



Dotto - a member of the CAMFED Association of women leaders educated with CAMFED support and trained Learner Guide — leads a My Better World life skills and self-development session with secondary students in Morogoro, Tanzania. Credit: CAMFED/Eliza Powell

# Understanding the role of CAMFED's peer mentors in shifting gender social norms in four districts of Tanzania

## Overview



## Authors

This overview was written by Luisa Ciampi (REAL Centre, University of Cambridge) with oversight and feedback from Nkanileka Mgonda and Rosemarie Mwaipopo (University of Dar es Salaam), who also guided the design and analysis. Pauline Rose (REAL Centre, University of Cambridge) provided overall guidance and editorial support.

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## Further Information

This overview presents a summary of the findings and conclusions from the [full Research Report](#).



## Summary

- CAMFED's Learner Guides have developed a range of skills and opportunities which enable them to support and engage with communities to shift harmful gender social norms.
- Due to these skills and opportunities, Learner Guides were particularly successful in supporting shifts in gender social norms in relation to education, and gender-based violence in particular.
- The Learner Guides were identified less frequently as contributing to shifts in areas such as early marriage and pregnant girls returning to school.
- Shifts in gender social norms were not attributed solely to Learner Guides' interactions within communities, but also included other mechanisms, such as policy changes, community action and institutional support.



Photo credit: Luisa Ciampi  
Pilot Study, Bagamoyo, Tanzania, October 2023

## Introduction

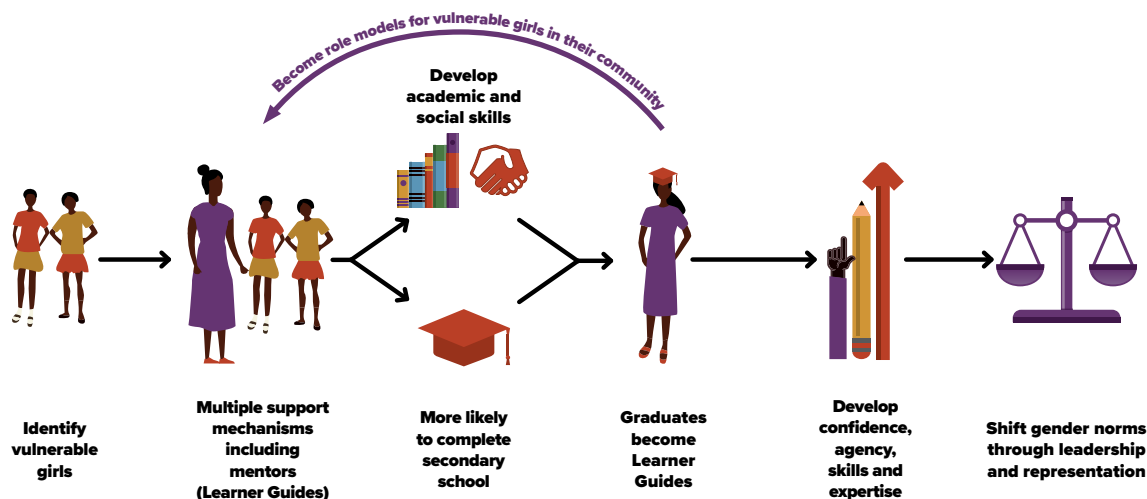
Gender inequalities can be exacerbated by a wide array of gender social norms, or beliefs of what is deemed acceptable and appropriate for males and females. In this research, these gender norms were clustered into six areas: education, early pregnancy, early marriage, gender-based violence, paid and unpaid work, and decision-making and leadership. Gender social norms shape access to opportunities, resources, freedoms, voice, and power in multiple areas of women's lives. Identifying, challenging, and shifting gender social norms is essential to improving gender equality in education and in young women's future opportunities.

CAMFED's Learner Guide Programme aims to shift harmful gender social norms that girls and women face by supporting girls to complete school, empowering them to be able to change their own life trajectory, and, in turn, enable them to support other girls and young women in their communities to do the same.

Through a collaborative research partnership between the REAL centre (University of Cambridge), the University of Dar es Salaam, and the non-governmental organisation CAMFED, this study set out to identify if and how the Learner Guide Programme has shifted gender social norms in four districts in Tanzania. This overview provides a summary of the key findings.

## What is the Learner Guide Programme?

Operating in Tanzania since 2005, CAMFED's Learner Guide Programme aims to support girls in government secondary schools to strengthen self-development and foundational learning skills, thus encouraging them to stay in school and improve their learning outcomes (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: CAMFED's Learner Guide Programme**

The primary support mechanism is provided by recent school graduates called Learner Guides, who went through the same CAMFED programme during their secondary education. In addition, some school graduates have been recruited as Learner Guides who were not previously supported by CAMFED. These graduates subsequently return to their local schools and volunteer to help other children with their studies.

Learner Guides volunteer for an 18-month period during which they are trained to deliver a life skills and wellbeing programme (called My Better World) to students in government secondary schools. The intention of the programme is for Learner Guides to act as peer educators and role models and support students in developing life skills and self-worth, and so encourage them to stay in school and improve their learning.

Studies show that the programme has improved girls' retention in school and their learning outcomes and psychosocial wellbeing, as well as being cost-effective (Girls' Education Challenge & CAMFED, 2022; PMA & CAMFED, 2022; Rose et al., 2022; Sabates et al., 2018). The programme was also well aligned with national priorities for scaling up (Mgonda & Ciampi, 2023).

It has been reported that Learner Guides take on leadership positions within communities and are increasingly being recognised as key community actors and active participants on multiple decision-making committees (Girls' Education Challenge & CAMFED, 2022; PMA & CAMFED, 2022). This indicates that they are well-positioned to shift gender social norms in their communities, as outlined in this overview.

## Research design

To determine the extent to which Learner Guides have shifted gender social norms in Tanzania, eight wards were selected across four out of 14 districts based on the following criteria:

- the Learner Guide Programme has been operating for over five years (to allow time for a shift in gender social norms),
- there is a relatively high level of gender inequality based on relevant national demographic datasets, such as early marriage, social-economic status, and education (including enrolment, dropout and completion rates).

**Phase 1:** aimed to identify gender social norms currently existing in each ward. Data were collected from relevant ministries (such as the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children), District and Ward officers in the selected locations, and community health workers, traditional leaders and head teachers within the identified communities.

**Phase 2:** aimed to identify key community groups and influential members that Learner Guides were aware of (both ones with whom they interacted, and those with whom they had less engagement). It also sought to identify gender social norms that Learner Guides felt they were shifting within their communities. This involved stakeholder mapping exercises and individual interviews with the Learner Guides.

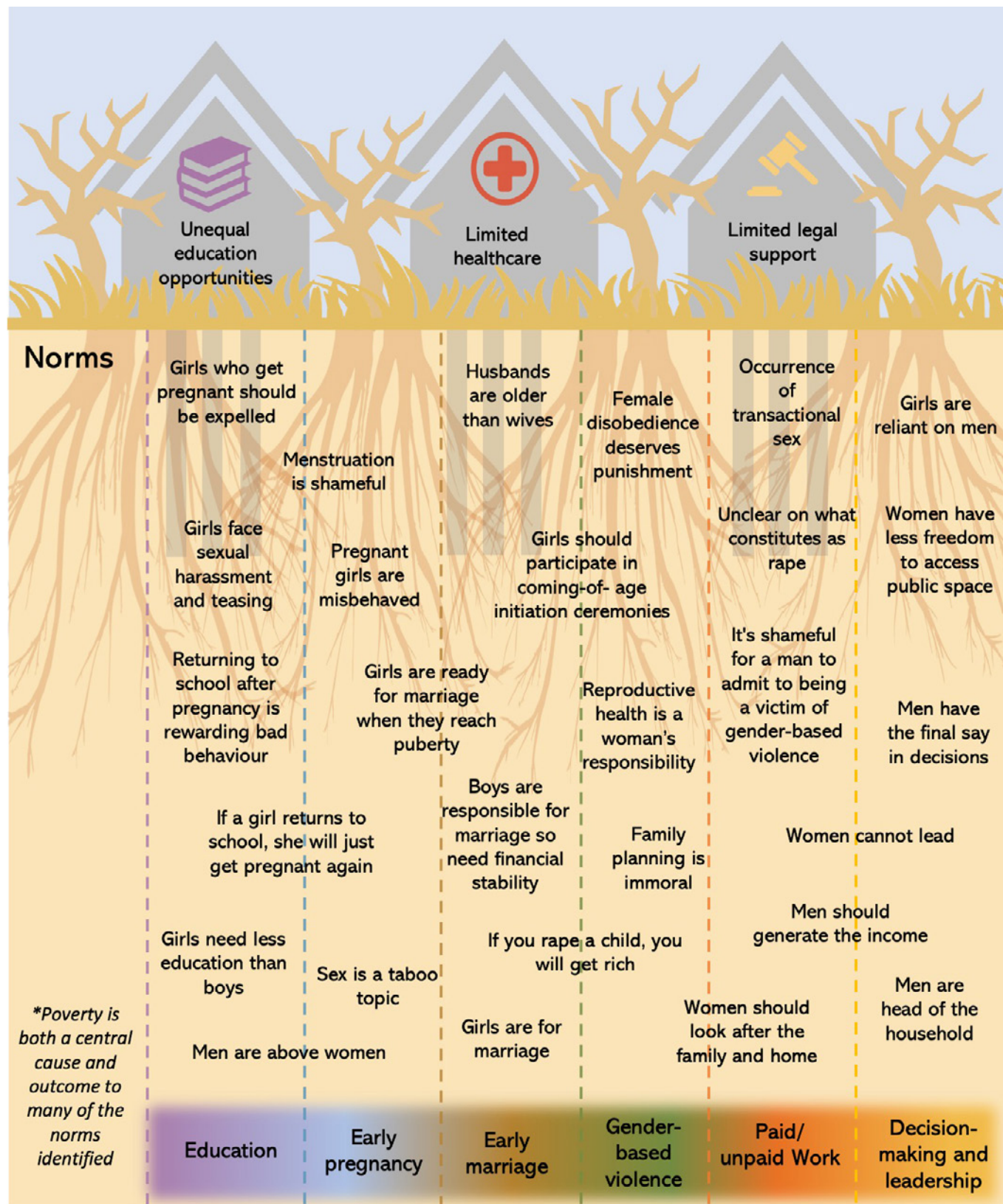
**Phase 3:** focused on gender social norms which community groups and influential community members identified were changing, and the reasons for these changes. This included their views on the role of Learner Guides in contributing to any changes. This involved group discussions and key informant interviews with district and ward leaders and community groups. District and ward leaders included local traditional and religious leaders, and local governance officers. Community groups included village development committees, parent support groups from schools supported by CAMFED, community-based financial groups, and school management groups.

## What gender social norms were hindering gender equality in the communities?

To understand the extent to which Learner Guides have been able to shift gender social norms in their communities, the first step was to identify gender social norms in the four study locations in Tanzania based on the data collected in Phase 1 (Figure 2). The phrases used in the diagram and text for each norm are a summary statement from interviewee quotes which identified similar norms. These norms were clustered into six areas: education, early pregnancy, early marriage, gender-based violence, paid and unpaid work, and decision-making and leadership. The norms are potentially visible in education, healthcare and legal spheres.



Figure 2: Gender social norms identified in the study districts



Note: This diagram summarises some of the most common norms identified in the data collection.

Source: Phase 1 individual interviews

Over half of the 45 interviewees highlighted overall improvements in girls' education, and that the rates of early marriages and the prevalence of gender-based violence occurrences had reduced. Ten interviewees indicated that there were reductions in early pregnancy rates. Most of the interviewees agreed that gendered job roles persisted, but that equal pay for men and women was normal, if they did the same job. In decision-making and leadership many of the interviewees identified that women spoke their minds more and were demonstrating good decision-making. However, most reported that men continued to make financial decisions. These changes indicated that some harmful gender social norms have shifted, but some of these norms persisted.

One norm affecting many others was the view that 'men are above women'. For example, in relation to **decision making and leadership** there was a view expressed that 'men are the head of the household'. Also, in respect to **paid/unpaid work** there was the idea that 'men should generate the income', and 'women should look after the family and home'. Such perspectives perpetuated norms such as 'women cannot lead', and 'men have the final say in decisions'. These attitudes affected the opportunities for women to access public spaces, and to hold leadership positions or high-income jobs. Moreover, they facilitated a reliance of girls and women on men.

These views underpinned one of the major norms in relation to **education**, namely that 'girls need less education than boys'. This norm was intertwined with attitudes linked to **early marriage** which suggested that 'girls are ready for marriage when they reach puberty'. This was also associated with perspectives that 'girls should participate in coming-of-age ceremonies'. These ceremonies were identified in keeping girls out of school when they start menstruation, promoting gender-based violence, and initiating links to transactional sex.

Norms associated with **early pregnancy** included perspectives that 'girls getting pregnant is shameful'. This was associated with views such as 'returning to school after pregnancy is rewarding bad behaviour' and 'if a girl returns to school, she will just get pregnant again'. Such norms were related to the view that 'girls who get pregnant should be expelled'. These norms around pregnancy persist despite the recent national directive in 2021 which allows girls to return to school after pregnancy.

An associated norm was that 'sex is a taboo topic' and a private matter. This compounded ideas that 'family planning was immoral' and dangerous. This norm was underpinned by religious beliefs, as well as by the notion that 'reproductive health is solely a women's issue'. This, coupled with the norm that 'men have the final say in decisions' and the idea that 'female disobedience deserves punishment', meant that women often made decisions regarding family planning in secret. This may have exposed them to early pregnancy and/or gender-based violence if they were discovered. The area of gender-based violence was also closely linked to these norms. There was also a lack of clarity about what constituted acts of gender-based violence. This could have affected potential legal support for women and girls.

All these norms affected how both boys and girls engaged with education, paid and unpaid work, and accessed leadership roles. It is important to recognise that whilst girls faced a multitude of harmful norms, some gender social norms can also affect boys and men. For example, the beliefs that 'it is shameful for a man to admit to being a victim of **gender-based violence**', or that 'boys drop out of school to earn an income', were identified as affecting boys and men.

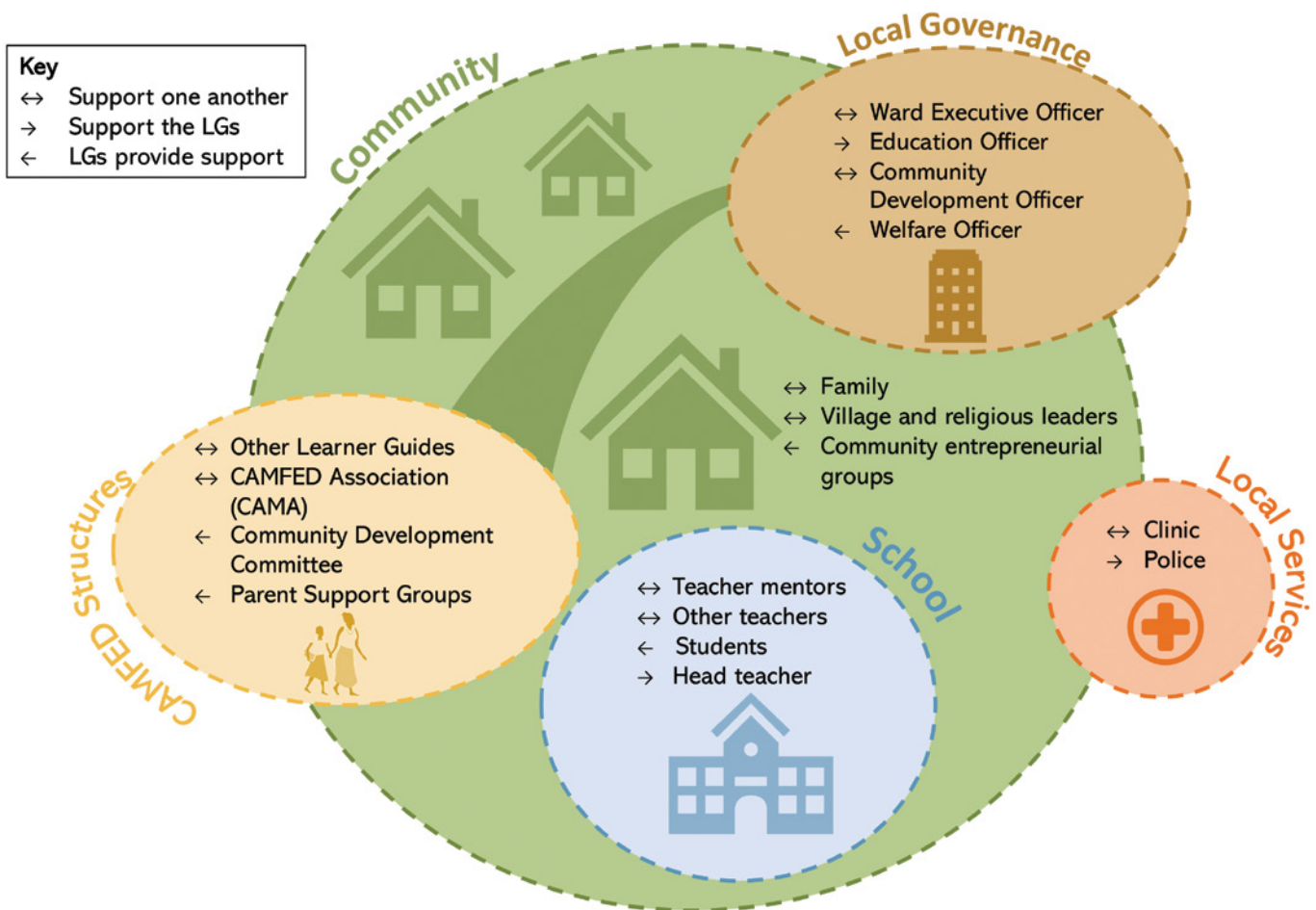
Some key differences in gender social norms were apparent between the districts. In matrilineal communities, such as in Kibaha and Pangani, women were seen to have more decision-making power. Traditional dancing, which was frequently linked to acts of gender-based violence, was mentioned more

frequently in Kilosa than in any of the other districts. 'Chikimanya', or the idea that one must protect those you know even in the face of crime, was mentioned most frequently in Kilosa. In Kilolo, alcohol affecting gender-based violence and early pregnancy was mentioned more than in other districts. This could be related to the livelihood activity of brewing alcohol. Interviewees in Kilolo and Kibaha also mentioned a belief that 'raping a child would make one rich' (this is rooted in witchcraft practice which has links to gender-based violence). With respect to paid work, in Pangani, highly gendered jobs around fishing were raised, as this was the local livelihood. Whilst many of the gendered job roles such as going out to sea at night to fish, links to female safety and physical ability, such gendered jobs also impacted the ability of women to earn their own income.

### Who in the community did Learner Guides engage with to support the shift in harmful gender norms?

The study identified that Learner Guides engaged with a wide range of community stakeholders, including CAMFED structures, the school, local governance institutions and services (Figure 3). Many of these connections were also an important source of support for the Learner Guides.

**Figure 3: Who did Learner Guides engage with in the communities?**



Source: Phase 2 Learner Guide stakeholder maps and interviews



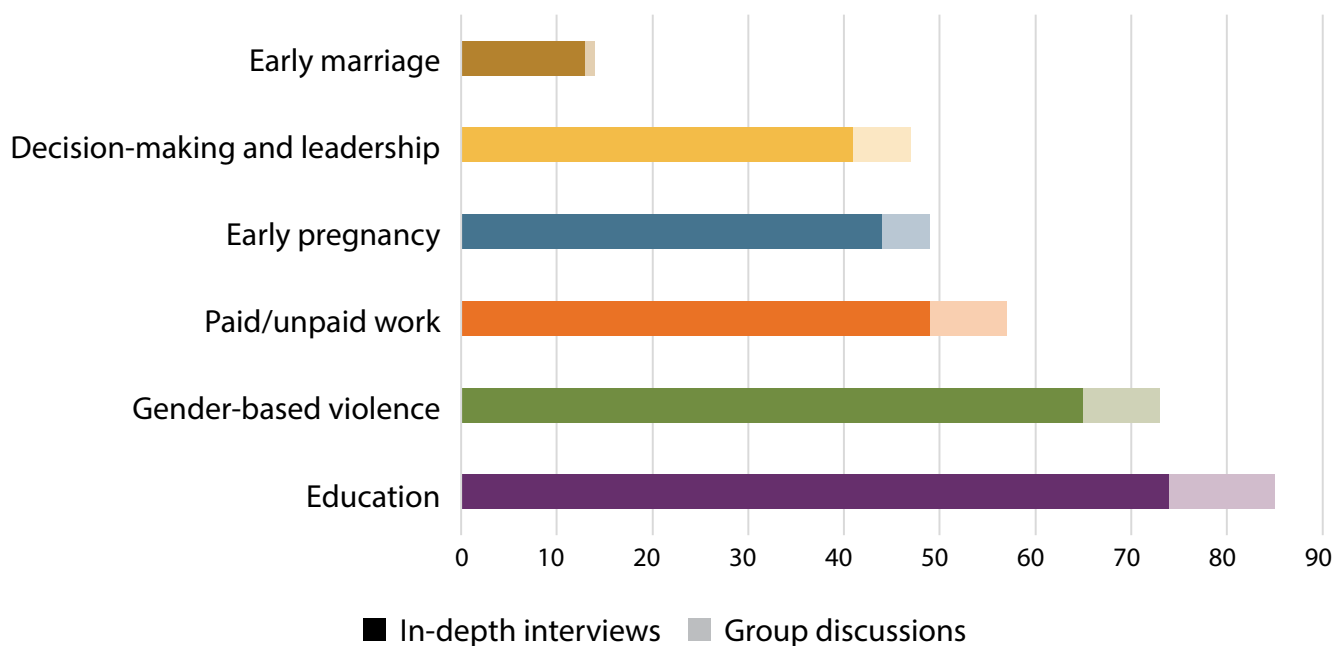
Learner Guides reported a range of ways that engagement in their communities helped them develop personal and professional skills and enabled them to support others. They reported improved confidence, motivation, and leadership skills which all linked to an increased capacity to make decisions. They also identified greater acceptance and respect from others within the wider community, and engagement in school and community roles. This linked to reports of better leadership opportunities.

*It [being a Learner Guide] has made me feel good. It has also made me stronger, confident, and respected by the community. For example, if I pass through the community, they call me a 'student facilitator'. It has made me recognised by the community and made me different from other people in the community ... We are also accepted in society and we are listened to. (Female, Learner Guide, Kilolo)*

### To what extent did Learner Guides help shift harmful gender social norms?

The study found that the majority of community groups and members (95 out of 146 in-depth interviews and 16 out of 32 group discussion groups) considered that Learner Guides were contributing to shifting gender social norms, particularly in the areas of education and gender-based violence (Figure 4). Across all four districts, out of those interviewees who did not directly attribute any change to Learner Guides, 10 were Islamic and Christian religious leaders, and three were traditional leaders. During Phase 2, Learner Guides indicated that they had limited interactions with local leaders. Given the influence of these leaders within communities, this could hold back changes in gender social norms.

**Figure 4: Extent to which Learner Guides changed gender social norms**



Note: Numbers relate to the number of interviewees and group discussions who mentioned the theme at least once.  
 Source: Phase 2 Learner Guide stakeholder maps and interviews.

Several community members identified that it was important that Learner Guides were from and part of the community as this enabled them to support shifts in beliefs and behaviours.

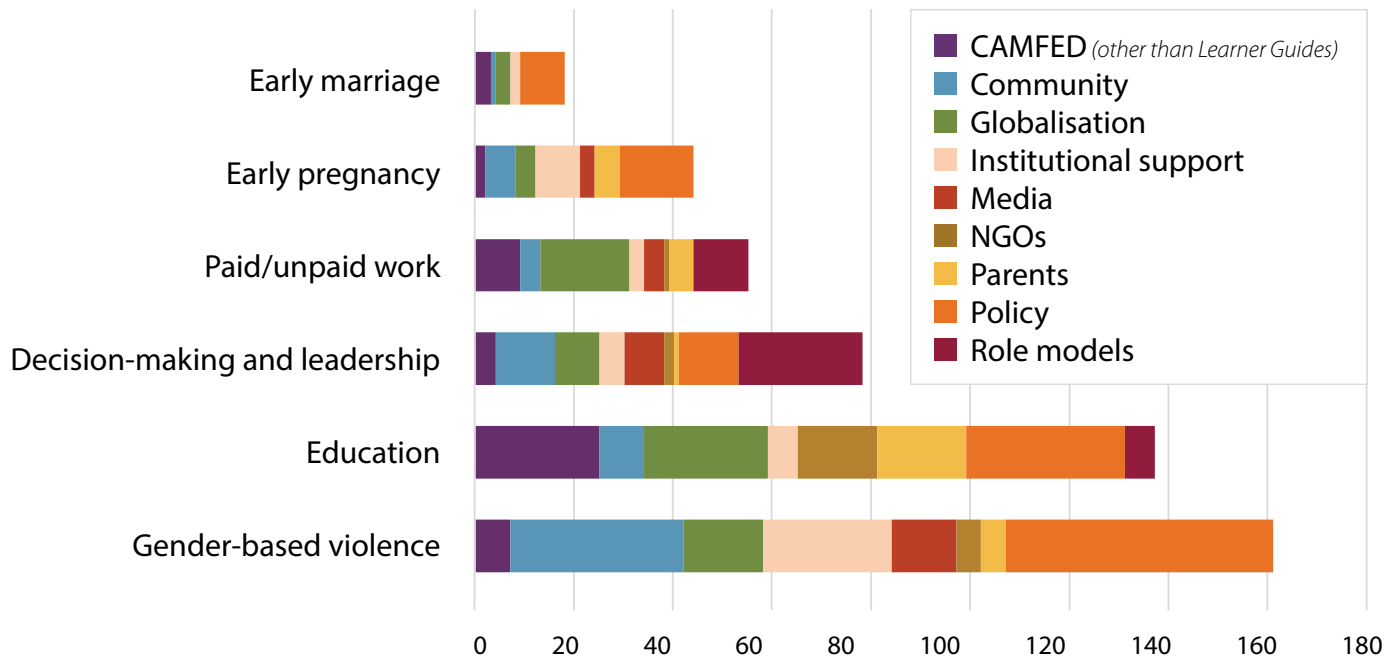
*The community listens to them [Learner Guides] because they have built relationships with the community. They can enter deep into our society, educate, and bring about change through these peer mentors. Parents have changed significantly in our community because these mentors have motivated them. (Female, Parent Support Group Member, Kibaha)*

Conversely, it was also suggested by some that Learner Guides might be limited in their ability to shift gender social norms because they were embedded into existing cultures and practices.

*There is one thing that I see in these Learner Guides – as they are indigenous to the community they are trying their best; but sometimes they engage themselves in the negative traditional practices for the fear of being segregated with the community ... I advise that it will be possible to shift the Learner Guides of this community to work in another community and vice versa so that they can be able to stand firm in the fight against the harmful gender social norms. (School Management Group Discussion, Pangani)*

In addition to the role of Learner Guides, community members identified a range of other factors which they believed contributed to shifts in gender social norms (Figure 5). For example, they attributed shifts in gender social norms in education to national policies, CAMFED support other than the Learner Guides themselves (such as financially supporting girls), work by other non-governmental organisations, and globalisation (including exposure to other cultures through processes such as urbanisation and migration). Shifts in gender-based violence were also attributed to policy, community action and institutional support. Shifts in paid/unpaid work were attributed to globalisation and role models. Shifts in decision-making and leadership were largely attributed to role models (other than the Learner Guides), and shifts in early pregnancy and marriage were attributed to policy changes.

**Figure 5: Factors affecting shifts in gender social norms beyond Learner Guides**



Note: Numbers relate to the number of times the theme is mentioned by participants in an interview or group discussion.

Source: Phase 3 group discussions and in-depth interviews

Community members identified that the Learner Guides were contributing to the shift in gender social norms by providing education to students and the wider community, by being seen as role models to students and the community, and by being advocates of change.

There were limited reports by the community suggesting that Learner Guides challenged norms about pregnant girls returning to school. There were no reports of Learner Guides challenging norms seen to be harmful to boys, even though some community members indicated that a resentment of focusing on girls was increasing and could harm progress in the fight for gender equality.

In **education**, Learner Guides were seen to play a significant and direct role in shifting the norm that ‘girls need more education than boys’ by directly educating the students and community and advocating for the value of education.

*They [Learner Guides] have been changing the community’s perspective to see that a girl child has the opportunity for education and can go to school and study unlike in the past ... There are changes nowadays in beliefs ... because of this, Learner Guides are educating parents, meaning nowadays education is equal, that both girls and boys go to school.*  
 (Male, Village Development Committee Member, Kilolo)



In relation to early pregnancy, Learner Guides were seen to play a key and direct role in providing sexual and reproductive health and rights education to students and education on family planning to the community. They were also regarded as role models for students by using their own testimonies to show the consequences of early pregnancy. These actions challenged the norm that 'sex is a taboo topic'.

*As Learner Guides provide education, starting from schools, continuing to secondary schools, and reaching the community through meetings and discussions, people gradually become aware. If you were unaware and didn't have an idea about family planning, someone entering a family now knows about it because they received education. (Male, Ward Executive Office, Kilolo)*

However, despite these positive reports, only two community members reported that Learner Guides played a role in shifting gender social norms regarding the return of girls to school after pregnancy.

In terms of **early marriage**, Learner Guides were perceived as playing a small role in reporting early marriages within the community. Two interviewees reported the Learner Guides intervened and stopped early marriages. There were also some reports of Learner Guides raising awareness against early marriages by advocating for girls to complete their education first. These actions challenged norms, such as that 'girls are ready for marriage when they reach puberty'.

*There are no child marriages here anymore. Everybody in the community fears [one] another and the credit goes to Learner Guides. In one incident, a girl of sixteen years was about to get married because she had failed her standard seven exams, so they thought they should marry her. On the day of the wedding the Learner Guide learned about that and reported it to the Ward Development Officer. The father was called to the Ward Office and commanded to call off the wedding. (Female, Community Financial Group Member, Pangani)*

Learner Guides were seen to play an important and direct role in shifting gender social norms in relation to gender-based violence by providing education to students and the community about what constituted gender-based violence; when, where, and how to report it; and in alerting local leadership groups so that action could be taken. Learner Guides were able to support this because they understood local support structures available within their communities given that they are part of the community.

*They [Learner Guides] have done it [contributed to reduced gender-based violence in the community] through the provision of education to girls, emphasising the importance of recognising some signs, such as a teacher behaving in a certain way that triggers sexual violence [and] encouraging girls to report such behaviour to a matron... So, Learner Guides have built confidence for girl students on how to handle violence-related behaviours. (Female, Village Development Committee Member, Kilolo)*

However, there were no reports of Learner Guides engagement with issues related to men also being victims of gender-based violence.

In the area of **paid/unpaid work**, Learner Guides were reported to have been teaching entrepreneurship skills to students and women, and participating in community women's groups, such as savings groups. They were also perceived as models of how women, even from challenging backgrounds, could be financially independent, and therefore have increased autonomy over their lives. In this way, Learner Guides were indirectly shifting norms, such as that 'only men should generate the income'. In addition, the data indicated that ownership of an increased income enhanced women's decision-making abilities.

*Before Learner Guides existed, people weren't involved in entrepreneurship, there were no groups. When Learner Guides came and educated people about forming groups for economic empowerment, they brought changes. People have been able to earn income from the education given by Learner Guides. (Female, School Management Group Member, Kilolo)*

Whilst the data on unpaid work was more limited, interviewees indicated that Learner Guides were contributing to shifts in gendered job roles by successfully engaging in jobs which were traditionally for men. However, these shifts in gendered job roles were also often linked to poverty, with comments indicating that women only take on traditionally-male jobs roles out of necessity rather than choice. There was limited data on shifts in unpaid work, such as household chores and transactional sex.

In **decision-making and leadership**, Learner Guides were identified by the community as role models because of their participation in local governance committees within schools and communities, as well as their ability to overcome obstacles and become a contributing member of the community. They also reported that Learner Guides instilled confidence in both girls and women through their work in delivering life skills lessons and engagement in women's community groups.

*Generally, they have changed the perspective of our daughters. In the past, our daughters were ignorant and lacked confidence; even if opportunities arose, they were fearful. But now, many girls have become aware. They have been given confidence even when facing challenges. Now they can seek jobs, participate in meetings, and ask questions. This has made a significant difference compared to when they were afraid in the past. (Male, Local Leader, Kibaha)*

Whilst Learner Guides have contributed to the increased visibility of women in decision-making spaces, this shift was heavily supported by policies such as 'special seats' or governance seats which were reserved for women. One interviewee identified that these shifts happened before the Learner Guides were in post:

*There could be a contribution, but these Learner Guides came after these committees were already elected. They continue to enlighten the community, but these committees were already in place. (Female, Ward Executive Office, Pangani)*

## Conclusions

The study has found that whilst gender social norms which disadvantaged girls and women were still persistent in the selected study areas within Tanzania, communities believed that many of these norms were slowly shifting due to a range of factors, one of which was the presence of Learner Guides. Other key factors included national policy change, the effects of globalisation, and other influences within the communities.

Learner Guides were identified as contributing to shifting gender social norms in all six areas of education, early pregnancy, early marriage, gender-based violence, paid/unpaid work, and decision-making and leadership. However, shifts were identified as more widespread in education and gender-based violence. Learner Guides were found to have a more limited contribution to shifting gender social norms which prevented pregnant girls from returning to school, and had no reported effect on shifting gender social norms which affect boys' engagement in school.

Most community members interviewed were positive about the Learner Guides' contributions to shifting gender social norms, with many identifying that the Learner Guides were able to support these shifts because they were from and part of the community. However, some community members were sceptical in this regard because Learner Guides were subject to existing gender social norms due to their direct link to the community, as well as their lack of formal qualifications.

Overall, community members agreed that Learner Guides had supported shifts in gender social norms by providing education to students and the wider community, particularly in sexual and reproductive health. They have also advocated for the value of educating girls, challenged and intervened in harmful traditional practices, and acted as role models in the community by participating in and leading local community groups.



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