REPORT BACK

The Graduation Project

APRIL – JUNE 2022

Thank you!

Your commitment to girls' education in Zimbabwe through The Graduation Project is keeping girls in school and ensuring they can lead their own lives.

Context & background

Seven miles.

That's how far some girls in Zimbabwe have to travel every day in order to go to school. For many, this long journey is simply too dangerous. Along the way they endure sexual harassment from men in the community. Sometimes the harassment escalates and becomes assault or rape. But with few secondary schools to attend, girls graduating from primary school feel like they don't have another option and risk their safety for the chance to continue their education. Girls desperate to stay in school resort to "bush boarding" and stay in unsafe places closer to school, away from their families. Here, too, they are vulnerable to assault and exploitation.

The Graduation Project is being implemented in Masvingo Province, which is located in the southern corner of Zimbabwe, just west of Chiredzi.

The presence of COVID-19 has exacerbated an array of other problems. The pandemic wasn't just a health crisis, it was an economic crisis as well. Families are struggling to make ends meet, which means affording further tuition costs for their children is impossible.

Your support for The Graduation Project is renewing girls' hope. With the construction of dormitories and implementation of skills trainings, girls in Zimbabwe are getting the chance to stay in school and work toward a brighter future. They're also learning about their rights and gender equality, along with their male peers as allies.

In this report, covering April through June 2022, you'll read about the progress girls have made in their engineering courses as part of a partnership with Purdue University, as well as additional features girls and project staff are adding to the newly opened dormitories.

You'll also read about girls' advocacy efforts against child marriage, and you'll meet Ashley, a program participant who shares how her life has been changed through The Graduation Project, in her own words.

Key activities

Activity 1: Support girls' clubs with gender equality training

— Champions of Change sessions for girls' clubs continued, with girls from two of the four schools in the project now being trained on the last modules of the curriculum, in which boys and girls discuss appropriate behaviors, attitudes and practices to promote gender equality. Meanwhile, several new participants completed training on a module about body confidence.

— In total, 462 girls have received training on the Champions of Change modules, some of whom were not originally recruited for the project but voluntarily joined these trainings.

— The schools participating in this project have also embraced the Champions of Change methodology in the classroom as more participants share their new knowledge and skills with other classmates during the normal school day.

Activity 2: Implement engineering courses for a water-recycling system

— During the reporting period, girls at two of the participating schools received guidance on fine-tuning their designed prototypes for the local water-recycling system. At the other two schools, girls received tablets so they could participate in trainings, which were held through a virtual platform.

*Activities with this icon incorporate Plan International USA's **GirlEngage** approach, which involves girls in every stage of the project, from planning to leading activities to evaluation.*

— All four schools hosted a visitor from Purdue University, who traveled to Zimbabwe to provide girls with support during their engineering lessons. The representative also met with project coordinators to explore possible opportunities to expand the engineering program to other schools in the area, which was met with excitement from the community.

— Staff at the project's four high schools noted a significant improvement in collaboration among students while implementing the engineering lessons, and administrators have expressed their desire to integrate engineering lessons into their normal school curriculum.

Girls in the project hosted a representative from Purdue University's engineering school, who visited Zimbabwe to provide project support.

Activity 3: Support young people-led committees

— Student and dormitory advisory boards at two schools developed a code of conduct, highlighting expected and unacceptable behavior within the school and dorm premises. The code includes 17 separate points, exemplifying girls' commitment to creating and maintaining a welcoming environment for everyone.

Girls attended menstrual health awareness events at two project schools which provided support and information to combat period stigma and misinformation.

— During the reporting period, project staff conducted a child safeguarding training with 50 girls and 30 boys that included online safety and how identify and report abuse.

Activity 4: Support menstrual health awareness events

— In June, project staff supported menstrual health awareness events led by local health agencies at two of the schools. In total, 590 girls and 419 boys attended the events and participated in discussions about how to use and dispose of period products and fighting period stigma against girls.

Activity 5: Extend COVID-19 response

— In partnership with the local Department of Social Development, Ministry of Health and Child Care and other national agencies in Zimbabwe, project staff held a two-day awareness campaign across two schools to continue sharing information with project participants and the surrounding community about the dangers of not complying with COVID-19 safety measures.

— Awareness sessions involved music, poems, theatrical performances and traditional dance to make the events lively and engaging. In total, 1,015 people attended the sessions, and each received masks and sanitizer.

Activity 6: Continue dormitory maintenance

— Girls and school authorities coordinated landscaping services at both schools to refine the appearance of both properties. In the next review phase, the project will continue contracting for landscaping on the dorm properties.

— The girls also requested benches and tables to be placed on the exterior grounds so they can use them during their studies or free time. As a result, the project will be installing them in the next few months.

— Installation of solar panels at the girls' dorms was successfully completed. The system is able to power lights, refrigerators and other small utilities like phones and computers. Following the installations, contractors trained teachers and the girls on how to operate the new system. Plans to connect the dorms to the public power lines have been initiated.

Contractors installed solar panels at dorm properties, and now girls will have reliable electricity for studying.

Some of the curtains at the dorms have been installed, and more will be hung to provide privacy for the girls while they stay there.

— To ensure girls' privacy, the project is installing curtains requested by the girls at both dorms. One of the dorm matrons, who is providing mentorship and security to the girls, has textile design skills and is currently working with several other local garment makers to create the curtains.

Activity 7: Complete well-water drilling

— Following the malfunctioning of one of the school's wells, the project reassessed and restarted drilling and equipping a new solar-powered well, which is now just over half a mile away from the school. Girls and teachers were trained on operating and maintaining the system.

— The project is also planning to install two additional tanks at the two project schools which have a reserve capacity of 1,320 gallons of water. These reserves will ensure that the girls have adequate supplies of water, even on days when pumping the well is more difficult.

— With these new water systems in place, the girls have been maintaining new vegetable gardens at their schools, which provide them with cooking ingredients in the dorms.

At the advocacy events girls led in June, their calls to action revolved around ending child marriage, preventing harassment and protecting children's rights.

Activity 8: Support girl-led advocacy

—In June, girls at one of the project schools launched an advocacy campaign targeted at male transportation workers who exploit and harass girls at their jobs. The campaign events were held following a **GirlEngage** activity where girls expressed sadness over some classmates who had dropped out of their school due to child marriages.

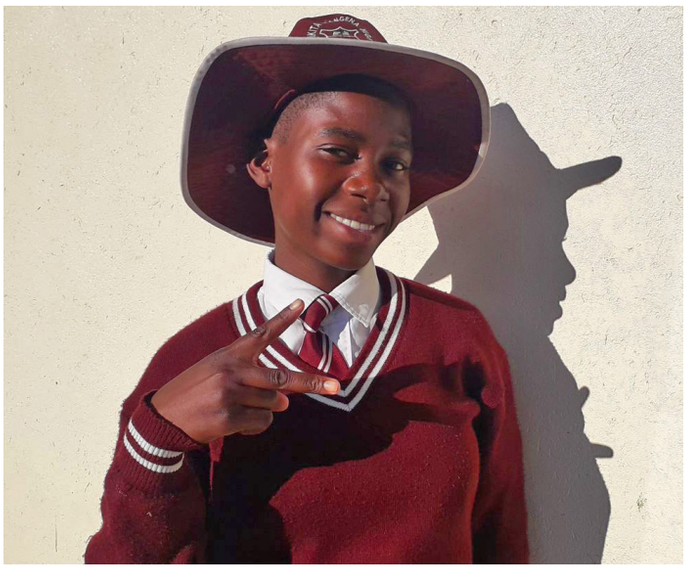
— Girls also commemorated Day of the African Child during this campaign, which covered the theme of eliminating harmful practices affecting children.

— The local chief, village leaders, nurses and representatives from government ministries attended the events to speak about the impacts of child marriage to about 500 attendees, including 265 girls.

"Advocacy plays a crucial role in our lives, as we now have a strong and proud tradition of speaking out for change. We are very grateful for the project for availing such opportunities for us, as in the past it was taboo to facilitate such discussions on pertinent issues affecting us as girls."

— CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE MENTOR

Your support is bringing Ashley's dreams to life



My name is Ashley. I am 16 years old, and I am in [year 4 of secondary school]. [There are eleven of us] in our family, and I am the eighth born. My father has two wives, so that is why we are many. My parents are peasant farmers.

When The Graduation Project was launched in 2020, I was part of the girls who sat to select the project [participants]. We started by coming up with selection criteria where long distance [from school] was the main determinant. I happened to fall within this category because I used to walk 12 kilometers one way to school. My life was unbearable, but I had no choice. Every day, I would arrive late in class, and I had limited time to read. I had to walk the same distance back home on a daily basis. The thoughts of going to school had actually traumatized me. At some point, I thought of dropping out of school because I couldn't bear the distance. Girls were also bullied on their way to and from school. Some of my friends dropped out of school because they couldn't bear the pressure.

The project came to my rescue in 2020 when I was selected as one of the beneficiaries. We started to stay in the hostels in February 2022 and I am so excited. I lived with the hope that one day my problems were going to pass. I am very grateful that I am now staying in the hostel equipped with everything we need as girls, courtesy of The Graduation Project.

In fact, the comfort we find in the hostel is not found anywhere else — even in our homes. We now have all the time to read, and our walking distance was reduced to zero. The project has not only built us a place to stay but also imparted confidence in us. We have been participating in various activities that include Champions of Change, engineering lessons and life skills training. All these activities made me think differently. I used to think engineering is very difficult and that it was only a field for men, but now I no longer see it that way.

In my engineering class, we developed a water recycling prototype. We had never heard of words such as "prototype," but now we speak confidently about them. I stand in front of everyone to illustrate how my prototype works. Very soon we will be developing the actual system of water recycling.

I used to like to be a lawyer, but due to my exposure to other worldviews, I now want to be an aerospace engineer. If I were to meet one of the donors today, I would take them to my rural home so that they can see how they have impacted my life in real time. Words cannot describe how grateful I am.