

**SYRIA
EDUCATION
PROGRAMME**

Technical Summary

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Review



**KEEPING SCHOOLS OPEN: IMPROVING
TEACHING AND LEARNING**



Contents

SECTION 1	08
Stakeholder responses	08
SECTION 2	13
Project documentation review	13
SECTION 3	15
Addressing the GESI Review's research questions	15
Recommendations	17
GESI Review methodology	18

Manahel, part of the Syria Education Programme (SEP I), began in February 2018 and was designed to mitigate the devastation caused to the education system in Northwest (NW) Syria after more than a decade of conflict. Funded by the British Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the five-year programme has the specific aims of providing access to safe, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities to children in NW Syria while strengthening the education system to manage education effectively.

Delivered by Chemonics, Manahel provides education to primary school-aged children and, since 2018, has benefited over 600,000 children through school, home, and after-school education and by responding to children's psychosocial and protection needs.



Manahel has supported formal education in NW Syria - including 16,293 school staff - at the cost of less than £2 per child, per month.



Maths and literacy scores have improved significantly since 2018. Fifty percent of Manahel-supported students entering grades 3 and 4 are now in the top two categories of proficient reader and progressing reader.



Despite the ongoing conflict, **Manahel has improved the resilience of 76% of supported children** in 2021/2022 through psychosocial support and safeguarding measures.

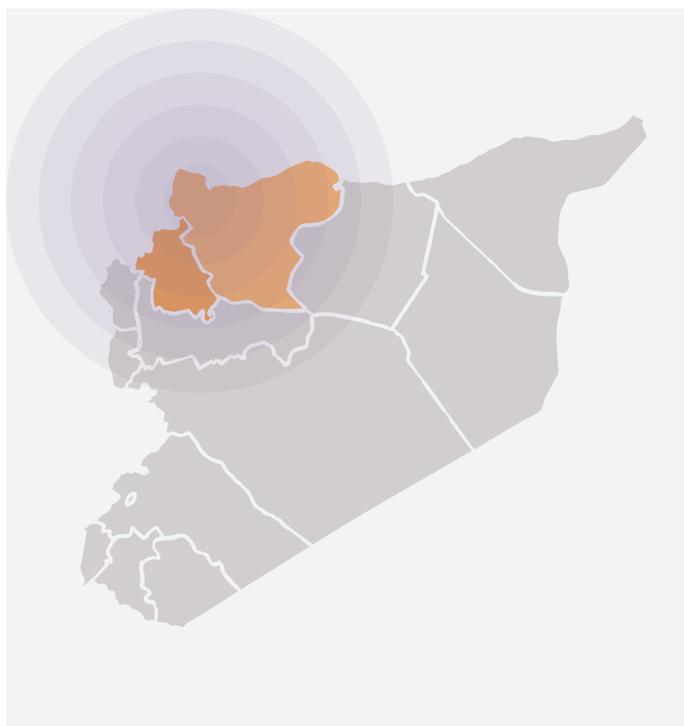


Qualitative and quantitative evidence shows that **Manahel's stipends to 16,293 school staff have kept schools open** and improved learning outcomes.

Country Context

More than a decade of acute crisis has devastated the education sector in the region. Airstrikes punctuate school days. Children are burdened by the emotional and physical toll of personal loss and continued instability. Teachers, bearing the same burdens as their students, choose to go to schools in the face of danger and sporadic pay, in order to provide a semblance of normalcy for their students.

Since a large-scale earthquake hit Southeast Turkey and NW of Syria on 6th February 2023, with various after-shocks, the focus of communities has been on survival and recovery. According to OCHA, the earthquake caused 4,500 deaths and 8,700 injuries in NW Syria up to March 13, 2023. In total, 148 cities and towns were affected with 1,869 buildings completely destroyed and 8,731 needing to be demolished. Overall, it has impacted up to 4.5 million people across SE Turkey and NW Syria.



Manahel pivoted its objectives following the disaster to centre on maintaining children’s daily routines and restoring normality wherever possible by addressing emergency interventions and safety concerns. This prioritised safe learning environments and a focus on improving children’s psychosocial wellbeing.

The impact of the earthquake meant that, whilst some planned activities like data analysis were able to continue, some were cancelled or suspended. Revised activities included scaled up psychosocial support (PSS) activities to focus on psychological first aid. Where possible, Manahel also conducted light repairs to earthquake-damaged schools and worked with others to provide shelter for families temporarily housed in schools.

Manahel continued to engage caregivers and students in providing community-informed awareness sessions with the goal of promoting resilience and healthy coping strategies. These awareness sessions were modified to focus on student wellbeing, ability to deal with cumulative post-earthquake stress, and ways to stay positive. Sessions reached a total of more than 68,000 children and 4,000 caregivers.

Within this context, there remain pervasive gender norms that shape the experiences and opportunities of Syrians in NW Syria. These are captured in the Manahel Gender Analysis and Action Plan (2021):

“The types of hardships and inequalities that Syrians face, however, change throughout their life trajectory. In the early childhood years, boys are often at a disadvantage compared to girls, because they are asked to work starting at a young age. Girls, on the other hand, are often excluded from the labour market. This challenge continues into early adolescence and adulthood. For example, in 2017, the unemployment rate for female youth (between 15 and 24 years of age) was 84 percent and the unemployment rate for women was 41 percent (compared to 27 percent for male youth and 11 percent for men) (World Bank, 2020). Since the war, as more men are recruited to fight, women have started to experience more work opportunities. However, when adolescent girls and women do work, they are often employed in informal and small-scale jobs, and they earn less money than men (CARE, 2016). During adolescence, opportunities for schooling also change. Because young girls are expected to marry and provide children to their spouses, rates of school attendance for girls at this stage of development are lower than those of their male peers (UNFPA, 2018)”.

The barriers facing girls’ and boys’ access to education, referenced in the 2021 analysis, include:

-  **Girls denied access to school because of domestic work or early marriage.**
-  **Boys denied access to school because they are expected to engage in paid work to help provide for their families, sometimes aged as young as nine (CARE, 2020a).**
-  **Families lack money to fund all, or some of, their children’s education.**
-  **Financial decision-making within families mainly made by fathers who prioritise their son’s education over their daughter’s.**
-  **Travel to school can present dangers to boys and girls.**
-  **Internally displaced people (IDPs) may lack civil documentation and school certification.**
-  **Displaced boys feel they are not listened to by teachers while girls subject to early marriage face social isolation from peers.**

The GESI Review

The Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Review of the Manahel programme was commissioned to consider Manahel's gender and social inclusion approaches and to provide evidence of what was working (and what was not working), in order to adapt extension activities and inform future programming.

The GESI Review was guided by the principle that projects should aim to take a GESI transformative approach to address the very real and persistent barriers that prevent children from learning, considering unequal power relations and inequalities experienced by individuals as a result of their social identities, including their sex, location, (dis)ability, wealth, education, age, caste/ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Findings and recommendations outlined in this review will inform future programming for the second phase of the FCDO-funded Syria Education Programme.

About this summary

This technical summary presents evidence from consultation with a range of stakeholders and a review of project documentation. It also considers the results of both against a set of six key research questions derived from the GESI framework developed as part of the FCDO's Girls' Education Challenge programme. Finally, it presents review recommendations for the future.

SECTION 1

Stakeholder responses



Stakeholder responses

The GESI review process delivered interviews and self-reflection exercises with Manahel team partners and downstream partners (DSPs) to gather evidence of good practice and interventions that had supported GESI in SEP I. Key informant interviews, focus group discussions, in depth interviews, and child gathering events were conducted to collect the perspectives of teachers, education officials, parents, and children on a range of issues. These range from training and support for teachers and teachers' views on perceptions of differences between girls and boys to Manahel's impact on learners, barriers to education and staffing and gender balance.

Technical team members

A total of five project team members provided evidence through a series of interviews and other review activities with the responses summarised below:

- Technical team members report understanding gender and social inclusion, good practice, and the interventions that support gender equality and social inclusion in the SEP I project.
- Technical team members highlight a significant increase in support for girls' education from teachers,

Children with severe disabilities have been able to access education and learning adapted for their special needs and circumstances.

parents, and the community which has been influenced in part by Manahel learning circles for teachers. They report that Grade 3 girls significantly outperformed boys in all reading skills and continue to do so in Grade 4 but warn that general attitudes to girls' education change

as girls get older as pressures around household income and early marriage increase. They also say that children with severe disabilities have been able to access education and learning adapted for their special needs and circumstances through the 34 Special Education Centres (SECs) in Manahel-supported schools.

- Technical team members highlight persistent gender imbalances in education sector leadership roles in NW Syria, with a lack of women in senior positions (from school principals to education directors), and in partner organisations based in NW Syria. They suggest that traditional community perceptions, as well as restrictions on women's roles and concerns about women's travel in the region, leading to 'women not applying', have all made it difficult to challenge these imbalances.
- They add that SEP I has endeavoured to provide the same opportunities for everyone, regardless of gender, but state that only two of the senior technical team staff in Turkey are women and say women in NW Syria still face barriers in achieving high level positions due to issues highlighted above.
- GESI-specific Continuing Professional Development (CPD) was not budgeted for in Manahel. There was no specific GESI training for the technical team or Downstream Partners (DSP) and a Gender Focal Point role is no longer funded, team members say. They add that activities supporting girls and Children with Disabilities (CWD) are unlikely to continue in NW Syria after the SEP project ends unless additional funding becomes available.
- Technical team members highlight the positive role played by groups such as a women's advocacy group and the CWD Parents' Association, where women's views can be expressed and captured. They say protection committees include student representatives (including girls) and are a forum for airing views and concerns at school level.

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Downstream partners (DSPs)

The review process gathered contributions from two representatives from each of the two key Manahel DSPs. Their responses are summarised as follows:

- Participating DSPs highlight the gender focus of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Office's responsibility to review all member proposals for funding from a GESI perspective. However, they say that gender equality 'does not exist' in leadership roles within humanitarian organisations in NW Syria because it is not possible for female staff to undertake fieldwork. This means that women employed by partner organisations are office-based or school-based.
- They also highlight the general lack of decision-making power for women and girls in NW Syria and the fact that women do not have senior roles in the Education Directorates (EDs). However, DSPs recognise that there have been efforts to improve gender balance on both fronts.

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Teachers

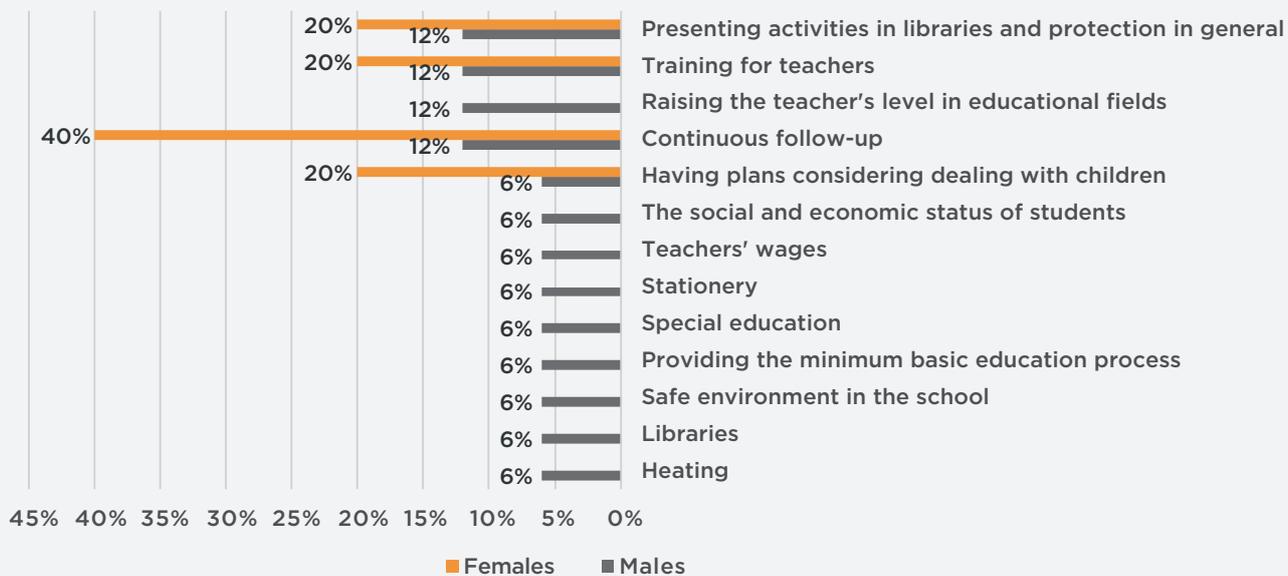
Teachers taking part in focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews contributed evidence on subjects as diverse as training and gender barriers to promotion. Their responses to the review are summarised below:

- Teachers report receiving training through Manahel on remedial reading and numeracy, psychological support, guidance, special teaching, protection, general education, and library management. Female teachers say they have received support from Manahel on remedial reading and numeracy, with the overarching goal of minimising dropout rates. Almost all teachers report attending teacher learning circles. However, more than 80% of teachers who took part in the FGDs said they had not received specific gender-responsive pedagogical training.
- Teachers made valuable observations about gender differences when in school, with boys generally more active and less well behaved than girls. Boys are also likely to face pressure to engage in child labour which, in turn, negatively affects their access to education. Conversely, girls have better access to education, and therefore better educational achievement because they don't face such pressures. Poverty, lack of parental care and instruction, distance to school, and security are the other main barriers to education for both boys and girls.
- Teachers highlight positive changes in behaviour of both boys and girls since working with Manahel, with improved academic achievement, participation, self-confidence, and behaviour. As the following graph shows, they believe that continuous follow-up by administrative and educational staff has had a particularly significant impact but also cite adoption of modern techniques, the creation of a safe atmosphere, library-based activities, and improved teacher skills as important in supporting learning.

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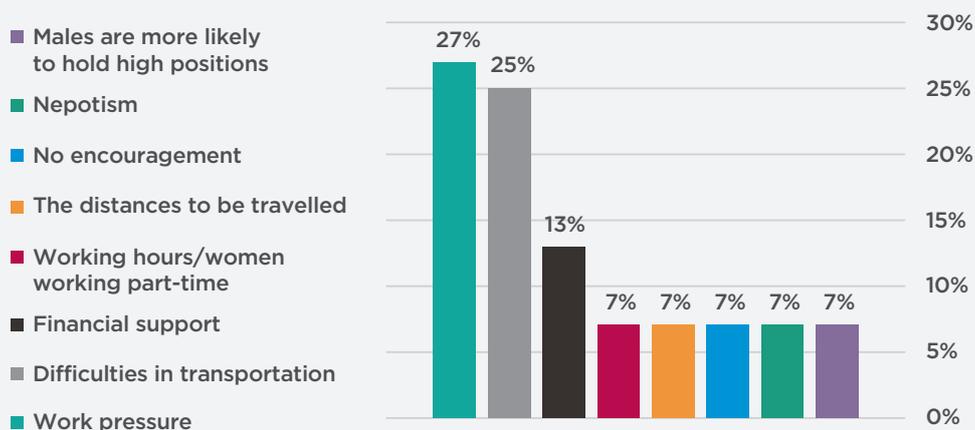
Teachers highlight positive changes in behaviour of both boys and girls since working with Manahel, with improved academic achievement, participation, self-confidence.

Reasons for changes in behaviour of girls and boys in the classroom according to teachers (male and female)



- Education managers say that approximately 10% of school head teachers are women, while 90% are male. However, there is a balance of approximately 50% women and 50% men working in Manahel-supported schools. They ascribe the leadership imbalance to the difficulty of travelling safely for women and “responsibilities that may not be appropriate for women”. However, key male and female school staff interviewed have different views about the reasons, with men citing challenges of transportation, nepotism, and work pressure and female participants reporting difficulties in transportation, financial support, male domination in high positions, lack of encouragement, and inflexible working hours. Disaggregated views on these barriers are highlighted here:

Challenges that hinder advancement to higher positions



Parents

- Parents who participated in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) identified a range of Manahel-supported interventions which had improved the educational achievement of their children, including activities aimed at limiting child labour and reducing dropout, providing psychosocial support (PSS) and awareness-raising activities, reducing bullying, and adjusting children's behaviour.

Parents identified a range of Manahel-supported interventions which had improved the educational achievement of their children.



Children

Children participated in the review through Children Gathering Events (CGEs) which featured 96 children (41% female, 59% male). Almost half of those taking part in the CGEs were CWD.

The majority of children reported that they feel secure in their educational settings.

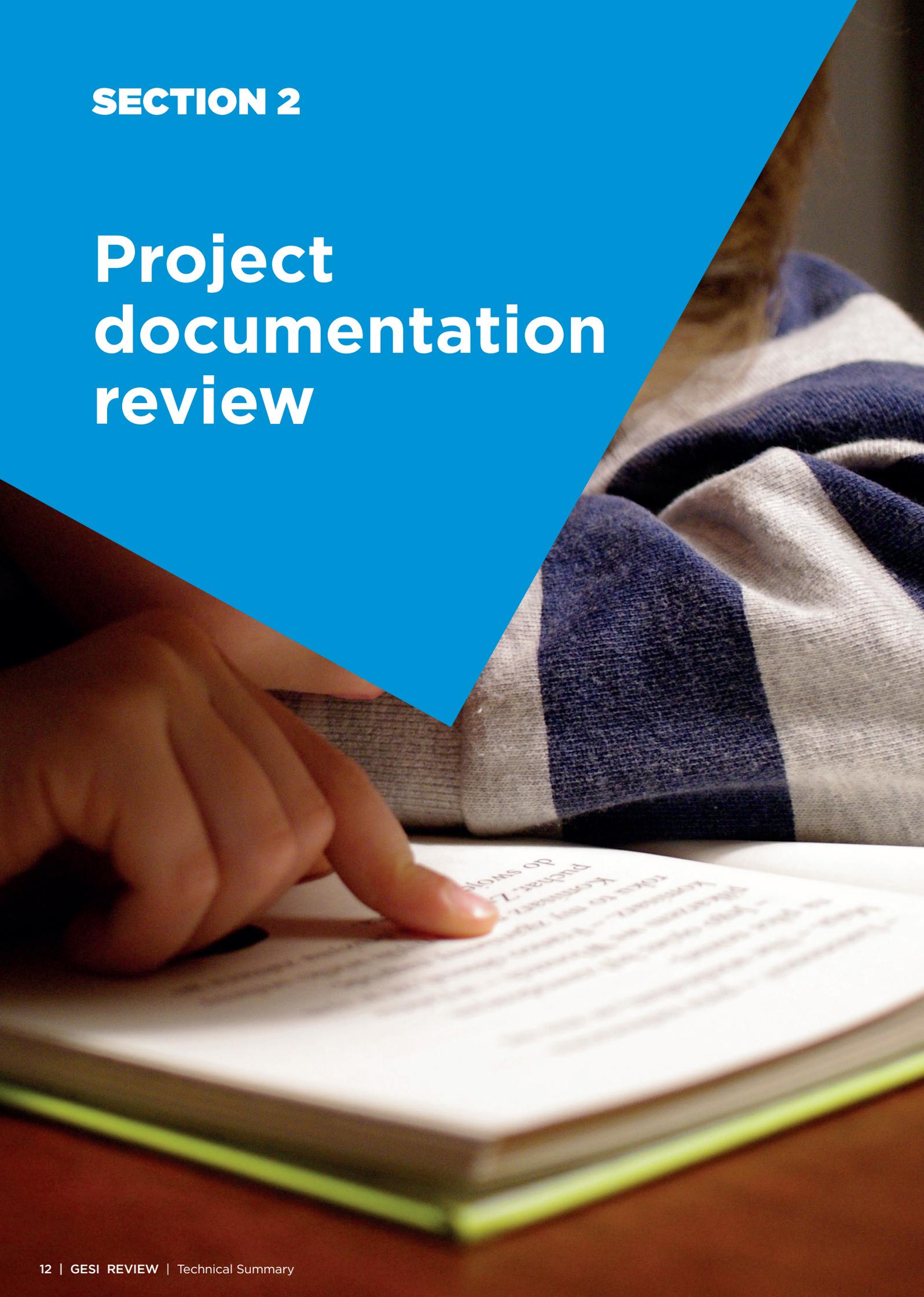
- The majority of children reported that they feel secure in their educational settings though a small percentage of students, particularly female students, reported feeling unsafe or did not provide a clear answer. Equally, they say transportation to and from school is not a significant barrier and the journey to school is safe.
- Children feel that they received fair treatment from teachers and staff and that the educational environment is generally equitable and supportive. Further, they say all students are encouraged to take part in classroom activities and have the opportunity for additional educational support when they need it. However, while quality facilities and resources are said by children to be available to most students, those with disabilities are slightly less happy with available facilities.
- Most students say they are confident in their teachers' academic abilities.
- Most students are confident that they will be able to complete their education and do not face any barriers which could stop them from attending school.

Most students are confident that they will be able to complete their education.



SECTION 2

Project documentation review



Project documentation review

Project documentation reviewed included quarterly reports, field visit reports, the bridging period workplan, gender analyses, teaching and learning materials, and learning assessment reports.

Key findings from the project documentation review are as follows:

- Documentation displays a general awareness of differences between students and it reflects and reports on degrees of social inclusion/exclusion and marginalisation. However, some reports – including much of the data presented to demonstrate progress related to *Output 2: Teachers are Trained and Supported to Provide High-Quality Education* – were not disaggregated by gender.
- Both gender analyses conducted by the project demonstrated a good understanding of how gender and marginalisation factors impact on children and their access to education in NW Syria. However, the project itself appears to have lacked a single individual with specific responsibility for GESI to act as a GESI Focal Point.
- Quarterly narrative reporting requirements did not ask for GESI-focused reporting or reporting against the FCDO's three Strategic Outcomes for Gender in Syria, though this has since been remedied. Further, opportunities to collect data from the women's advocacy group and the CWD Parents' Association appear to have been missed.
- The report *Manahel Gender Analysis and Action Plan, 2021*, draws heavily on gender studies/analyses by international organisations with knowledge and experience of NW Syria and delivers nuanced findings. Also, the report, *Gender-based Programming on SEP: Snapshot and Recommendations for Next Steps (2022)* included practical recommendations which the Manahel team could usefully consider for future programmes.
- A two-day gender and inclusion staff training event was held in 2018 though the content of this event was unclear.
- Annual SEP I learning assessments demonstrated improvements in literacy performance and showed that girls had been underperforming compared to boys in numeracy, although this gap is closing.
- Gender and disability were referenced in guides developed for classroom teachers, lead teachers, education supervisors, and instructors, but this was only in brief and there was a lack of specific guidance on GESI responsive pedagogy and inclusive classroom practice. Further, the Teacher Competency Framework guiding the project's Teacher Professional Development (TPD) approach during SEP I is very comprehensive but the specific core competency that most directly addresses GESI considerations was more GESI neutral than GESI-responsive or transformative.

The project demonstrated a good understanding of how gender and marginalisation factors impact on children and their access to education.

Teacher Professional Development was more GESI neutral than GESI responsive or transformational.

SECTION 3

Addressing the GESI Review's research questions

Addressing the GESI Review's research questions

Evidence gathered from the project documentation analysis and stakeholder consultation exercises informed the answers to the following six key research questions, which were identified at the outset of review and informed by GESI framework developed as part of the FCDO's Girls' Education Challenge programme:

Research Question 1: *Has the project had sufficient resources to be able to contribute towards improved gender equality and social inclusion? Has the project been able to convert these resources into GESI-responsive practices?*

- Manahel team members report attending gender mainstreaming training during SEP I but, as above, it is not clear what the training covered. Also, some staff question whether the sessions could be accurately described as 'GESI training' (as opposed to 'gender mainstreaming training'). Further, there does not seem to have been regular follow-up/refresher training.
- The Gender Focal Point (GFP) employee was laid off due to budget cuts in the second half of SEP I.

Team members report attending training but this could be strengthened to be GESI focused.

Research Question 2: *How well has the project planned activities that will contribute towards improved gender equality and social inclusion? How likely is it that these activities will transform inequitable relations and structures?*

- Aspects of Manahel's GESI-responsive programming come close to demonstrating good practice but the picture is mixed, and future programming should work towards better or best practice.
- The SEP I project planned and delivered a range of activities which aimed to help improve gender and social inclusion, but progress was restricted by the lack of a GESI analysis at the outset of the project.
- The project conducted two gender analyses, but it is unclear whether these led to/or informed significant adaptations to project implementation, or whether they were conducted in a participatory manner.
- Staff changes/reductions in 2022 led to a 'loss of institutional memory' of GESI related practice. It was therefore difficult to determine the degree to which the two GESI analyses were carried out in a participatory manner.
- The programme could have gone further to actively engage with men and boys, to influence attitudes and behaviours, and to develop male support and championship on behalf of girls in schools and communities.
- It is hard to predict whether project activities will permanently transform inequitable relations and structures due to the extremely difficult NW Syria context, with ongoing conflict, insecurity, and instability.
- Some project activities aimed at addressing disparities and inequalities have been dependent on external funding, including teacher salaries and maternity leave, and there are concerns that these will not continue without external funding.

Good GESI practice demonstrated by SEP I included a range of activities designed to transform unequal structures, institutions and norms at the school, community, and institutional level.

Research Question 3: *How strong have the processes been through which the project knows whether it is making contributions towards improved gender equality and social inclusion?*

- SEP I included aspects of good practice, but its Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) systems were not informed by good-to-best GESI practices. Also, there is no evidence that girls and women, including those with disability, had a role in determining the purpose and design of any MEAL activity. Some of these newer good-to-best practices are recognised in the more recent work to improve and enhance the MEAL approach, tools and methodologies.
- The SEP I project rigorously tracked learning progress/achievement of learners through use of annual Learning Assessments and standard EGRA and EGMA testing.

Some newer good-to-best practices are recognised in the more recent work to improve the MEAL approach.

Research Question 4: *How effectively has the project been accountable to girls and women, particularly those from excluded social groups?*

- There is abundant evidence that SEP I took a robust approach to risk management. This is reflected also in the strong focus on child protection and safeguarding, including during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- There is lack of clarity over consultation mechanisms used to communicate with women and girls. It is also not clear the extent to which girls and women have been involved in regular monitoring and information sharing, both upwards and downward.

There is a strong focus on child protection and safeguarding.

Research Question 5: *To what extent have girls and women, particularly those from excluded social groups, been central to the project structure, partnerships, and decision-making processes?*

- There needs to be more effort made in future programming to demonstrate good practice in actively partnering with GESI transformational organisations and promoting active and meaningful participation of girls and stakeholders from excluded social groups. Further, there are opportunities to move towards truly transformational best practice.
- Due diligence was undertaken to ensure the DSPs met the stringent requirements of both FCDO-funded projects and those managed/delivered by Chemonics, but it is not clear whether this included assessment of partners' GESI expertise at the point at which partnership agreements were made.
- DSPs are based in the field and almost entirely staffed and led by men. This is understandable in the context of NW Syria but less so in the case of the DSPs' Turkish staffing, reporting that 70% of staff in the country are male.
- Evidence of the involvement of women and girl beneficiaries in decision-making processes is limited and suggests that consultation and input from them was minimal.

There are opportunities to move towards truly transformational best practice.

Research Question 6: *Has the influencing work carried out by the project been likely to lead to a positive change in the unequal structures and relations that sustain gender inequality and other exclusions?*

- Organisations have struggled to fundamentally change unequal structures and relations that sustain gender inequality and other exclusions in the short term, and this is likely to continue. However, the project demonstrated good/better practice at the institutional level and made major progress by influencing the Education Directorates in Idleb and Aleppo to drive key change.
- Influencing work has impacted in other ways, promoting positive attitudes towards girls' access to education and access to education for CWD.
- Parents, teachers, education specialists, and senior education officials were all supportive of boys, girls and CWD attending school and credited the project with improving children's self-confidence, academic performance, absenteeism and resilience. These successes suggest that the SEP I project had a positive influence at individual, household, and community level.

The SEP I project had a positive influence at individual, household, and community level.

Recommendations

Taken together, the findings from the GESI Review point to some important actions and adaptations that future programming should include or promote. These are:

- Sufficient resources should be allocated to deliver GESI-responsive activities and incorporate both a GESI-responsive focus for aspects of project delivery and comprehensive gender analysis to inform project implementation/adaptation.
- Use of GESI indicators should be built into the programme log frame during the inception period.
- Periodic GESI reflection exercises should be conducted to ensure focus on/moving towards being GESI-transformative and to review shifting understanding of context and environment.
- More systematic tracking, and capture of evidence, of changes in views, attitudes and behaviours of beneficiaries and key stakeholders should be incorporated into regular monitoring and evaluation over the life of the programme.
- There should be continued support for CWDs and consideration of activities that focus on boys and men, to (a) support boys who may experience forms of gender bias and social exclusion, and (b) to develop and expand male awareness of gender issues.
- Careful consideration should be given to the most appropriate mechanisms for sharing information and consulting with women and girls.
- GESI indicators should be part of due diligence processes when selecting and contracting downstream partners.
- Material reviews could be adopted to test for stereotyping and gender bias/language in materials for teacher training, education officials, learners, or other stakeholders.
- There should be reviews made of the GESI policies, approaches and materials of other international/national organisations working in the NW Syria region.
- Teacher training should encourage teachers to reflect on their own gendered views and potential biases and is informed of a Teacher Competency Framework with GESI-responsive components.

GESI Review methodology

The GESI Review was based on several research strands led by:

1. GESI consultant:

- Review of project documents (samples of quarterly reports, field visit reports teaching and learning materials etc.) and reports and analysis from various international organisations regarding the education context in NW Syria.
- Individual and group discussions with Manahel technical team members and project DSPs regarding project policies, the MEAL system, teaching and learning approaches, protection and safeguarding, various iterations of the project workplan, and project implementation approaches.
- Development of field-based interview tools for qualitative data collection.

2. MEAL team from Manahel partner

- Field based data collection through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with key stakeholders in the field, including Education Directorates (EDs), Education Assembly (EA) members, education officials, head teachers, school staff, a sample of students, parents, and community representatives; and Children Gathering Events (CGEs). In total 160 informants were interviewed in NW Syria, either individually or in groups.
- Data analysis, using an integrated mixed-method analytical approach to document and analyse the qualitative data.

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