

Support by Gender

State of the Evidence

Description of the Evidence

Evidence suggests that general programs that aim to improve educational outcomes may help the most disadvantaged gender the most (Evans and Yuan 2019). A J-PAL review including randomized evaluations of 25 programs to increase school participation disaggregated results by gender and found that most programs that improved school participation were as effective—if not more effective—for girls as they were for boys. Specifically, programs aimed at reducing costs and increasing perceived benefits of education increased participation for boys and girls equally in 14 examples, and improved girls' attendance more in 5 examples. Overall, programs aimed at increasing participation tended to help the gender with the lowest initial attendance most. While this is typically girls, it may be boys in some cases, such as examples from Nicaragua (Maluccio and Flores 2004) and Colombia (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2011).

Similarly, a forthcoming J-PAL review of 53 programs aiming to increase learning found a similar lesson may be true for learning outcomes: programs did not often have significantly different impacts on learning by gender. In most examples where this was not true, learning increased more for girls than for boys (such as in these examples in Uganda (Lucas et al. 2014) and Tanzania (Mbiti et al. 2019)).

However, the body of research on the role of gender-specific barriers to and enablers of learning is still growing. Girls may face unique barriers to education, which in some contexts may require targeted programs designed specifically to overcome these barriers. In some instances when girls benefited less than boys, gender-specific barriers, such as gender stereotypes or preferential treatment afforded to boys by tutors, prevented girls from benefiting from programs to the same extent as boys, such as in this example in Peru (Beuermann et al. 2013). In other instances, girls benefited more from the presence of gender-specific enablers. For example, giving girls bikes to use as transportation to secondary school in India increased both enrollment and achievement, including a 12 percent increase in the number of girls who passed the secondary school certificate exam (Muralidharan and Prakash 2017). Another study in India



found that female teachers were more effective at teaching girls than male teachers, but no less effective at teaching boys, suggesting that hiring more female teachers might reduce gender gaps in test scores (Muralidharan and Sheth 2016). In another example, giving girls the chance to learn in groups with female friends improved learning outcomes in Bangladesh (Hahn et al. 2017). On the whole, more research is needed to firmly establish the role of gender-specific barriers and enablers.

One of the key challenges to understanding if and how interventions affect girls differently is that studies do not always report program impacts by gender. It is therefore important that randomized evaluations report gender differences in program impacts more consistently.

Notes on Context

Differentiating support by gender may look different depending on context, where either gender may face different barriers to participation or learning in school. Programs targeting one gender may be more effective at closing gender gaps in participation or learning when those gaps are larger in magnitude to begin with.

Equity Considerations

Programs providing differentiated support to boys and girls will want to consider whether and how the approach may exacerbate or reduce existing gender gaps in participation and learning. While girls are often the most disadvantaged gender in school participation and learning, in some contexts boys have worse outcomes. It will be important to consider how targeted programs for girls may have negative or null effects on boys (and vice versa).

Programs that provide the same support to boys and girls may be able to improve outcomes for both genders but in some cases, may not address underlying gender gaps in school participation and learning outcomes if the most disadvantaged gender is not helped the most.

Operationalization

Research Questions

Below are open research questions on this topic. This list is not exhaustive but rather is illustrative of the types of questions that will help education actors make more evidence-based decisions to improve learning. Education actors interested in implementing programs in this category may want to consider including a randomized evaluation alongside implementation to (1) understand the impacts of the program, and (2) add to the global knowledge base.

One simple way to increase the knowledge base is to encourage research and implementer teams to measure and report gender-specific outcomes, even when programs are not targeting support by gender. This will help education actors better understand the role of gender-specific and gender-neutral programs in addressing educational outcomes for girls and boys.

- What are effective approaches to close gender gaps in school participation?
- What are effective approaches to close gender gaps in learning?
- What types of programs are most effective at addressing different gender-specific barriers such as cultural norms, financial constraints, and safety challenges?

The Population Council's Girls' Education Roadmap (Psaki et al. 2021) outlines a number of open questions in the area of girls' education.

Successful Examples

- The Impact of a School-Based Gender Attitude Change Program in India ([Jayachandran et al. 2020](#))
- The Effect of Village-Based Schools in Afghanistan ([Linden and Burde 2013](#))
- Cycling to School: Increasing Secondary School Enrollment for Girls in India ([Muralidharan & Prakash 2017](#))

Further Action Options

For approaches with limited evidence of effectiveness in the literature, more evidence generation is recommended to close evidence gaps. Based on the evidence for this category, potential next steps might include:

- Connecting with researchers to identify relevant open questions that would benefit from further research;
- Other activities to think through the research needs of this evidence in your context.

If you are interested in exploring these or other options, please contact the [J-PAL Education team](#) at, JPAL_Education@povertyactionlab.org, to set up an initial exploratory meeting. The team will be happy to brainstorm potential next steps.

