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DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING EVIDENCE-BASED LIFE SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMMES AND GIRLS' CLUBS

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WHY LIFE SKILLS AND WHAT DO THEY ENTAIL?

Girls' clubs and life skills programmes have become popular policy tools to increase adolescent girls' well-being and empowerment. Governments and nongovernmental organizations, particularly those in low- and middle-income countries, are investing in programmes to increase young girls' agency and key life outcomes. The Population Council's Evidence in Gender and Education Resource (EGER) mapping of more than 280 global organisations found that life skills and girls' groups were among the top components most frequently used in girls education programmes. The analysis revealed that 51 percent of 320 programmes aiming to improve girls' enrolment and attainment are dedicated to life skills and safe spaces for girls.

The World Health Organisation describes life skills as *'the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life'*. While there is no comprehensive list of these skills, life skills programmes often have soft skills (e.g. negotiation and communication) or psychosocial skills like self-efficacy at their core. In many life skills programmes, these 'soft skills' are often paired with 'hard skills' such as vocational training, and reproductive health information to support decision-making. The training is often delivered through girls' clubs, where girls can meet exclusively in a safe location, form friendships, and share experiences, and are typically held in an after-school setting with a peer leader and mentor.

THE BARRIERS TO 'AGENCY'

Agency is the capacity to make decisions that positively impact one's life. Women typically experience two types of barriers to this agency: external and internal.

External barriers are issues outside of a woman's control. These issues include economic and legal barriers as well as restrictive gender norms or conflict, which limit the choices women can make.

Internal constraints are the psychological factors that prevent (or enable) women and girls from exercising agency: the 'power within'. The factors include aspirations, self-efficacy and attitudes about gender norms. Women generally have a weaker sense of power within than men. For example, approximately 30 percent of women worldwide believe it is problematic if a woman earns more than her husband.

THE ROLE OF LIFE SKILLS PROGRAMMES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Life skills programmes provide girls with access to soft skills training which can give them the self-belief and abilities to make choices to invest in their human capital accumulation. This enhancement of their agency and capacity to make decisions can positively impact their lives. Over time, strengthening their agency can lead to improvements in access to education, labour market outcomes, reproductive health, along with reductions in incidences of gender-based violence.

This guide leverages insights from the rich body of evidence on 'how' and 'why' such life skills programmes have been effective, and leverages these insights to propose some practical considerations for the design of life skills programmes.

UNDERSTAND THE LOCAL CONTEXT AND IDENTIFY THE BARRIERS

Before implementation, it is important to critically assess the appropriateness and scope of life skills programming in the local context. It is essential to keep the intended programme impacts front of mind, to identify the girls' scope for decision-making in the specific context, and to consider how external barriers may limit girls' agency and undermine the appropriateness of an intervention targeting their internal barriers to agency.

A. Start with the long-term impact and need

Several randomised evaluations of life skills programmes, including the Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) programme in Uganda, the Girls Education Programme (GEP) in India, and negotiation skills training in Zambia, show that such programmes have positive effects not only on girls' 'power within' and agency but also downstream outcomes in education participation, labour market participation, marriage and childbearing, and gender-based violence. For example, Room to Read's GEP, comprising life skills classes and mentoring sessions, reduced girls' likelihood of dropout in grade 7 by 31 percent. Meanwhile, BRAC's ELA Programme in Uganda, delivering life skills and vocational skills training, increased girls' likelihood of engaging in income-generating activities by 67 percent relative to a comparison group average of 10 percent before programme implementation, whilst also delaying the age of marriage and childbirth. These life skills programmes boosted women's agency to decide how best to invest in their future, such as in deciding to continue schooling or delay marriage/childbearing. Unpacking the most salient need in a specific context, and thus having a clear north star on what the main objective is for the programme, can assist in maintaining direction. **Identifying and starting with these objectives helps ensure that the programme addresses the area of high need.**

B. Identify the contextual barriers and drivers

Given that life skills training programmes typically target adolescent girls directly, it is important to explore whether their agency is primarily impacted by internal or external barriers. Find out whether girls are deciding to continue schooling (or not), whether—and why—they want to get married, and their preferences. Knowing this information can help position life skills more accurately within the local context and increase the likelihood of the training genuinely benefitting the girls.

For example, randomised evaluations of two different life skills programmes in Bangladesh illustrate the importance of contextual information. The BALIKA programme, which focused on either remedial education, reproductive health/gender rights training, or vocational training for adolescents, was able to delay marriage. However, the Kishoree Kontha programme, which combined psychosocial skills with remedial education, failed to impact the likelihood of early marriage. Regional variation in prevalent marriage norms, determining girls' input in marriage decisions, likely explains the different outcomes. The area where the BALIKA intervention was implemented had higher rates of marriages arranged by couples rather than their families (more than 20 percent) compared to the location of the Kishoree Kontha programme (10 percent). In the BALIKA context, parents asked for their daughter's consent before arranging her marriage in more than 70 percent of cases, further illustrating that these differences in the prevalent norms and scope for girls to be included in decision-making may have contributed to the difference in the programme's impact. In fact, qualitative evidence from Kishoree Kontha suggested that girls may not have had the power or opportunity to influence decisions related to marriage even if they so desired.

Even if girls have the scope to make decisions, programme design still needs to consider the impact of prominent external barriers on girls' decision-making process. Are there structural constraints like economic structures, legal barriers and/or conflict that prevent girls from being involved in decision-making or shape choices for themselves?

Where external barriers are prominent, life skills training may not be sufficient to shift outcomes for girls. For instance, when girls have the freedom to make decisions about their reproductive health, such as choosing whether to have casual relationships outside of marriage, they can avoid unwanted pregnancies more effectively using the training provided through the life skills programme. On the other hand, if rates of early childbearing are high because early marriage is high in the context, even reproductive health training may not be enough to cause girls to choose to delay childbirth. This is because once married, they may have limited input in decisions about when to have children.

IDENTIFY THE MOST RELEVANT 'MECHANISMS' FOR CHANGE

Mechanisms are ways in which girls acquire agency and exercise it by making decisions to improve their lives. There are a variety of mechanisms through which life skills could shift girls' agency, and leveraging these more intentionally in design could increase programme efficacy. These mechanisms include the following:

Power within: 'Power within' is the internal belief in one's worth and ability, measured through aspirations, self-efficacy and attitudes about gender norms. The Educate! programme in Uganda, which paired soft and vocational training to improve engagement in income-generating activities, had no discernible labour effects after four years but improved high school and tertiary school completion rates among girls. At the high school level, girls who participated in the programme were 6.6 percentage points more likely to complete secondary school, helping to close the gender gap between boys and girls. The training also increased the likelihood of enrolling in or completing tertiary education for girls by 8.4 percentage points, relative to the control group. Researchers noted that the changes in girls' soft skills, particularly those focused on long-term goals, may have contributed to girls feeling more in control of their lives, leading them to adopt a more future-oriented, persistent and proactive mindset.

Many Girls Education Challenge (GEC) projects included social and emotional learning (SEL) within the life skills and girls' clubs. These soft skills were captured in the life skills indices and in the self-esteem and self-efficacy measurements. The projects' external evaluations showed links between improvement in SEL—such as life skills, self confidence and self-esteem, self-efficacy and leadership—and other outcomes, including learning and successful transition. Projects saw an average increase of 23 percent in the girls' ability to apply SEL skills to their lives. One mechanism for change is a girls' club. The Somali Girls Education Promotion Programme (SOMGEP-T) included Girls' Empowerment Forums (GEFs), a school-based empowerment club dedicated to developing girls' life skills. These GEFs were associated with significantly higher gains in learning—a difference of 6.6 percentage points over and above the comparison group in terms of aggregated learning scores.

Information: Providing girls with new information allows them to consider the cost and benefits of making certain decisions. A randomised evaluation of the Girl Empower intervention in Liberia, which included reproductive health training, improved girls' knowledge of safe sexual practices and HIV, led to an increase in condom use and a reduction in the number of active sexual partners.

Negotiation and bargaining skills: These skills equip girls to communicate their desires and hopes for their lives to others and negotiate with other decision makers. In Zambia, a negotiation skills training programme for adolescents increased school enrolment by approximately 10 percent in the crucial upper secondary years. It also increased attendance by enabling strategic cooperation between parents and their daughters. Concretely, daughters made strategic transfers to their parents (e.g. doing more household chores) in response to greater educational investment.

Social bonds: Helping girls build stronger relationships with their support networks can encourage girls' investment decisions and help them achieve their goals. Girls who received the GEP's life skills classes and mentoring sessions were 4 percentage points less likely to have dropped out of school after grade 7 from a base of 13.2 percent (equivalent to a 31 percent decrease in dropout), and the impact was persistent through grades 8 and 9. Researchers deduce that this effect was driven by strengthening social relationships among the girls, making them want to spend more time in school and helping them overcome demotivating factors to schooling, such as teasing.

The knowledge of the existence and manifestation of these mechanisms can inform the curation of life skills content that best suits the intended long-term impact and local context. For example, if a project identified high rates of absence during menstruation because girls did not know how to use available pads or materials or were feeling ashamed, the designers of the life skills programme could include content to improve girls' information and address this issue in a sensitive and supportive manner, being intentional about supplying relevant information and strengthening social bonds around shared experiences.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS MATTER IN DRIVING IMPACT

Any substantive effort to enhance girls' well-being, social networks and life skills, especially when designed and implemented well, can contribute to girls feeling safe and happy at school and can form the foundation for girls' focus, attendance and motivation for learning. That said, being a member of a girls' club is not generally sufficient to raise learning outcomes. Strong pedagogy, curricula and materials are also important. Additionally, projects that combine girls' clubs with engagement sessions with parents and community members may also impact social and gender norms in communities. Four key areas have driven implementation success in GEC projects:

A. Ensure girls' participation by actively engaging community and caregivers.

GEC projects found that actively engaging the community and caregivers in the development and running of the girls' clubs achieved strong buy-in. It is likely that this engagement also helped shift attitudes towards girls' rights and freedom of movement more generally. When engaging with the community specifically, GEC found that enlisting opinion formers and community gatekeepers can help shift negative perceptions of the clubs. Through these influential networks, the perceptions of the girls' clubs can be reframed from a place for them to gossip or as a threat to local cultures and traditions to a valuable space for learning new skills and gaining knowledge. Inviting parents, particularly mothers, to participate in the clubs reinforced the bond between mothers and daughters and the club's status within the community. This interaction also led to further involvement in girls' education, increasing attendance and strengthening learning.

B. Select appropriate basic logistics to maximise attendance.

A pragmatic and flexible approach to the timing, duration and location of club sessions is important for supporting regular attendance and access, particularly for the most vulnerable girls. GEC programmes' mentors typically ran 30- to 45-minute club sessions once or twice a week, but after-school sessions sometimes posed attendance challenges. Education systems that have recently reformed their school timetables to formally include extracurricular life skills periods have experienced improved club attendance by scheduling sessions within this time slot. Education for Life (Action Aid) in Kenya delivered their girls' club content component within the same three-hour session as English and maths lessons,[1] meaning that their girls, most of whom had small children, did not have to return for separate club sessions but had a clear, short time period in the afternoon which they could plan for and commit to.

C. Develop effective facilitators.

GEC finds that when a programme seeks to shift gender norms and attitudes, life skills must be taught by facilitators who can challenge old ways of thinking, model new ones, and can operate within a relationship of mutual trust with girls. This dynamic moves away from the traditional teacher-student relationship and requires intensive input and encouragement from project staff. Dedicating time to build capacity with intensive facilitator training at different stages of a programme is critical to maintain and increase engagement.

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[1] The project capitalised on a restructuring of the curriculum and school day. It changed the session time and length and integrated life skills into the literacy and numeracy components to positively impact on attendance.

D. Measure success through monitoring and evaluation.

Using a clear framework on what life skills are, defining the programme's expected achievements, and how these effects can be measured is key to understanding impact. Defined concepts with indicators reduce the risk of priorities becoming misaligned or approaches being implemented and monitored ineffectively. It is also worth recognising that projects that can contact participants after the programme are more able to measure contributions to improvements in agency, self-esteem or confidence and capture the life choices that girls have been able to make due to the life skills interventions or due to attending a girls' club. *See* J-PAL's Practical Guide to Measuring Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Impact Evaluations *for details on the methodologies that can be used to collect data about women's agency and ability to make choices that positively affect their lives.*

If you are designing a life skills programme and would like to discuss how to incorporate evidence in the design, or how to evaluate the programme using randomised evaluations, please reach out to the Girls Education and Empowerment portfolio at gee@povertyactionlab.org.

If you are designing programmes that focus on reaching the most marginalised girls and would like to know more about the implementation evidence that the GEC has collated, please reach out to the Girls' Education Challenge at emma.sarton@girlseducationchallenge.org.