
Girls' Education at Scale

Summary of an Evidence Review of Expanding and Improving
Gender-Equitable Education

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Research, evaluation and learning are core components of Co-Impact's work. As we embark on a concerted effort to contribute to achieving gender equality at scale in the global south, we need to learn about and build on the existing evidence and knowledge. As part of our broader learning effort, we commissioned a series of rapid reviews of literature by area experts to help us understand major trends as well as new directions about what we know works - and doesn't work - to achieve gender-equitable outcomes at scale in the global south. While these reviews serve as a core component of our evolving thinking, they do not represent official opinions of Co-Impact.

Given that these reviews are focused on critical evidence of initiatives that have been evaluated at scale, we understand there are experiences and knowledge that may not be captured in these documents. We hope to invest in additional reviews in the future to cover other areas of inquiry, and also to build on a wider spectrum of evidence and perspectives.

This important work underpins the development of our own research and learning strategy, in which we will prioritize the questions and needs of practitioners working to achieve gender equitable outcomes, and also to amplify the voices and experiences of women, girls, and other marginalized groups. We hope that this evidence and knowledge, in turn, will contribute to building the global evidence base.

Background

In many countries, girls have fewer educational opportunities than boys. Even in countries where parity has been achieved, there are often regions or subgroups where girls face limited educational opportunities. Yet education, in addition to being a human right, has well-established benefits for girls. It increases economic opportunity, reduces adolescent marriage, and delivers gains to the subsequent generation.

The evidence on how to increase girls' access to education and how to improve the quality of their learning in school continues to grow rapidly. Yet much of the evidence derives from relatively small studies. While small studies implemented by non-government agencies can teach important lessons (e.g., whether a theory applies in real life) and small studies implemented by government agencies can teach other lessons (e.g., whether existing education delivery structures can implement a program and deliver positive benefits under careful supervision), there are lessons from interventions implemented at large scale that can be learned no other way.

Purpose

This rapid review synthesizes a wide range of evaluations that have been implemented at scale (reaching at least 10,000 students) to explore the most effective interventions for expanding and improving girls' education. We principally focus on student learning and school completion outcomes rather than outcomes earlier in the education process (like attendance). We complement this evidence strategically with some smaller scale studies or studies with other outcomes that shed light on the larger scale studies. We also examine the role of explicitly gender-focused interventions such as menstrual health programs or those that provide safe spaces for girls.

Beyond reviewing the evidence, this review provides a discussion of how to begin the process of deciding which interventions apply in which contexts through a consideration of constraints, solutions, and program costs. We provide lessons on scaling up programs effectively.

Evidence

Three classes of interventions implemented at scale have at least somewhat consistently delivered gains to girls' education: make school cheaper, make school more physically accessible, and teach better.

Making school cheaper usually comes in the form of eliminating school fees or providing scholarships. In some countries, fees have been eliminated only for girls; in other places, they have been eliminated for girls and boys but still delivered sizeable gains for girls. Another way to make school cheaper involves providing school meals, which yields

¹ This is an overview of the study "Girls' Education at Scale: Review of Evidence," by Evans, Mendez Acosta, and Yuan. Author affiliations: Evans and Mendez Acosta (Center for Global Development); Yuan (Harvard University). Corresponding author: Evans, devans@cgdev.org.

nutritional benefits as well as gains in school participation and student learning.

Making school more physically accessible involves school construction in places that lack sufficient school infrastructure for children to easily access schooling. It also involves providing easier transport to school, such as bicycles for secondary school girls. Making school accessible boosts school completion and learning.

Education systems can teach better by drawing on a wide range of strategies that have shown clear gains for girls at scale. These include multi-faceted literacy instruction programs that include detailed teacher guides together with teacher coaching and materials for students. They also include a range of programs to target students who have fallen behind for focused instruction, such as by teaching aides. Education technology has a mixed track record, but in some cases it has been deployed effectively to improve the quality of instruction. Perhaps the most common at-scale technology programs have been those to provide equipment to schools or students, and those have not been effective.

There is less evidence that programs that are highly focused on girls' needs (e.g., the provision of sanitary pads or of girls' safe spaces) deliver clear gains in terms of final educational outcomes. However, menstrual health programs do improve girls' emotional well-being and reduce harassment, and they may boost attendance in some contexts. Girls' safe space programs have, in several countries, helped to reduce violence against girls. These are worthy objectives in and of themselves.

We also identify areas with either positive evidence but from fewer contexts (e.g., providing eyeglasses for students or literacy training for mothers) or areas with more mixed evidence on our outcomes of interest (cash transfers, other teacher policies, accountability programs).

Recommendations

Few programs that have been evaluated at large scale have sought to integrate girls' concerns with general educational improvements. While some school construction or improvement programs have focused on ensuring, for example, sex-segregated bathrooms, there is much to learn about how to improve pedagogy in such a way that it not only boosts learning outcomes and encourages girls to complete their schooling, but also pushes back against restrictive gender norms. Overall, the number of topics on which there is extensive evidence on the effectiveness at scale, especially in contexts that already have small scale evidence, is very limited. More studies that illuminate both the process of effectively (or ineffectively) moving to scale and the impact of programs at scale will clear the path for improved girls' outcomes in the future.