



# FREEDOM FOR NEPAL'S MUSAHARS

## STREET CHILD PROGRAMS IMPACT REPORT

DECEMBER 2022



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Between 2018 and 2022, Street Child and our three exceptional local partners Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS), Aasaman Nepal and Group of Helping Hands Nepal (SAHAS), co-designed and delivered two ground-breaking, holistic multi-actor interventions aimed at empowering and reducing debt bondage for more than 11,000 young women and girls of Nepal’s Musahar caste, a sub-caste of the ‘untouchable’ Dalits.

These interventions, called Breaking the Bonds and Marginalized No More, increased literacy and numeracy, created livelihoods opportunities, strengthened life skills and rights awareness empowerment and changed stakeholder attitudes, providing a robust platform for meaningful change for a population so disenfranchised that 96% cannot read or write a single letter, and 100% are married with children by age 15.

Together, these programs harnessed local energy and a desire for change to catalyze dramatic gains in learning outcomes and household income for Musahar women and girls over four years, as well as strengthening state capacities to provide quality, equitable education to all children.

The work is a clear example of the tremendous advancements that can be achieved within ultra-marginalized communities when a truly inclusive group of stakeholders, starting with the community itself, comes together to interrogate a challenge, innovate a solution, and invest in its success. This holistic model provides a proof point for the power of localization, of putting the community at the center of both innovation and delivery, and of meaningful, inclusive partnerships. Programmatically, it also illustrates the vital need for education as a first step in emancipation and the fundamental basis for change in earning and wellbeing, as well as its incredible potential to galvanize community energy and activism.

By successfully combining learning with access to other systems vital for freedom, such as the economy, decision-making and health, the intervention demonstrates to funders and policymakers that complex challenges are solvable, and that investing and delivering holistically instead of in siloes can have a multiplier effect on both impact and return.

Finally, and most importantly, these programs illustrate the overwhelming extent to which sustainable, community-wide change is possible when women understand their rights and their own potential, and are empowered to act.

# THE CHALLENGE

Nepal's Musahar people are among the most politically marginalized, economically exploited, and socially humiliated groups in the world. Considered 'untouchable' even by other Dalits - the lowest ranked caste in Nepal - they live in remote villages in the country's south-east Terai region, and are isolated geographically and linguistically. Facing extreme prejudice from those with power and influence, Musahars are systematically excluded from education and employment, civic, legal, and health systems.

Musahars live in severe poverty – on around \$27 per month for the entire family – in remote, isolated villages.

Musahar women are doubly oppressed by their caste status and gender. Lacking access to water, hygiene systems and reproductive autonomy, Musahar women and girls have lower health outcomes than men and are often forced into early marriage or bonded labor, or trafficked across the border to India by families desperate to get out of poverty. Most do not have birth certificates or citizenship papers and are unable to access government relief or vote; consequently, Musahar women are voiceless and invisible.

99% of Musahar women - around 24,000 - are trapped in modern slavery, working on other people's land for little-to-no pay.

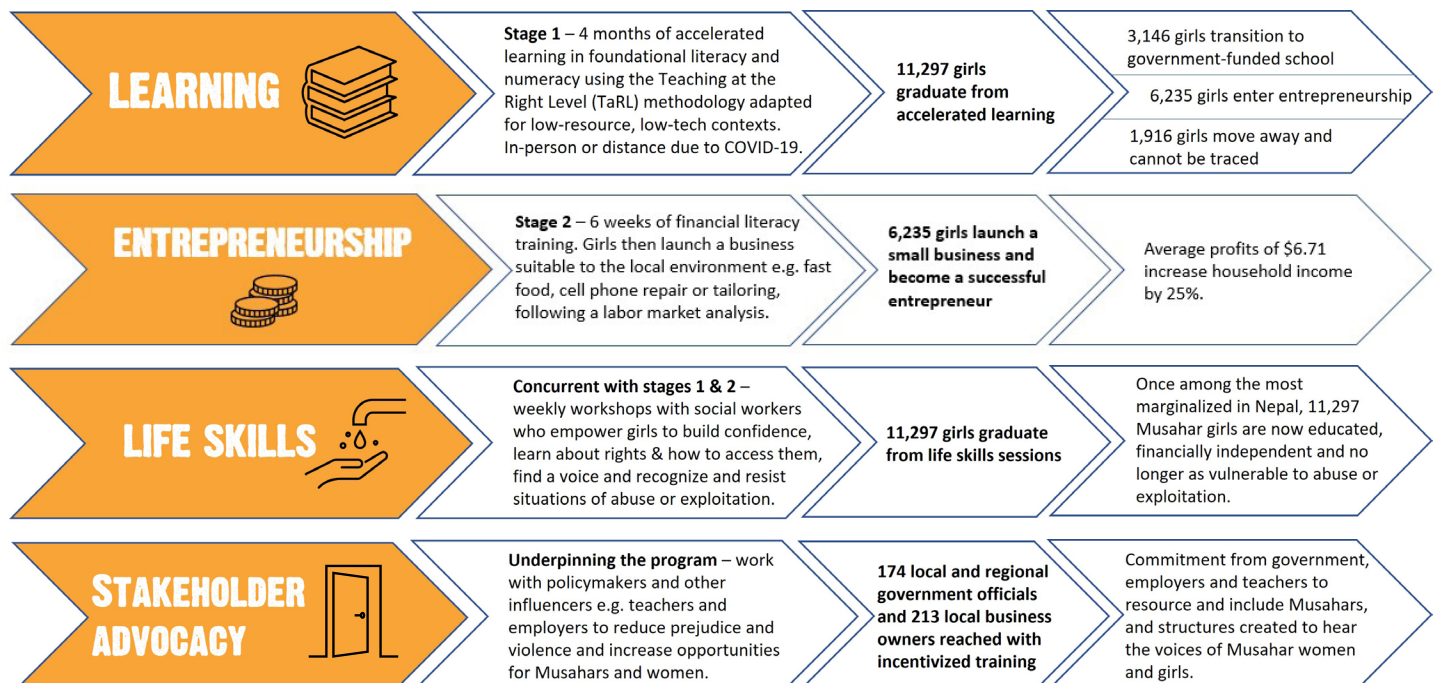
Education offers an alternative future, but Musahars face prejudice and exclusion at school. Teachers are generally of higher caste status and believe that Musahars are not educable, and as Musahars speak local dialect Maithili instead of Nepali, the official language of instruction, the curriculum is not accessible to them either culturally or linguistically. Many Musahars therefore believe that school is purposeless, with no path to further education or employment, and either never enrol or drop out early.

Only 4% of Musahar women can read or write even their own name and almost all girls are married with children by age 15.

# THE SOLUTION

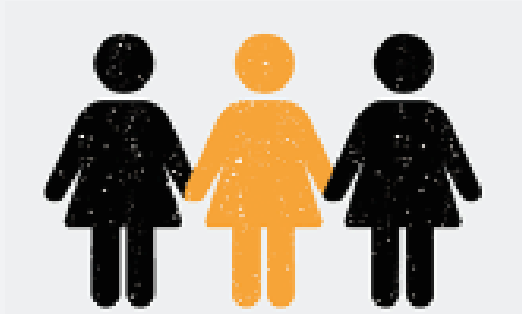
In 2017-2018 Street Child was selected by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office to transform literacy levels among Musahar girls via two funding streams: UK Aid Direct and the prestigious Girls' Education Challenge. Breaking the Bonds was launched first for girls aged 15-18 in Mahottari, Dhanusha and Siraha districts, Province 2. Marginalized No More launched one year later for girls aged 10-18, leveraging lessons learned from the early cohorts of Breaking the Bonds, expanding into two new districts - Saptari and Sunsari - and doubling the number of girls targeted.

Working with Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS), between 2017 and 2018 Street Child carried out 18 months of in-depth consultation with Musahar women (see Innovation, pg. 7) and other stakeholders. Out of this came a comprehensive model designed specifically to address the complex barriers Musahar women and girls face to freedom, advancement, and inclusion.



# IMPACT IN NUMBERS

Results from this holistic program demonstrate that when core literacy and numeracy skills are combined with empowerment, resources and meaningful opportunities, the catalytic power of learning is exponentially multiplied, even for ultra-marginalized people. At the start of the program participants were excluded from education and employment and trapped in debt bondage; by program-end they had learned to read, write and count, increased their capabilities and confidence, grown income-earning opportunities, and improved participation in democratic processes, meaningfully transforming their lives and freeing themselves from modern day slavery.



**28%**  
OF MUSAHAR GIRLS AGED 10-14  
TRANSITIONED INTO PUBLIC SCHOOL  
VERSUS ZERO PREVIOUSLY



**55%**  
OF ALL 11,297 MUSAHAR GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN  
AGED 10-18 COULD READ & WRITE  
BY THE END OF THE PROGRAM



**346**  
GIRLS AND / OR THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS  
OBTAINED CITIZENSHIP CERTIFICATES  
AFTER LEARNING ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS

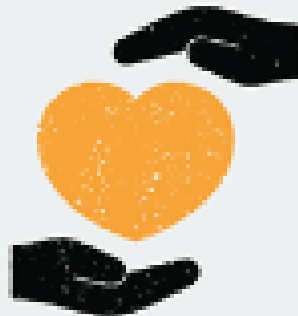


**602**

GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES ABLE TO ACCESS  
LEARNING FOR THE FIRST TIME,  
WITH AIDS (E.G. EYE GLASSES)  
AND ADAPTED LEARNING RESOURCES

**47%**

INCREASE IN GIRLS REPORTING  
AWARENESS OF AND  
CONFIDENCE IN  
THEIR MARITAL RIGHTS



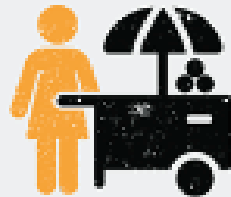
**33**

CHILD MARRIAGES ACTIVELY  
PREVENTED BECAUSE OF THIS  
AWARENESS, BY GIRLS  
THEMSELVES



**6,235**

**MUSAHAR GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN GRADUATED FROM ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING WITH A SMALL BUSINESS**



**\$6.71**

**IS THE AVERAGE PROFIT; THIS IS 25% MORE THAN STANDARD MUSAHAR INCOME**



**GIRLS' UNDERSTANDING OF FAMILY PLANNING & REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS & PROCESSES ROSE FROM 23% TO 61% THROUGHOUT THE PROGRAM**



**GIRLS' CIVIC SENSE, UNDERSTANDING OF AND PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING ROSE FROM 4% TO 82%**

### **MY STORY: RUMI, AGE 17**

Rumi graduated from Street Child's Marginalized No More program in 2021. Since launching her food stall, she has noticed that despite previously being considered 'untouchable', people from other castes are now buying food from her, which has significantly contributed to her increased daily profits. Her story shows that the project has helped participants overcome underlying caste-based marginalization.

'After I set up the food stall I was afraid that nobody would come eat here, but people started to show up. I started by making a profit of Rs.200 per day [US\$5] and managed to do better each day. My parents are very supportive and help me prepare the fast-food items I sell. After completing the program I feel happy that I am able to do things on my own and run my own business.'



# SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

## DISRUPTING MODERN SLAVERY AND IMPROVING SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Literacy is catalytic and a fundamental instrument to interrupting modern slavery and sustainably transforming lives, not just for individuals but for entire communities. By providing the skills and knowledge to attain and sustain an enterprise or safe employment and take part in civic activities, foundational learning has opened up a vital opportunity for Musahars to shape and influence the systems and structures around them. Perhaps most crucially, through community feedback, we have found that literacy is a key tool in dismantling long-held caste-based biases and a central instrument in the fight against debt bondage, enabling Musahars to position themselves as participating and deserving members of society.

## AMPLIFYING MUSAHAR GIRLS' INFLUENCE AND VOICE

We have established 410 Kishori Chhalphal Kendra, or Girls Assemblies, for Musahar girls and young women attending school. These build on the safe spaces created for life skills training to provide a structure within which girls can provide ongoing peer support and cascade learning to younger girls who did not access the original programs; this is vital for longevity of impact and scale. Crucially, meetings are attended by regional government representatives, giving girls the opportunity to advocate for community change directly to policymakers. Assemblies are also linked to a country-wide, Government-run network of stakeholder meetings aimed specifically at increasing girls' access to and success in education. (See Innovation, pg. 7.)

## STRENGTHENING STATE CAPACITIES

Street Child acknowledges that the state and its investors are crucial for scaling strategies that create sustainable shifts towards education equity, and our approach to strengthening state capacities in Nepal was showcased in the 2021 Global Education Monitoring Report [[bit.ly/3oZUkbs](https://bit.ly/3oZUkbs)].

## INFLUENCING POLICY

→ Following the programs' excellent results Street Child was able to undertake an Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), bringing the first ever province-wide, citizen-led assessment of literacy levels to Madhesh Province with ASER Nepal, the UK Government and local partner Aasaman. Reaching 68,941 children, the assessment showed that learning levels across the entire province are low, leading to a successful advocacy campaign for increased investment in literacy in the province by the Government of Nepal. On the back of this we ran a ten-week Teaching at the Right Level pilot in partnership with the Government of Nepal and the World Bank, aimed at testing strategies to improve education access and quality for most-marginalized children. We are now looking to scale this to reach 24,000 children across Madhesh Province (see Next Steps, pg. 8).

→ Street Child has won funding to undertake deeper ethnographic research into the systemic barriers faced by Musahar girls. This is being carried out by 50 Musahar girls themselves and includes several of our own graduates. The research is taking place in 20 communities across all five programmatic districts in Province 2 and has the goal of gathering robust qualitative data to advocate for better learning opportunities and education policy and programs for Musahar and other marginalized girls.

## INCOME GENERATION

→ 387 employers from local businesses agreed to consider Musahars for employment and reported that training around Musahars' specific vulnerabilities and support needs had helped with this. For example, due to a historical lack of success in the workplace Musahars have reduced resilience to standard workplace challenges such as feedback on performance or handling multiple tasks, and require targeted support to enable them to succeed.

→ Street Child was able to obtain agreement from local government in Sunsari district to provide farmland to Musahars for a three-year trial in collective vegetable farming, alongside a financial contribution towards animal rearing. This will enable Musahars to farm independently and reap the financial rewards of their work.

## SCALING DISABILITY INCLUSION

Along with our disability inclusion partner Street Child devised and produced a disability inclusion curriculum, handbook and teacher training program to drive understanding of how to teach accessibly and reduce prejudice among non-Musahar teachers. The program and materials are now being delivered in non-Musahar communities including Street Child programs in other countries.

# INNOVATION

## KISHORI CHHALPHAL KENDRA - GIRLS' ASSEMBLIES

To cement girls' newly developed confidence and life skills, as an extension of our Life Skills workshops Street Child established 410 community-based Girls' Assemblies for Musahar girls attending community or public schools, called Kishori Chhalphal Kendra.

A core component of our Sustainability Strategy, these innovative groups drive sustainable gender equality and equity, and embed Musahar girls' participation in local and wider decision-making structures by bringing them together as peers with local level leaders to discuss issues of concern. Topics include investment in girls' education, reducing prejudice among teachers, raising awareness of gendered violence, and coping with climate change.



Crucially, Assemblies are linked to the Girls Inclusive Education Network (GIEN), a country-wide network of stakeholders established by the Government of Nepal specifically to drive girls' access to and attainment in education. The network comprises representatives from communities, school committees, child welfare councils, municipality chairs, and the chief minister of each province, as well as one Musahar girl from each Assembly. Accessing this network amplifies Musahar girls' voices, allows them to hold government accountable, and provides an opportunity for them to directly feed into local decision-making structures.

Girls' Assemblies are essential for putting education and literacy at the heart of government discussions, and for raising the voices of some of the most marginalized within high-level conversations. They are also a space where women can share experiences, develop their leadership skills, and cascade their learning, skills and knowledge to other Musahar girls in a structured and genuinely supportive environment. [Watch a video about the groups here.](#)

## COMMUNITY INCLUSION

A core value for Street Child, as part of our Localization Strategy, is to empower local communities and organizations to develop and deliver their own solutions, catalyze their independence, and leverage their expertise and ties with communities targeted for support. Our Nepal programs showcase this approach in multiple ways. Particularly significant is Street Child's relationship with the National Nepal Musahar Sangh, a community-based collective of Musahar leaders. We incorporated their feedback into program design and recruited 40 Musahars to be Community Educators, comprising 60% of the program delivery team - the only NGO program in Nepal to do so. Since our partnership began, we have also supported the Sangh to secure independent funding from the UK Government.

The program was grounded in 18 months of extensive participatory research with relevant stakeholders, starting with Musahar women and girls. It also included local agencies who had worked with the Musahar before, and those responsible for excluding Musahars from services and systems like education and employment. The research was carried out by Musahars themselves.

## LOW-TECH / NO-TECH DISTANCE TEACHING & LEARNING MODEL DURING COVID-19

When COVID-19 lockdowns closed schools, many governments pivoted to online or other forms of alternative learning. However, almost two-thirds of Street Child beneficiaries could not access any government interventions due to a lack of connectivity and resources. To mitigate the potentially huge learning losses for these children, Street Child developed a distance teaching and learning model (DTL) which uses a combination of three activities to maintain children's learning levels: 1) printed learning materials, 2) audio learning via MP3 players, and 3) SMS messaging and phone / in-person drop-in support where possible. The model was designed with our technical advisor Pratham specifically for success in low-resource environments, and uses local materials, resources and talent to reach as many children as possible at low-cost.

Crucially, the intervention not only keeps children learning when schooling is disrupted, but also provides a safe and stable routine to prevent disengagement and drop-out and protect children's mental health at a time of enormous stress. The model turned out to be so impactful that it even outpaced the progress of in-person instruction: reading at story level increased from 20% at in-person endline to 28% at distance endline; and reading at word level rose from 75% at in-person endline to 87% at distance endline.

# NEXT STEPS FOR STREET CHILD IN NEPAL

## CLOSING THE LEARNING GAP ACROSS NEPAL



In partnership with the World Bank, in 2021 Street Child implemented a ten-week Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) pilot to alleviate learning loss and accelerate learning levels among most marginalized children. In turn, this supported and strengthened existing efforts from the Government of Nepal's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) at national, provincial and local levels. The pilot reached 2,240 students in grade 4 and grade 5 across 64 schools and resulted in a 33% increase in students' ability to read a simple paragraph or more, and a 46% increase in solving math problems. [Watch a video about it here.](#)

We are now seeking support to scale this response to reach 24,000 most-marginalized children in Madhesh Province, the poorest province with the lowest learning performance: 60% of girls who have completed 8th grade cannot count, read, or write even at 3rd grade levels. We shall leverage lessons learned from the recent TaRL pilot, and the successful strategies employed in our Musahar programming, to support children to catch-up with their learning until they reach the appropriate level for their grade, ensuring their engagement and retention in public schools.

**FUNDING NEED \$1.5M.**

### GREEN SCHOOLS

Nepal is considered among the five countries in the world most vulnerable to climate change because of its mountainous topography and subtropical location causing heavy rains. Almost all communities - around 80% of the population - are experiencing increased soil erosion, landslides, flash floods and drought due to worsening conditions. Inevitably, these have the most severe impact on lives and livelihoods within the poorest and most precarious communities. In total, experts predict that climate change will cost Nepal 2.2% of its annual GDP by 2050.

Street Child is supporting the government's 'Green School Directive', which asks schools to embrace green practices, learn about the



environment, and develop skills and strategies for coping with climate change. We have run a successful pilot in partnership with Wildlife Conservation Nepal across 50 schools in one municipality, and are seeking to scale this to reach 200 schools in 50 municipalities across three worst-affected provinces in Nepal.

The program will address climate crises and human-wildlife conflict by supporting local officials to develop a climate mitigation strategy and a 'green' curriculum focusing specifically on local challenges. It will also train school leaders and teachers in climate education, establish Eco Clubs for students (pictured below), deliver public awareness campaigns, and support communities to develop waste and water management systems.

**FUNDING NEED \$1.5M.**



## **RESILIENT LIVELIHOODS FOR FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS VULNERABLE TO CLIMATE CHANGE**

Nepal's mountainous regions are severely impacted by climate change and among the worst is Karnali Province, in the north-west, where multi-dimensional poverty affecting more than half the population compounds the problem. This program will provide sustainable, alternative livelihoods to 950 caregivers of out-of-school children who are worst affected by poverty and climate change, focusing on women heads-of-household to address the fact that Karnali Province is lowest-ranked in Nepal for gender equity.

The program will provide women with (1) vocational skills training in climate-resilient livelihoods; (2) funding to establish innovative, climate-smart enterprises; and (3) access to credit, microfinance and a group savings pool for crisis preparedness.

As a result, the families most susceptible to climate disasters will increase their annual income by at least 20%, which will further strengthen their capacity to respond to disasters. The program will also indirectly benefit 3,800 children and other family members.

**FUNDING NEED \$200,000.**

## **AWARDS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Street Child was awarded the 2022 David M. Rubenstein Prize by the Library of Congress for our 'outstanding and measurable contribution to increasing literacy levels in multiple parts of the world'. The results of our education work with Musahar girls contributed strongly to this win.

Core funder the UK Government's FCDO awarded *Marginalized No More A+* two years consecutively for the program's results, and 5/5 for value for money. Street Child was the only organization out of 41 actors delivering through the Girls Education Challenge to receive the latter.

The program's COVID-19 response was featured by the United Nations Girls Education Initiative [UNGEI] as an exemplar of how to adapt programming in a crisis to ensure gender equality [[bit.ly/3sCX7r7](https://bit.ly/3sCX7r7)].

In 2020, Street Child Nepal was awarded the Dina-Bhadri Honorary Award by the Government of Nepal for our contribution to the development of the Musahar community.

In 2019 Street Child won the WISE Award for Innovation in Education for our Family Business for Education program, which formed the basis of our livelihoods work with the Musahar. This has supported the launch of 35,000 new businesses since 2010 with an 84% success rate for two or more years. With the profit families can afford to send an average of two children to school, many for the first time.

## ABOUT STREET CHILD

One in 10 children worldwide is out of school, and the vast majority live in regions experiencing a humanitarian crisis, such as conflict, disaster, disease, displacement, or extreme poverty.

Street Child is an impact-driven international organization working in these most challenging contexts to ensure that all children are safe, in school and learning.

**Our goal is to reach 1M most-marginalized children by 2024, supporting them to be safe, in school and learning.**

Backed by UNICEF, the World Bank, Education Cannot Wait, governments and a range of generous private donors, we deliver our holistic package of programs - including education, livelihoods and child protection - in 20 crisis-affected countries worldwide including north-east Nigeria, Bangladesh, Nepal, Cameroon and Afghanistan.

We specialize in working with local level organizations for lasting impact.

In 2019 we were named Top Performer of eight agencies running schools in Liberia by the Center for Global Development following an extensive evaluation, for significantly improving children's learning levels while remaining affordable to the Liberian Government. The agency also highlighted our work successfully improving child safety in the classroom.

## THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our first thanks must go to Musahar women and girls, for their bravery, courage and commitment; to the communities who welcomed and were willing to work with us; and to the many other stakeholders crucial to the program's success. These include the rest of the Musahar community; the National Nepal Musahar Sangh, a community-based collective of Musahar leaders; local NGOs Janaki Women Awareness Society, SAHAS and Aasaman who delivered the program with Street Child; the Government of Nepal; regional and local government representatives; local employers and teachers; our technical advisor Pratham; and core funder the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Secondly, thanks to those who contributed to a total investment of more than \$5M in Musahar girls since 2017. Street Child is a trusted partner of many generous grantmakers, private donors and organizations who have supported / continue to support the work in Nepal, and we are incredibly grateful to you all.

**Together, we are building a brighter future where every child is safe, in school and learning.**

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