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EMBRACE INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

# Leaving No Learner Behind: Innovative Gender Equality and Inclusion Strategy By & For Youth Living with Disabilities

## Context

In rural Western Uganda, deeply rooted gender norms and persistent stigma toward disability limit girls' access to safe, inclusive, and quality education. Learners living with disabilities face exclusion, bullying, and extremely low enrolment, while girls are often expected to prioritize domestic labour over schooling. Economic hardship, limited accessible infrastructure, and insufficient teacher capacity further compound these barriers. Girls living with disabilities experience intersecting forms of discrimination that reduce participation, confidence, and retention. Despite national commitments to inclusive education, school environments often lack practical models that address both gender inequality and disability-related stigma simultaneously. This project responded to these challenges by testing a disability-led, gender-responsive approach within primary schools.

## The Innovative Solution

The project tested a disability-led innovation in which professional women and men living with disabilities designed and facilitated inclusion workshops, mentorship circles, as well as holiday camps in five primary schools. By placing persons living with disabilities in visible leadership roles, the initiative challenged stereotypes and modelled inclusive leadership. Activities were embedded into daily school life and focused on disability awareness, gender equality, confidence-building, and anti-bullying. A participatory, community-based approach ensured that learners, teachers, parents, and local leaders actively engaged in shifting attitudes and practices. The innovation tested whether lived experience-led programming could measurably improve school culture, inclusion, and gender-responsive learning environments.

## Advancing Gender Equality

Gender equality was central to the project's design, recognising the compounded barriers faced by girls with disabilities. Women mentors with disabilities led mentorship circles, serving as role models who demonstrated



### COUNTRY

Uganda

### AMOUNT

\$165,395

### TESTING PERIOD

10 months  
Ended October 2025



**GENDER RESPONSIVE (GE2)**

**THEME: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

leadership, resilience, and agency. Activities challenged harmful gender norms, promoted equal participation in classrooms and extracurricular activities, and strengthened girls' confidence to remain in school. Inclusion Ambassadors—female students, including girls with disabilities—were trained to advocate for inclusive practices. Community sensitization engaged parents and leaders to support girls' education, address menstrual health stigma, and reduce early dropout. The approach explicitly addressed both gender and disability discrimination, advancing more equitable learning environments.

## Testing Framework

A participatory testing framework combined baseline and endline surveys, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and community feedback. Tools such as the CATCH methodology measured changes in attitudes, comfort, fear, bullying, and social inclusion, disaggregated by gender and disability. Continuous feedback loops enabled adaptive management, including adjustments for language barriers, confidence-building needs, and external disruptions such as teacher strikes. The framework prioritised lived experiences alongside quantitative indicators to assess whether disability-led interventions could shift norms, increase participation, and strengthen gender-sensitive, inclusive education outcomes.

## Results and Impact

The innovation demonstrated strong positive results across all schools regarding inclusion. Of note:

- Acceptance of learners with disabilities increased from 82% to 92%, while fear declined from 54% to 7%.
- Peer interaction rose to 98%, and reported bullying decreased by 8%.
- Girls' belief in equal access to education increased significantly, with 94% affirming equal learning opportunities for girls and boys.
- Participation in extracurricular activities increased across all groups, with girls with disabilities experiencing the largest gains.
- Retention rates reached 84% for girls and 87% overall.

## Key Lessons

1. Disability-led facilitation drives norm change: Learners respond strongly to mentors with lived experience.
2. Mentorship by women with disabilities is transformative: Visible role models significantly increase girls' confidence and participation.
3. Participatory learning accelerates inclusion: Role plays and storytelling quickly reduce stigma and bullying.
4. Repetition strengthens retention: Regular recap sessions are essential in dynamic school environments.
5. Engaging adults matters: Teacher and parent involvement is critical to sustaining gender- and disability-inclusive practices.

### PARTNER ORGANIZATION(S)

Embrace International Foundation Uganda (EIF Uganda) Local schools, School Management Committees, District Education and Community Development Officers

### TARGET PARTICIPANTS

Primary 5 and 6 learners (girls and boys), with a focus on girls and learners with disabilities; teachers; parents; and community leaders. 723 learners reached (383 girls, 340 boys), including 54 learners with disabilities

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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### ABOUT FIT

The Fund for Innovation and Transformation supports Canadian small and medium-sized organizations (SMOs) testing innovative solutions that advance gender equality in the Global South.



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*“Seeing women with disabilities leading and teaching us showed me that I can also be a leader one day. I now believe that disability is not inability.”*  
— Girl student participant, Uganda