



# Evidence pathways to gender equality and food systems transformation

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Advisory  
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Investing in rural people



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# NINE LESSONS



**1** RAISE THE VISION FROM 'INDIVIDUAL INCLUSION' TO 'CHANGING STRUCTURES'



**2** USE THEORIES OF CHANGE TO CONNECT PROGRAMMATIC ACTION WITH INSTITUTIONAL INTENT



**3** UNDERSTAND LOCAL GENDER NEEDS AND TARGET TO CONTEXT



**4** MOVE FROM 'EQUAL PARTICIPATION' TO ENGAGED DECISION-MAKING



**5** CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES AND ASSUME WOMEN AS ACTORS



**6** FOCUS ON SOCIAL RELATIONS TO AVOID BACKLASH



**7** BUILD CAPACITIES FOR THE FUTURE



**8** MATCH TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION WITH TRANSFORMATIVE MEASUREMENT



**9** CREATE ALLIANCES FOR CHANGE

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This publication is the result of a partnership between the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers (CGIAR), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP). It was first presented at the UN Food Systems Pre-Summit in July 2021.

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# INTRODUCTION

Women play a vital role in the global food system, representing almost half of the total agricultural workforce in low-income countries.<sup>1</sup> However, persistent gender inequalities within food systems are widely documented.<sup>2</sup> Women have fewer options to acquire food production assets, own less land, and are less connected to food value chains, either for staple or cash crops. They are less involved in decision-making or local food system governance. Where they do have involvement in food supply chains, their time poverty often increases, due to the need to balance unpaid care work. Many women-owned enterprises remain in the informal sector, constraining scope for access to capital or business expansion.

There is a growing recognition that the roots of this inequality lie in discriminatory social norms. These norms affect how policies and legal frameworks are formulated and implemented; who participates in decision-making processes and governance mechanisms; how institutions are managed; how service providers target their clients and prioritize their needs; and, ultimately, how resources are allocated and decisions are taken within households and communities.

At the same time, evidence is increasing that traditional approaches to gender mainstreaming and the empowerment of women in food systems programming have failed to adequately close the 'gender gap'. If systemic gender inequalities are to be addressed, then food systems programming needs to move from trying to **'address the symptoms'** of gender inequality, to **tackling its root causes**. That is, to shift from a lens of **'equal participation' of men and women**, to a vision of **transformative change and reform**.

## Transformative approaches for gender responsive and equitable food systems

**'Gender transformative approaches represent a shift in how we think about and approach gender in order to address these shortcomings. They seek to tackle inequalities by engaging women and men together in addressing underlying gender barriers... Instead of burdening women with the responsibility for equality, gender transformative approaches engage men and women together as agents of change.'**<sup>3</sup>

But what does adopting a 'transformative approach' mean in practice? Four international agencies, CGIAR, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP), have come together to summarise learning and experience from 47 evaluations addressing food systems-related programming since 2017. This resulting summary highlights nine lessons from experience to contribute to the global evidence base, and to help enrich gender-responsive and transformative approaches to food systems programming in future.

**The 47 evaluations brought together in this summary comprise 22 corporate, global or thematic evaluations; 17 country-specific evaluations; and 8 joint-agency evaluations.**

1 FAO Gender Policy 2020-2030.

2 See for example FAO, IFAD and WFP (2020) Rural Women and Girls: Critical Agents of Positive Change: 25 Years After Beijing; FAO Gender Policy 2020-2030; FAO (2018) The Gender Gap in Land Rights; CGIAR (2021) Gender in agriculture and food systems: An Evidence Gap Map.

3 CGIAR <https://www.cgiar.org/innovations/gender-transformative-approaches/>



## RAISE THE VISION FROM 'INDIVIDUAL INCLUSION' TO 'CHANGING STRUCTURES'

Many food systems programmes had supported the empowerment of individual women, benefiting them through e.g. improved participation in value chains, providing new skills training, or offering access to resources. However, evaluations

identified a need to confront the wider systemic and structural barriers that restrict progress on gender equality if structural changes in gender relations are to occur.

Social norms, gender-based violence and inequalities in household decision-making and access to land, as well as changes in laws, policies and government capacities related to food systems, are all areas that would benefit from greater programmatic attention in future.

Consequently, evaluations recommend that programme designs raise their focus from the individual to the societal, **recognising and targeting the structural barriers that define gender relations, as well as the individuals within them, to generate systematic and lasting change.**

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

A synthesis of IFAD gender evaluations reported that projects using a highly participatory approach to community development were effective in achieving gender-inclusive results. They reached out to a large number of women and successfully mobilized them for community affairs. However, it observed that while community-driven approaches may generate substantial benefits for both genders, they are unlikely to transform traditional gender roles if they build on existing power relations, rather than challenging them. Instead, designing interventions with a **clear transformative purpose**, e.g. to break through traditional gender roles and stereotypes, were found to be more effective for gender equality.



## USE THEORIES OF CHANGE TO CONNECT PROGRAMMATIC ACTION WITH INSTITUTIONAL INTENT

Evaluations highlight gaps between institutional gender policies – which often articulate transformative visions of social change – and programmatic action on the ground, which may have little connection to these wider frameworks. This gap means that country level staff and partners may struggle to translate gender equality concepts into clear actions tailored to local

needs, particularly when corporate indicators are inadequate (see Lesson 8).

To address this, evaluations recommend:

- Articulating a **clear conceptual vision** (which adopts a transformative lens) of 'what gender means' for organisations/ inter-agency mechanisms – and communicating this at all levels.

- Using **theories of change** to translate these higher-level intentions into the practical designs, implementation and monitoring of food systems programming. For example, by specifying the intended changes in gender relations which are the ultimate aim of the activity, and then identifying the pathways (direct or indirect) through which the programme is expected to contribute to these results.

Evaluations note that theories of change also help locate individual interventions within a **wider framework of agency interventions** which supports a continuum of change in gender relations.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

From 2013, CGIAR began to place an increased emphasis on a theory of change (ToC) approach to its research. As part of the process, its Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security research programme realised the need for a well-articulated gender ToC, to help gear its research activities more explicitly to development outcomes. The resulting ToC helped guide research questions and hypotheses away from situational diagnostics and towards gender transformation, and ultimately reshaped the research programme.



## UNDERSTAND LOCAL GENDER NEEDS AND TARGET TO CONTEXT

Evaluations consistently found food systems programmes undermined by weak or limited gender analysis. This meant that some vulnerabilities were assumed, rather than known – which in turn led to inaccurate targeting. For example:

- In Ethiopia, female-headed households were automatically targeted for assistance by many agencies, due to their assumed greater vulnerability. Yet subsequent analysis found that many of these households in fact had greater resources, with men sending remittances home from migrant work in Saudi Arabia.

- In Georgia, no specific targeting strategies were applied to include women in programme implementation, since women were assumed to have held equal social and economic positions to men since socialist times. In fact, evaluation analysis found this not to be the case, with specific measures needed to enhance their participation.

On occasion, detailed analysis had been done, but had not been followed through by an adequate focus on gender equality in programme design.

Limited or shallow analysis also often treated women as a **single homogenous**

**group**, rather than identifying diverse gender needs. For example, women in different areas of Nepal had different levels of engagement in community meetings, varied ease of movement outside the home and different levels of comfort in speaking publicly. They required differentiated targeting strategies accordingly. In Yemen, limited analysis led to a blanket targeting approach – with the effect that only higher status women engaged in project implementation mechanisms. More tailored strategies were needed to include more disadvantaged women.

Conversely, detailed analysis led to more gender-sensitive programming in Indonesia.

Evaluations accordingly recommend **more granular analysis of structural gender inequalities in context, and designing targeting strategies accordingly**, based on individuals' own articulation of their

needs and 'what would work' for them. This supports tailored theories of change (Lesson 2).

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

In Indonesia, analysis underpinning WFP's 2017-2020 Country Strategic Plan used an intersectionality lens to compare the situation of women and girls, men and boys from different age groups, of socio-economic status, and living in urban and rural areas. The gender analysis also considered harmful gender norms, gender-based violence and women's unequal access to nutritious foods, as well as women's unequal access to land, productive assets and agricultural income. The design of the Country Strategic Plan took the analysis on board, mainstreaming gender equality with gender-specific, gender-sensitive and gender-transformative elements.



# 4

## MOVE FROM 'EQUAL PARTICIPATION' TO ENGAGED DECISION-MAKING

Evaluations found a common (and often mistaken) assumption that women's participation in food systems programming automatically leads to changes in structural gender relations. An understanding of 'gender equality' as 'equal numbers of men and women' was still widespread.

Moving beyond a 'participation' model to **providing opportunities to participate in decision-making structures** offered the

greatest opportunities to change gender norms and start to generate structural change. Nonetheless, evaluations are clear on the nuancing needed for different cultural contexts. Examples come from Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Engaging women in **project management structures** showed particularly strong potential to change social norms, as in Sudan.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

In Pakistan, an FAO agriculture project in the socially conservative area of Balochistan worked to organize men and women (separately) in product-specific Farmer Marketing Collectives and Mutual Marketing Organizations, to carry out value chain assessments and link them to markets. Travel outside the home was restricted, but the project provided capacity building and training, and was assessed as, despite sociocultural constraints, having ensured that women were empowered and felt equally part of the development process (including having increased income and financial decision-making at the household level).

The Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (RWEE) programme is implemented as a joint programme by FAO, UN Women, WFP and IFAD. In different countries, workshops were held to train male or female "change catalysts" or "champions" at community level. Household level discussions and visioning were held, and action plans developed. In Kyrgyzstan, women reported that, as a consequence of using the approach, they have a changed role within the family. They felt empowered and the decision-making within the family became more balanced. Community participation increased with women becoming more active, lobbying the local self-governance office on issues and even standing for election in some cases.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

An IFAD initiative in Sudan worked to ensure that women were represented in all project structures, for example in extension teams, as young professionals engaged in project support and within State Co-ordination Units, so that they had direct input into decision-making. Specific responsibilities for gender quotas and targets were assigned to project staff and communities were trained on gender concepts including the engagement of women in decision-making. The engagement of women within the project structures contributed to a sense of ownership and led to changes in social norms among women and men.

## 5

## CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES AND ASSUME WOMEN AS ACTORS

Evaluations found some inadvertent reinforcement of **gender stereotypes** in food systems programming. For example, functional skills training for women, while individually useful, on occasion confirmed traditional gender roles and stereotypes, rather than being geared to address women's strategic needs. In some cases, project activities reinforced women's roles as unpaid carers, for example by targeting females alone in family nutrition projects.

Conflict analyses conducted as part of programming tended to see women as victims of violence and not necessarily as active participants in promoting peace. Needs assessments in emergencies, including food-related crises, were often limited to externally-perceived "women's issues" such as hygiene or sexual and reproductive health, rather than their broader needs.

Evaluations highlight the importance of continual checking for, and avoidance of, any potential reinforcement of gender stereotypes. They also stress the importance of focusing instead on **women's strengths, capacities and resilience**. Positive examples come from conflict-related food systems programming in Yemen and Colombia.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

In Yemen, the formation of women water user groups in an FAO water and peace building project, alongside quotas of women on Water User Group boards, and the selection of two women and two men to be part of the Conflict Resolution Committee in every area, meant that women were positioned as playing an active role in addressing community conflicts. Consequently, conflict resolution mechanisms better reflected the gender-specific challenges related to conflict and water scarcity.

In Bangladesh, despite significant sociocultural constraints, IFAD built on the existing capabilities of destitute women, providing additional training and contracting them for work with labour-contracting societies. This improved their confidence and strengthened both their economic and social status.

## 6

## FOCUS ON SOCIAL RELATIONS TO AVOID BACKLASH

Several evaluations found **'gender equality' erroneously equated with 'targeting women'**, rather than adopting a lens of social relations or recognising intersectionalities of discrimination. This led to some missed opportunities or unanticipated negative effects.

For example, the perceived 'priority treatment' of women and girls in some food systems programmes created a **backlash effect**. In Malawi, providing take home rations in schools mostly for girls, led to resentment from boys and in some

cases bullying. In Ethiopia, negative effects resulted from targeting only women for food assistance, including domestic violence due to men's suspicion at women's long absence to collect food, or if they came back empty-handed due to delays. In the Gambia and Ghana, targeting women without clear messaging to households on the benefits of their participation, exposed projects to resentment, with some officials complaining that women were given preferential treatment due to the largely female composition of implementing agency personnel.

Conversely, approaches focused on **social relations**, which included men and boys and recognised intersectionalities, avoided backlash and also created scope for dialogue and renegotiation of gender norms. For example, engaging men in gender-transformative nutrition and health messaging helped improved outcomes in several countries, as well as offering an opportunity to move away from traditional stereotypes. The sensitization of men and traditional leaders and making them change agents themselves also prove successful in several locations.

**Providing social space for dialogue** on gender norms and intersectionalities between men and women, boys and girls, had powerful effects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Nicaragua.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

As part of a joint programme between FAO and WFP, Dimitra Clubs were formed in Tanganyika Province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Clubs were self-organized community groups dedicated to promoting change in the communities. They used approaches rooted in dialogue, knowledge exchange and gender equality. Evaluations found that the clubs played an important role in women's community participation and leadership while improving overall equity in gender roles.

In Uganda and Nicaragua, CGIAR worked with local communities to jointly identify and address barriers to gender inclusive participation in decision-making. This approach helped to generate new spaces to build understanding between women and men from different socio-economic backgrounds about the potential benefits of inclusiveness in forest management. Women's confidence grew and women benefitted from greater opportunities to plant their preferred trees on farms that they now have secure tenure over.





## BUILD CAPACITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Evaluations signal the powerful potential of **transformatively-focused capacity strengthening activities** to address gender inequalities in food systems. Such approaches both enable national actors to take the lead, and maximise the likelihood of programming being built on local understanding of gender relations.

Evaluations find that maximum benefit is attained from **multi-level approaches**. In Malawi, for example, simultaneously building capacities at institutional, organizational and individual level created the basis for various stakeholders to improve their engagement with schools and communities, including for school feeding.

Support to strengthen **normative frameworks** for food systems from a transformative perspective have also proven successful in several countries.

However, evaluations also note that the **demand for capacity strengthening** activities is far greater than many agencies are currently able to provide, within the limits of available human and financial resources.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

In Uganda, FAO supported Government partners to identify the gender gaps in climate change-related issues. A thematic area was identified and formulated to address the gender gaps and facilitate the development and implementation of a gender-responsive National Action Plan for Agriculture. The Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development issued a budget call circular, requiring the mandatory mainstreaming of gender and climate change into all sectoral budget framework papers and district local government plans.



## MATCH TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION WITH TRANSFORMATIVE MEASUREMENT

Evaluations consistently reflect **shortcomings in standard corporate measurement systems**, which often struggle to capture complex changes in gender relations. Indicators are often geared to quantify the participation of women and men, without analysing changes in power structures or gender-based roles. Transformative change processes are therefore unguided by corporate accountability systems, and progress often goes uncaptured.

Evaluations recommend **re-balancing monitoring systems**, away from standard

indicators and towards more flexible and creative measurement, with the use of more diverse methods, such as case studies and participatory and qualitative research. These tools can more readily recognise complexity, context-specificity and unpredictability, and can help measure behaviour and institutional change, and its contribution to gender and wider development outcomes.

Using gender-focused databases can also be valuable in tracking and monitoring change and reform at normative level.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

The CGIAR research programme on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security developed a monitoring system to assess the gender dimensions of different aspects of Climate Smart Agriculture and Climate Information Services. This helped to better understand if and how a climate-smart agriculture practice impacted the gender division of labour, control over resources and benefits, and participation in decision-making.

### EVIDENCE FOCUS

The FAO Gender Land Rights Database, which maps policies and laws relevant for women's land rights in over 85 countries, alongside the FAO Legal Assessment Tool, which assesses the extent to which legal and policy frameworks are conducive to gender equitable land tenure, are assessed as having made significant contributions to monitoring progress towards women's equal rights to land ownership, an SDG indicator.



# CREATE ALLIANCES FOR CHANGE

Evaluations stress that **building strategic networks and alliances on gender equality** has not been systematically pursued, but promises much potential. Evaluations note that where several agencies work together in synergy, the transformative effects can be considerable.

Although some practices may be more transformative than others, evaluations report that it is ultimately the **combination of practices** brought by different partners that brings about changes in gender roles and relations.

Evaluations note the **untapped potential** of the private sector, microfinance institutions, cooperatives, NGOs, economic interest groups, indigenous organizations or district assemblies, women’s groups and advocacy groups – who all play valuable roles in raising awareness and advocating for gender issues. Although engaging a broad range of stakeholders presents challenges in terms of coordination and diverse stakeholder interests, evaluations found that **engagement builds mutual trust, programme ownership, and learning**, helping enhance programme quality and the potential scale-up and sustainability of programmes.

**EVIDENCE FOCUS**  
In Malawi, a joint programme on gender equality brought together the combined strengths of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, WFP, UNFPA and UNICEF on gender, food security and nutrition, quality of education and access to sexual and reproductive health rights in a synergistic approach. This enabled stakeholders to cover the same target group with different forms of support, resulting in increased enrolment, attendance and lower dropout.

**EVIDENCE FOCUS**  
In Colombia, WFP evaluation findings suggest that a multi-sectoral “empowerment plus” programme showed promise to become the new best practice for engaging smallholder farmers to reduce household poverty and food insecurity while economically empowering women, improving attitudes about the treatment and rights of women, and reducing women’s risk of violence by their partners.

# ANNEX

## List of Component Evaluations



- 
- CGIAR Research Program 2020 Reviews: Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) (2020)
- 
- CGIAR Research Program 2020 Reviews: Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (2020)
- 
- CGIAR Research Program 2020 Reviews: Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM) (2020)
- 
- CGIAR Research Program 2020 Reviews: Rice Agri-Food Systems (RICE) (2020)
- 
- Evaluation of Gender in CGIAR I Report of the Evaluation of Gender in CGIAR Research (2017)
- 
- Evaluation of Gender in CGIAR Volume II Report of the Evaluation of Gender at the workplace (2017)
- 
- Synthesis of Learning from a Decade of CGIAR Research Programs (2021)



- 
- Evaluation of FAO Strategic Objective 1: Contribute to the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition ANNEX 2. Gender (2018)
- 
- Evaluation of FAO's Contribution to Strategic Objective 4: Enabling Inclusive and Efficient Agricultural and Food Systems ANNEX 1. Analysis of Contributions to Gender Equality (2017)
- 
- Final evaluation of the project "Securing tenure rights for forest landscape dependent communities: linking science with policy to advance tenure security, sustainable forest management and people's livelihoods" (2019)
- 
- Evaluation of the Strategy and Vision for FAO's Work in Nutrition (2019)
- 
- Evaluation of FAO's contribution to the humanitarian – development – peace nexus 2014–2020 (2020)
- 
- Evaluation of FAO's work on gender (2019)
- 
- Evaluation of FAO's Contribution to Integrated Natural Resource Management for Sustainable Agriculture (SO2) ANNEX 2. Gender (2018)
- 
- Evaluation of FAO's support to climate action (SDG 13) and the implementation of the FAO Strategy on Climate Change (2017) (2021)
- 
- Evaluation of the project "Strengthening the role of women in peacebuilding through natural resources management at the community level in the rural areas of the governorates of Sana'a and Lahaj in Yemen" (2021)



- 
- IFAD's Engagement in Pro-Poor Value Chain Development (2019)
- 
- Georgia Country Strategy and Programme Evaluation (2019)
- 
- Republica de Ecuador: Evaluación De La Estrategia Y El Programa En El País (2019)
- 
- What works for gender equality and women's empowerment - a review of practices and results: Evaluation Synthesis (2017)
- 
- IFAD's support to innovations for inclusive and sustainable smallholder agriculture (2020)
- 
- India Tejaswini Women's Empowerment Programme: Project Performance Evaluation (2020)
- 
- Federal and Democratic Republic of Nepal: Country Strategy and Programme Evaluation (2020)
- 
- Republic of the Sudan: Country Strategy and Programme Evaluation (2020)



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- Evaluation of Bangladesh WFP Country Strategic Plan 2016-2019 (2019)
- 
- Evaluation of Democratic Republic of the Congo Interim Country Strategic Plan 2018-2020 (2020)
- 
- Evaluation of Indonesia WFP Country Strategic Plan 2017-2020 (2020)
- 
- Evaluation of Cameroon WFP Country Strategic Plan 2018-2020 (2020)
- 
- Evaluación de medio término de la Operación Prolongada de Socorro y Recuperación OPSR 200708 Colombia (2017)
- 
- Evaluación final de la relevancia del rol y la respuesta del PMA para avanzar en un enfoque de asistencia alimentaria vinculado a los sistemas de protección social en Ecuador (2018)
- 
- Impact Of A Marketing Intervention To Empower Women And To Reduce Risk Of Intimate Partner Violence In Colombia: The Seed Study Survey Report (2018)
- 
- Evaluation thématique sur les questions de genre dans les interventions du PAM en République centrafricaine 2014-2018 Rapport d'évaluation Septembre 2019
- 
- Evaluación temática Evaluación de género del Plan Estratégico de País de El Salvador (2017-2021) Informe de evaluación Versión final Abril 2020
- 
- Evaluation thématique sur les questions de genre dans les interventions du PAM au Burkina Faso (2016-2018) Rapport d'évaluation | Janvier 2020
- 
- Evaluation of the WFP Gender Policy 2015-2020 (2021)



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Evaluation of the JPGE Malawi (2017)

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Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Drought Response in Ethiopia 2015 – 2018 (2018)

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Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique (2020)

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Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls (plus case studies: Bangladesh, Iraq, Colombia, Nigeria) (2020)

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Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls; Companion Piece: Review of progress: Mainstreaming gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls into the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus agenda (2021)

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OECD (2021) Lessons from Evaluation 5: Gender Equality

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WFP, FAO, IFAD and UN Women (2021) Global End-term Evaluation of the Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda from 2014 to 2020 Final Evaluation Report 5 May 2020


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Evaluation of the Joint Programme for Girls Education (JPGE) with financial support from the Norwegian Government July 2014 – October 2017 Evaluation Report

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