The Impact of a School-Based Gender Attitude Change Program in India

Researchers:

Diva Dhar

Tarun Jain

Seema Jayachandran

Sector(s): Gender, Labor Markets

Location: Haryana, India

Sample: 314 government schools

Initiative(s): Post-Primary Education Initiative (PPE)

Target group: Secondary schools Students

Outcome of interest: Discrimination Aspirations Gender attitudes and norms

Intervention type: Information Training Norms change Engaging men in gender norms change

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Partner organization(s): Breakthrough, Government of Haryana, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), Gates Foundation, International Growth Center (IGC)

Gender inequality is an issue across all societies and it is particularly challenging in many low-income countries. In India, researchers evaluated the impact of interactive classroom discussions about gender roles and gender discrimination on adolescents' gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors. The program impacted participants' attitudes and made them more supportive of gender equality. In addition, the program led students, particularly boys, to enact more gender-equitable behavior. These short-run effects were still present two years after the program had ended.

Policy issue

Gender inequality is an issue across all societies and it is particularly challenging in low-income countries. Economic development alone seems unlikely to achieve gender equality, as many gender gaps persist despite economic progress. Increasingly, researchers are considering the role of cultural norms in perpetuating gender inequality as research shows that even long-held norms can be changed. Addressing gender norms at an early age may have an impact not only on adolescents throughout their life but also on their parents and future generations. Can interactive classroom discussions about gender roles and gender discrimination change adolescents' gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors?

Context of the evaluation

According to the last government census in 2011, the state of Haryana had the most male-skewed sex ratio among all Indian states, with 861 girls for every 1,000 boys. Sparked by the Government of Haryana's interest in evaluating policies to reduce

gender inequality, researchers partnered with Breakthrough, a human rights organization based in India that works to promote social change. Breakthrough designed and implemented a curriculum around promoting gender equality among adolescents.

Breakthrough's program, titled Taaron ki Toli (Gang of Stars), was centered around classroom discussions about gender equality in secondary schools, with a 45-minute session held every three weeks for two and a half school years. Sessions included interactive classroom discussions on household chores and learning skills like communication. Outside of the classroom, students completed homework assignments, such as writing stories or discussing gender with family members, in addition to activities like optional Breakthrough clubs.

Two girls in conversation.

Photo credit: Thomas Chupein, J-PAL

Details of the intervention

In partnership with Breakthrough and the Government of Haryana, researchers evaluated a school-based program to test if adolescents' gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors can change through discussion and persuasion. From a sample of 314 government schools, researchers randomly selected 150 in which to implement the program, while the remaining 164 served as a comparison group. The program began in the 2014-2015 academic year and targeted secondary school students between 11–15 years old, as adolescence is believed to be a critical time for development when students are still forming their own attitudes and are mature enough to reflect on complex issues. Over two and a half years, Breakthrough facilitators conducted 27 45-minute long sessions during the school day.

Researchers surveyed students four to nine months before the program began and one to six months after the program ended. They aggregated survey responses into indices that captured students' gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors.

To measure the program's medium-term impacts, researchers surveyed the students again two years after the program ended, when the students were, on average, 17 years old. In addition, they distributed application forms for a college scholarship program to female participants to determine whether the program increased girls' aspirations and thus made them more likely to apply for a scholarship. Finally, researchers also informed participants about a petition to end the dowry system, with the names of signatories to be published in the local newspaper, to evaluate whether participants would be willing to publicly support a gender-progressive position.

Researchers are measuring long-term impacts of the program into adulthood. They are surveying the students and their parents five years after the program ended to gather information on participants' education, employment, and marriage status.

See author Seema Jayachandran explain the intervention and results:

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Results and policy lessons

The Breakthrough program made students' gender attitudes more progressive, or aligned with more gender-equal views. Both boys and girls changed their behavior to be more gender equitable, but girls may have faced greater external constraints to enacting change. These effects persisted two years after the program had ended.

Gender attitudes: A few months after the program ended, students expressed more progressive gender attitudes and continued doing so two years later. In the short term, the program led to a 0.18 standard deviation increase on the gender attitude index, with equal impacts for boys and girls. To put this in context, students who initially held gender discriminatory attitudes changed their views to be more gender-equal in 16 percent of cases. The largest impacts were on attitudes towards employment, gender roles, and education. Two years after the program, there continued to be an increase in the gender attitudes index of 0.16 standard deviations, indicating that the short-term effects had persisted two years after the program ended.

The program also changed students' perceptions of social norms about women's employment. Students' perception that others in the community held gender-progressive views related to women's employment increased by 5.2 percentage points from 34 percent. In the medium term, participants continued to view the community as more supportive of female employment, but there

was no longer an effect on perceived norms about female education.

Despite these impacts on attitudes, boys and girls were no more likely to sign a public petition to end the dowry system two years after the program ended.

Aspirations: The program had no impact on girls' reported educational and professional aspirations in the short term or medium term. This may have been because girls' aspirations, as measured in the surveys, were already high and comparable to boys before the program. However, in the medium term, girls were 3.1 percentage points (or 8 percent) more likely to apply to the college scholarship, indicating a change in their educational intentions.

Gender-equitable behaviors: As a result of the program, participants' behavior became more aligned with gender-progressive norms by 0.20 standard deviations in the short term. This effect was greater for boys than girls: a 0.26 standard deviation increase for boys compared to 0.14 for girls. In practice, this meant that boys reported doing more household chores, while girls did not reduce their number of chores, for example. These results suggest that although both boys and girls changed their behavior, girls may have faced greater external constraints to enacting change. Participants continued to exhibit more gender-equitable behaviors two years after the program ended, with a 0.23 standard deviation increase on the gender-equitable behaviors index. Even in the medium term, the impact on behavior was more pronounced for boys than girls.

These results suggest that programs that attempt to directly shape individuals' gender attitudes can make adolescents' attitudes and, in turn their behavior, more gender-progressive. They also highlight the importance of including boys and men in programs aimed at altering gender norms, given that boys and men might have more freedom to act on their gender-progressive views.