

Supporting girls' education: an evaluation of 'Room to Read' in Nepal

Emerging baseline findings Executive Summary

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December 2018

Executive summary

Background and report objectives

Nepal, a small mountainous country situated between China and India, is one of the world's poorest countries. Of its nearly 30 million inhabitants, adolescent girls are amongst the most disadvantaged. A historical preference for sons first manifests soon after children are born but is amplified as they grow up as a result of increased pressure to conform to gender norms. As a result, adolescent girls have less access to secondary schooling than do boys, face a variety of restrictions associated with menstruation, are highly vulnerable to child marriage, and have limited access to mobility and decision-making. Room to Read, a US-based charity, is working to address these disadvantages by focusing on literacy and gender equality in education in Nepal.

This executive summary summarises preliminary findings from the baseline survey of Room to Read's Girls' Education Program evaluation, led by Emory University and Nepal's Center for Research on Environmental Health and Population Activities (CREPHA) of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) consortium. The Girls' Education Program fosters adolescent girls' educational success and broader development through regular girls-only life-skills classes, careful monitoring of girls' at-risk status, group mentoring for girls that is bolstered by one-on-one mentoring if a girl is identified as being at risk, educational sessions aimed at caregivers, community outreach, and need-based educational material support for the poorest girls. This evaluation aims to determine the short- and long-term impacts of the programme on adolescent girls' capabilities, including school retention, progression and performance, life-skills development, empowerment, voice and agency.

Methodology

Evaluation of the Girls' Education Program, which is quantitative and quasi-experimental, is taking place in Nepal's Nuwakot and Tanahun districts. The final baseline sample included 571 girls, aged 12-14 (or enrolled in 6th grade), who are participating in the programme at one of

24 schools (12 per district). It also included, as a control group, 1,126 girls the same age who live in randomly selected adjacent areas and are not participating in the programme.

Data was collected between July and September 2018 by Nepali female enumerators who had been carefully trained in survey administration and ethics. Face-to-face interviews were computer-assisted via android tablets (where connectivity allowed) and with paper-based forms (where connectivity was poor). While interviews were conducted with girls as well as with their caregivers and school administrators, this report focuses on the findings from core adolescent respondents.

Surveys completed by adolescent girls included 18 modules encompassing topics ranging from educational experiences and outcomes to gender attitudes and marriage aspirations. Questions were drawn from previous research with Nepali adolescents and validated youth development scales but also included novel modules designed for this study (e.g. those on caretaker/daughter social networks). Care was taken to ensure that questions were framed in ways that made data comparable to that being collected in the other GAGE core study sites.

Key findings

Education and learning

At baseline, adolescent girls in the intervention group and the control group were similar in terms of their educational aspirations, access and outcomes. Aspirations were extremely high. Over 70% of girls aspired to post-secondary education—with over 40% wanting to complete a bachelor's degree and over 30% aiming for a master's degree. Nearly all girls (99%) were confident in their ability to meet their educational aspirations.

Overall, girls' attendance also was high. Over the last two weeks, the median number of days missed by girls in both groups was zero. That said, 30% of girls had missed at least one day. The most common reasons that girls missed school were illness or disability (themselves or someone else in the household), a need to help with farm work, social or cultural reasons, and lack of interest in education. While

previous research has documented that Nepali girls are quite likely to miss school due to menstruation, less than 1% of girls in the baseline sample reported an absence due to menstruation—however, only half (47%) reported having their menses.

Maths and reading outcomes, which were assessed with a simple tool designed for developing contexts, also were similar across groups. In terms of maths, the average girl scored 4.4/5, meaning that most girls were comfortable with subtraction and some were moving on to addition. In terms of reading, the average girl scored 4.5/5, meaning that girls were comfortable reading either short paragraphs or longer stories.

Health and sexual and reproductive health

While over two-fifths of girls (42%), across both groups, had participated in an activity aimed at improving their health or nutrition knowledge over the last year, few (17%) had actually accessed health or nutrition support—likely due to the fact that adolescents are generally healthy. More interestingly, over a quarter of girls (26%) reported that they had some functional difficulty in performing routine tasks, most often reporting problems with memory or concentration. About 2.4% had significant difficulty with routine tasks.

While only half of the girls in the sample had begun menstruating, the majority (80%) reported at least some knowledge of the menstrual cycle. However, girls' knowledge was fragmented and thin. Nearly one-fifth of girls (17%), for example, believed menstruation to be a sign of disease and another tenth (9%) reported that they did not know whether it was a sign of disease. Girls in the intervention group were markedly more likely to believe in the disease-theory of menstruation than their peers in the control group (22% versus 15%). Although, as noted above, few girls missed school due to menstruation, menstrual taboos were extremely common. The majority avoided praying or making offerings while menstruating (84%), about half mentioned limited physical contact with family members, and one-fifth (20%) did not enter the kitchen or participate in food preparation while on their periods. Just over one-quarter of girls (28%) reported having received any menstrual hygiene support, such as access to pads, over the last year.

Bodily integrity and freedom from violence

Girls in both the intervention and control group reported high levels of bullying. Over the last week, about half (52%) had been teased by a peer and half had teased (47%) a peer. In that same time frame, about one-fifth (22%) had been hit or pushed by a classmate and one-eighth (14%) had hit or pushed a classmate. Girls in the intervention group compared to those in the control group, more often had pushed or hit a classmate (17% versus 13%).

Girls' risk of child marriage and trafficking was low, which would be expected in a sample comprising mostly school-going girls. Nearly all girls (99%) had never been married and most were able to correctly report the legal age of marriage for girls and boys. The average preferred age for marriage was 22 years for women and 24 years for men – although girls rarely (1%) reported that the ideal age for girls to marry was under 18. A similarly small minority of girls (2%) had been approached with a good job offer – a potential proxy measure for risk of trafficking. Of these girls, four in five (80%) lived in Tanahun district.

Psychosocial well-being

The survey found that across both groups, girls had extraordinarily high levels of social support and strong 'soft skills'. Nearly all girls reported that their parents, friends, neighbours and teachers helped and encouraged them and that their parents provided them with adequate supervision and structure. For example, girls reported that they were able to relate to others in a friendly way (94%), had good adult role models (95%), and that their families had clear rules (99%). Most girls also reported that they had opportunities for socialisation and recreation. More than half (54%) of girls in the sample participated in a sport and a large majority (82%) talked with their female friends about topics including education.

Girls' non-cognitive skills were similarly strong. Nearly all reported having personal goals (97%), making plans to achieve those goals (96%), and finishing the tasks they start (97%). The survey also found evidence that more mentoring could be beneficial to girls. Almost one-third (32%) of girls, for example, reported that they had a hard time figuring how to operationalise their goals and more than a half (55%) reported that they sometimes gave up when tasks became too hard.

Voice and agency

Girls in both groups reported similar – and moderate – freedom of movement and access to voice and decision-making. Over two-thirds (70%) of girls, for example, reported being able to visit a friend's house alone. A large majority (88%) were comfortable expressing their opinions to their friends but only a quarter (26%) were comfortable expressing their opinion to coaches and leaders of programmes. Girls reported more input into decisions such as who their friends are (3.5/5) and how long they would like to stay in school (3.3/5) than time spent on chores (2.9/5). Girls' civic engagement was low – very few reported being members of child clubs, savings groups, or other associations and even fewer reported holding a leadership position.

In terms of role models, girls primarily reported talking to their mothers about their daily lives and their educational goals, their fathers about the type of work they would like to do, and their sisters about puberty.

While most girls (90%) had access to a mobile phone, only 5% of girls had their own phones. Most (57%) used those belonging to their mothers. Girls tended to use phones for communication rather than for access to the internet (59% versus 21%), in part because less than one-third of phones were internet enabled.

Economic empowerment

Girls' plans for their own eventual economic empowerment were universally high and did not vary between the intervention and control group. Nearly all (99%) reported that they would like to be employed as adults, primarily in government or office work (67%), and that they were confident that they would be able to achieve their plans (99%). Of the 766 girls who responded to a question about having a savings account, 45% reported having their own, mostly informal, savings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given girls' ages, only a few (19) were involved in any sort of vocational training. Of those that were, all mentioned textiles.

Key implications for policy and practice

Our baseline findings point to a number of policy and practice implications to support adolescent girls in the study communities to reach their full capabilities and broader well-being as follows. Our longitudinal study will be able to capture over time the extent to which Room to Read's programme interventions are contributing to this end.

- Although girls' access to quality education is overall good – and their aspirations almost universally high – barriers still exist for a minority of girls in Tanahun and Nuwakot districts of Nepal. Barriers include illness/disability, the need to partake in agricultural work to earn money, social, religious and cultural norms, and a lack of interest in attending school.
- Despite policy and programming, the perception of menstruation as a disease and the prevalence of menstrual taboos are common. Girls would benefit from more practical menstrual hygiene support as well as continued work on the social norms which surround menstruation.
- Research and programming should direct more focus to bullying in school, given this is a common risk facing adolescent girls.
- Although girls' aspirations are almost universally high, they would benefit from mentors and role models who can better support them to operationalise their goals.
- Girls need expanded access to school- and community-based clubs in order to foster their civic engagement.
- Girls need expanded access to formal and informal savings opportunities and, as they grow up, more access to training programmes that are aligned with their own aspirations as well as labour markets.
- Mobile phones may be a key platform to reach adolescent girls, even in geographically remote communities – although given low internet connectivity, texting-based platforms are likely more useful in the short- and medium-term.



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About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit www.gage.odi.org.uk for more information.

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ISBN: 978-1-912942-04-6

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