ENHANCING WOMEN’S AGENCY: CROSS-CUTTING LESSONS FROM EXPERIMENTAL AND QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

This publication summarizes a review paper on interventions that improve women’s agency, “What works to enhance women’s agency: Cross-cutting lessons from experimental and quasi-experimental studies” by Wei Chang (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Eleonora Guarnieri (ifo Institute), Seema Jayachandran (Northwestern University), Lucía Díaz-Martin (J-PAL), Akshara Gopalan (J-PAL), and Claire Walsh (J-PAL).

OVERVIEW AND POLICY ISSUES

Women and girls lack agency in many contexts around the world. Compared to men, women in low- and middle-income countries, on average, have less freedom of choice, control over their life, say in household decision-making, and lower life satisfaction.1 At the institutional level, social norms around early marriage, having sons versus daughters, domestic and unpaid care work, and women’s role in the workforce and politics further limit women’s opportunities compared to men.1–3

This review defines women’s agency as their ability to set goals and act on them, to make decisions that matter to them, and to participate in the economy and public life.4,5 A woman’s agency is limited if she does not believe in her own worth, has a limited role in household decisions, cannot decide on her own where to go and when, or if she suffers from violence. Meanwhile, a woman can gain and express agency in various domains of her life, including within her family, through engaging in economic activities and participating in political and community decision-making. Although agency is inherently multifaceted, much of the existing evidence synthesis focuses on one intervention type or outcome (e.g., economic empowerment). This review analyzes approaches that cut across different domains to improve women’s agency.

Supporting women to be agents is largely considered to be a key component of reducing gender inequality. It is important to understand what approaches are effective in enhancing women’s agency comprehensively across multiple domains and why. This review focuses on evidence that cuts across the many ways in which women can express agency, drawing from quantitative evidence to summarize research on interventions that aim to support women’s agency.
KEY LESSONS

Gender norms surrounding women’s agency limit the impacts of many interventions that aim to support and empower women.

Access to financial resources alone, without addressing household dynamics or gender norms, does not consistently improve women’s agency.

Programs that give women access to resources are more likely to be successful in improving women’s agency if they use design features that give women more control over those resources.

For young women, some economic interventions were effective in delaying the timing of marriage and childbearing. Changing household dynamics after marriage seems more challenging.

Programs designed to relieve multiple constraints that women face are frequently effective in improving women’s agency. These programs often include elements that raise awareness of gender dynamics or develop soft or life skills. However, more research is needed on cost-effectiveness along with which program elements drive impacts and how.

Some approaches that improve women’s agency across multiple domains include the following: 1) adolescent girls’ programs that enhance girls’ soft and life skills; 2) laws that mandate gender equality by protecting women’s property rights, removing labor restrictions, or guaranteeing women’s representation in politics; 3) cash and in-kind transfer programs that enhance women’s agency in marriage and childbearing decisions or protect women against violence; and 4) the intensive, multifaceted “Graduation” approach originally developed by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) BRAC.

Photos: Cover, 6, 7 Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment; 2, 8, 11 Juan Arredondo/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment; 10 Paula Bronstein/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment
MEASURING AND DEFINING AGENCY

Drawing from existing literature on women’s agency and empowerment, this review uses a framework consisting of direct and indirect indicators of agency. Direct indicators of agency are fundamental to a woman’s ability to make meaningful choices and to act on them. However, the precise manifestations of agency will always vary between individuals. Indirect indicators of agency are outcomes that may result from women exercising agency. Yet, since they may not fully capture a woman’s ability to make meaningful choices and act on them, indirect indicators serve as proxy measures. This review identifies four direct indicators of agency and seven indirect indicators of agency across three key domains:

DIRECT INDICATORS OF AGENCY

- **“Power within”**
  Internal belief in one’s worth and ability, measured through aspirations, self-efficacy, and attitudes about gender norms. Related to a woman’s belief in her ability to set goals and act on them, some of these measures are considered subjective and focus on women’s own perceptions of agency.

- **Household decision-making**
  A woman’s participation in household decisions on a range of topics (e.g., spending money, visiting family/friends, health care for themselves and their children).

- **Freedom of movement**
  A woman’s ability to choose where to go and when, a key manifestation of agency.

- **Freedom from violence**
  A woman’s ability to live free of emotional, physical, or sexual violence, which embody an extreme limitation of a woman’s agency. Measured through experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) or violence against adolescent girls.

SELECTED INDIRECT INDICATORS OF AGENCY ACROSS THREE DOMAINS

**FAMILY DOMAIN**
- Timing of marriage and childbearing
- Contraceptive use

**ECONOMIC DOMAIN**
- Labor force participation
- Income generation from entrepreneurship

**POLITICAL AND COMMUNITY DOMAIN**
- Participation in politics and community decision-making
- Voting behavior
- Participation in groups and ties in the community

Note: This review adapted existing frameworks by Laslo et al. (2017); Kabeer (1999); Malhotra and Schuler (2002); Ibrahim and Alkire (2007); Alkire et al. (2013); and Quisumbing, Rubin, and Spruwe (2016) to develop this list of direct and indirect indicators of agency.
This review synthesizes evidence from 160 papers that evaluated interventions that either targeted women and girls or aimed to improve women’s agency in low- and middle-income countries. The document is structured according to the direct and indirect indicators of agency and describes whether and how different interventions led to changes in women’s agency. This review also summarizes major trends across these indicators and interventions to distill findings that cut across the different areas in which women can gain and express agency.

**TABLE 1. INTERVENTIONS INCLUDED IN THIS REVIEW**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVENTION TYPE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information sharing</td>
<td>Providing information on key issues in a targeted manner, either through inviting a specific audience to receive information or through de facto geographic targeting (e.g., paper/leaflets that have limited geographic reach).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass media intervention</td>
<td>Providing information on key issues in a nontargeted manner (i.e., general audience received information) through mass media channels (e.g., public screening of video, radio, television).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community mobilization</td>
<td>Capacity-building efforts through which community members plan and carry out community-wide activities on a participatory and sustained basis, usually with gender-related objectives (e.g., series of public events to educate on and reduce street harassment) or components that encourage women’s participation (e.g., participatory groups to empower women to demand better health care services).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging men</td>
<td>Targeting men in programs with gender equality objectives (e.g., discussions, trainings, financial groups).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills</td>
<td>Training programs emphasizing business, financial, or vocational skills and knowledge required for employment or entrepreneurship; sometimes including an apprenticeship or internship and linkages to formal employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment/life/soft skills</td>
<td>Training programs emphasizing women’s and girls’ ability to thrive in the world via empowerment, including psychosocial skills (e.g., locus of control and self-efficacy), soft skills (e.g., negotiation and goal setting), and life skills (e.g., reproductive health). Often cover many topics simultaneously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent girls programs</td>
<td>Training programs geared toward adolescent girls’ skills acquisition, often delivered in a “safe space” model in an after-school setting with a peer leader and mentor. Can include components such as microcredit or vocational training.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

* Given the large body of public health and medical literature, this literature review excluded studies that evaluated the effects of behavioral change interventions or health care services on women’s health.

** For specific findings related to each indicator of agency, see Chang et al. 2020.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVENTION TYPE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microcredit</td>
<td>Providing small loans through banks or NGOs to be repaid with interest, either through communal group banking or through individual credit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings</td>
<td>Access to savings vehicles through bank accounts, savings groups, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), or Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs). The latter three involve women managing lending groups that pool savings, typically outside of formal banking systems, and also include elements of mutual support and social relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business grants</td>
<td>Providing cash or in-kind support to businesses with the intention to support productive investments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfers</td>
<td>Providing cash or in-kind support to households with the intention to support household consumption or expenses. Conditional transfers either require the funds to be used for specific purposes or require certain conditions to be fulfilled prior to disbursement; unconditional transfers have no such requirements. In-kind transfers can be in the form of food or other consumables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to jobs</td>
<td>Programs to increase access to employment opportunities, such as access to recruitment services, job offers, or wage subsidies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicomponent interventions</td>
<td>Programs that include a combination of the aforementioned interventions, e.g., the Graduation approach developed by the NGO BRAC (a program that combines multiple components designed to provide a “big push” to unlock the poverty trap, including a productive asset transfer, technical trainings, consumption support, access to savings, and life skills or health information training).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land and property regulations</td>
<td>Laws and regulations that protect women’s rights to own, acquire, and manage tangible or intangible properties (e.g., land, housing, bank accounts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender quotas</td>
<td>Laws and regulations that reserve a defined proportion or number of seats for women in political or community representation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to childcare</td>
<td>Policies and programs that provide families with affordable access to childcare services.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS

I. Gender norms surrounding women’s agency limit the impacts of many interventions that aim to support and empower women.

While this finding is not surprising, many of the studies in this review offer empirical evidence across intervention types and outcome areas confirming what many scholars and practitioners have previously documented. Social norms related to gender limit the effectiveness of many interventions that target women. For example, loans and business training had limited success for women-owned enterprises in Pakistan, as social norms expected women to run businesses from home and to have limited interactions with people outside of the household. In addition, women business owners in India, Ghana, and Sri Lanka did not benefit from programs that provided microcredit or business grants if other members of their household also owned businesses. Women may have directed their financial resources to men’s businesses rather than their own, driven in part by the social norm that expect husbands to earn more than wives.

Gender prejudices against women playing a role in public life can limit the impact of interventions aimed at increasing women’s participation in politics and community decision-making. In India, gender quotas for women in local government bodies, which increased women’s representation in politics and community decision-making, also changed community attitudes about women candidates’ ability to win elections. However, electoral victories by women political leaders did not have sustained impacts on women’s subsequent political participation in areas with high levels of gender prejudice. Norms related to how women should behave in public may also prevent women’s meaningful participation in community decision-making. In Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo, requiring women’s participation in decision-making processes for community-driven development increased women’s meeting attendance but did not encourage them to speak more at the meetings.

Information interventions may also fail due to restrictive gender norms that prevent women from acting on information. In China, sharing information with women about voter rights increased their knowledge about voting but did not affect their voting behavior, potentially due to social restrictions related to women’s mobility and voting. In Uganda, an information intervention describing how women should be included in community-driven development inadvertently highlighted the fact that women had been systematically excluded, which further discouraged women’s participation in public life.

Restrictive social norms that dictate women’s key life cycle decisions and their role in society can impede interventions from having transformative impacts on women’s agency. For example, an adolescent girls empowerment program in Bangladesh had no impact on girls’ age of marriage, perhaps because the program did not change the social norm that parents made decisions about their daughters’ marriage. In addition, providing women’s partners and other family members with information about the benefits and safety of women’s employment did not increase female labor force participation in India, a setting with restrictive norms about women working outside the home.

Evidence base: 18 papers

II. Access to financial resources alone, without addressing household dynamics or gender norms, does not consistently improve women’s agency. Cash and in-kind transfers offer one exception.

Overall, access to financial resources through microcredit, savings groups, and business grants had limited impacts on women’s income generation from entrepreneurship and mixed impacts on employment. The lack of consistent impacts can be partially explained by household dynamics. For example, women in Uganda who reported that their partners did not treat them well did not experience economic gains from access to bundled services including a business grant, while women who did not report being treated poorly by their partners doubled their income. Evidence from India, Ghana, and Sri Lanka indicates that women diverted credit or business loans provided to them to their spouses or other businesses in the household, which may explain why women-owned businesses did not benefit from access to financial resources. Access to financial resources through jobs and employment, microcredit,
and savings groups did not consistently increase household decision-making power for women in the experimental and quasi-experimental studies we reviewed. In contrast, cash and in-kind transfers did increase women’s agency in some domains. For example, access to conditional cash transfers enhanced women’s decision-making power in Mexico, Uruguay, and Ecuador (but not Colombia). However, more research is needed, as the survey questions used to measure decision-making were frequently associated with the cash transfer conditions that parents had to meet to receive the funds (e.g., children’s schooling). Various kinds of transfers (in-kind, conditional, or unconditional) were also effective in reducing IPV through increasing women’s power in the home or alleviating economic stress. For younger women, transfers delayed the timing of marriage through encouraging girls to stay in school longer or alleviating families’ economic pressure, which may have compelled them to marry girls early.

Evidence base: 32 papers

III. Programs that give women resources are more likely to be successful in improving women’s agency if they use design features that give women more control over those resources.

Transferring funds to women’s accounts through direct deposits or mobile payments gave women more control over financial resources and improved economic outcomes. In India, depositing wage payments for a federal workfare program directly to women’s bank accounts coupled with training on the benefits of the accounts increased women’s labor market participation. The program also enhanced women’s ability to travel to common places, like markets and health centers, and led women to hold more liberal attitudes toward women’s work. Researchers posited that strengthening women’s control over their income by depositing wages in bank accounts enhanced their bargaining power and enabled them to push back against restrictive gender norms.

Along the same lines, mobile payments, relative to cash, offered privacy and enabled women to protect their resources and maintain control over their use. For instance, providing cash transfer payments through mobile money instead of cash increased women’s participation in economic activities in Niger. Likewise, in Uganda, distributing loans to female borrowers through mobile money increased business profits by 15 percent relative to cash.

In some settings, savings accounts that offered commitment devices or were costly to access protected women’s control over financial resources against the demands of others, especially among women with low levels of decision-making power in the household. In the Philippines, access to a commitment savings account, which restricted withdrawals until the funds reached a prespecified amount or date, increased women’s control over household decisions related to spending on children. These commitment savings accounts were particularly effective for women who had lower levels of decision-making power at the start of the program. In rural Kenya, women market vendors used their zero-interest accounts despite large withdrawal fees, but few men used similar accounts that were offered to them. One possible explanation is that the relatively high withdrawal fees helped women protect their funds against pressures to share resources with family or friends. Similarly, in Kenya, women with low levels of decision-making power relative to...
their spouse stopped using their bank accounts when they were offered ATM cards that increased the accessibility and reduced the costs of using savings accounts.57

Some of the approaches outlined above helped women exercise agency by circumventing family members in immediate, daily decisions. However, such strategies of concealment can take a psychological toll on women and are unlikely to fundamentally alter power dynamics based on gender. For example, offering women in Zambia private access to contraceptives increased women's contraceptive use by giving them more control to act on their fertility goals relative to women who were offered contraceptives while their partners were present.58 However, offering contraceptives to women in private lowered women's self-reported health and happiness, suggesting that concealing contraceptive use from the partner could have caused marital conflict.58 In Uganda, women reported anecdotally that their contraceptive use from the partner could have caused marital conflict.58

In Bangladesh, exposure to increased job opportunities in the garment sector through the arrival of nearby garment factories was effective in delaying the timing of marriage and childbearing. Changing household dynamics in the context of marriage seems more challenging.

Evidence base: 8 papers

IV. For young women, some economic interventions were effective in delaying the timing of marriage and childbearing. Changing household dynamics in the context of marriage seems more challenging.

For young women, decisions about marriage and childbearing can be responsive to economic interventions, such as access to employment and cash or in-kind transfers. In India, access to job opportunities through recruitment services substantially changed women's fertility preferences, increased their participation in the labor market, and delayed marriage and childbearing.66 In Bangladesh, exposure to increased job opportunities in the garment sector through the arrival of nearby garment factories was associated with lower likelihood of early marriage and childbirth, due to older girls postponing marriage to work and younger girls staying in school.49 Various in-kind and cash transfer models were also effective in delaying marriage and childbearing among adolescent girls in Bangladesh, Malawi, Pakistan, and Kenya. 47,48,50,51 In Malawi, however, the effects of unconditional cash transfers were temporary and did not last after the transfers were discontinued.49

Nonetheless, most economic approaches did not consistently lead to positive impacts on women's household decision-making after marriage.12,24,26,28,31–38 This suggests that it may be more challenging to enhance women's agency within a marriage relative to their agency in the decision about when to marry. Further research is needed to identify effective approaches to change household dynamics within a marriage.

Evidence base: 19 papers

V. Programs designed to relieve multiple constraints that women face appear to be effective in improving women's agency. These programs often included elements that raised awareness about gender dynamics or developed participants' soft or life skills. However, more research is needed on cost-effectiveness along with which program elements are driving impacts and through what mechanisms.

Many programs that bundled together multiple intervention components enhanced several aspects of women's and girls' lives and improved their agency along several dimensions. For example, the intensive, multicomponent Graduation approach developed by the NGO BRAC, which provided a productive asset, consumption assistance, skills training, savings, and/or mentorship, led to sustained positive changes in income, consumption, and political participation among women living in extreme poverty in most contexts where it has been tested (e.g., Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, and Pakistan).61–63 Programs designed for adolescent girls often bundled various types of trainings (e.g., vocational, technical, and empowerment, life, or soft skills) and sometimes microcredit in a “safe space” setting where school-age girls could interact with peers and mentors. While these programs had inconsistent impacts on marriage and childbearing, they improved some elements of “power within,” social relationships, and economic empowerment later in life.1,64–70

Economic interventions, such as microcredit, transfers, and savings groups, coupled with trainings, discussions, or coaching to explicitly address gender dynamics were effective in improving women's agency by increasing “power within,”71–73 enhancing freedom of movement,171 reducing IPV,13,24 increasing participation in collective action,72 and strengthening social ties.33,73,74,75 Business trainings with components aimed at developing soft skills or addressing gender-specific constraints, such as self-confidence, gender equality, and self-efficacy, were effective in improving women's business outcomes in the majority of evaluations.77–80 For example, women in societies that strictly regulate women's social interactions often have limited social networks. In India, business training with a friend helped strengthen women's support networks and thus increased business incomes among women who faced the most caste-based social restrictions.81 However, no study directly tested business trainings that address gender-specific constraints against a standard business training module.

Across these bundled interventions, it is important to question whether offering multiple components is necessary to achieve impacts, and if so, to what extent the benefits of delivering each component are greater than the costs. For example, in six out of the seven countries where the Graduation approach was implemented, researchers found that the estimated benefits for households were greater than the costs.27,63 Studies of
interventions similar to the Graduation approach in Ghana and Uganda also suggest that the multicomponent nature was critical: providing access to financial resources alone, such as transfers or savings accounts, did not generate economically meaningful and cost-effective impacts in the way that the integrated packages did. Understanding the comparative cost-effectiveness of programs with various intensity levels is important to help inform policymakers considering different programming options in contexts with limited resources.

Evidence base: 30 papers

VI. Adolescent girls’ programs, laws that mandate gender equality, cash and in-kind transfer programs, and the Graduation approach are among the most effective approaches to improve women’s agency across multiple domains.

Adolescent girls’ programs provided various kinds of training, sometimes combined with economic resources, in a classroom or after-school setting. These trainings typically focused on developing life or soft skills such as negotiation, persuasion, resilience, reproductive health, and long-term planning. There is strong evidence that these programs improved girls’ “power within”—specifically, self-efficacy or attitudes about gender in Kenya, Bangladesh, Liberia, Ethiopia, India, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Haiti, and Zimbabwe. The majority of the evaluations of adolescent girls’ programs also found positive impacts on other meaningful outcomes, such as girls’ schooling, labor market participation, income-generating activities, and ties in the community, despite mixed impacts on marriage and childbearing decisions. However, implementation details and context were important to the success of a program. For example, an adolescent girls’ program in Tanzania did not improve “power within,” income generation, fertility preferences, or social ties, which researchers attributed to the fact that local implementers faced challenges adhering to the program model (e.g., holding sessions in the same location every week, replacing materials as they were worn).

Evidence base: 15 papers

Laws that protected women’s property rights had positive impacts on women’s agency in multiple areas. For example, equal inheritance property laws in India, which allowed women to have equal shares as men in ancestral property prior to marriage, were associated with greater educational attainment, delayed marriage, and increased employment for women. In Ethiopia, expanding wives’ access to marital property and removing restrictions on working outside the home were associated with improved occupational choices, particularly for unmarried young women, perhaps due to the availability of better economic opportunities. In China, which has a high prevalence of sex-selective abortions due to son preference, a legal reform that protected women’s property rights after divorce was associated with more girls among second-born children, indicating married women’s greater influence over fertility decisions.

Gender quotas that mandated women’s representation in local politics and community decision-making had sustained impacts.
on women's political agency, along with “power within” and agency in marriage decisions. Electoral quotas for women in India had long-term positive impacts on women’s political participation and women’s electoral success in subsequent elections.\(^{14,15,97}\) Importantly, these political gender quotas also increased girls’ aspirations,\(^ {98}\) improved attitudes toward female leaders,\(^ {14,15}\) and reduced child marriage.\(^ {99}\) In contrast, gender quotas were not as effective in changing gender norms or increasing women’s participation in public life when applied to community-driven development projects,\(^ {16,18,19}\) potentially because these gender quotas were not backed by government-sponsored, institutional, or legal mandates.\(^ {19}\)

**Evidence base: 17 papers**

Cash and in-kind transfers were effective in reducing IPV, but these effects rarely persisted after the transfers ended. Some studies indicate that cash transfers decreased IPV by alleviating poverty-related stress and reducing women’s tolerance for violence. Cash, vouchers, or food transfers reduced emotional, physical, and sexual IPV in Ecuador;\(^ {43}\) Unconditional cash transfers reduced physical violence in South Africa\(^ {45}\) and physical and sexual violence in Kenya.\(^ {46}\) However, these positive effects were not universal: women in Bangladesh only experienced positive impacts when the transfers were combined with a nutrition training program.\(^ {44}\) In addition, while more educated women in Ecuador experienced a reduction in emotional violence after receiving a cash transfer, lower-educated women who had as much or more education than their partners experienced an increase in emotional violence as a result of the transfer.\(^ {43,100}\) This finding illustrates the need to understand whether and how certain subgroups of women experience negative impacts as a result of access to transfers.

Conditional and unconditional transfers for adolescent girls in the form of cash, vouchers, and/or food also increased girls’ agency in marriage and childbearing. A cash transfer program conditional on girls’ school attendance delayed marriage in Pakistan.\(^ {48}\) Another cash transfer program in Malawi, conditional on school enrollment, delayed marriage only for girls who were out of school before the transfer was implemented.\(^ {47}\) Unconditional transfers also reduced marriage and childbearing while they were in place in Malawi\(^ {19}\) and reduced pregnancy among vulnerable children in Kenya.\(^ {51}\) Similarly, an in-kind transfer program that provided girls with school uniforms reduced marriage and childbearing in Kenya.\(^ {50}\) In Bangladesh, an in-kind transfer program reduced child marriage while it was in place.\(^ {3}\) Prolonging girls’ education and reducing family financial pressures that may have led to marriage or dropping out of school are two potential explanations for these impacts.

**Evidence base: 11 papers**

The NGO BRAC’s Graduation approach is an intensive, multifaceted intervention that often provides a productive asset, consumption assistance, skills training, savings, and/or mentorship over a limited period of time. This program, or similar models, led to sustained positive changes in income, consumption, and household assets two years after the asset transfer in Afghanistan; three years after the asset transfer in Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Pakistan, and Peru; and four years after the asset transfer in Bangladesh.\(^ {61–63}\) The intervention also increased women’s political participation and awareness across all countries. Nonetheless, there were no long-term impacts on women’s household decision-making.\(^ {61–63}\)

**Evidence base: 3 papers**
In the full review, we provide evidence synthesis for each direct and indirect indicator of women’s agency. Below are a few examples of indicator-specific takeaways—click through for more details and to read more takeaways from each section of the review:

**“Power within”:** Adolescent girls’ programs that included soft and life skills training, sometimes bundled with other interventions, improved girls’ self-efficacy and confidence and reduced their acceptance of restrictive gender norms.

**Household decision-making:** The economic interventions reviewed (microcredit, savings, unconditional transfers, and multicomponent poverty alleviation programs) had mixed and inconsistent impacts on women’s household decision-making. However, a small number of studies found that improving property rights laws and the justice system’s capacity to address domestic violence improved women’s influence over family decisions.

**Freedom of movement:** Most studies in which an intervention improved freedom of movement did not identify how exactly this effect occurred. However, two studies found that increasing women’s power in the home through control over financial resources was also effective in improving women’s freedom of movement, suggesting that this channel should be explored further.

**Freedom from violence:** Women’s access to cash and food transfers decreased experiences of IPV in the short run (though one study documented increases in emotional violence for some women). Reducing poverty-related stress and tolerance for violence are potential explanations for these impacts. Access to microcredit, savings groups, or employment did not lead to similar results.

**Timing of marriage and childbearing:** Overall, interventions that changed perceptions about girls’ abilities and opportunities or increased the educational and economic opportunities available to them encouraged girls and young women to delay pregnancy.

**Contraceptive use:** Giving women more direct control in family planning by providing privacy, life skills training, and more options in contraceptive products, or by encouraging more gender-equitable attitudes among men increased women’s agency in contraceptive use.

**Labor force participation:** Providing access to free or subsidized childcare increased women’s labor market participation in Indonesia, Kenya, and parts of Latin America.

**Income generation from entrepreneurship:** Business training programs varied greatly in program design and had mixed impacts on earnings. Successful programs often included gender equality content or addressed gender-specific constraints such as agency, soft skills, or social networks.

**Participation in politics and in community decision-making:** The Graduation approach increased women’s participation in politics and community decision-making in several contexts.

**Voting behaviors:** There is suggestive evidence that information sharing programs that aimed to encourage voting among women were not successful due in part to restrictive gender norms.

**Participation in groups and ties in the community:** Several studies suggest that women’s SHGs either increased or strengthened women’s ties in the community and participation in other groups in South Asia.
CONCLUSIONS

This review attempts to connect the dots between various domains, intervention types, and mechanisms to distill learnings on what approaches are effective in enhancing women’s agency. The rigorous evidence reviewed suggests the following:

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should intentionally address the constraints that women face when designing interventions. Programs should be designed to address power imbalances and social inequalities based on gender.

Gender norms play an important role in moderating or even limiting the intended intervention impacts. For this reason, access to resources alone, without addressing gender-specific constraints, is often not an effective mechanism for enhancing women’s agency.

Programs that offer resources might be more successful if they employ design features (e.g., digital accounts, privacy features) to give women more control over those resources. Nonetheless, design features that enable women to hide decisions from their spouses likely do not offer long-term solutions to the very power imbalances that require women to shield their possessions or conceal their choices.

Bundled programs that address multiple constraints women face, often including soft or life skills, appear effective in improving multiple indicators of women’s agency. However, more research is needed to understand costs, which mechanisms generate positive outcomes, and whether the full package of services is required.

Adolescent girls’ programs, laws that mandate equality, cash and in-kind transfers, and the Graduation approach are effective interventions in enhancing multiple indicators of women’s agency.

Opportunities to enhance women’s agency change over a woman’s life cycle. The timing of marriage and childbirth for young women offer key margins for improvements. It appears more challenging to alter household decision-making dynamics within a marriage.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should develop and test programs and policies that aim to shift—rather than accommodate—individual attitudes and collective norms about gender that perpetuate inequality. Mass media interventions, which can be scaled at relatively low costs, may be a promising approach, but future research is needed to explore how to use mass media interventions to shift attitudes toward gender norms, including, but not limited to, attitudes toward gender-based violence.

In general, more research is needed to test mechanisms through which interventions have worked and to evaluate long-run impacts after interventions end, especially for bundled programs. Other research priorities include better understanding the cost-effectiveness of bundled programs along with the role of soft skills in generating positive impacts on women’s agency.

How to improve relationships and power dynamics between individuals that consciously or unconsciously constrain women’s and girls’ agency (e.g., partners, parents, extended family members) remains another area for future research.

Experimenting with and validating metrics for household decision-making, psychological outcomes, and gender-based violence are important for future research efforts. As metrics are refined, other open questions remain: What is the relationship between elements of “power within” and other aspects of women’s agency like labor force or political participation? What kinds of interventions can enhance married women’s decision-making power? What kinds of interventions successfully reduce women’s time spent on unpaid care and domestic work?

ABOUT J-PAL

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a global research center working to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence. Anchored by a network of 194 affiliated professors at universities around the world, J-PAL conducts randomized impact evaluations to answer critical questions in the fight against poverty.

FOR FURTHER READING


Evidence Review Author: Wei Chang | Editor: Lucía Díaz-Martin

BIBLIOGRAPHY


