Learning beyond school: the impact of a remedial learning and literacy program on out-of-school girls in Pakistan

Sector(s): Education, Gender

Fieldwork: Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan

Sample: 300 villages

Target group: Women and girls

Outcome of interest: Empowerment Student learning Women's/girls' decision-making Aspirations Gender attitudes and norms

Intervention type: Tracking and remedial education Empowerment training Pedagogical innovation

Partner organization(s): Government of Punjab, Pakistan, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi, UK International Development

Nearly 60 percent of girls in Pakistan do not finish primary education, despite significant increases in enrollment. Once girls are out of school, they have limited opportunities to return to formal education. To address these barriers, the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), *Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi* (ITA), and the government of Punjab developed a program called *Siyani Sahelian* (Advancing Action for Adolescent Girls, or A3G) to support learning for out of school for adolescent girls. Researchers measured the impact of the alternative schooling model on adolescent girls' education, aspirations, and empowerment.

Policy issue

Globally, once children stop going to school, they often have no path to return to formal education. Additionally, in many contexts, the barriers faced by children are more severe for girls. These may include an inability to afford tuition and school materials, having to travel long distances to school, violence against girls in and around schools, and gender-insensitive school environments such as a lack of female teachers.[1] According to UNICEF, 129 million girls worldwide do not attend school, with 32 million of them elementary school age and 97 million secondary school age.[2] This has long-term impacts on their later life outcomes. Low levels of education can restrict women's access to the workforce, lead them to marry and have children young, and limit their aspirations and power within their homes. Giving out-of-school adolescent girls a second chance at education might greatly enhance their reading and numeracy skills, encourage them to continue with formal education, boost their future incomes, and give them more control over household decisions. Research shows that educating girls also has the potential to positively impact outcomes among people who didn't participate in the program, such as siblings, and can improve the nutrition, years of education, and test scores of future generations.

Despite the documented learning crisis, little research exists on how to improve learning and later life outcomes for adolescent girls who do not attend school. This project used a randomized evaluation to study the causal effect of a learning program targeting adolescent girls on their education, aspirations, and empowerment.

Context of the evaluation

In Punjab, Pakistan, only 65% of women have completed primary school and 40% of girls are out of school by 9th grade.[3] By grade 9, only 13 percent of girls are in school. Various barriers to education are present for girls in this region. For example, 45 percent

of villages do not have schools. Distance to school can be a larger barrier for girls than boys since parents may worry more about girls' safety and girls tend to have time-consuming household responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings and completing household chores. Furthermore, cultural constraints could discourage parents from sending adolescent girls to mixed-gender primary schools. Parents may also doubt the economic returns of keeping their daughters in school and fear for their safety while they are there. Finally, girls who temporarily drop out of school due to a lack of support or shocks to family income or health could find it difficult to re-enter the system.

To address these barriers, the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), the non-profit organization *Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi* (ITA), and the government of Punjab developed a program to support schooling for adolescent girls aged 9 to 19 in rural Punjab, Pakistan. *Siyani Sahelian* (Advancing Action for Adolescent Girls, or A3G), provided a culturally sensitive, easily accessible, alternative schooling model for out-of-school adolescent girls. The A3G program had two tracks based on prior schooling level. For girls with some formal schooling, the remedial learning track lasted six months and taught the content of grades 5 through 8. For girls with little or no formal schooling, the functional literacy track consisted of a three-month course on basic literacy and numeracy. A3G's goal was to help adolescent girls improve their literacy and numeracy skills so they could move on to secondary education or secure higher-paying jobs in the future. The program was designed to address multiple barriers faced by girls: the groups met in a central, accessible location for fewer hours per day than a standard school day. Female teachers delivered lessons to groups of only girls using active, student-centered pedagogy. This alternative educational approach was designed to appeal to girls and their families, taking into consideration the constraints they face.



Three girls sit in a classroom holding books and other learning materials.

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Details of the intervention

In partnership with FCDO, ITA, and the government of Punjab, researchers used a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of the A3G program's alternative schooling model on adolescent girls' education and empowerment. From a sample of 300 villages, researchers randomly selected 150 in which to implement the program, while the remaining 150 served as a comparison group. The program began in September 2019 and ended in December 2019 for the girls in the three-month program, and March 2020 for the girls in the six-month program. Following the end of the program, researchers collected follow-up surveys in March 2020. Researchers used a household survey to interview a total of 7,200 households across these 300 villages. Researchers also interviewed one village member per community using a community survey. At the community level, researchers collected information on the number of schools and other services, availability of work opportunities for girls and women, and types of economic activity in the villages.

Researchers sought to measure several key outcomes at the household level, including literacy and numeracy, educational and career aspirations, empowerment, and social indicators such as time use and psychological well-being. The research took place in Bahawalpur and Muzaffargarh districts in Punjab, Pakistan.

Researchers tested the program's impact on adolescent girls' literacy and numeracy, as well as their decision-making power and status within the household. The researchers also measured the impact of the program on other household members' perceptions and values about girls and women, educational attainment and aspirations, and spending. Finally, the researchers measured the impact of the program on other households that did not have an eligible adolescent girl participating in the program in order to discern the potential spillover of the program to nearby non-participating households.

In addition to receiving ethical review and approvals from an institutional review board, researchers made efforts to address and account for ethical questions. Researchers did not anticipate that the content of the courses would be offensive for participants or pose other risks to their families. Furthermore, researchers used female enumerators and took necessary measures to ensure participant confidentiality and consent. Finally, since measuring empowerment is likely to be subject to reporting bias, researchers conducted interviews privately and assured participants about confidentiality.

Results and policy lessons

Research ongoing; results forthcoming.

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1. Psaki, Stephanie, Nicole Haberland, Barbara Mensch, Lisa Woyczynski, and Emily Chuang. 2022. "Policies and Interventions to Remove Gender-related Barriers to Girls' School Participation and Learning in Low- and Middle-income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Evidence." Campbell Systematic Reviews 12 (1): e1207. doi: 10.1002/cl2.1207.
2. UNICEF. "Girls' Education." Last modified January 19, 2020. https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education.
3. UNICEF. "Pakistan (Punjab) Education Fact Sheets." 2022.