Providing Life Skills Training and Mentoring To Reduce School Dropout Among Girls in India

Sector(s): Education

J-PAL office: J-PAL South Asia

Location: India

Sample: 2,459 schoolgirls

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

Target group: Children Women and girls

Outcome of interest: Dropout and graduation Self-esteem/self-efficacy Socio-emotional development Soft skills Take-up of program/social service/healthy behavior

Intervention type: Coaching and mentoring Soft skills Psychosocial support

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0001046

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Research Papers: Advancing the Agency of Adolescent Girls

Partner organization(s): Room to Read, U.S. Department of Labor

Globally, over 98 million girls do not have access to education, and in many places, girls may struggle to influence decisions about their schooling. In partnership with Room to Read and J-PAL South Asia, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of a school-based life skills training program on girls' dropout rates and life skills in India. The program led to fewer girls dropping out of school and improved girls' life skills, including future planning, agency, sense of empowerment, and socioemotional support. Enhanced socioemotional support from the program appeared to be a key driver of girls' decision to stay in school.

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Gender inequity in school access remains persistent around the world with more than 98 million adolescent girls out of school. Because education is essential for building life skills and accessing employment, girls' lower access may limit their ability to gain the skills and knowledge they need for work and everyday life.[1]

In rural India, girls face compounding barriers to staying in school, including low aspirations, narrow views of women's roles in society, limited social support, and little power over decisions that affect their own lives. Previous research has shown that interventions that provide material incentives such as cash, , bicycles, , or uniforms, can be an effective way to keep girls in school. However, less is known about whether non-material programs that provide socioemotional support and empower girls to advocate for themselves are equally effective.

Can a school-based life skills program reduce school dropout and improve school progression and life skills among adolescent girls in India? Do any gains in school enrollment lead to better academic performance?

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This evaluation took place in the Ajmer district of Rajasthan, a state in northwest India with some of the country's lowest levels of female literacy in 2018.

Among the mothers of girls in the study, only 20 percent had any secondary education or worked for an employer. Seventy-four percent of mothers said that dowry was necessary for daughters, and more than 90 percent reported that their daughters were not allowed to travel alone to any place other than school or a friend's house. Among the 11-year-old girls themselves, 17 percent were married at the time of the baseline survey, and over 70 percent agreed that dowry was always necessary for marriage. A quarter of girls agreed that boys are naturally better at studying than girls, that girls should not pursue higher education since they will eventually marry, and that boys should go to school over girls when money is tight.



Three school girls stand with a chalkboard sign that reads "Education."

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In partnership with Room to Read, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of a school-based life skills program on school dropout and life skills among adolescent girls in Ajmer, Rajasthan. Room to Read is a non-profit organization that encourages girls to finish secondary school and develop life skills through their life skills training program, the Girls Education Program (GEP). They randomized 2,459 girls across 119 schools to two groups:

1. *Girls Education Program (GEP) group (60 schools)* – Girls in sixth grade were offered the GEP. The GEP consists of twice per month hour-long life skills classes in schools and group mentoring sessions for girls in grades 6 and 7. GEP teaches ten life skills including self-confidence, expressing and managing emotions, empathy, self-control, critical thinking, decision-

making, perseverance, communication, relationship building, and creative problem solving. Women from the local area who have completed secondary and postsecondary school were trained and hired full-time by Room to Read as social mobilizers to deliver the program. On average, social mobilizers delivered GEP in two schools to fifty girls.

2. *Comparison group (59 schools)* – Girls in the comparison group were not offered the GEP.

Researchers surveyed girls and their caregivers before the program began (December 2015–January 2016) and two years after the program started (July 2018–December 2018), once girls had completed seventh grade. They collected data on girls' educational outcomes, primarily dropout, attendance, grade progression, and test scores, as well as life skills, including planning for the future, gender attitudes, and aspirations. Researchers then collected administrative records from schools tracking enrollment and grades through the start of ninth grade (July 2019), allowing them to assess whether dropout effects persisted beyond the evaluation period. The study had very low program dropout (below 1 percent) and high program participation.

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After two years, girls who participated in the GEP were less likely to drop out of school, were more likely to progress to subsequent grade levels, and demonstrated better life skills related to agency, socioemotional support, and goal-setting than girls in the comparison group. GEP had no impact on other life skills (e.g., employment or educational aspirations and self-esteem), school attendance, or test scores.

School dropout and progression: Girls in the GEP group were 4.1 percentage points less likely to have dropped out of school by the end of seventh grade compared to girls in the comparison group, where the dropout rate was 13.2 percent (a 31.1 percent reduction). The same girls were also 4.2 percentage points (4.9 percent) more likely to progress to seventh grade. Using administrative records collected through the start of ninth grade (1.5 years after the intervention ended), researchers found that the reduction in dropout held steady at around 25 percent across grades eight and nine. This remained consistent even as girls reached a common dropout point at the transition to high school. In addition, the dropout reduction is concentrated among girls with a high chance of dropping out, suggesting that GEP may have been most impactful for girls that were particularly vulnerable.

Researchers posit that girls in the GEP may have been less likely to drop out because they felt more supported and connected. Girls in the GEP group reported having more friends and spending more time socializing, and these stronger friendships may have raised girls' expectations about the benefits of attending school given they would have their friends' company.

Life skills: Girls in the GEP group also showed improvements in several life skills domains six months after their final seventh grade class relative to girls in the comparison group. They expressed more concrete future goals and clearer plans to achieve them and more equitable views about how boys and girls should be treated, indicating shifts in gender norms. Girls in the GEP group also reported greater empowerment. This included a 17 percent increase in perceived say over school attendance decisions, a 29 percent increase in the probability they feel they are the sole decision-maker about the type of work they will do, and a 32 percent increase in the likelihood of talking to their parents about marriage.

The program also shifted girls' expectations around marriage: girls in the GEP group were more likely to cite 18 as the appropriate marriage age. They were less likely to select ages below or above 18 compared to the comparison group, reflecting the curriculum's emphasis on 18 as the legal and appropriate minimum age of marriage.

Academic performance: GEP had no impact on school attendance, time spent studying, or scores on standardized tests administered by the researchers. Researchers propose that this may reflect girls' stronger social support structures in the GEP group. For example, an increase in social support may have made it easier to miss school, as friends could help them catch up on missed assignments, thus offsetting increased inclination to attend. Similarly, increased socializing at school may have diverted attention away from academics, potentially offsetting improvements in academic performance that could have arisen from

greater motivation.

Even without improvements in test scores, continued enrollment can still be valuable. Staying in school helps girls build human capital, potentially delay early marriage in a place where child marriage is common, and strengthen their social ties and life experiences. These findings suggest that a school-based life skills program can reduce dropout and improve life skills among adolescent girls in settings where girls face gender disadvantages.

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1. World Bank. n.d. “Education.” Accessed June 1, 2026. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/education-day.