to COVID-19. The employment element of the livelihoods strand has unfortunately been paused indefinitely, so all existing beneficiaries including the 187 Dining for Women funded girls were transitioned into entrepreneurship instead of employment, leading to the need for extra funding for cash grants. We therefore repurposed excess funds from both Tutor stipend and Social Worker stipend budget lines (fewer tutors and social workers are needed for remote instruction) and the Gender Equality Training budget line, to assist more girls to set up enterprises such as braiding and tailoring.

Training began in July, and the team have revised the livelihoods strategy to take into account the new needs of the community and the extremely different economic landscape following COVID-19. Mask production will be a crucial source of income here for the foreseeable future, and education on issues such as hygiene for those selling products in marketplaces has been ramped up.

Community advocacy

This part of the program has also suffered greatly from COVID-19 lockdown, as we have not been able to hold in-person community meetings since March. We have therefore repurposed the Gender Equality Training budget line (a stipend for Community Integration Coaches) into cash grants and food distribution as described above. This part of the program is a crucial piece, and in-person sessions will begin again as soon as possible; however, our relationships with communities have changed drastically over the past ten months, getting stronger and closer as we have supported them like no other agency before, and it is likely that community advocacy will be much easier going forward. Since the grant was awarded, we have significantly increased the number of Musahar – especially Musahar women – whom we actually employ

in our Nepal office, and this is already having a hugely beneficial impact on the perception of women's capabilities across our Musahar communities.

Beneficiary numbers

Beneficiary numbers have not changed.

Challenges

The challenge of COVID-19 has been addressed above, so in this section we set out *how* the remote instruction differs from the original incarnation. The remote program is designed to be successful for children learning outside a formal structure, who have limited resources and little-to-no learning support from caregivers, either because their caregivers are absent (Musahar men are usually absent from the home working for long periods of the year and mothers work long hours at farming or small-scale trading) or because they are first-generation learners. Self-sufficient learning of foundational literacy and numeracy and life skills is supported by peripatetic teachers and social workers who (safely) distribute learning packs and instructional materials, recorders, and safety equipment; check in regularly with phone calls and SMS support; and assist in-person with queries and wellbeing support once per week when dropping off supplies.

To ensure that girls can 'teach' themselves and remain engaged, the schedule includes a series of fun, engaging and interactive activities, including songs, games, and worksheets, that align to familiar approaches used by our teachers to trigger learner memories and boost continuity. Activities are delivered via three approaches:

- 1) Printed learning packs – deployed with resources that children and communities are likely to have available in their homes and environments (e.g. sticks and stones).
- 2) Audio-assisted learning – pre-recorded audio messages played through solar-powered MP3 players; and
- 3) Phone learning – lessons and support delivered by phone and SMS communication where possible.

Girls participate in one 60-minute session per day, 6 days a week. Each lesson integrates literacy, numeracy, and protection information – e.g. songs about handwashing – in recognition of the fact that children require lifesaving information during a crisis, as well as education. To address the risk of harm in the home, remote sessions also disseminate vital information about service providers and free government services (e.g. abuse helplines), and work towards building girls' capacity to make autonomous decisions and resist, respond to, and report violence of all forms.

Financial literacy also uses audio-assisted learning and printed packages with pictorial messages and text, and training includes topics such as basic accounting principles, writing a business plan, managing stock, how to save etc. Girls participate in one 15-minute session per day, 6 days a week, and social workers also provide face-to-face check-ins and SMS support.

Resources have to be shared, so sanitation of recorders and materials (print packs are laminated so they can be wiped down) is crucial. Staff receive training in sanitation and hygiene, and it is their job to ensure that resources are sanitized before being rotated.

Lessons learned

We have learned several things from our pilot. Results are equivalent or, in some cases stronger, than in-person learning, over a shorter timeframe. This can be attributed to comparably stronger levels of girls' attendance and engagement in learning through the remote modalities, as well as the pedagogical strength of the intervention. While girls, teachers, and parents did comment on the challenges of remote learning in

our survey, they also highlighted many positives. For example, Radhika from Sunsari said: ‘I enjoyed [remote learning] because learning at the center used to be so noisy’. Teacher Bibha from Mahottari said: ‘This has been good for girls who were previously shy who now feel more comfortable to ask questions; also parents are listening to the sessions.’ An enormous 95% of parents said that they liked the remote sessions, because (1) they were able to overhear sessions and engage; and (2) it enabled girls to both study and work. It is clear that with the right structure and support, learning can potentially take place in a far shorter timeframe than previously anticipated. These results came from a five-week pilot, so the next step is to test a larger number of girls over a longer period to see how long it takes to achieve desired gains in functional literacy and numeracy. As mentioned above, we have pivoted to remote learning for the remainder of the program, but if results of a larger evaluation show similar findings, we will adapt all programs beyond the Musahar and beyond Nepal accordingly.

Organizational changes

See Lessons learned, above.

Unexpected events, outcomes, and benefits

COVID-19 is a tragedy, but it has also led to the development of a low-cost learning product that is demonstrating excellent results in early testing, part-funded by Dining for Women. The tool is designed to be successful for children learning alone, and can work for those who have little-to-no literacy. For this reason, with adaptation we believe the framework could potentially reach millions of children who are chronically unable to access in-person schooling, for reasons including disability, lack of permission, or constant disruption to access because of conflict or disaster. We are currently in talks with various partners to fund extended testing.

Beneficiary numbers, direct and indirect

With the Dining for Women grant we have directly supported 187 Musahar girls including 10 teenage mothers to access first in-person, then remote learning with excellent results. These girls have also accessed life skills and financial literacy training. Because of COVID-19 the employment element of the livelihoods strand has unfortunately been paused indefinitely, so all 187 have been transitioned into entrepreneurship and began vocational training in July – e.g. in duck farming, tailoring, mask production, and hair braiding (see attached case studies and photos). The region is facing economic devastation, so this will not be a quick or easy fix, but we are monitoring girls closely, offering hands-on support, and continuing to provide food relief where necessary to ensure survival.

Indirectly, we estimate that the program will ultimately reach an average of six further family members per participant with increased income and consequently improved life outcomes (better health, more education, better nutrition etc.); this comprises one extra adult per beneficiary (187 additional adults) plus five children per beneficiary (935 children total). Gender equality training and consequent changes in policy and practice have the potential to reach tens of thousands of Musahar and non-Musahar girls going forward, once reinstated as is the ‘post’-COVID-19 priority.

Monitoring

Baseline and endline assessments, formative assessments, and attendance records were the key tools used to track and measure progress, ensuring the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The assessment framework was designed to capture the changes realized as a result of the remote activities and to test and validate the assumptions and logical links between learning targets, learning achievements, project outputs and outcomes.

A mixed methods approach was used including (i) learning tests to track reading and arithmetic levels; (ii) case studies comprising semi-structured interviews to track feedback, experience, and outcomes; and (iii) a longitudinal study to track a sample population and assess impact in achieving learning. This approach also carefully considered interaction between actors, learning activities and learning outputs, during COVID-19 in particular.

Baseline and endline assessments were conducted over the phone using a tailored KOBO toolbox, including the Annual Status of Education Report [ASER] testing tools for literacy and numeracy. Attendance was recorded by Community Management Committee Focal Points daily, submitted to Community Educators and Protection Advisors weekly, and shared with Street Child's M&E team for verification and analysis.

If the project is ongoing, provide plans and expected results, including projected timeframe.

The Dining for Women-funded part of the program ended 12-31-2020, but the full program will continue until 09-30-2021. We have a no-cost extension from core funder the FCDO, in response to the extensive delays caused by COVID-19.

Message to members and leveraging the grant

Firstly, a huge thank you for your wonderful support and interest in the program. Dining for Women was among the first two major funders to invest in the program outside the UK Government, and that has had a huge impact on US funders' confidence in the program. It is always helpful to be able to tell potential funders that others have trusted and funded the program, and since receiving the Dining for Women grant, we have won exponentially more support for the program from US foundations – including a first-ever six-figure grant for the US office.

Additionally, Street Child US CEO Anna attended two dinners in-person and Skyped into two more during our Featured Month (October 2019), and met some wonderful, fun people who asked insightful questions, fed her generously, and have continued to support Street Child financially or professionally since (e.g. with marketing and legal advice).

The program described in this report is different from that described in the initial grant application, but in our opinion, it is even stronger. Street Child has always been good at locating and focusing on the critical levers to success, but with COVID-19 breathing down our necks we have found ourselves operating at warp speed on an extraordinary plane, driven by emotion and desperate fear for the lives of our beneficiaries.

We have repurposed some Dining for Women funds to keep people alive, but we have also used the grant to pilot a new remote education methodology, whose results were so promising that the model was shortlisted for a \$1m prize in December 2020 (results pending). We aimed to reach 5,000 community members this year with community advocacy; instead, we have reached 80,000 with lifesaving information and supplies, for around 30c per head. We have driven resistance among beneficiaries to early marriage to the extent that even in this COVID-19 year we have been able to intervene in three child marriages. We ran an urgent market assessment in June and another in September, and an extra 225 girls (125 Dining for Women grantees and 100 from a separate cohort) now have a cash grant, access to the market, a strong business plan for trading, and the hygiene knowledge to keep safe.

Despite the changes and the challenges of the past year, we very much hope that you are still proud to have supported Street Child, the way we are proud and grateful to be a Dining for Women grantee.