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School-Based Girls' Education Program: Changes in Life Skills, Gender Attitudes, and Future Aspirations in Laos

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Abstract

This study examined changes in life skills, gender knowledge and attitudes, and educational, occupational and marriage aspirations among adolescent girls after three years in a school-based Girls' Education Program (GEP) in Laos. A repeated cross-sectional design compared girls with no program exposure to an equivalent grade-level cohort that had completed three years of the program, across all 12 program schools in Champasak and Luang Prabang provinces. Data were collected from 388 girls at baseline and 452 at endline using a 57-item self-completed survey, and analyzed using t-tests, multivariate regression and correlations. Mean scores were significantly higher at endline for decision-making ($D = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$; $d = 0.27$), collaboration ($D = 0.07$, $p < 0.05$; $d = 0.20$) and gender knowledge and attitudes ($D = 1.66$, $p < 0.001$; $d = 0.61$). Uncertainty in responses to gender items declined markedly between baseline and endline. Educational aspirations shifted toward technical and vocational qualifications, and occupational aspirations shifted toward self-employment, while the intended age of marriage for self was lower at endline. Participants rated program content as relevant and reported high learning, valuing financial planning most, though roughly one third found gender-based-violence content very difficult. Because the design did not include randomization or a non-program comparison group, causal claims cannot be made; nonetheless, the findings are consistent with GEP evaluations in other geographies and support the program's association with meaningful gains in life skills and gender-related attitudes.

Keywords: girls' education; life skills; gender attitudes; adolescent aspirations; Laos

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a formative period when young people acquire cognitive, social and emotional skills that shape their educational trajectories, relationships and life decisions. For girls in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), it is also a period of heightened vulnerability. Worldwide, more primary-school-age girls than boys remain out of school, and in low-income countries secondary-school-age girls are considerably more likely to be out of school than boys (UNICEF, 2022; Evans et al., 2024). Girls who leave school early face elevated risks of child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, gender-based violence and constrained economic opportunity, which tend to reinforce one another across the life course (Kagesten et al., 2016). Child, early and forced marriage affects millions of girls annually, with roughly 90% of cases occurring in LMICs (Koski & Heymann, 2021).

In response, more programs seek to strengthen girls' "life skills": non-academic competencies for setting goals, managing emotions, building relationships and making informed decisions. This domain substantially overlaps with social and emotional learning (SEL), soft skills, non-cognitive skills or 21st-century skills. The EASEL Lab's Taxonomy Project documents inconsistent and sometimes conflicting terminology, complicating comparisons of frameworks, measures and results across studies (Jones et al., 2019). Its Explore SEL platform maps more than 40 leading frameworks, including Room to Read's Life Skills Education Learning Outcomes, onto a common structure of cognitive, emotional and social skills, alongside related

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attitudes, values and identity (Harvard Graduate School of Education [EASEL Lab], 2019). Positioning a program within this shared conceptual space clarifies its target constructs and supports more transparent interpretation of its outcomes.

Evidence on girls' life-skills programming has strengthened considerably over the past decade but remains uneven. A classroom program in Haryana, India, directly addressing adolescents' gender attitudes produced more gender-equitable attitudes and self-reported behavior that persisted at follow-up (Dhar et al., 2022). However, systematic reviews highlight thinner evidence for some barriers and outcomes. Differences in curricula, dosage and context limit comparability, while few studies examine pathways linking program components to outcomes (Psaki et al., 2022; Kagesten et al., 2016).

Room to Read's Girls' Education Program (GEP) is a widely implemented school-based life-skills intervention combining education, mentoring, targeted material support and community engagement. Its Life Skills Education Learning Outcomes framework defines developmentally sequenced outcomes across ten skills: self-confidence, expressing and managing emotions, empathy, self-control, critical thinking, decision-making, perseverance, communication, relationship building and creative problem-solving (EASEL Lab, 2019). A randomized controlled trial in Rajasthan, India, covering 119 schools and approximately 2,400 girls, found participation associated with a 25% lower dropout rate and higher-grade progression, alongside significant gains in decision-making, relationship building, creative problem-solving and communication indices (Room to Read, 2018). These findings align with broader evidence that structured SEL and life-skills programming can improve adolescents' socio-emotional and school-related outcomes (Tagat et al., 2025).

In Laos, Room to Read has implemented a customized four-year version of GEP (grades 8–11) in which life-skills sessions and parent meetings are led by trained schoolteachers with support from Room to Read Social Mobilizers, who additionally provide mentoring and need-based material support. Girls in low-income districts of Laos face substantial obstacles to completing secondary school, and economic pressure has become an increasingly prominent driver of dropout (Wong et al., 2025). This concern is echoed in Lao PDR's 10th Education, Science and Sports Sector Development Plan 2026–2030, which identifies economic hardship, education-related costs, limited employment prospects, and the opportunity cost of schooling as major factors contributing to declining school attendance, secondary enrolment, and dropout (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2026). The program also operates within a national policy environment that has prioritized adolescent girls' empowerment, most visibly through the 2030 Noi Framework, a multi-sectoral initiative launched in 2016 by the Government of Lao PDR and UNFPA to reduce school dropout, early marriage and adolescent pregnancy and to strengthen girls' life skills and agency in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (UNFPA, 2019). Although GEP has been evaluated elsewhere, context-specific evidence from Laos, where the delivery model, program length and entry grade differ from the standard GEP, is limited. Understanding whether the associated gains observed in other geographies also appear in this adapted model is important both for the Lao program and for the wider question of how program design features shape outcomes.

The present study examines changes in life skills, gender knowledge and attitudes, and aspirations among Lao GEP participants after three years in the program. Based on program theory and prior GEP evaluations, we tested the hypotheses such as **H1:** Life-skills levels (decision-making and collaboration) are higher after three years of program exposure; **H2:** Gender knowledge and attitudes are more equitable after three years of program exposure; **H3:** Educational, occupational and marriage aspirations differ after three years of program exposure.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Population and Sample group

The study covered 12 GEP schools in Champasak and Luang Prabang provinces, Laos. The Lao program adapts GEP into four years spanning grades 8–11. The trained schoolteachers deliver life-skills sessions and parent workshops, while Room to Read Social Mobilizers provide group and individual mentoring and need-based material support. Life-skills instruction is more intensive in earlier grades and tapers later, while mentoring, material support, and family and community engagement continue throughout (Table 1). This teacher-led, later-entry model differs from the facilitator-led model for grades 6 and 7 evaluated in the Indian randomized trial (Room to Read,

2018), allowing examination of whether comparable gains appear under a different delivery design.

Table 1. Key characteristics of the Laos customized Girls' Education Program, by grade band.

Component	Grades 8–9	Grades 10–11
Life-skills education	13 sessions/year (90 min); one outdoor activity; ~25 girls/class	7 sessions/year (90 min); ~25 girls/class
Mentoring	Individual as needed; each SM oversees 80–100 girls	Individual as needed; each SM oversees 80–100 girls
Material support	Need-based (e.g., uniforms, supplies)	Need-based (e.g., uniforms, supplies)
Family, school & community	Two parent workshops/year; active parent committee	Two parent workshops/year; active parent committee

SM = Social Mobilizer. Adapted from the program description in the underlying evaluation report.

The repeated cross-sectional design compared girls at the similar grade level at two time points, minimizing age and maturation influences on life-skills levels that occur irrespective of program exposure. However, without a non-program comparison group, it cannot support causal inference, a limitation shared with many quasi-experimental evaluations in this field (Psaki et al., 2022).

The experimental unit was the individual girl. A census approach included all 12 program schools across Champasak and Luang Prabang provinces. The baseline and endline samples comprised 388 and 452 girls, respectively.

2.2 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire with 57 items across three domains: educational, occupational, and marriage aspirations (5 multiple-choice items); gender knowledge and attitudes (24 items, three-point Likert scale); and life skills, including decision-making, emotional resilience, and collaboration (28 items, four-point Likert scale). Life-skills items were adapted from Room to Read's Adolescent Life Skills Assessment (ALSA), while gender items drew on established gender-programming tools. The instrument was translated into Lao. Trained staff administered the survey, with two adult proctors present at each school.

The repeated cross-sectional study compared non-overlapping, same-grade cohorts: girls beginning grade 11 in 2022 without program exposure (baseline, a proxy for pre-program grade 10 completers), and girls completing grade 10 in 2024 after three years of exposure (endline). At both time points, trained staff administered the questionnaire on-site, with two adult proctors present per school.

2.4 Data analysis

Data were cleaned, coded and analyzed in Stata. Negatively worded items were reverse-scored. Item statistics and exploratory factor analysis were used to evaluate the construction of composite scores. On this basis, composites were retained for decision-making, collaboration, and gender knowledge and attitudes, while the emotional-resilience composite was dropped for insufficient psychometric adequacy. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the retained constructs was acceptable and generally improved from baseline to endline (Table 2). Aspiration items were analyzed individually. Changes between baseline and endline were evaluated using independent-samples t-tests on composite means, multivariate regression, and correlation analysis, with the collection cycle (baseline vs. endline) as the classifying factor and the individual girl as the experimental unit. Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's d. Levels of statistical significance are denoted throughout as * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ and *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of constructs by data collection cycle.

Construct	Baseline	Endline
Perseverance and decision-making	0.75	0.78
Relationship building and communication	0.67	0.76
Gender knowledge and attitudes	0.77	0.74
Expressing and managing emotions	0.40	0.51

The expressing-and-managing-emotions (emotional resilience) composite did not reach acceptable internal consistency and was excluded from subsequent analyses.

3. Results

Life skills and gender knowledge and attitudes

Table 3. Mean composite scores by data collection cycle and construct

Construct	Baseline				Endline			
	N	Mean	SE	SD	N	Mean	SE	SD
Decision-Making ***	387	2.99	0.02	0.43	452	3.10	0.02	0.45
Collaboration *	387	2.93	0.02	0.39	452	3.00	0.02	0.46
Gender knowledge & attitudes ***	387	13.29	0.16	3.12	452	14.96	0.11	2.38

*SE = standard error; SD = standard deviation. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$*

All composite means were higher at endline than at baseline. Decision-making (raw mean difference = 0.12, $p < 0.001$) and gender knowledge and attitudes (raw mean difference = 1.66, $p < 0.001$) increased significantly, with standardized effect sizes of d = 0.27 (small) and d = 0.61 (large), respectively. The change in collaboration (raw mean difference = 0.07, $p < 0.05$) was also significant, with a small effect size (d = 0.20). (Table 3)

At baseline, a high proportion of girls reported that they did not know how to respond to specific gender items, a pattern of "missingness" unique to the gender domain and interpreted as discomfort or lack of knowledge.

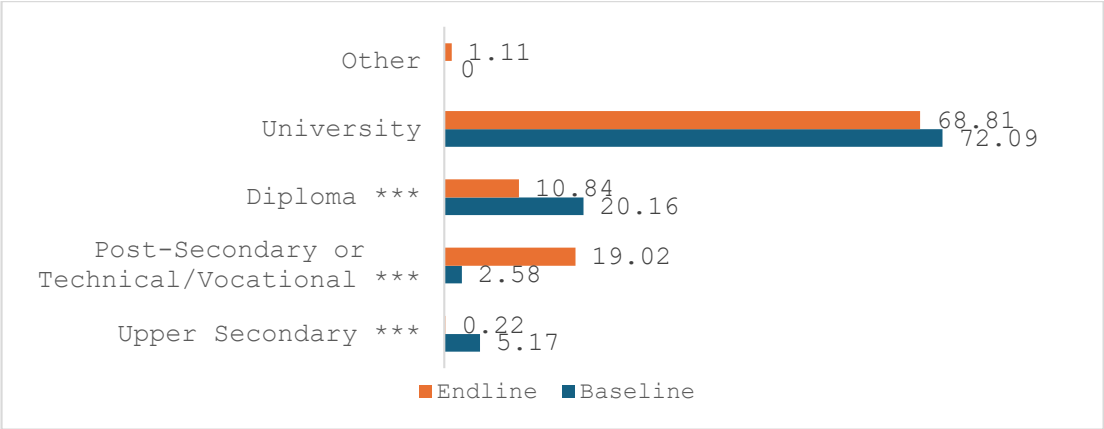
Table 4. Percentage of girls responding "I do not know" to gender items, by data collection cycle (all 24 items).

Item	Baseline	Endline	Difference
Only men should become engineers or scientists	21.45	7.74	13.71
Men are better than women in doing business	21.71	8.19	13.52
Women cannot become good leaders like men	15.25	7.08	8.17
A good wife should obey her husband even if she disagrees	13.70	6.19	7.51
House chores should be women's responsibility only	10.08	4.87	5.21
Men and women should have equal rights in family decisions	1.55	0.66	0.89
Wives should be educated less than husbands	5.94	3.32	2.62
Boys should receive more educational opportunities than girls	6.72	4.42	2.30
In a relationship, men should show more power than women	18.86	15.71	3.15
Daughters should have equal right to inherit as sons	10.34	2.65	7.69
It is normal for a husband to hit his unfaithful wife	29.20	16.81	12.39
Women should tolerate violence to keep the family together	16.54	11.28	5.26
A husband can hit his wife if she refuses intercourse	7.24	3.76	3.48

Item	Baseline	Endline	Difference
It is acceptable for male students to bully female students	2.84	2.88	-0.04
Daughters should have the same opportunity to work as sons	2.07	0.44	1.63
A woman who is not married is worthless	8.79	2.88	5.91
If your partner wants to touch you, you can say no	9.30	1.55	7.75
A husband's violence is a private matter	19.90	11.06	8.84
Your partner should decide who you can spend time with	11.63	6.42	5.21
It is acceptable for families to force girls into marriage	7.75	2.43	5.32
A husband may beat his wife if she burns the food	4.91	3.98	0.93
Menstruation is normal and good for women's health	10.08	0.22	9.86
Menstruation signals possible pregnancy after intercourse	25.32	11.06	14.26
Teachers/parents should let girls discuss STDs	12.66	6.42	6.24

Uncertainty declined at endline: the percentage responding "I do not know" fell for all but one item. Whereas more than half of the items showed more than 10% undecided responses at baseline, only five did so at endline—four related to gender-based violence and one to menstrual health (Table 4).

Chart 1. Educational aspirations of girls.



Educational aspirations changed significantly. Fewer girls aspired only to Upper Secondary at endline, while more aspired to a Post-Secondary or Technical/Vocational qualification and fewer to a Diploma - indicating that increased interest in technical/vocational education came at the expense of Upper Secondary and Diploma pathways. The difference in University aspirations was not significant (Chart 1).

Occupational aspirations also shifted. The percentage of girls aspiring to become a businessperson/self-employed increased sharply, while aspirations toward medical professions and the armed forces declined; a small share aspired to farming at endline.

Table 5. Occupational aspirations of girls

Occupational aspiration	Baseline	Endline
Home Maker	0.52	0.66
Businessperson/Self-employed ***	17.31	45.13
Armed Forces **	20.93	14.16
Teacher	2.84	4.42
Medical Professional ***	37.98	27.88

Occupational aspiration	Baseline	Endline
Farmer	0.00	7.74
Others ***	20.41	0.66

These shifts are consistent with national sector priorities that seek to expand access to TVET and higher education, strengthen career guidance, improve labor-market relevance, and promote flexible skills pathways linked to employability and sustainable economic development (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2026) (Table 5).

Regarding marriage, the intended age of marriage for self was significantly lower at endline than at baseline, whereas the ideal ages for female and male family members were statistically equivalent across cycles.

Table 6. Marital-age aspirations of girls by data collection cycle.

Reference person	Baseline		Endline	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Self ***	26.4	2.9	25.7	3.0
Brother / male family member	26.3	3.2	26.4	3.8
Sister / female family member	25.1	3.1	25.0	3.4

*BL = baseline; EL = endline. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$*

At endline, the intended age for self was significantly higher than that for female family members and lower than that for male family members (Table 6)

Girls' perceptions of the program

Table 7. Perceptions of difficulty, relevance and learning by content strand (% of girls).

Content strand	Very difficult	Very important	Learned a lot
Gender norms and stereotypes	10.6	48.89	54.42
Gender-based violence	32.7	67.92	66.15
Menstrual and sexual health	10.6	80.09	83.63
Collaboration	4.4	75.44	76.77
Communication and leadership	12.8	72.57	66.81
Decision-making	11.7	82.96	83.63
Resilience	13.1	75.00	72.12
Financial planning	11.5	88.05	78.54

For eight content strands, girls rated difficulty, relevance and learning. Most strands were rated "not at all" or "somewhat" difficult; gender-based violence was the clearest exception, rated "very difficult" by 32.7% of girls. In terms of relevance and self-reported learning, most content was rated "very important" and associated with high learning, with financial planning rated most important; the two gender strands of gender norms/stereotypes and gender-based violence received the lowest relevance and learning ratings. Self-reported learning correlated positively with relevance and negatively with difficulty for all strands except menstrual and sexual health. (Table 7)

Relationships between variables. All measured constructs were positively correlated with one another at both time points (r = 0.17–0.69). At baseline, gender knowledge and attitudes correlated with the intended marriage age for a female family member, and the three marriage ages were intercorrelated. Additional associations emerged at endline:

Table 8. Correlations between constructs and intended age of marriage at baseline

	Decision-Making	Collaboration	Gender K&A	Marriage: Self	Marriage: Male
Collaboration	0.58	—			
Gender knowledge & attitudes	0.17	0.27	—		
Marriage age: Self				—	
Marriage age: Brother/equivalent				0.42	—
Marriage age: Sister/equivalent		0.13		0.57	0.65

K&A = knowledge and attitudes. Blank cells indicate correlations that were not statistically significant at p < .05.

Table 9. Correlations between constructs and intended age of marriage at endline

	Decision-Making	Collaboration	Gender K&A	Marriage: Self	Marriage: Male
Collaboration	0.69	—			
Gender knowledge & attitudes	0.20	0.24	—		
Marriage age: Self	0.11		0.11	—	
Marriage age: Brother/equivalent	0.16	0.15	0.20	0.43	—
Marriage age: Sister/equivalent	0.10	0.13		0.66	0.59

K&A = knowledge and attitudes. Blank cells indicate correlations that were not statistically significant at p < .05.

Gender knowledge and attitudes correlated positively with the intended age of marriage for self and for male family members, and all three marriage ages correlated positively with decision-making. (Tables 8 and Table 9)

Other relationships were noted. At endline, aspiring to a Post-Secondary/Technical/Vocational degree was negatively correlated with both decision-making (r = −0.11) and gender knowledge and attitudes (r = −0.15), and with the intended age of marriage for self (r = −0.17); wanting to start a business was negatively correlated with the ideal marriage age for a male family member (r = −0.11). Self-reported learning across content strands correlated positively with the measured constructs, indicating that girls who reported learning more also tended to score higher on the life-skills and gender composites.

4. Discussion

The endline cohort scored significantly higher than the baseline cohort in decision-making, collaboration, and gender knowledge and attitudes, consistent with H1 and H2. These are between-cohort differences, not changes measured within individuals. The largest standardized difference was in the gender domain (d = 0.61), while differences in decision-making and collaboration were small. Higher life-skills scores are broadly consistent with findings reported in other GEP settings (Room to Read, 2018), although differences in design and delivery limit direct comparison. Fewer "do not know" responses at endline may indicate greater familiarity or comfort with gender topics, but do not by themselves demonstrate improved knowledge or confidence.

The gender findings can be considered alongside experimental evidence from Haryana, India, where a school-based curriculum produced more equitable attitudes that persisted at follow-up (Dhar et al., 2022). In contrast, Kagesten et al. (2016) reviewed factors shaping attitudes and highlighted the importance of family, peers, and wider social environments, rather than establishing the effectiveness of a particular curriculum. These studies provided complementary intervention and contextual evidence, but neither establishes the explanation for the differences observed in the Lao cohorts.

Aspirations also differed between cohorts, consistent with H3. The endline cohort more often preferred technical or vocational education and self-employment. Separately, endline participants rated financial planning as the most important content strand; this rating was not a between-cohort comparison. Economic and employment concerns

are possible explanations for the aspiration differences, but were not tested. These findings are relevant to the later 2026–2030 sector plan's priorities for TVET, career guidance, and employability (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2026); the plan does not establish what caused differences observed in 2022–2024. The lower intended marriage age at endline warrants qualitative follow-up. The contextual account of autonomy and marriage decisions presented by Yang et al. (2026) offers a possible avenue for inquiry, not evidence explaining participants' intentions.

Gender norms and gender-based violence received the lowest relevance and self-reported learning ratings at endline, while the gender composite showed the largest difference between-cohort. Gender-based violence was also rated the most difficult topic. Content ratings and composite scores measure different aspects of participants' responses, so this contrast does not establish a contradiction or identify a learning mechanism. Lee (2024) provides contextual evidence of barriers to open discussion, but the present study did not test whether those barriers explain participants' ratings. Locally relevant, safer discussion approaches therefore merit exploration rather than being treated as methods shown effective by this evaluation.

The main limitation is that the repeated cross-sectional design compared different cohorts without randomization or a non-program comparison group. Baseline respondents were beginning grade 11 in 2022, whereas endline respondents were completing grade 10 in 2024; selection through the grade transition could therefore affect comparability. Both rounds included the same 12 schools, but student composition and school representation may have differed. Other unmeasured explanations include policy and socioeconomic changes, broader social trends, teacher turnover or delivery differences, and survey conditions. These are possibilities, not changes established by this study. Self-reported outcomes and possible familiarity with expected responses add uncertainty, and the emotional-resilience composite was excluded because of low reliability. The need to clarify pathways is consistent with evidence gaps identified by Psaki et al. (2022). Future research should combine longitudinal tracking with comparable non-program schools and an appropriate analytical design, alongside qualitative inquiry into education, work, and marriage decisions. Despite these limits, the study provides descriptive evidence on life skills, attitudes, aspirations, and content perceptions in a teacher-led Lao GEP setting, without establishing program effects.

5. Conclusion

Girls completing three years of teacher-led GEP in Laos scored higher in decision-making, collaboration, and gender knowledge and attitudes than an unexposed same-grade cohort, with the largest difference in gender ($d = 0.61$). They showed less uncertainty on gender items, greater interest in technical or vocational training and self-employment, and valued financial planning most. Gender-norms and gender-based-violence content was rated least relevant and hardest despite the largest domain difference. These between-cohort associations do not establish program effects but suggest that shorter, later-starting, teacher-led GEP may be associated with outcomes similar to those reported elsewhere.

Schools should protect scheduled life-skills sessions, retain trained teachers across grades where possible, and refer girls facing economic hardship to Social Mobilizers early, as economic pressure is a leading dropout driver. Teachers should strengthen decision-making and collaboration, where differences were smallest, through role-play, group problem-solving and case discussion. For gender-based violence, they should use local scenarios on household finances, marriage and relationships, with safer formats such as single-sex small groups and anonymous question boxes. Strengthening financial planning and guidance on TVET, higher education and self-employment in grades 10–11, linking gender content to economic decisions. It should refresh teacher coaching on gender-based violence, address intended marriage age in parent workshops, and revise emotional-resilience items before the next evaluation. Policymakers could integrate teacher-led life-skills sessions into lower-secondary teacher training and timetables, allocating teaching time to limit workload. Scholarships and career guidance under the 2026–2030 sector plan could target girls transitioning to upper secondary.

6. Conflict of Interest

The authors are affiliated with Room to Read, the organization that implements the program evaluated in this study. The authors declare no financial conflict of interest with any external organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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