

# Leadership-in-Action Reflective Report

Behind The Numbers

*Helping Educate Girls look beyond India: research, relationships and lessons in leadership*

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Host Organisation: Educate Girls UK



## **1. What was my LiA?**

When I think about my Leadership-in-Action placement, the first thing that jumps out to me is that it did not at all look the way I imagined it would. I did my LiA with Educate Girls UK, the UK branch of an Indian non-profit that brings out-of-school girls in rural communities into education. I had to answer one simple question: if this model has worked for girls in India, where else in the world could it work, and what would it take to get there? I spent my placement helping to answer it.

Educate Girls began in 2007, when its founder, Safeena Husain, ran a pilot across 50 schools in Rajasthan. Today it works with state governments and communities across roughly 30,000 villages, powered by more than 55,000 community volunteers known as Team Balika. It has helped enrol over two million girls and improved learning for around 2.5 million children. In 2015 it launched the world's first Development Impact Bond in education, in which investors are repaid only if measurable targets are met, and it exceeded them. In 2025 it became the first Indian organisation to win the Ramon Magsaysay Award, often called Asia's Nobel Prize.

The UK branch is a charity whose job is to connect that work to the world beyond India: meeting donors, speaking at conferences across the UK and Europe, and sharing what has been learned.

My project speaks to two of the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Quality Education (SDG 4) and Gender Equality (SDG 5).

## **2. First Task**

My first task was a conversation. I met Garima Sahai, one of the directors of the UK branch, and we worked out what my role would be. She discussed EdUK's plan to expand beyond India and begin operations in countries with geographically and economically similar contexts to India, where an educational charity for girls would have the most impact. She said we had to evaluate which countries were worth researching. Some work on global problem areas had already been done, so I was not starting from zero, but I was starting with very little context.

South Asia was the obvious first place to look, and Pakistan, where I grew up, is the closest match to India. But the geopolitical tension between the two countries meant it was not a realistic starting point for an Indian organisation, so we agreed to leave it. This was a useful early lesson. I had assumed the strongest case for expansion would simply be the greatest need and the most similar context, but whether an organisation can operate somewhere depends just as much on politics, risk and trust. It was interesting to see how global tensions and bilateral relations impact the exchange of services across two countries in real life. We turned to Africa and settled on Ethiopia and Nigeria.

## 2.1 Writing Memos

The heart of my placement was a pair of case memos, one per country, each covering the education context, what drives girls' exclusion, how the problem varies by region, and which NGOs are already working on it. They took several weeks and drew on UN and World Bank reports, academic studies and NGO research, along with graphs and charts of my own. The more I read, the less alike the two countries looked.

In Ethiopia, the headline is progress. Primary net enrolment is close to 89 per cent. But only about a third of children go on to secondary school, and around 90 per cent of ten-year-olds cannot read and understand a simple sentence. UNICEF estimates that about 17 million children are out of school, nearly half of them girls. I was surprised by how much the national picture hid. In the pastoralist region of Afar, primary enrolment was around 46 per cent in 2018, roughly half the national rate, and 96 per cent of girls aged 15 to 19 have undergone FGM/C. Conflict and climate shocks have damaged more than 9,000 schools, about a fifth of the total. And the barriers stack: because secondary schools are far apart, rural girls often have to board in town, which costs families money and raises girls' exposure to violence, giving families a second reason to keep them at home.

Nigeria has the largest out-of-school population in the world, around 18.3 million children, and it is heavily concentrated among girls in the north. Roughly half of girls in the northeast and 40 per cent in the northwest are not attending primary or lower secondary school, against under 10 per cent in the southern states. Kebbi and Sokoto have the worst out-of-school rates, at around two-thirds of children. Nigeria spends about 7 per cent of its budget on education against a UNESCO benchmark of 15 to 20 per cent, and about 30 per cent of women are married before 18, close to 50 per cent in the north. In the northeast the schools themselves have been targeted: 276 girls were abducted from Chibok in 2014, and the UN recorded 859 schoolchildren abducted in 2023 and 777 in 2024.

Two findings changed how I thought about the work. In Nigeria, "the north" is not one place. Child marriage varies more by ethnic group than by religion, which is why the most respected local organisations spend years on community research before designing anything. In Ethiopia, I read evidence suggesting that keeping girls in school and reducing child marriage are related but not the same outcome, and that system-wide measures such as free secondary schooling may shift marriage patterns more than small community programmes. Both taught me that a model cannot simply be lifted from one place and set down in another.

## 2.2 Talking to the people doing the work

Reading could only take me so far, so the second half of the research was people. For each country I mapped the NGOs already working on girls' education: what they do, how long they have existed, who leads them and how to reach them. Then I contacted leaders and other relevant staff to ask for preliminary meetings with Educate Girls UK. Most of this was done remotely. I reached out to 6 organisations in each country, out of which only 3-4 actively replied. I then ended up meeting with representatives from a total of 5 NGOs across both Ethiopia and Nigeria.

The organisations were deeply varied. Some were urban and some rural. Some, like the Centre for Girls Education in Zaria, run programmes directly and built their model on years of

community research. Some, like FAWE Ethiopia, combine grassroots clubs and bursaries with policy advocacy. Some, like Ethiopiaaid and the Malala Fund, do not implement at all; they fund and build the capacity of local partners. Some have existed for decades and others are relatively new. Each conversation was a small lesson in how the sector fits together.

That changed what I was analysing, because partnership turned out to mean very different things for different bodies. With one organisation the natural collaboration might be shared research. With a funder or facilitator, Educate Girls could be the on-the-ground body while drawing on that organisation's donors. With a local implementer, it might be a joint programme. Part of my job was working out which of these fitted each organisation, and what Educate Girls could offer in return.

The conversations also gave the numbers a human weight. Much of what I had written in the memos was confirmed by the people I spoke to, and the details that stayed with me, from the research and the calls alike, were the ones that turn a statistic into a day in someone's life: girls in Afar reportedly walking eight hours a day for water in a drought, missing school and arriving exhausted when they do attend; girls who board far from home and become more vulnerable there; girls who migrate alone to escape a forced marriage and end up in domestic work, invisible in the very surveys that are meant to count them. It is hard to stay abstract about "barriers" after that. It made me more careful, and it made me want the work to be worth the time these people gave me.

## **2.3 Defending my findings**

When the memos were done, I presented them to Garima and then to some other members of the board. I had expected to walk them through my findings. What I got were questions: what had I learned from my conversations, where had each number come from, and what did it all mean for Educate Girls UK? I was recalling work from weeks earlier, answering questions quickly, and defending my sources and conclusions in front of people with far more experience than me.

It was uncomfortable, and it was some of the best learning of my placement. At university, and as a debater, I am used to arguing positions. This was different, because the people questioning me were deciding what to do with the answer. I learned that resilience is mostly about staying calm and specific when the questions get hard.

## **3. Second Task**

My second major task was turning the memos into presentations for board members and colleagues responsible for expansion who had not been part of the process. This was a new skill. My degree involves little visual output, and the audience was corporate rather than a group project.

I had to decide how much belonged on the slides and how much in the memo, how to use graphics without overwhelming readers, and how to handle difficult subject matter with care, keeping it professional without being gratuitously upsetting. I followed Educate Girls' branding and revised after feedback. I came away better at presenting long, complex information in clear, simple visual form, which I expect to use in whatever I do next.

## **4. Third Task**

The third part of my LiA was completely unplanned. I was in Valencia when Garima mentioned that some team members were travelling to Seville to meet potential funders and donors, and invited me to join them for the weekend. I had to decide fast. I changed my accommodation and travel plans, took the first train I could find the next morning, and arranged somewhere to stay myself.

I explored the city first, and was glad to. Seville, with its gilded churches and architecture, was exactly the change from the UK I had hoped my LiA would offer. The meetings took place at a hotel, and my role was modest: taking notes and contributing where I could. But watching the team present was really instructive. They used slides to explain what Educate Girls does, shared key facts, and showed how donors' money is used in practice. Funders asked direct questions about who the programme reaches and how their contribution would be spent, and I helped record them. Afterwards we took them out for dinner.

This was where my earlier work made sense. The facts I had handled in memos and slides were the same ones the funders wanted to probe, and I could see how much a credible case depends on evidence that is clear and defensible. I saw that senior decisions are shaped as much by conversation, trust and relationships as by documents. And after weeks behind a screen, watching a room of funders engage with the organisation's impact made the work feel real.

## **5. Final Tasks**

The final part of my LiA has not happened yet. In October I will help host and organise a conference at LSE run by Educate Girls UK with Safeena Husain, the founder of Educate Girls, who studied at LSE and received an honorary doctorate there in 2024. I will help recruit volunteers, set up the venue, map attendees and speakers, and coordinate speakers. Guests will include educators, academics, lawyers, human rights activists and potential funders.

I am most looking forward to hearing from young women who were part of the Educate Girls programme and have since gone on to university and other paths: what it meant to them and how it could be improved. Because this falls after this report, I have not counted it as evidence of impact, but after months of statistics on a screen I am glad the placement will end with the people the work is for.

## **6. Impact Assessment**

I produced two detailed case study memos, presentations based on them, and preliminary conversations with NGOs in both countries. I defended my findings to the UK branch's directors and board and supported the team at a funder meeting. That I will keep working with Educate Girls UK, and hope to continue next year, suggests the contribution has been useful.

But I want to be honest about its limits. My work was largely research, and expansion into a new country depends on factors far beyond a single placement: funding, partnerships, government relationships and organisational capacity. I cannot say whether Educate Girls will expand into Ethiopia or Nigeria, and that decision was never mine. What I can say is that

early-stage expansion work is exactly this kind of research and relationship-building, and that I have left analysis, contacts and materials that can be built on. I also became aware of the limits of my own view. A case study written from London, however well researched, is no substitute for local knowledge, which is why any expansion would need local partners rather than an imported model.

## **7. What I learned**

Leadership in this placement was rarely about being in charge. I often had less data and context than the people I was speaking to, and the leadership lay in taking responsibility for my work anyway.

### **Courage and resilience**

Approaching senior NGO leaders on sensitive subjects meant asking thoughtful questions without much background knowledge. Defending my memos to the board meant standing behind my findings. Saying yes to Seville at short notice was a smaller but related act of initiative. Each time, the discomfort was the teaching point.

### **Empathy and sensitivity**

The subject, girls missing out on an education, deserves care, and speaking with people who have devoted their working lives to it required me to stay objective while remaining respectful. I also learned to ask what Educate Girls could offer in return, not only what I could learn. Ethical collaboration starts with that question.

### **Communication and adaptability**

Moving from long memos to concise slides taught me to adapt my writing to different audiences and to use judgement about what each one needs. Acting on feedback quickly and responsibly became routine.

### **A global mindset**

Setting Pakistan aside showed me that global citizenship includes recognising political realities, and researching Ethiopia and Nigeria showed me that a model that works in one country cannot simply be transplanted into another. The same global problem, girls out of school, looks entirely different in Afar, in Kebbi and in Rajasthan. Acting as a global citizen means approaching unfamiliar contexts with curiosity rather than assumptions, listening to the people who know them best, and being honest about what an outsider can and cannot offer. I intend to keep leading that way: asking what a community needs before deciding what to offer, and treating local partners as experts rather than recipients.

## **8. What's Next?**

My LiA gave me a view of girls' education from three angles: the desk, the conversation and the funder's table. The biggest change for me is in how I understand impact. Much meaningful work happens before anything visible does, in the research, the questions and the careful preparation that make a decision possible. As a Politics and International Relations student, I have seen how policy, funding and geopolitics shape what can be done

in practice. I will continue working with Educate Girls UK, including at the LSE conference in October and, I hope, into next year.

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Statistics in this report are drawn from my Ethiopia and Nigeria case study memos, which cite sources including UNICEF, the World Bank, the UN Children and Armed Conflict reporting and Girls Not Brides. Organisational background is from Educate Girls, the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation and the Charity Commission register.