



# Advancing gender equality and adolescent wellbeing in education systems

**A CASE STUDY FROM SENEGAL**





# :: Introduction

## The problem

Adolescence is widely recognized as a period of increased physiological demand and opportunity for intervention.<sup>1</sup> For girls, puberty is associated with higher iron requirements and broader nutritional needs essential for cognitive development, energy levels and learning capacity.<sup>2</sup>

In Senegal, available evidence indicates that a significant proportion of adolescent girls experience anaemia, underscoring the importance of targeted nutrition strategies during this life stage. A recent analysis reports that approximately six out of 10 adolescent girls (15–19 years) in Senegal are anaemic, with dietary patterns marked by limited intake of iron-rich foods identified as a key contributing factor to this high prevalence.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, addressing adolescent nutrition can yield benefits for health, including educational participation and performance.

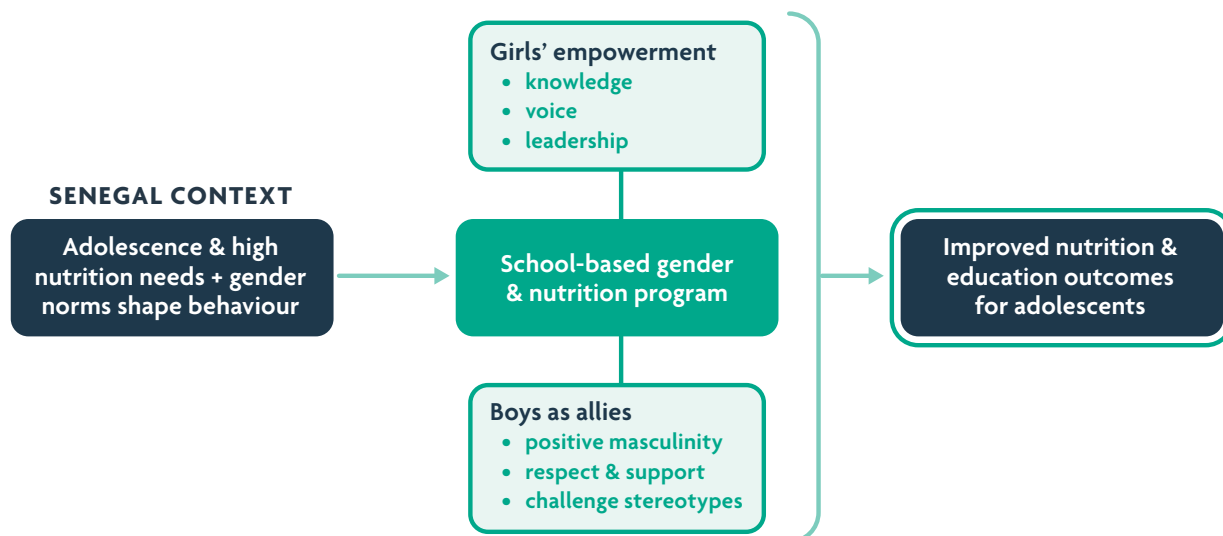


## Why gender equality matters for girls' nutrition in schools

Evidence shows that gender equality — especially women's and girls' empowerment in decision making, education and resource control — measurably improves nutrition outcomes for adolescent girls. Studies find that married adolescent girls whose mothers or caregivers have greater autonomy, access to information and influence over household resources are more likely to have better nutritional status, including higher BMI-for-age and improved haemoglobin levels.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, integrating gender equity into nutrition and education programs has a strong association with improved dietary quality and health outcomes.<sup>5,6</sup>

Schools are one of the most effective platforms for reaching adolescents at scale: they act as social spaces where norms are reinforced, behaviours are shaped and peer influence is strong. School-based programs allow for repeated engagement with adolescents in a structured setting, creating opportunities to link nutrition, health and life skills. Although most adolescents can enroll in school, there is a growing concern among the Ministry of Education in Senegal about school retention among girls and emerging patterns of disengagement among boys.

**Figure 1:** Gender equality and adolescent wellbeing





## How the program responds

Nutrition International conducted a sex- and gender-based analysis (SGBA) in 2021 to understand how prevailing gender norms affect adolescent nutrition. The analysis highlighted adolescence as a critical period where gender norms become more apparent and influential in shaping health, nutrition and educational participation. This finding is consistent with global research showing that early and middle adolescence have long-term implications for wellbeing, agency and life trajectories.<sup>7</sup> During this period, girls and boys begin to experience different expectations regarding roles, responsibilities and behaviour. These expectations can influence how they engage with school and health services.<sup>8</sup>

In response to the SGBA findings and recommendations, a gender action plan was developed and structured around five priority themes designed to address the nexus of gender norms, nutrition and health that shape adolescence. To implement selected elements of the

plan within the nutrition program delivered through the education system, Nutrition International partnered with the Forum for African Women Educationalists – Senegal (FAWE). FAWE has more than two decades of experience in girls' education, gender equality and rights-based programming, with a strong track record of combining community engagement with sustained institutional collaboration.

This case study showcases Nutrition International's strategic collaboration with FAWE, emphasizing how localized expertise and community-rooted strategies have elevated gender mainstreaming efforts within a school-based nutrition project. It documents the key lessons and insights emerging from the pilot delivery of gender equality modules in selected schools in Senegal, and it captures how approaches to promote gender equity were operationalized within schools to address inequalities in adolescent health, nutrition and empowerment.

## :: Methodology

The case study used qualitative methods to capture perspectives across roles, regions and school contexts, drawing on a desk review of program documents, interviews and group discussions with 37 stakeholders, including FAWE, education authorities, school staff and adolescent girls and boys across five academies from December 8–11, 2025. Participatory exercises with adolescents, alongside guided discussions with adult stakeholders, explored lived experiences, implementation realities and perceived changes, with findings analyzed thematically to identify common patterns and differences across settings.



# :: Program overview

Between 2023 and 2024, Nutrition International, in partnership with FAWE-Senegal, implemented a pilot program within the Senegalese education system to strengthen adolescent health and nutrition outcomes, aligned with Senegal's national education and gender frameworks.

The program operated gender-responsive approaches through three mutually reinforcing pathways:

- 1 **Structured engagement of boys on positive masculinities and shared responsibility.**
- 2 **Targeted empowerment of girls through leadership, decision making and confidence-building activities.**
- 3 **The use of gender-sensitive behaviour change communication (BCC) materials.**

The intervention was initially piloted in four Inspections d'Académie (IA) and subsequently expanded to a total of six.<sup>i</sup> Across these academies, the program operated in 118 schools, providing a structured platform for piloting approaches to promote gender equality within school-based adolescent health and nutrition programming.

Implementation followed a cascade and peer-led model, with teachers and school leaders trained and supported to mentor selected adolescent peer leaders, who then facilitated discussions, awareness activities and norm-change initiatives within peer-based settings. Through this approach, 305 schoolgirls received training in leadership, decision making and personal development, and 200 adolescent boys received training in positive masculinities. These numbers reflect direct participants; although broader peer groups and school communities were reached through the cascade model, the specific numbers of indirect participants were not recorded.

## Program delivery model

The program incorporated four modules: positive masculinities, menstrual health, leadership, and gendered nutrition norms. Table 1 details the program's design, implementation, and integration into the education system, illustrating the transition of training and learning from central development to school- and student-level engagement.

**Table 1: Program delivery model**

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION	TARGET ACTORS
<b>Modules development</b>	FAWE developed and adapted training manuals and learning materials using local languages, cultural references and real-life school and community scenarios to ensure relevance and understanding.	FAWE technical team, education specialists
<b>Trainers of trainers (TOT)</b>	Centralized training sessions were held in Dakar to equip selected teachers, regional gender focal points and supervisors with content knowledge and participatory teaching methods.	Supervising teachers, IA focal points and educators
<b>School-level dissemination</b>	Trained educators returned to their academies and schools to share content and methods with colleagues through staff meetings, mentoring and classroom integration.	Teachers, school leadership
<b>Student engagement</b>	Awareness sessions were organized for students by trained teachers and adolescent peer educators. Where feasible, teachers supported trained peer leaders to convene school-based discussion groups for girls and boys to facilitate peer exchange on gender equality, health and nutrition.	Adolescent girls and boys, peer mentors
<b>Ongoing support</b>	FAWE and regional focal points provided follow-up support to train teachers, school leaders and student peer educators, coordination and informal supervision during implementation to address challenges and adaptations.	FAWE staff, regional focal points

Program reporting indicates that trained adolescents actively supported peer learning and awareness activities, thereby contributing to broader engagement with gender equality, health and nutrition.

<sup>i</sup> An Inspection d'Académie is the regional office of the Ministry of National Education in Senegal responsible for managing and overseeing the education system within a region.



## Recruitment and selection

Teachers and school leaders were identified through collaboration between FAWE and the IA, with endorsement from school leadership. Selection criteria prioritized willingness to engage on gender and adolescent issues, availability to supervise activities alongside teaching responsibilities and institutional positioning that enabled follow-up.

Students were selected at the school level by trained teachers and school leadership based on motivation, leadership potential, capacity to positively influence peers and gender balance.

## Roles and responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities across the program were distributed among students, teachers, school leadership, FAWE facilitators and Nutrition International to support a cascade and peer-led implementation model. Table 2 summarizes the respective roles and responsibilities of each actor involved in program delivery and supervision.



**Table 2:** Roles and responsibilities in program delivery

ACTOR	ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
<b>Adolescent peer leaders</b>	Led peer-to-peer discussions, facilitated club activities and conducted sensitization initiatives on leadership, gender equality, nutrition, menstrual hygiene management and violence prevention.
<b>Teachers</b>	Delivered and adapted training content, mentored peer leaders, coordinated activities within schools and ensured alignment with school calendars and regulations.
<b>School leadership</b>	Provided institutional authorization, legitimized activities within school governance structures and supported scheduling and space allocation
<b>FAWE facilitators</b>	Developed training modules and manuals, delivered ToT training, provided technical accompaniment and monitored implementation.
<b>Nutrition International</b>	Provided strategic direction, financing and technical assistance to ensure alignment with Nutrition International's gender and adolescent nutrition priorities.

## School engagement in practice

Engagement with schools followed both formal and operational entry points. Formal authorization was secured through the IA and school leadership, followed by orientation meetings to agree on scope, roles and timing. Implementation involved periodic training workshops, mentoring sessions and follow-up visits, with day-to-day coordination managed by supervising teachers and school leadership. Activities were scheduled in accordance with academic calendars and adapted to local constraints, including examinations and, in some cases, student strikes. Where clubs were not fully functional, peer-led discussions and school-wide sensitization provided alternative modes of engagement.

## :: Findings



### **Emerging evidence of adolescent girls' decision making and agency.**

Nutrition International's program monitoring and survey data provides a useful snapshot of adolescent girls' agency and decision making power in Senegal. Results from the 2025 Nutrition Intervention Monitoring System (NIMS) Adolescent Health and Nutrition (AHN) survey shows 50.8% of adolescent girls reported having decision making power — either independently or jointly — over accessing health and nutrition services, reflecting increased confidence and participation in health-related decisions.<sup>9</sup> This proportion is higher than data found in the 2023 Demographic Health Survey (DHS), which shows that only 24.3% of married adolescents aged 15–19 are able to make decisions on their own health care.<sup>10</sup>

Although these indicators are not directly comparable, they provide a glance at how agency is experienced and reported. Within this context, gender-responsive approaches may be contributing to environments in which girls are increasingly able to engage with information, services and decision making processes related to their nutrition and health, while highlighting the importance of enabling girls to remain in school. The qualitative findings that follow further explore how these dynamics were experienced, negotiated and operationalized in practice.



## Participatory methods enabled adolescents and educators to surface and interrogate gender norms more effectively than traditional classroom teaching.

This case study suggests that participatory teaching methods enabled adolescents and educators to explore gender norms related to health and nutrition. Teachers and facilitators observed that dialogue-based approaches facilitated meaningful discussions of sensitive topics, including gender, health and power. This points to the importance of supportive environment in which adolescents could question and redefine these norms.

***“It’s all about interaction. The interaction was really decisive...It made it easier to grasp the concepts.”***

– KII, focal point, Louga

Role play and other participatory activities were seen as particularly effective in engaging adolescents who are usually quiet or less involved in class. Educators across regions noted that theatre, case studies and small-group discussions allowed students to explore issues such as decision making, household responsibilities and social expectations in ways that traditional lectures did not.

***“When you explain things simply, some students lose interest. But as soon as there is role-playing or theatre involved, everyone pays attention and reacts.”***

– FGD, teachers, Saint-Louis

School leaders highlighted visible shifts in girls’ participation in the school and confidence as a result of these activities.

***“Thanks to this training, girls have realised that they have decision making power, that they are capable of moving forward, standing up for themselves and being present in all the activities of the establishment.”***

– FGD, teachers, Matam

However, there were challenges such as time constraints, facilitation capacity and the extent to which institutions tolerate non-traditional teaching methods. In Louga, a focal point highlighted how academic schedules and assessment periods constrained implementation, noting that “the main challenge is choosing the right time.”

While FAWE’s training of trainers model strengthened educators’ confidence in applying participatory techniques, rigid curricula and exam pressures limited opportunities for sustained and systematic engagement.

***“For example, Friday evenings are often dedicated to student assessments. Students are very busy revising.”***

– KII, focal point, Louga

As a result, gender-related discussions were sometimes integrated informally, through clubs, extracurricular activities or brief classroom moments.



## School-based clubs helped sustain learning and practice, but their effectiveness depended on available resources and institutional support.

School-based clubs were the main mechanism through which gender- and health-related activities were intended to be disseminated by teachers after the initial training sessions. Educators, FAWE focal points and IA representatives all described clubs as practical spaces where students could continue discussions, apply concepts and engage with their peers. This was particularly important in contexts where curriculum demands and exam schedules limited the time available for sustained classroom-based engagement.

These clubs offered flexible spaces for participants such as informal discussions, peer exchanges and theatre-based sensitization. Teachers described how clubs enabled the continuation of learning beyond formal sessions, including diversified approaches led by students themselves. In practice, clubs became the main avenue through which gender-related content was maintained within schools, as they could operate outside rigid lesson plans and adapt to local constraints. As one participant noted, “it is challenging to follow these topics formally and continuously, yet they are addressed during crucial moments” (FGD, schoolteachers, Matam).

The findings also show that clubs did not function equally across all schools. Their continuity depended on resources, supervision and logistical support. In Saint-Louis, IA-level actors noted that while action plans and club structures existed, implementation frequently stalled due to a lack of basic operating means. One key stakeholder has confirmed that while “the plan is in place, it cannot be executed without the necessary resources” (KII, schoolteacher, Saint-Louis). Club meetings were also affected by transport challenges, limited materials and competing for academic demands.

The selection dynamics within the clubs further influenced who benefited most from club participation. In several academies, teachers reported that students’ chosen clubs were often those already perceived as leaders or academically engaged. In Saint-Louis, the focal point explained that it was the responsibility of the “teacher” to choose participants, and that the selected students were leaders in their field. While this approach facilitated smoother organization and early uptake, it also raised questions about the extent to which clubs reached more marginalized adolescents, including those at greater risk of disengagement. The dissemination to students depended on the establishment of groups at schools by the teachers or school leaders.



## Trusted partnerships were critical for acceptance, coordination, and institutional reach.

The case study shows that the partnership model underpinning the intervention was a critical enabler of access, acceptance and coordination within the Senegalese education system. The collaboration between Nutrition International, FAWE and the Ministry of Education was consistently described by stakeholders as complementary and aligned with institutional priorities.

FAWE's longstanding commitment to girls' education and gender equality has been identified as a key factor in fostering institutional trust. Education officials and IA focal points described FAWE as a known, credible and trusted actor, which facilitated entry into schools and reduced resistance to programming on sensitive topics. This legitimacy proved particularly important in contexts where gender and adolescent health issues are closely scrutinized and where externally driven initiatives are often met with caution. FAWE's presence functioned as a conduit between national policy objectives, school-level realities and deep understanding of social norms in communities, facilitating dialogue where it might otherwise have been constrained.

Nutrition International's role was perceived as enabling rather than directive. As FAWE staff noted, "instead of teaching people how to receive a fish every day, the aim is to teach them how to fish" (KII, FAWE focal point). By integrating gender-transformative activities within the context of adolescent nutrition program, the narrative was felt to align with fundamental educational priorities, such as student retention, learning conditions and overall wellbeing. Stakeholders highlighted that "this work contributes to the Ministry of Education's gender policy and to the national policy" (FGD, FAWE), and that "from the beginning, you cannot work in Senegal and set aside the Ministry of Education's program, especially everything related to girls' education" (FGD, FAWE).

Stakeholders noted that this positioning helped shift gender from a perceived standalone social agenda to an issue directly connected to educational performance and adolescent development. As one FAWE participant described, their role was less about shaping a standalone strategy and more about feeding evidence into existing Ministry processes: "our findings are taken into account by the Ministry through members involved in drafting its strategy...we bring our results to help consolidate the Ministry's work" (FGD, FAWE). This strengthened institutional buy-in, particularly among government actors.

Legitimacy was built through both formal processes and working relationships. Formal approval for program implementation and school-based engagement came through alignment with the Ministry, official correspondence and engagement with the IA. At the same time, day-to-day coordination relied on informal factors such as responsiveness, regular communication and trust between partners. Where these relationships were strong, implementation was more flexible and better able to adjust to regional- and school-level constraints.

Stakeholders also pointed to broader structural conditions, which created coordination challenges linked to working with multiple actors. Differences across regions, overlapping initiatives, limited government capacity and reliance on external partners affected how well approaches could be harmonized and how collaboration functions in practice.



## Changes in gender norms emerged through small, often contested practices.

Adolescent consultations showed that stepping outside expected gender roles often triggered immediate and public reactions from peers, highlighting how strongly norms are enforced within school settings. In Matam, adolescents described an incident where a boy's involvement in classroom cleaning was met with ridicule rather than acceptance. As recounted by a participant during the consultation with boys and girls in Matam, "he threw the brooms in the middle of the classroom and asked the girls to sweep up, but I refused" (Adolescent girls, Matam). While expressed through mockery and rejection, these reactions point to the pressure boys face to conform to dominant expectations of masculinity and the social risks associated with behaviour seen as challenging those norms.

At the same time, some positive changes were observed. In several schools, boys began to take part in care-related tasks and peer relationships in less rigid ways, while girls increased their participation despite continued scrutiny. Although these shifts were gradual, they were sustained through school clubs, peer discussions and follow-up support from trained educators. One focal point explained that after participating in positive masculinity modules, boys started joining cleaning activities at school; over time, this behaviour became more accepted within the school. Similar changes were noted in classrooms, where reduced conflict among boys and greater cooperation with girls suggested emerging shifts in peer dynamics.

For girls, increased participation was most visible in leadership and decision making spaces. In Matam, school leaders observed clear shifts in girls' willingness to speak, assert themselves and seek representative roles within school governance.

***"Girls didn't dare run for president of the student council before. Today, they are the ones who run, sometimes even more than the boys."***

– FGD, school principals, Matam

Beyond formal leadership roles, educators also noted changes in everyday classroom dynamics, where girls began to speak more frequently and position themselves as active contributors. While these observations reflect changes perceived by school actors and cannot be attributed to a specific activity or level of implementation intensity, they illustrate how shifts in participation were experienced in practice.

However, educators stressed that greater visibility did not mean scrutiny disappeared. Girls who spoke up or took on leadership roles were still closely observed by their peers and sometimes questioned. Participation required persistence and active support from teachers and peer groups. As one educator shared, a girl who had seen several classmates leave school chose to speak publicly to justify her decision to remain enrolled, despite academic challenges and social pressure.





## Schools functioned both as spaces where gender norms are enforced and as spaces where those norms can be questioned.

Schools operate under strict rules, curricula and performance pressures, and they remain one of the few institutions with regular and sustained contact with adolescents at this stage of life. As a result, schools are key spaces where gender norms are expressed, discussed and, in some cases, challenged.

School actors in Matam consistently emphasized the importance of schools as a starting point for engaging with adolescents on issues such as decision making, behaviour and future planning. As one focal point explained, the work undertaken through the program created space for dialogue that had previously been constrained within formal schooling.

*“There were certain inhibitions. There were things that weren’t discussed, neither between teachers nor between professors. For example, marriage. Before, these subjects were avoided. Today, we talk about everything. It’s not perfect, but in our beliefs, there are concepts that we considered ‘noble’ and didn’t talk about. Nowadays, we talk more, with the aim of helping pupils to understand the world and overcome certain obstacles.”*

– KII, focal point, Louga

Educators also observed that schools offer a structured setting in which adolescents can collectively reflect choices that go beyond academic performance, such as relationships, marriage and life paths. In Matam, one participant emphasized how school-based activities enabled sensitive issues to be openly discussed:

*“Early marriage, early pregnancy. Before, we didn’t want to talk about them. People often told us that it was not our place to talk about relationships between girls and boys. Today, there are fewer barriers. Teachers can say what they need to say in class, as long as it is positive and contributes to the education of their students.”*

– KII, focal point, Louga



While early marriage and pregnancy were the most frequently cited taboo topics, menstruation emerged more indirectly through discussions of girls’ absenteeism, discomfort and participation in class. Although not always named explicitly by participants, physical health and ability to remain in school were linked by stakeholders to health issues that had previously been considered inappropriate for classroom discussion. Program actors described using the same school-based spaces to reframe menstruation as a health and education issue, creating entry points to link hygiene, nutrition and attendance.

At the same time, respondents made it clear that the influence of schools cannot drive change alone. Several participants emphasized that, although schools can encourage reflection and change, adolescent decision making is also influenced by family authority and community norms, and that efforts within schools are strengthened when messages extend beyond the classroom.

*“During the training sessions, we emphasized that awareness-raising should not stop at school, but also continue at home, with parents and peers. If pupils use these channels, the message is more likely to be well received.”*

– FGD, teachers, Matam

# ::: Conclusion

The study shows that when gender-focused activities are delivered within school-based programs — and when they are well designed, institutionally supported and attentive to the political context — they can contribute to changes in social norms and practices and positively enable aspirations during adolescence. It also makes clear that schools cannot advance this work independently. Norm change occurs within broader systems shaped by authority, limited resources and social expectations, all of which must be addressed during implementation.

The initiative was implemented in a way that allowed challenges and tensions within these systems to surface and be addressed. Rather than presenting a fixed model to be replicated, the case study offers practical lessons for advancing gender-transformative education, grounded in the realities of Senegal's education system and the everyday lives of adolescents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended for stakeholders working within the education system. They are designed to support institutionalization, coherence and the responsible scale-up of gender equality and adolescent wellbeing approaches within the education system.

- 1 Position gender-transformative education as a core nutrition-sensitive intervention** within adolescent nutrition strategy. Strengthening girls' agency, decision making and participation should explicitly be recognized as enabling determinants of improved adolescent nutrition outcomes across the life course, shaping health-seeking behaviour, dietary practices, school retention and future maternal and child nutrition. Promoting positive masculine norms among adolescent boys encourages them to take on caregiving roles. This positioning will support more coherent design, investment and monitoring of pathways through which adolescent nutrition outcomes are achieved.
- 2 Include gender equality within education strategies** by linking gender, health and nutrition to everyday concerns such as school retention, classroom participation and psychosocial development, making these approaches actionable and relevant within existing school contexts. Support the Ministry of Education to lead the development of a national reference framework for gender-transformative education, enabling harmonized language, aligned modules and shared principles, while allowing adaptation to regional and cultural contexts.
- 3 Formalize long-term partnerships with women's rights organizations** as institutional partners within the education system, recognizing their role in providing contextual legitimacy, facilitation expertise and continuity in gender-transformative programming at school and community levels.
- 4 Integrate participatory approaches into pre-service and in-service teacher training**, pedagogical supervision and inspection frameworks to legitimize these methods as core educational practice.
- 5 Consolidate and strengthen existing student participation mechanisms**, including school clubs and student governance structures, as platforms for continuity, peer learning and leadership development.
- 6 Formalize structured engagement with parents and community leaders** to reinforce school-based norm change and align expectations across household, community and institutional environments.
- 7 Embed explicit equity provisions in design and monitoring** to ensure that gender-transformative education reaches adolescents facing intersecting vulnerabilities, including those at heightened risk of disengagement, while remaining responsive to uneven access, resource constraints and school-level realities.

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