

## Building safer and more inclusive education systems:

### PLANE's approach to safeguarding and GESI in Northern Nigeria

For the past four years, SDDirect has worked through the DAI-led component of FCDO's flagship education programme, the **Partnership for Learning for All in Nigeria (PLANE)**, with the Federal Ministry of Education and government counterparts in Jigawa, Kano and Kaduna. Our aim has been to make education safer and more inclusive for all children. What has emerged is not a stand-alone safety or inclusion project, but a practical model for embedding safeguarding, gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) into the everyday business of education reform.

## Summary

### The challenge

High levels of violence against children, including school-related GBV; overcrowded and unsafe schools; exclusion; weak safeguarding implementation; climate, conflict and attacks on education; and major gaps on GESI and safeguarding.

### The model

Government-owned policy reform linked to practical school tools, action plans, referral pathways, capacity building, named leads, community accountability and routine monitoring.

### What changed

More schools implementing safeguarding guidelines and action plans; more Designated Safeguarding Leads; more visible reporting; more communication with girls and boys about safeguarding; stronger state and federal demand for technical support.

### Why funders should care

A practical and scalable model that joins safeguarding, gender equality and social inclusion and education quality in one system-facing offer.

## Results<sup>i</sup>

# 60%

schools implementing safeguarding guidelines

# 51%

schools with safeguarding action plans in 2026, up from 0% in 2021

# 73%

of 2,562 schools with Designated Safeguarding Leads

# 68%

schools promoting safeguarding reporting mechanisms through communications materials

**PLANE demonstrated that safeguarding and GESI can be embedded through government systems at scale.** In the three focal states, safeguarding was practised in 2,562 schools as a result of PLANE and government interventions. Over time, this translated into clearer school-level practice, stronger accountability and greater visibility of risk.

By February 2026:

- 60% of schools demonstrated implementation with PLANE and Government safeguarding guidelines;
- 51% of schools had safeguarding action plans, compared with 0 in 2021;
- 73% of the 2,562 schools had Designated Safeguarding Leads; and (*importantly*)
- 8% of schools reported abuse incidents in the previous year, helping to make concerns more visible and strengthening the basis for response and follow-up.

These shifts matter because they show movement from policy aspiration to operational practice. More schools had concrete guidance. More schools had named people responsible. More schools had action plans. More concerns were being surfaced rather than remaining hidden. There was also stronger state and federal demand for technical support, suggesting that safeguarding and GESI had moved from the margins towards the centre of education reform conversations.

Alongside these quantitative shifts, PLANE supported a broader set of achievements that strengthened the enabling environment for safer and more inclusive schooling. These included the development and approval of policy promoting school safety and security, the convening of inter-ministerial and agency coordination meetings, stronger knowledge-sharing through Communities of Practice, the development of minimum standards for GESI-responsive schools, and stronger school-based referral pathways and systems to protect learners.

### Box 1: Why these achievements matter so much

PLANE has delivered these results in a context where children face multiple, overlapping risks to their safety, inclusion and learning. In Nigeria, both girls and boys experience high levels of violence at home, in the community and in school. Before the age of 18, around 50 percent of girls and 52 percent of boys experience physical violence. Sexual violence affects 25 percent of girls and 11 percent of boys, while 17 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys experience emotional violence. School-related violence is also widespread: 44 percent of girls, more than 7 million, and 35 percent of boys, more than 6.3 million, have experienced one or more forms of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by teachers and/or classmates.

This is the environment in which PLANE has been working. It is not a low-risk setting or one where strong safeguarding systems were already in place. The programme has been operating where violence, exclusion linked to gender and disability, weak safeguarding implementation, and pressures from conflict and climate shocks all reduce children's ability to learn and thrive.

That is what makes the team's achievements more significant. They show that practical, system-based reform is possible even where the baseline is difficult and the barriers are deeply entrenched. They also reinforce why safeguarding and GESI cannot be treated as secondary concerns. Safer and more inclusive education systems are not peripheral to learning reform; they are a core part of how better learning, wellbeing and equity are achieved.

**Crucially, PLANE demonstrates that safer and more inclusive education systems are possible, at scale, even where the context is challenging.**

*Info taken from -  
<https://files.mutualcdn.com/tfg/assets/files/Nigeria-school-related-gender-based-violence-fact-sheet.pdf>*

## The model

PLANE's model linked policy reform to practical school-level implementation. Rather than treating safeguarding, gender equality, disability inclusion and wider social inclusion as separate workstreams, the programme brought them together in one system-facing approach.

At school and community level, this meant developing culturally appropriate referral pathways with multiple stakeholders, including children; supporting schools to create context-specific safeguarding guidelines and action plans; training and mentoring School Support Officers, Designated Safeguarding Leads, School-Based Management Committees and other community actors; and putting in place named roles, monitoring structures and routine review mechanisms.

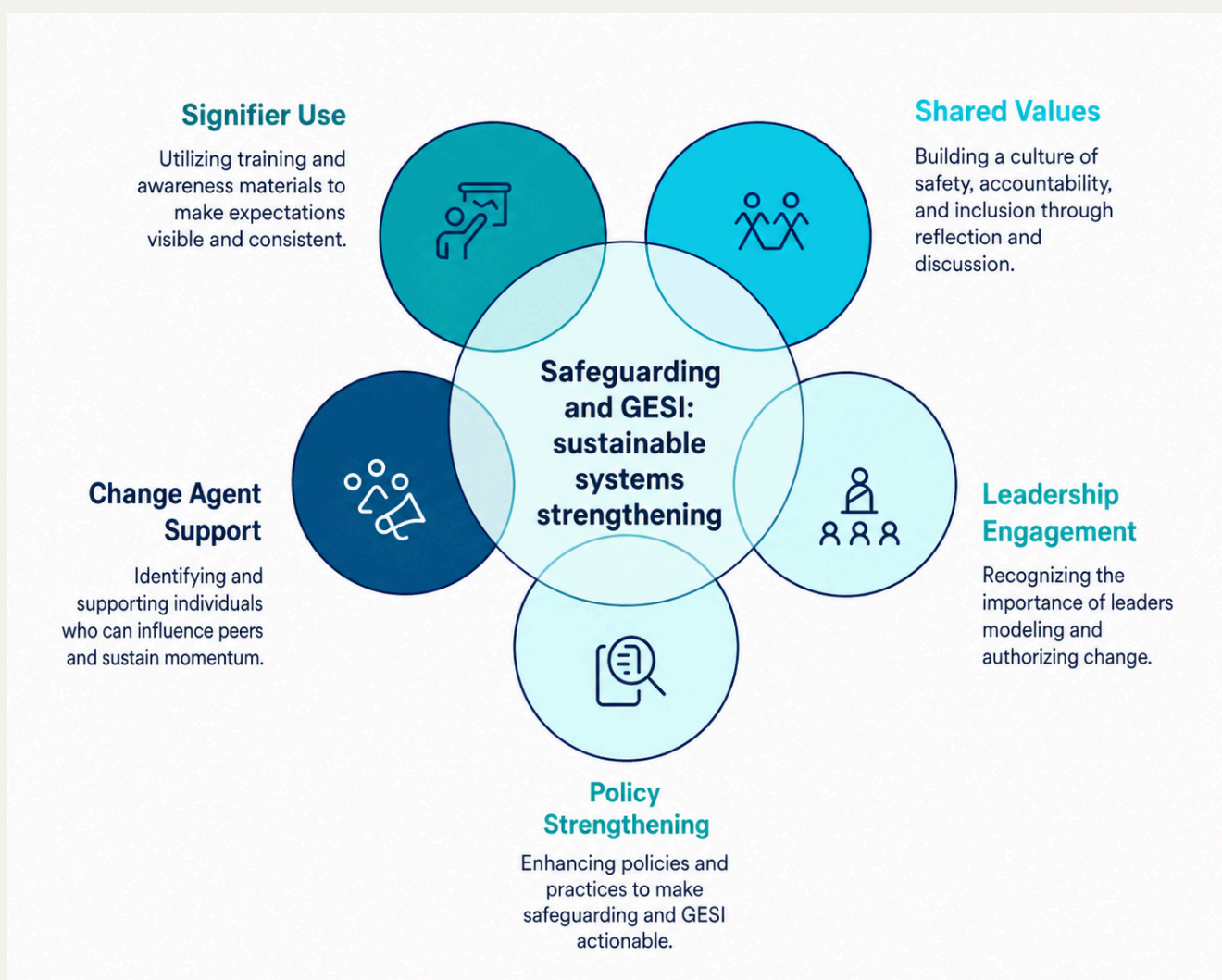


Figure 1: SDDirect's model of sustainable systems strengthening

At state and federal level, it meant strengthening the wider safeguarding and GESI ecosystem through policy dialogue, coordination, capacity building, monitoring, and support to government systems so that reform could be sustained and scaled rather than delivered in parallel by the programme.

In practice, the model worked because it combined five elements of change.

- First, it worked on shared values, using reflection and discussion to build cultures of safety, accountability and inclusion.
- Second, it engaged leadership, recognising that reform sticks when leaders model and authorise change.
- Third, it strengthened policies, practices and procedures so that safeguarding and GESI became actionable rather than rhetorical.
- Fourth, it identified and supported change agents inside institutions who could influence peers and sustain momentum.
- Fifth, it used signifiers such as training, awareness materials and reporting mechanisms to make expectations visible and consistent.

## How the model was integrated across the programme

A major strength of the PLANE approach was that safeguarding and GESI were integrated across the full programme rather than confined to one technical strand.

In Output 1, the focus was on teaching, learning and school-level systems. PLANE supported state-owned GESI scans, capacity development plans and self-assessment tools; strengthened GESI-responsive pedagogy and safeguarding monitoring; and built the capacity of SUBEBs, LGEAs, School Support Officers, Designated Safeguarding Leads and Gender Desk Officers. It also used refresher training, peer learning, roundtables and advocacy to create local ownership and change agents.

In Output 2, the focus was governance, policy and budgets. PLANE supported the mainstreaming of safeguarding and GESI into policies, implementation frameworks, medium-term sector strategies and annual budget processes. It also supported more inclusive teacher recruitment and leadership pathways, policy review and responsive budgeting tools, and the domestication of safe school policies and the National Policy on Safe, Secure and Violence-Free Schools.

In Output 3, the approach was adapted for non-state education systems, including innovation hubs, community learning hubs, IQTE and private providers. This included strengthening non-state actor capacity, simplifying and translating standards, working with private school associations and boards, and using community and religious leader engagement to support uptake.

In Output 4, the programme strengthened the evidence, learning and communications needed to support wider uptake. PLANE promoted its safeguarding and GESI approach through campaigns and events, produced communication and advocacy materials, and strengthened learning loops and monitoring systems so that government actors could increasingly communicate and act independently.

## Box 2: Embedding safeguarding through government leadership

One of the clearest signs of progress under PLANE has been Kano State's shift from safeguarding preparation to full government-led classroom implementation. Through the rollout of structured, guided Safeguarding Short Messages in 44 pilot schools, one in each LGA, and the integration of monitoring into existing SUBEB and school oversight structures, safeguarding has begun to function as a routine, system-owned accountability mechanism. This demonstrates how PLANE's safeguarding support has helped move safeguarding from project activity to embedded government practice.

## Box 3: Female Teacher Recruitment – addressing the root causes in partnership with the government

The SDDirect Safeguarding and GEDSI team identified female teacher recruitment as one of the key root causes shaping both safeguarding risks and GEDSI barriers in education, and made it a priority issue within PLANE's systems-focused reform agenda with support from Outcome 2 and Outcome 4.

PLANE has supported state efforts to strengthen the recruitment, retention and deployment of female teachers, particularly in rural and underserved areas. This is central to the wider safeguarding and GEDSI agenda: female teachers can improve girls' enrolment, participation, retention and sense of safety, while also contributing to more gender-responsive school environments.

By combining research, analysis, policy dialogue and support to government planning, PLANE has helped position female teacher recruitment as a core education systems issue. In doing so, it has strengthened the case for state-led action that links workforce reform to safer, more inclusive education for girls and boys in their full diversity.

## Why this model matters

**What SDDirect's approach to safeguarding and GESI in PLANE shows is that safer and more inclusive education systems are not built through one-off training or stand-alone activities. They are built by linking policy, practice, capacity, accountability, community engagement and evidence within government systems.**

The key to the success of this model is that **it worked with existing systems and people in government**, supporting them through Technical Assistance that met them where they were and took them on a journey of change. **This model is cost effective, sustainable and scalable – all key at a time when resources in this area of work are increasingly short.**

The programme's experience also shows that safeguarding and GESI are mutually reinforcing. Children cannot learn well if they are unsafe, excluded or unable to participate fully. Equally, education reform will not be genuinely inclusive unless it addresses the different ways gender, disability and other forms of marginalisation shape children's experience of school.

Our approach therefore **offers a credible model for donors looking to invest in approaches that combine school safety, gender equality, social inclusion and education quality**. It is practical, system-facing and scalable. It has **shown measurable progress in schools, strengthened government demand and ownership, and generated a body of practice that can inform future investment in safer and more inclusive education systems**.

## What next

Due to the changing funding landscape, PLANE's standalone implementation of safeguarding and GESI work has now been closed. The sustainability of the model means that work will continue on after PLANE resources have gone. However, more can be done by: deepening our impact in Kano, Kaduna and Jigawa; and by replicating our work in other states or in other contexts entirely.

If you would like to find out more about our approach to safeguarding and GESI on PLANE, or on other projects, please contact Danielle Cornish-Spencer, Head of Technical Services, SDDirect on [danielle@sddirect.org.uk](mailto:danielle@sddirect.org.uk)



Figure 2: Communications materials developed through PLANE to support inclusion between classmates

<sup>ii</sup>Results accurate as of February 2026