Advancing the Agency of Adolescent Girls

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Disclaimer

Motivation

- ▶ Throughout the developing world, women and girls face severe limitations on their ability to exercise agency in important choice domains

- ▶ Limitations on agency have remained stubbornly persistent even as other dimensions of women's and girls' welfare have shown rapid improvement in recent decades

- ▶ For example, in this study's location of Rajasthan, India, net primary school enrollment rates for girls increased from 25 percent in 1983 to 85 percent in 2009.

- ▶ However, in our evaluation sample, over 90 percent of adult women in our respondents' households state that a wife should always obey her husband, and, at an average age of eleven, 17 percent of our subjects are married

This Evaluation

- ▶ This project explores whether it is possible to increase girls' agency and stimulate the development of more equitable gender norms in a setting of intense gender disadvantage and, through these attitudinal changes, increase girls' schooling attainment
- ▶ Specifically, we evaluate the impact of a life skills curriculum and mentoring program through an RCT including 2,459 adolescent girls enrolled in 119 schools in Rajasthan, India

Overview of GEP

- ▶ The Girls' Education Program (GEP) seeks to enhance girls' agency and enable them to advocate for themselves in decision-making processes
- ▶ Core elements are in-school, biweekly life skills classes and group mentoring sessions
- ▶ The curriculum, developed by partner organization Room to Read (RtR), is implemented by a female Social Mobilizer who is from the area and has completed secondary school
- ▶ 95,000 girls in 9 countries enrolled in GEP since 2007

Life Skills in GEP

▶ Life skills, or "non-cognitive skills", cover a range of traits that are seen as important determinants of academic achievement, labor market success, and individual well-being

▶ RtR identified ten life skills that are targeted by GEP: self-confidence, expressing and managing emotions, empathy, self-control, critical thinking, decision-making, perseverance, communication, relationship building, and creative problem solving

▶ GEP also involves applying skills to simulated situations; evolves as girls age and regularly revisits topics

Experimental Design

- ▶ GEP begins in grade six and typically continues through secondary school
  - ▶ Primary data collection for this evaluation took place after two years (when girls had completed grade 7)
- ▶ In other contexts, GEP has included material support as well as family and community engagement
- ▶ Ajmer district within Rajasthan was chosen as the evaluation site; it was a state where Room to Read had a limited prior engagement and was open to expansion
- ▶ Given that GEP is a school-level intervention, a cluster-randomized trial was appropriate

Experimental Design: Sample Selection

- ▶ 119 schools in Ajmer, Rajasthan were identified as eligible to receive the program
    - ▶ To be eligible, a school needed to enroll girls in grades six through eight, have 16-32 girls in grade five, not offer other NGO-based life skills classes, and have an adequate classroom available
    - ▶ School-level randomization was stratified by school quality index
- ▶ All girls enrolled in sample schools in grade five and on track to enroll in grade six were eligible for evaluation
- ▶ Any eligible girl for whom parent/guardian provided consent was enrolled (2,459 girls in total)
- ▶ 3% of eligible population was never enrolled in study; by endline, 24 girls fully attrited (0.098%) and 72 girls did not complete child survey (we conduct bounding exercises to assess importance)
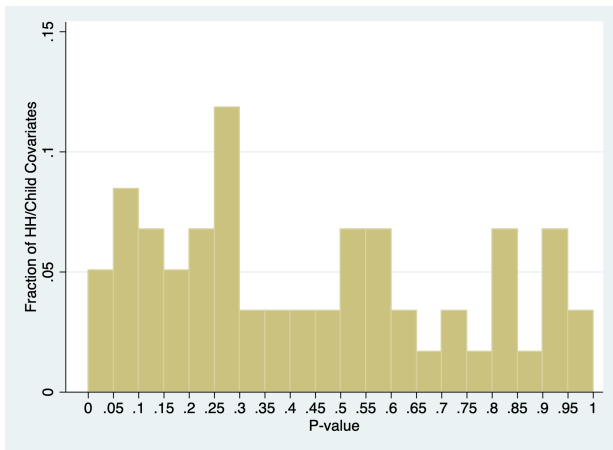
Program Engagement (Grades 6 and 7)
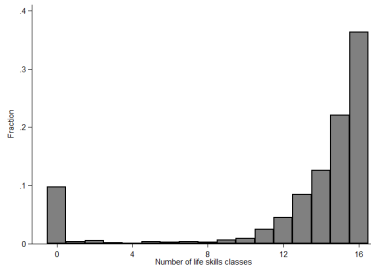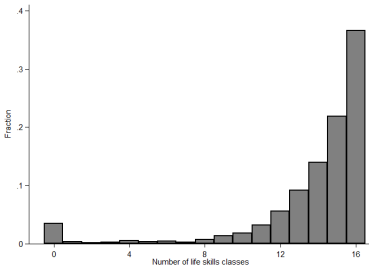
High levels of program attendance; complete attendance at life skills classes is the mode in both years

Balance by Treatment Assignment

▶ Only an indicator for whether child works has a p-value below 0.10
 and a false discovery rate below 25 percent (it is 23 percent)

Statistical Models (Pre-specified)

▶ Benchmark model includes controls for baseline value of outcome, a vector of age dummies, and baseline variables where imbalances were identified:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 T_s + \beta_2 Y_{is,t-1} + \beta_3 \xi_{is,t-1} + \mu_s + \gamma_i + \lambda_i + \epsilon_{ist}$$

▶ The additional controls add precision, but there are no significant changes in estimated treatment effects; we also show consistent effects in a simpler specification.

Non-cognitive skills
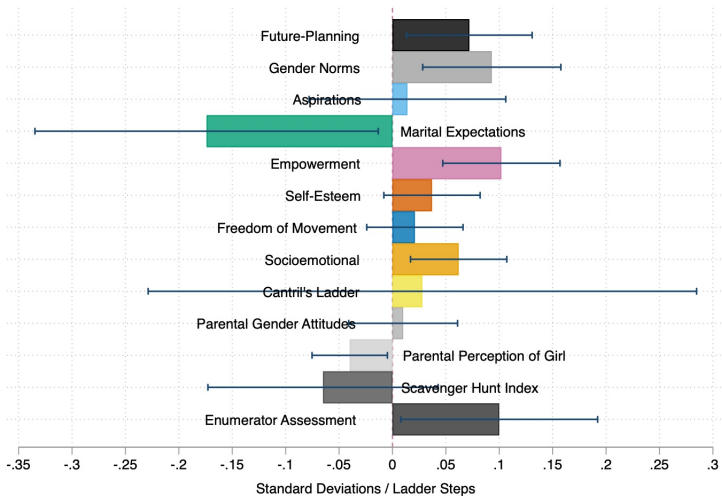
Life Skills

- ▶ Girls in GEP report improvements in social and emotional support and empowerment
- ▶ They also demonstrate more positive gender norms and clear evidence of increases in future planning
- ▶ There is also evidence of a decline in parental perceptions of girls' strength (they perceive them as less helpful) and a shift in enumerators' perceptions of girls
- ▶ However, in subsequent analyses, we find no evidence of significant changes in performance on demonstration-based tasks designed to measure life skills

School Dropout
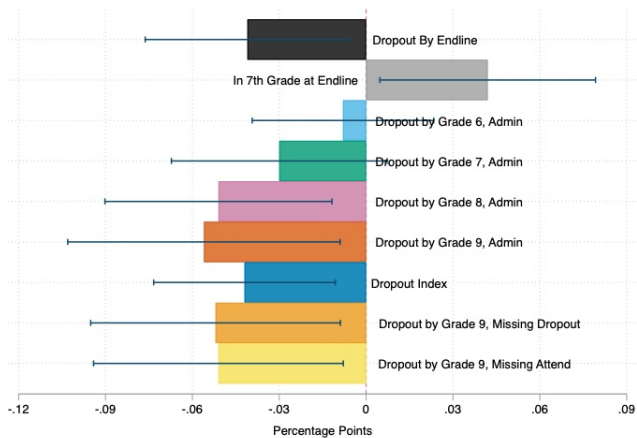
Dropout Results

▶ We observe a decline in dropout of about 25-30% that is persistent from the conclusion of grade seven (survey endline data) to the initiation of ninth grade (as observed in administrative data).

▶ The start of grade nine (secondary school) is a point of significant dropout for girls: dropout rate in the control arm increases from 13% to 29% between grades seven and nine.

Ancillary Outcomes

- ▶ We find statistically insignificant impacts on school attendance and survey-based and administrative test scores
- ▶ We also fail to reject a null effect of treatment on child labor and child marriage
- ▶ Pre-specified heterogeneity analyses suggest little heterogeneity with respect to school quality, baseline child age, maternal education, or exposure of the household to recent shocks

Discussion

- ▶ The growth in socioemotional support is consistent with reduced dropout — girls value social engagement more — with no effect on school performance.
- ▶ Girls clearly also exercise more decision-making power, though it is not obvious that they use this agency to negotiate with their parents around staying in school
    - ▶ Parental and child preferences around education in fact seem well-aligned: in the control sample at endline, two-thirds of parents report that they expect their daughters will complete at least senior secondary school, and 71 percent expect their daughters will complete at least five more years of schooling (beyond grade seven).

Conclusion

- ▶ While past research has demonstrated that material transfers can be used to promote schooling, we show that non-material interventions targeting attitudinal barriers can generate shifts in schooling

- ▶ GEP impacts on girls' social supports in school appear to play central role by increasing shadow value of continued school enrollment

- ▶ High rate of program participation and amplifying effects of strengthened friendship networks highlight tradeoffs inherent in targeting inside versus outside of schools