



Empowerment, Aspirations, and Girls' Education

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As gender gaps in school enrollment and attainment continue to narrow around the world, global priorities have shifted toward focusing on the quality of education and the implications that a high-quality education has for broader societal outcomes. There is ample evidence illustrating the benefits of investing in girls' education including that it supports improved social, economic, and health outcomes. While girls' education offers many benefits, it is not yet a guarantee of more equal societies.¹ A key component in the theory of change related to the relationship between girls' education and equity is the empowerment of women and girls which enables them to use the knowledge and skills they develop through schooling. Broadly defined, empowerment refers to one's ability to have both control and power over the decisions and resources within their life.² However, measures of 'empowerment' and the process through which it is achieved are understood in a variety of ways and are sometimes not defined at all thus making it challenging to achieve.

In light of the importance and ambiguity that characterizes much of the literature and policy related to girls' empowerment, it is necessary to unpack the various conceptualizations of empowerment and to examine the conditions under which education fosters empowerment in order to better understand when and how empowerment can be achieved through education for girls.³

- 1 Carvalho, S. & Evans, D.K. (2022). *Girls' Education and Women's Equality: How to get more out of the World's Most Promising Investment*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development.
- 2 Narayan, D. (2002). *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/15239> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO; Kabeer, N. (2001). *Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment' in Discussing women's empowerment: theory and practice*. SIDA Studies No. 3 SIDA, Stockholm. <http://mailakabeer.net/2001/09/02/reflections-on-the-measurement-of-womens-empowerment-in-discussing-womens-empowerment-theory-and-practice-sida-studies-no-3-sida-stockholm/>
- 3 King, E., & Winthrop R. (2015). *Today's challenges for girls' education*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/todays-challenges-for-girls-education/>; Ojobo, J.A. (2008). Education: A catalyst for women empowerment in Nigeria. *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Sciences*, 4(1). <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ejesc/article/view/42995>; Olufunmilayo, F.O. (2014). Empowering girls and connecting people through school social work intervention. *African Journal of Social Work*, 4(1): 38-58. <https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/Empowering%20Girls%20and%20Connecting%20People%20through%20School%20Social%20Work.pdf>; Psacharopoulos, G., & Patrinos, H.A. (2010). Returns to investment in education: A further update. *Education Economics*, 12(2): 111-134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964529042000239140>

In this note, we offer an overview of the literature related to the relationship between education and girls' empowerment and aspirations.

Going to school does not equal empowerment

A common narrative in the education sector implies that simply sending girls to school will result in empowerment.⁴ While getting girls into schools is a critical first step, it is not by itself enough to ensure that empowerment will be the outcome. First, in recent years, researchers have found that learning boosts indicators of empowerment even more than simply going to school.⁵

Second, gender parity in education outcomes (including learning) does not guarantee empowerment for women and girls and thus statistics signaling gender parity in participation, completion, and learning may be misleading from an empowerment lens. For example, a study focusing on girls' education and empowerment in South Africa finds that despite gender parity in school completion having been achieved, a lack of conversations about gender issues and strategies to combat dominant narratives related to traditional societal gender roles in school contributed to girls feeling disempowered despite having completed their schooling.⁶ While education and school can and should be part of the equation, wider community, institutional, and legal changes are also necessary for education to support women's and girls' empowerment.⁷

What is empowerment?

Empowerment is a frequently used yet often vaguely defined concept. The first step to achieving empowerment requires understanding what it is we're striving for. "You know it when you see it" is not a sufficient education policy goal. In this section, we outline the recent evolution of the concept of empowerment as it relates to gender and education.

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- 4 Burns, K. (2008). (re)Imagining the global, rethinking gender in education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 29(3): 343-357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300802259111>; King, E., & Rose, P. (2005). Transparency or tyranny? Achieving international development targets in education and training. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25(4): 362-367. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.04.001; Manion, C. (2012). *Power, knowledge and politics: Exploring the contested terrain of girl-focused interventions at the national launch of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative in The Gambia*. Theory and Research in Education. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878512459393>; Monkman, K. (2011). Framing gender, education and empowerment. *Educational Policy Studies and Research Department*, 6(1): 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.1>; Subrahmanian, R. (2005). Gender equality in education: Definitions and measurements. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25(4): 395-407. 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.04.003; Tarabini, A. (2010). Education and poverty in the global development agenda: Emergence, evolution and consolidation. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 30(2): 204-212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2009.04.009>
 - 5 Kaffenberger, M., & Pritchett, L. (2020). *Women's education may be even better than we thought: Estimating the gains from education when schooling ain't learning*. RISE working paper 20/049. https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/RISE_WP-049_Kaffenberger_Pritchett.pdf
 - 6 Holmarsdottir, H., Ekne, I., & Augestad, H. (2011). *The dialectic between global gender goals and local empowerment: Girls in Southern Sudan and South Africa*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.14>
 - 7 Pereznieto, P., & Taylor, G. (2014). A review of approaches and methods to measure economic empowerment of women and girls. *Gender and Development*, 22(2): 233-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.920976>

The evolution of girls' education and empowerment as a policy priority

Introduced in the international policy community at the 1995 UN Fourth Conference on Women, the Beijing Platform for Action explicitly references girls' and women's empowerment as both the means *to achieve* and *a condition of* gender equality.⁸ Since then, promoting women's empowerment has often been viewed as a critical mechanism through which to achieve greater economic growth and social outcomes while also strengthening gender equity.

As global attention toward strengthening women's and girls' empowerment has grown, education has emerged as a fundamental component of the empowerment equation. However early on, 'empowerment' in relation to girls' education was often equated with girls simply going to school. For example, Duflo argues that women's empowerment is about "improving the ability of women to access the constituents of development—in particular health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation."⁹ Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),¹⁰ to "Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women," focused on parity in access and related outcomes for girls and women with little focus on the necessary underlying structural conditions.¹¹ Thus providing access to education for girls' became a primary stimulant for the advancement of women, with some believing that all that was needed was to "just build schools and girls will be empowered."¹²

In the years following the MDGs, we see expanded empowerment paradigms emerge in the literature related to quality education. Here we begin to see the relationship between empowerment and education expand beyond access to include ideas about self-determination, aspirations, and mobility. For example, in a study focused on a national girls' education program in India, Shah (2011) argues that empowerment and education in developing countries are integrally intertwined and schools have the ability to uniquely operate as a space, for both teachers and students, to facilitate the idea of empowerment.¹³ In a report on the missing ingredients in girls' empowerment, Kumar and Gupta

8 Anand, A., & Gouri, S. (1998). *Beijing! : UN Fourth World Conference on Women*. https://ocul-gue.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma992412796905151&context=SP&vid=01OCUL_GUE:GUELPH&lang=en

9 Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4): 1051–1079; p. 1053. 10.1257/jel.50.4.1051

10 United Nations. (2000). Millennium Development Goals. <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

11 North, A. (2010). MDG 3 and the negotiation of gender in international education organisations. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 40(4): 425–440. 10.1080/03057925.2010.490363; Unterhalter, E. (2005). Mobilization, meanings and measures: Reflections on girls' education. *Development*, 48(1): 110–114. 10.1057/palgrave.development.1100120; Unterhalter, E., & North, A. (2011). Girls' schooling, gender equity, and the global education and development agenda: Conceptual disconnections, political struggles, and the difficulties of practice. *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 23(3): 1–22. 10.1353/ff.2011.0045

12 Burns, K. (2008). (re)Imagining the global, rethinking gender in education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 29(3): 343–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300802259111>; King, E., & Rose, P. (2005). Transparency or tyranny? Achieving international development targets in education and training. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25(4): 362–367. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.04.001; Manion, C. (2012). *Power, knowledge and politics: Exploring the contested terrain of girl-focused interventions at the national launch of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative in The Gambia*. Theory and Research in Education. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878512459393>; Monkman, K. (2011). Framing gender, education and empowerment. *Educational Policy Studies and Research Department*, 6(1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.1>; Subrahmanian, R. (2005). Gender equality in education: Definitions and measurements. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25(4): 395–407. 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.04.003; Tarabini, A. (2010). Education and poverty in the global development agenda: Emergence, evolution and consolidation. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 30(2): 204–212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2009.04.009>

13 Shah, P. (2011). *Girls' education and discursive spaces for empowerment: Perspectives from rural India*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.90>

explain that an “empowered girl” – one who recognizes her own potential and has aspirations—is a product of sustainable and rigorous development in school curriculums and classroom pedagogy.¹⁴ Kabeer expands on this idea to integrate “resources that actively and purposefully interrogate the ways gender structures opportunity and mobility for girls and women in society.”¹⁵

Empowerment continues to be an important part of improving gender equity and features prominently in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”¹⁶ Yet even as a core part of SDG 5, ‘empowerment’ is not explicitly defined. SDG 5 targets include a wide range of measures related to access to and participation in a variety of areas. This definition and measurement of empowerment, however, doesn’t address what it means for women and girls to become and live empowered.

Definitions of empowerment

As ideas about empowerment as an outcome continue to evolve, the varying and sometimes conflicting definitions of empowerment have led it to remain a contested and vaguely understood concept. Beginning in the 1980’s, studies largely used empirical measurements linking development indicators to empowerment as an output with little attention paid to the drivers and social processes shaping empowerment. This incited a call to re-envision the empowerment process and the associated enabling factors, including education.¹⁷ As noted above, education’s initial role in the empowerment process was understood primarily as sending children to school with little attention paid to the schooling process or outcomes beyond enrollment and completion. Empowerment is still sometimes, yet inaccurately, seen as a direct result of schooling and can often be conflated with the terms self-confidence and self-esteem, which can undermine its ability to foster changes in social norms and support deeper equity (see Box 1).¹⁸

14 Kumar, K., & Gupta, L. (2008). What is missing in girls’ empowerment? *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(26-27): 19-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40278899>

15 Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women’s empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender and Development*, 13(1): 13-24; p.24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273>

16 United Nations. (2015). Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

17 Alsop, R., Bertelsen, M., & Holland, J. (2006). *Empowerment in practice: From analysis to implementation. Directions in Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/6980> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO; Kabeer, N. (2001). *Reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment’ in Discussing women’s empowerment: theory and practice*. SIDA Studies No. 3 SIDA, Stockholm. <http://nailakabeer.net/2001/09/02/reflections-on-the-measurement-of-womens-empowerment-in-discussing-womens-empowerment-theory-and-practice-sida-studies-no-3-sida-stockholm/>; Oxaal, Z., & Baden, S. (1997). *Gender and empowerment: definitions, approaches and implications for policy*. Brighton, UK: Bridge, Institute of Development Studies. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/gender-and-empowerment-definitions-approaches-and-implications-for-policy/oclc/41541528>; Parpart, J., Rai, S.M., Staudt, K.A. (2002). *Rethinking empowerment: Gender and development in a global/local world*. Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group. <https://www.routledge.com/Rethinking-Empowerment-Gender-and-Development-in-a-GlobalLocal-World/Parpart-Rai-Staudt/p/book/9780415277693>

18 Monkman, K. (2011). Framing gender, education and empowerment. *Educational Policy Studies and Research Department*, 6(1): 1-13, p.5. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.1>

BOX 1. THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT REQUIRES A NUANCED PERSPECTIVE AND UNDERSTANDING

Monkman outlines several key points on the intersection between education and empowerment that have appeared continually throughout the literature:

1. "Education does not automatically or simplistically result in empowerment.
2. Empowerment is a process; it is not a linear process, direct or automatic.
3. Context matters; decontextualized numerical data, although useful in revealing patterns and trends, are inadequate for revealing the deeper and nuanced nature of empowerment processes.
4. Individual empowerment is not enough; collective engagement is also necessary.
5. Empowerment of girls and women is not just about them, but perforce involves boys and men in social change processes that implicate whole communities.
6. It is important to consider education beyond formal schooling: informal interactional processes and multi-layered policy are also implicated."^a

a. Monkman, K. (2011). Framing gender, education and empowerment. *Educational Policy Studies and Research Department*, 6(1): 1–13, p.10. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.1>

More expansive conceptualizations of empowerment draw on multi-dimensional frameworks from several theorists including Kabeer, Rowlands, and Stromquist.¹⁹ Kabeer's approach to women and girls' empowerment uses three interactive dimensions of agency, structure, and strategic relation.²⁰ Rowlands' empowerment model has three dimensions which situate empowerment on 1) a personal level to develop a sense of self, confidence, and capacity; 2) close relationship level to develop negotiation skills and influential decisions; and 3) a collective level to learn the importance of working together in order to achieve greater impact.²¹ Similarly, Stromquist's four dimensional empowerment model focuses on 1) a cognitive component which explores a critical understanding of one's self; 2) a psychological component which explores feelings of self-esteem; 3) a political component which explores the inequities of power as well as the ability to work with others; and

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- 19 Duruamaku-dim, J.C., Ekwueme, C.O., & Ncharam, S.E. (2013). Empowerment as a potent tool for alleviating poverty and stress among Nigerian rural women. *Global Journal of Educational Research*, 12(1). 10.4314/gjedr.v12i1.8; Malhotra, A., Schuler, S.R., & Boender, C. (2002). Measuring women's empowerment as a variable in international development. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://www.ssatp.org/sites/ssatp/files/publications/HTML/Gender-RG/Source%20documents/Technical%20Reports/Gender%20Research/TEGEN5%20Measuring%20Women%27s%20Empowerment%20ICRW%202002.pdf>; Rowlands, J. (1995). *Empowerment examined*. <https://pages.uoregon.edu/aweiss/Intl640/Rowlands%20Empowerment%20Examined.pdf>; Stromquist, N. (1995). Romancing the state: Gender and power in education. *Comparative Education Review*, 39(4). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/447339>
- 20 Kabeer, N. (2002). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3): 435-464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- 21 Rowlands, J. (1995). *Empowerment examined*. <https://pages.uoregon.edu/aweiss/Intl640/Rowlands%20Empowerment%20Examined.pdf>

4) an economic component which explores financial capacity and independence.²² Another model in the literature focuses specifically on the process and transformation of power by examining 1) power over—being in control, 2) power to—making one’s own decisions, 3) power within—sense of self-esteem and dignity, and 4) power with—collective support.²³ Together these theoretical frameworks provide a basis for understanding empowerment as a complex and multidimensional concept.

Empowerment and education

As the education sector has turned its focus toward improving the quality of education and strengthening the link between education and later life outcomes, empowerment has also become an increasingly prominent priority and a necessary input to achieving these goals.

To unpack the links between education, gender, and empowerment, Murphy-Graham and Lloyd developed a conceptual framework based on existing evidence.²⁴ Their framework outlines the necessary conditions schools must meet in order to provide students, particularly girls, with the foundational support to become empowered. Murphy-Graham and Lloyd argue that “empowered individuals come to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings and their ability to contribute to personal and social betterment. They develop the capacity to critically examine their lives and broader society and take action toward personal and social transformation.”²⁵ Murphy-Graham and Lloyd’s framework centers four competencies—1) critical thinking and knowledge acquisition, 2) social competencies, 3) personal competencies, and 4) productive competencies—around three necessary conditions for education to have an impact, 1) the learning environment is physically, materially, and socio-culturally conducive to learning, 2) the school fosters dignity and equality for all students, and 3) the school encourages learning by doing.²⁶

It’s useful for policymakers, educators, and those aiming to use education to increase empowerment to first consider whether the necessary conditions have been met for empowerment interventions to be effective. Then, it’s critical to be clear about what specific competencies the program aims to support. As we’ll discuss in more detail below, many empowerment programs fail to make clear the

22 Stromquist, N. (1995). Romancing the state: Gender and power in education. *Comparative Education Review*, 39(4). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/447339>

23 Perezniето, P., & Taylor, G. (2014). A review of approaches and methods to measure economic empowerment of women and girls. *Gender and Development*, 22(2): 233-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.920976>; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (n.d.) *A conceptual model of women and girls’ empowerment*. https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/BMGF_EmpowermentModel.pdf; Mosedale, S. (2003). *Towards A Framework for Assessing Empowerment*. Impact Assessment Research Centre (IARC). Working Papers 30578. University of Manchester: Institute for Development Policy and Management (IDPM). <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ags/idpmia/30578.html>; Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning empowerment: Working with women in Honduras*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/questioning-empowerment-working-with-women-in-honduras-121185/>

24 Murphy-Graham, E., & Lloyd, C. (2015). Empowering adolescent girls in developing countries: The potential role of education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14(5): 556-577. [10.1177/1478210315610257](https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210315610257)

25 Murphy-Graham, E. (2012). *Opening minds, improving lives: Education and women’s empowerment in Honduras*. Vanderbilt University Press. <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/university-press/book/9780826518293>

26 Murphy-Graham, E., & Lloyd, C. (2015). Empowering adolescent girls in developing countries: The potential role of education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14(5): 556-577. [10.1177/1478210315610257](https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210315610257)

specific competencies they're targeting and neglect to ensure that necessary conditions have been met which may contribute to the mixed evidence related to empowerment interventions.

Safe and appropriate learning environments

As a starting point, Murphy-Graham and Lloyd argue that education is unlikely to foster empowerment if the learning environment is not appropriately equipped to do so. The learning environment condition means that school infrastructure is conducive to supporting girls which may include working toilets, girls' rooms or safe spaces, classrooms with enough desks, and materials to use.²⁷ This is not to say that empowerment is impossible without sufficient female-appropriate infrastructure but to note that there may be important pre-conditions in order for schools to function as empowering environments at scale. Additionally, to foster dignity and equality, girls also need to feel comfortable coming to school without fear of sexual harassment, bullying, corporal punishment, or shaming.²⁸ A recent cross-national study of the 20 most populous countries in sub-Saharan Africa finds that nearly 30 percent of adolescent girls have experienced physical or sexual violence, with those who are enrolled in school reporting slightly higher rates of abuse.²⁹ Another cross-national study in sub-Saharan Africa finds that sexual abuse and physical violence is often perpetrated by teachers and that this increases absenteeism.³⁰ For girls in situations of conflict and displacement, concerns about safety in and on the way to school are heightened considerably and can limit both participation and learning even further.³¹ Together these examples illustrate that the basic pre-condition of safety and dignity are not guaranteed and should be viewed as an important first-order condition to implementing empowerment programs.

Norms and beliefs

Girls also need to believe in themselves and see themselves as equals to boys.³² This may require a deliberate shift from traditionally embedded gender roles at home, in school, and in society. Finally, girls need to learn through action. This can be through building agency in order to critically analyze their surroundings, believe that they have upward mobility, and be able to take action toward those

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- 27 Kayser, G.L., Rao, N., Jose, R., & Raj, A. (2019). *Water, sanitation and hygiene: measuring gender equality and empowerment*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/97/6/18-223305.pdf?ua=1>; Nielsen, A., & Carnwath, A. (2019). *Inclusive learning: How WASH in schools empowers girls' education*. Paris, France: UNICEF. <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/how-wash-in-schools-empowers-girls-education/>; Zawahri, N., Sowers, J., & Weinthal, E. (2011). *The politics of assessment: Water and Sanitation MDGs in the Middle East*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2011.01730.x>
- 28 Dunne, M., Humphreys, S., & Leach, F. (2003). *Gender and violence in schools*. Paris, France: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146763>; Dunne, M., Humphreys, S., & Leach, F. (2006). Gender and violence in schools in the developing world. *Gender and Education*, 18(1): 75-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250500195143>
- 29 Evans, D.K., Hares, S., Holland, P., & Acosta, A.M. (2023). "Adolescent Girls' Safety In and Out of School: Evidence on Physical and Sexual Violence from Across Sub-Saharan Africa." *The Journal of Development Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00220388.2023.2172333
- 30 Lee, S. & Rudolf, R. (2022). "The relationship between school-related gender-based violence and absenteeism: Evidence from 14 Southern and East African Countries." *South African Journal of Education*. 42(4) 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n4a1981>
- 31 Carvalho, S. (2022). "Refugee Girls' Secondary Education in Ethiopia: Examining Vulnerabilities of Refugees and Host Communities in Low-Resource Displacement Settings." *Journal on Education in Emergencies*. 8(2): 139-69. <https://doi.org/10.33682/cy3t-dhqt>
- 32 Casely-Hayford, L., & Hartwell, A. (2010). Reaching the underserved with complementary education: lessons from Ghana's state and non-state sectors. *Development in Practice*, 20(4/5): 527-539. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20750150>; UNICEF. (2020). *Towards an equal future: Reimagining girls' education through STEM*. New York: UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/reimagining-girls-education-through-stem-2020>

beliefs.³³ Kabeer's model reflected this idea of agency in order to help give sense to both wellbeing and empowerment.³⁴ Murphy-Graham and Lloyd's three conditions form the base that all schools need to provide in order for girls to feel empowered at school.

For education to support empowerment, schools and communities should function as empowering environments. Evidence from India suggests that in order for girls to feel empowered and supported by their teachers, teachers and administrators need both structural and practical policy support so that educators themselves can be empowered to create learning environments that move away from patriarchal traditions.³⁵ In Bangladesh, scholars put forth the idea that individual agency by itself is not enough to positively affect wellbeing without examining the material and social factors shaping us because of the inherent nature that "gender discrimination remains deeply entrenched in families and in society."³⁶ A study in rural China examines the impact of girls' agency on their life choices, including education, and finds that it's important for girls to understand cultural opportunity structures particularly when it comes time for young girls to make these life choices.³⁷ Another study in India found that targeting the community proved beneficial to both women and men which helped create a "cycle of change" that empowered girls and women to feel more emboldened to speak up and become agents of change.³⁸ Additional studies from Uganda, Pakistan, Morocco, and China explored the relationship between girls' education, empowerment, and the embedded structure of home and community within these spheres and found that improving educational conditions, as an inclusive concept, results in both personal and relational empowerment for girls.³⁹

Aspirations and empowerment

Aspirations have also become a common piece of the education and empowerment puzzle. However, like empowerment, defining and measuring what it means to be aspirational, and to what end, can be a complex task. Researchers have sometimes defined aspirations by contrasting it to expectations, where aspirations describe "an individual's desire to obtain a status object or goal such as a particular

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- 33 Bajaj, M. (2009). 'I have big things planned for my future': the limits and possibilities of transformative agency in Zambian schools. *A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 39(4): 551–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920701844503>; Kober, M.J. (2016). *Educational opportunities for adolescent girls' empowerment in developing countries*. Master's Thesis. San Francisco: The University of San Francisco. <https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1204&context=theses>
- 34 Kabeer, N. (2002). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3): 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- 35 Shah, P. (2011). *Girls' education and discursive spaces for empowerment: Perspectives from rural India*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.90>
- 36 DeJaeghere, J., & Lee, S.K. (2011). *What matters for marginalized girls and boys in Bangladesh: A capabilities approach for understanding educational well-being and empowerment*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.27>
- 37 Seeberg, V. (2011). *Schooling, jobbing, marrying: What's a girl to do to make life better? Empowerment capabilities of girls at the margins of globalization in China*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.43>
- 38 Baily, S. (2011). Speaking up: Contextualizing women's voices and gatekeepers' reactions in promoting women's empowerment in rural India. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 6(1). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.107>
- 39 Changezi, S.H., & Biseth, H. (2011). *Education of Hazara girls in a diaspora: Education as empowerment and an agent of change*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.79>; Maslak, M.A. (2011). *Education, employment and empowerment: The case of a young woman in Northwestern China*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.119>; Molyneaux, K.J. (2011). *Uganda's universal secondary education policy and its effect on 'empowered' women: How reduced income and moonlighting activities differentially impact male and female teachers*. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.62>; Muskin, J., Kamime, A., & Adlaoui, A. (2011). Empowered to empower: A civil society-government partnership to increase girls' junior secondary school outcomes in Morocco. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 6(1): 129. [10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.129](https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.1.129)

occupation or level of education” and expectations pertain to the likelihood one ascribes to achieving those goals.⁴⁰

Defining and measuring aspirations in the context of global education and development is challenging in part because worthy aspirations vary by context. In any situation, the concept of aspirations is multidimensional encompassing goals related to professional, social, and other aspects of life.⁴¹ The concept of aspirations is generally not individually constructed but instead “intertwined with intergenerational agreements, family projects, and shared understandings of the changes needed to improve the life of young women.”⁴² DeJaeghere defines aspirations in the context of girls’ education as “a young woman’s process of hoping and imagining, with others, about their future lives” and outlines three dimensions in which aspirations may manifest - including social, economic, and cultural - in the diagram below.⁴³

What do we know about aspirations?

The literature on education and aspirations is a ripe and growing area for research. Much of the existing research has focused on older children, is set in western, high-income countries, or focuses on raising parents’ aspirational levels for their children.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, the limited evidence that exists suggests that school ambitions and high occupational aspirations are linked, and several empirical studies show that youth aspirations are correlated with later life outcomes.⁴⁵

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- 40 MacBrayne, P. (1987). Educational and occupational aspirations of rural youth: A review of the literature. *Research in Rural Education*, 4(3). https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-07/4-3_6.pdf; Tafere, Y. (2010). *Changing educational aspirations of children living in poverty in Ethiopia*. Young Lives working paper No. 58. <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-WP58-Tafere-EducationalAspirationsInEthiopia.pdf>
- 41 Ray, D. (2003). *Notes of aspirations and the poor*. New York: New York University. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.503.9358&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- 42 Ames, P. (2013). Constructing new identities? The role of gender and education in rural girls’ life aspirations in Peru. *Gender and Education*, 25(3). 10.1080/09540253.2012.740448
- 43 DeJaeghere, J. (2018). Girls’ educational aspirations and agency: imagining alternative futures through schooling in a low-resourced Tanzanian community. *Critical Studies in Education*, 59(2): 237-255, 10.1080/17508487.2016.1188835
- 44 Bernard, T., Dercon, S., Orkin, K., & Taffesse, A.S. (2011). *The impact of role models on parental aspirations and investments in children’s education in Ethiopia*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/impact-role-models-parental-aspirations-and-investments-childrens-education-ethiopia>; Fleisch, B., & Shindler, J. (2009). *School participation from ‘Birth-to-Twenty’: Patterns of schooling in an urban child cohort study in South Africa*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/253480990_School_participation_from_‘Birth-to-Twenty’_Patterns_of_schooling_in_an_urban_child_cohort_study_in_South_Africa; Hill, N.E., Ramirez, C., & Dumka, L. (2003). Early adolescents’ career aspirations: A qualitative study of perceived barriers and family support among low-income, ethnically diverse adolescents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 24(7): 934-959. 10.1177/0192513X03254517; Garg, R., Melanson, R., & Levin, E. (2007). Educational aspirations of male and female adolescents from single-parent and two biological parent families: A comparison of influential factors. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36: 010-1023. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-006-9137-3>; Macours, K., & Vakis, R. (2016). Sustaining impacts when transfers end: Women leaders, aspirations, and investment in children. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22871>
- 45 Fruttero, A., Muller, N., & Calvo-Gonzalez, O. (2021). *The power and roots of aspirations: A survey of the empirical evidence*. Policy Research Working Paper 9729. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/332481625231659043/pdf/The-Power-and-Roots-of-Aspirations-A-Survey-of-the-Empirical-Evidence.pdf>; Ross, P. (2019). *Occupation aspirations, education investment, and cognitive outcomes: Evidence from Indian adolescents*. World Development, Elsevier, vol. 123(C), pages 1-1. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/wdevel/v123y2019ic2.html>; Guyon, N., & Huillery, E. (2021). Biased aspirations and social inequality at school: Evidence from French teenagers. *The Economic Journal*, 131(634): 745-796. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueaa077>

Academic success, experiences in school, and occupational expectations

School experiences can shape future aspirations. Studies in the United States and western Australia find that educational aspirations are motivated by learning and achievements suggesting that academic success increases aspirations.⁴⁶ In France, a study found that girls who benefit from teacher favoritism in math are more likely to select a science track in high school.⁴⁷ Research on an intervention in Ethiopia finds that “aspirations were altered when children began to assess them in relation to their schooling achievements in the course of their educational pathways... In other words, higher aspirations are associated with high achievements, while lower achievements may result in a lowering of aspirations.”⁴⁸ Thus while the evidence on gender bias suggests that negative experiences can have negative impacts on performance and aspirations, the opposite also seems to be true for supporting children in raising their aspirations in connection to schooling. However, this can present somewhat of a chicken-and-egg problem if we believe that aspirations may also drive achievement in the first place thus suggesting that creating opportunities for students to be and feel successful may help to strengthen aspirations.

The relationship between education and aspirations also works in the reverse direction. Evidence from Ethiopia suggests that aspirations are correlated with years of schooling, with a slightly stronger correlation for boys than girls perhaps due to differential aspirations among parents.⁴⁹ Results from a Young Lives Ethiopia study, using data between 2002 and 2008, indicated that educational aspirations were based on occupational aspirations.⁵⁰ When asked about education level aspirations, 87 percent of girls versus 63 percent of boys aspired to attend university. When asked about professional goals at the age of eight and then again at age of twelve, children changed their answers reflecting more frequent aspirations to become doctors, lawyers, civil servants, and nurses and less aspiration to become teachers, farmers, soldiers, and housewives. Particularly for girls, by the age of twelve, aspirations to become a doctor had increased by 20 percentage points to 63 percent of all girls and aspirations to become a teacher had decreased by 44 percentage points to only 23 percent of all girls. However, over time these aspirations waned. The study found persistent poverty, policy contexts, and location to be indicators related to changes in aspirations for children as they got older.⁵¹ A similar outcome was identified in a study in Nairobi slums in which

46 Kao, G., & Thompson, J.S. (2003). Racial and ethnic stratification in educational achievement and attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29: 417-442. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100019>; Young, D.J. (1998). *Ambition, Self-Concept, and Achievement*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ574238%20>

47 Terrier, C. (2020). Boys lag behind: How teachers' gender biases affect student achievement. *Economics of Education Review*, 77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2020.101981>

48 Tafere, Y. (2010). *Changing educational aspirations of children living in poverty in Ethiopia*. Young Lives working paper No. 58. <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-WP58-Tafere-EducationalAspirationsInEthiopia.pdf>

49 Favara, M. (2017). Do dreams come true? Aspirations and educational attainments of Ethiopian boys and girls. *Journal of African Economies*, 26(5): 561-583. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejx018>

50 Tafere, Y. (2010). *Changing educational aspirations of children living in poverty in Ethiopia*. Young Lives working paper No. 58. <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-WP58-Tafere-EducationalAspirationsInEthiopia.pdf>

51 Tafere, Y. (2010). *Changing educational aspirations of children living in poverty in Ethiopia*. Young Lives working paper No. 58. <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-WP58-Tafere-EducationalAspirationsInEthiopia.pdf>

younger children had higher aspirations than those in either of the two older cohorts.⁵² This might suggest that early and sustained interventions to support aspirations and success could be useful, particularly given the relationship between academic success and aspirations. While discrepancies in educational aspirations and expectations seem commonplace amongst young children as evident by the previous paragraphs, encouraging and boosting aspirations without providing opportunities can potentially hinder academic self-perception or achievement and lead to lower self-esteem.⁵³

Generational aspirations

Parental aspirations can go a long way in shaping children's aspirations for themselves. In a literature review on girls' education, King and Winthrop discuss an adverse and cyclical aspect of gender inequality in developing countries.⁵⁴ If parents have lower aspirations for certain children, particularly when it's lower for girls than boys, or for younger children, then it can lower aspirations for the children themselves. In India, a study found that parents, mothers in particular, have a significant influence on children's reported gender discriminatory attitudes.⁵⁵ A study in China also found evidence of children inheriting their parental beliefs about gendered academic abilities, particularly that boys are better at math than girls. Boys whose parents held this belief scored 0.17 SD higher than boys whose parents did not hold this belief, and girls whose parents held this belief scored 0.29 SD lower relative to boys scores.⁵⁶ Sometimes lower aspirations are driven by limited information which can cause education to be undervalued. A study in India found that parents ranked education access as fairly low in terms of problems they faced.⁵⁷ The literature linking either parental aspirations or girls' aspirations to education and learning outcomes is scarce and more evidence is needed to understand the effect that changing mindsets has on school achievement and life outcomes.

52 Kabiru, C.W., Mojola, S.A., Beguy, D., & Okigbo, C. (2013). Growing up at the 'margins': Concerns, aspirations, and expectations of young people living in Nairobi's slums. *J Res Adolesc*, 23(1): 81–94. [10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00797.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00797.x)

53 Chen, X., & Hesketh, T. (2021). Educational aspirations and expectations of adolescents in rural China: Determinants, mental health, and academic outcomes. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 18(21): 11524. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8583625/>; Patton W., & Creed P. (2007). Occupational aspirations and expectations of Australian adolescents. *Aust. J. Career Dev* 16: 46–59. [10.1177/103841620701600108](https://doi.org/10.1177/103841620701600108)

54 King, E., & Winthrop R. (2015). *Today's challenges for girls' education*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/todays-challenges-for-girls-education/>

55 Dhar, D., Jain, T., & Jayachandran, S. (2021). *Reshaping adolescents' gender attitudes: Evidence from a school-based experiment in India*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/research-paper/working-paper_714_Reshaping-Adolescents-Attitudes-About-Gender_India_Aug2020.pdf

56 Ebel, A., & Hu, Feng. (2019). How important are beliefs about gender differences in math ability? Transmission across generations and impacts on child outcomes. EdWorkingPaper: 19-67. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/8txd-ed83>

57 Banerjee, A., Banerji, R., Duflo, E., Glennerster, R., & Khemani, S. (2010). Pitfalls of participatory programs: Evidence from a randomized evaluation in education in India. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 2(1): 1–30. <http://www.aeaweb.org/articles.php?doi=10.1257/pol.2.1.1>

Empowerment programs and interventions to raise aspirations

In this section, we give a brief overview of the state of the evidence related to interventions to improve girls' empowerment and aspirations.

Empowerment

In a report highlighting the latest needs and evidence for girls' education, the Girls' Education Roadmap reviewed 288 organizations and 532 programs, and 22 percent encompassed a current empowerment training component.⁵⁸ This is consistent with a systematic review of interventions related to girls' education which finds that 21 percent of girl-targeted interventions include some form of empowerment program.⁵⁹ In another review, primarily focused on women's agency, 15 evidence-based reports on adolescent girls' programs found strong evidence on positive 'power within' results (such as self-efficacy or attitudes about gender) and mixed evidence on longer-term outlooks such as childbearing decisions.⁶⁰ While empowerment programs are growing in popularity, their approaches vary widely and few have been rigorously evaluated and of those that have, many focus on short-term outcomes. Furthermore, the relationship between empowerment, academic outcomes, and other social outcomes, like delaying marriage or reducing gender-based violence, remains unclear. Many interventions under the empowerment umbrella target all of these outcomes. Future research could focus on disentangling these outcomes and their relationship to various interventions in the empowerment space.

Girls' clubs

Girls' clubs, or creating safe spaces for girls at or near schools, is a common intervention in the empowerment category, particularly for adolescent girls. So far evidence is mixed. For example, the Gender Innovation Lab at the World Bank currently has a research program operating in several countries focused on adolescent girls' empowerment.⁶¹ While specific interventions vary across countries, programs typically offer safe spaces and girls clubs led by mentors, and training in vocational, financial literacy, and life skills. The empowerment programs for adolescent girls (ELA) in Tanzania did not show any significant economic, health, or social outcomes, while programs

58 Psaki, S., Haberland, N., Kozak, M., & Woyczynski, L. (2021). *Girls education roadmap: 2021 report*. EGER reports. New York: Population Council. https://egeresource.org/documents/4/Girls_Education_Roadmap_2021_Report.pdf

59 Evans, D., & Yuan, F. (2019). *What we learn about girls' education from interventions that do not focus on girls*. Working Paper 513. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/what-we-learn-about-girls-education-interventions-do-not-focus-on-girls.pdf>

60 Chang, W., Diaz-Martin, L., Golapan, A., Guarnieri, E., Jayachandran, S., & Walsh, C. (2020). *What works to enhance women's agency: Cross-cutting lessons from experimental and quasi-experimental studies*. J-PAL: Cambridge, MA. https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/research-paper/gender_womens-agency-review_2020-march-05.pdf

61 World Bank. (2020). *GIL Top Policy Lessons on Empowering Adolescent Girls*. Gender Innovation Lab. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33138>

in Uganda and Sierra Leone did show positive results.⁶² Another girls' club and life skills training program in Ethiopia showed no evidence that empowerment activities on their own improved girls' education or reduced gender-based violence. The researchers involved in the evaluation suggest that contextual realities should be taken into account and should temper expectations of what empowerment programs can achieve in the face of additional limitations related to financial constraints and economic vulnerabilities.⁶³ The authors recommend coupling gender empowerment programs with other economic empowerment programs. Though, as described below, such multi-faceted programs also have mixed reviews and can become too complicated when they attempt to achieve too many different goals, particularly if necessary pre-conditions have not been met.

Multiple interventions

Some empowerment programs encompass many different interventions targeting various outcomes. Thus far, few have achieved all desired outcomes suggesting that perhaps simply adding on to interventions may not be the key to achieving desired outcomes. For example, a large empowerment program for adolescent girls in Bangladesh included safe spaces, regular meetings for girls, academic and life skills training, an incentive program to delay early marriage, and community sensitization.⁶⁴ While evidence from a J-PAL evaluation of the empowerment communities did not show a significant impact on delaying marriage or childbearing, educational attainment improved with more girls staying in school.⁶⁵ Similarly, a Population Council program in Zambia that provided a combination of safe spaces, health service vouchers, and girl-friendly savings accounts did not show significant health, economic, or social outcomes.⁶⁶ A school-based life skills program in India found a stronger sense of empowerment and agency among girls in the treatment group (e.g., a 29 percent increase in the probability of being their own work-related decision-maker) but treatment girls did not express greater aspirations about future planning or gender norms than those in the control group.⁶⁷ A girls' empowerment intervention in Liberia 'Girl Empower' included life skills training, caregiver support, savings startups, local capacity building for local health service providers, and a cash incentive for attendance.⁶⁸ A randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluating the program in

- 62 Bandiera, O., Buehren, N., Burgess, R., Goldstein, M., Guesci, S., Rasul, I., & Sulaiman, M. (2017). *Women's empowerment in action: Evidence from a randomized control trial in Africa*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/707081502348725124/pdf/118203-WP-ELA-PUBLIC.pdf>; Bandiera, O., Buehren, N., Goldstein, M., Rasul, I., & Smurra, A. (2018). *The economic lives of young women in the time of Ebola: Lessons from an empowerment program*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/research-paper/The-Economic-Lives-of-Young-Women_ELA_SL_Bandiera-et-al_Dec2018.pdf; Buehren, N., Goldstein, M., Gulesci, S., Sulaiman, M., & Yam, V. (2017). *Evaluation of an adolescent development program for girls in Tanzania*. Policy Research Working Paper 7961. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/245071486474542369/pdf/WPS7961.pdf>
- 63 Stark, L., Seff, I., Assezenew, A., Eoomkham, J., Falb, K., Ssewamala, F.M. (2018). Effects of a social empowerment intervention on economic vulnerability for adolescent refugee girls in Ethiopia. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 62*(1):S15-S20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.06.014>
- 64 Field, E., Glennerster, R., Buchmann, N., Nazneen, S., Pimkina, S., & Sen, I. (2015). *Empowering Girls in Rural Bangladesh*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/empowering-girls-rural-bangladesh>
- 65 Field, E., Glennerster, R., Buchmann, N., Nazneen, S., Pimkina, S., & Sen, I. (2015). *Empowering Girls in Rural Bangladesh*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/empowering-girls-rural-bangladesh>
- 66 Population Council. (2018). *GirlsRead! Developing Evidence-Based Approaches to Keep Girls in School*. <https://www.pop-council.org/research/girlsread-developing-evidence-based-approaches-to-keep-girls-in-school>
- 67 Edmonds, E., Feigenberg, B., & Leight, J. (2020). *The impact of school-based life skills classes for adolescent girls in India*. <https://voxddev.org/topic/labour-markets-migration/impact-school-based-life-skills-classes-adolescent-girls-india>
- 68 World Bank Group, Innovations for Poverty Action, & International Rescue Committee. (2016). *Sisters of Success: Measuring the impact of mentoring and girls groups in supporting girls' transition into adolescence and adulthood, in Liberia*. Baseline Report. <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/sisters-success-mentoring-and-girls%e2%80%99-groups-liberia>

Liberia found that the intervention did not achieve its primary goal of reducing sexual violence for young girls, but there were positive statistically significant effects towards life skills, gender attitudes, and reproductive health.⁶⁹ Several other examples of girls' empowerment programs include youth clubs in Niger, community awareness programs in Ethiopia, female mentors in Liberia, and vocational and life skills programs in South Sudan.⁷⁰

Targeting pre-conditions for empowerment

Some evidence suggests that simple interventions targeting concrete challenges girls face—like traveling long distances to school—may be an effective way to support empowerment and boost academic outcomes—as exemplified in Zambia and India (see Box 2).⁷¹

BOX 2. COMBATTING LONG DISTANCES TO SCHOOL MAY BE AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO BOOST EMPOWERMENT AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES FOR GIRLS

“Wheels of Change” is a program led by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and World Bicycle Relief (WBR) which examined the impact of bicycle access towards girls' education and empowerment outcomes in Zambia.^a A randomized evaluation of 2,471 girls in grades 5–7 from 100 schools tested if shortening the distance to school—3 km or more—through the provision of bicycles would impact school attendance, grade transitions, exams, and empowerment outcomes. Results from the one-year study found that access to bicycles had a significant impact on commute time and punctuality, absenteeism, safety, and empowerment. Girls who received bicycles showed significant improvement when reporting feeling in control, prosocial tendencies, and self-image. A similar bicycle program for secondary girls, ‘Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana’ (Cycle Program), introduced by the government of Bihar, India also found several qualitative accounts highlighting an increase in confidence, mobility, and empowerment in adolescent girls. Exposure to the bicycles closed the gender gap in secondary school enrollment by 40 percent and proved to be more cost effective than a cash transfer program, generating externalities such as changes in existing patriarchal social norms and female mobility.^b

a. Fiala, N., Garcia-Hernandez, A., Narula, K., Prakash, N. (2018). The impact of bicycles on girls' education and empowerment outcomes in Zambia. World Bicycle Relief. <https://worldbicyclerelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WBR-Policy-Brief-2020.04.09.pdf>

b. Muralidharan, K., & Prakash, N. (2013). Cycling to school: Increasing secondary school enrollment for girls in India. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 9(3): 321–350. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160004>

69 Innovations for Poverty Action. (2018). *Girl empowerment in rural Liberia*. Massachusetts: Innovations for Poverty Action. <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/girl-empowerment-rural-liberia>

70 Giacobino, H., Huillery, E., & Michel, B. (2018). *Leveraging youth clubs for women's empowerment in Niger*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/fr/node/2431>; Goldstein, M.P., Buehren, N., Chakravarty, S., Slavchevska, V. (2017). Adolescent girls' empowerment in conflict-affected settings: Experimental evidence from South Sudan; Population Council. (2020). *Biruh Tesfa (“Bright Future”)*. <https://www.popcouncil.org/research/biruh-tesfa-safe-spaces-for-out-of-school-girls-in-urban-slum-areas-of-ethi>; Innovations for Poverty Action. (2018). *Girl empowerment in rural Liberia*. Massachusetts: Innovations for Poverty Action. <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/girl-empowerment-rural-liberia>

71 Fiala, N., Garcia-Hernandez, A., Narula, K., Prakash, N. (2018). The impact of bicycles on girls' education and empowerment outcomes in Zambia. World Bicycle Relief. <https://worldbicyclerelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WBR-Policy-Brief-2020.04.09.pdf>; Muralidharan, K., & Prakash, N. (2013). Cycling to school: Increasing secondary school enrollment for girls in India. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 9(3): 321–350. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160004>

Norms and attitudes

Programs which target both boys and girls may be a promising area for further research. For example, a program led by Breakthrough and J-PAL, focused on empowering adolescent girls and boys through the encouragement of gender-equitable attitudes and raising girls' aspirations noted large significant changes in gender attitudes and behaviors, particularly among boys.⁷² Another study in India, on the program Girl Rising, found that both boys and girls reported more positive outcomes with respect to gender norms and attitudes, and also significant changes in the likelihood of speaking up in support of girls.⁷³ Evidence focused on learning outcomes rather than empowerment, shows that increasing investments for *both* boys and girls significantly improves girls' outcomes and, in some cases, more so than just girl-specific interventions.⁷⁴

Aspirations

Like studies related to empowerment, interventions and evidence related to aspirations are mixed in global education. Here we briefly examine several common types of interventions which aim to bolster aspirations particularly for girls.

Inspirational messages

One strategy for strengthening aspirations involves exposing children and parents to inspirational videos and messages. The idea is that children and their families may not be aware of potential options for their future—or may not think that options they know of are possible for them. By sharing inspirational messages or information, aspirations may shift. In Ethiopia, an intervention which showed inspirational documentaries to heads of households and their spouses showed little evidence of closing the gender gap in education but did find higher levels of parental aspirations for first born children.⁷⁵ In Uganda, a researcher found that showing children the movie “The Queen of Katwe”—a movie about a young Ugandan girl whose life changes after she is introduced to chess—improves their performance on a math exam.⁷⁶ While inspirational and information campaigns can be useful as a means of introducing new possibilities and acting as a source of inspiration, children must also have access to learning environments and other resources that can prepare them to reach their goals, as well as pathways to realize aspirations.

72 Dhar, D., Jain, T., & Jayachandran, S. (2021). *Reshaping adolescents' gender attitudes: Evidence from a school-based experiment in India*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/research-paper/working-paper_714_Reshaping-Adolescents-Attitudes-About-Gender_India_Aug2020.pdf

73 Vyas, A., Malhotra, G., Nagaraj, N.C., & Landry, M. (2019). Gender attitudes in adolescence: Evaluating the Girl Rising gender-sensitization program in India. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1): 126-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1598450>

74 Evans, D., & Yuan, F. (2019). *What we learn about girls' education from interventions that do not focus on girls*. Working Paper 513. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/what-we-learn-about-girls-education-interventions-do-not-focus-on-girls.pdf>

75 Bernard, T., Dercon, S., Orkin, K., & Taffesse, A.S. (2011). *The impact of role models on parental aspirations and investments in children's education in Ethiopia*. Massachusetts: J-PAL. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/impact-role-models-parental-aspirations-and-investments-childrens-education-ethiopia>

76 Riley, E. (2022). Role models in movies: The impact of Queen of Katwe on students' educational attainment. *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_01153

Role models

Limited access to female role models is another common reason cited for low aspirations among girls. There is a small but growing—and again, mixed—literature on female role models and mentoring programs. For example, in India, a role model program in which female leaders acted as mentors for adolescent girls helped to improve educational attainment, but had no impact on longer term labor market participation.⁷⁷ In another study in India, providing targeted awareness information interventions improved career aspirations for women.⁷⁸ In Madagascar, Nguyen examines the impact of role models on schooling returns.⁷⁹ The impact on test scores is positively associated with exposure only to a role model who comes from a similar socioeconomic background as the students. In France, girls were more likely to enroll in STEM classes if they were exposed to women who had a background in science.⁸⁰ In Turkey, girls who spent more than a year in a classroom with teachers who held traditional gender views performed worse on math and verbal tests than girls in more classrooms with teachers holding more gender equal views.⁸¹

While female teacher programs are currently popular, one study cautions against programs which aim to simply increase the number of female teachers in a school under the assumption that they will be able to serve as role models. Qualitative evidence raises concerns about relying on female teachers as role models in sub-Saharan Africa when “these teachers also belong to marginalized groups” and do not send motivating signals to students.⁸²

Financial support and incentives

As discussed earlier, the ability to invest in education is an inhibiting factor for young children to access and stay in school, particularly for girls. Two studies in Colombia and Mexico found that the provision of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) was able to boost aspirations and consequently schooling outcomes. In Colombia, one year after receiving a cash transfer, children and their parents were 20 and 11 percentage points more likely to aspire to higher education.⁸³ In Mexico, parents increased aspirations for their children’s education by a third of a school year after receiving cash transfers.⁸⁴ In Mexico, girls who received informational sessions had higher educational aspirations,

77 Beaman, L., Duflo, E., Pande, R., & Topalova, P. (2012). Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: a policy experiment in India. *Science (New York, N.Y.)*, 335(6068): 582–586. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1212382>

78 Jensen, R. (2012). Do labor market opportunities affect young women’s work and family decisions? Experimental evidence from India. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 127(2): 753–792. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjs002>

79 Nguyen, T. (2008). *Information, role models and perceived returns to education: Experimental evidence from Madagascar*. Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/documents/Nguyen%202008.pdf>

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were more likely to study a STEM subject, and less likely to marry before the age of 10.⁸⁵ In Nicaragua, girls in a cash transfer program who frequently interacted with local female leaders showed more optimism about the future, had a greater income six months later, and sustained investments in nutrition and education two years later.⁸⁶

Moving forward

Education is a powerful, necessary (albeit insufficient) input to not only improving girls' empowerment but for enhancing life-long opportunities for women and improving equity in society. Empowerment and aspiration programs should become an integral part of the academic and learning process rather than limited to an after-school add-on in order to facilitate shifts in norms and foster consistent environments able to facilitate empowerment. However, these programs must clearly define what empowerment is, how it will be achieved, and ensure that the necessary pre-conditions (e.g., safe learning environments) are met. Moving forward, there are several lessons we can take from the existing literature and evidence on empowerment to help ensure that education can foster empowerment and equity.

Action Area 1: Make schools safe for girls. If schools are not safe from violence, sexual abuse, harassment, or bullying, they will not foster empowerment for girls and will instead likely become disempowering. Ensuring that critical pre-conditions are met should be a top priority in strengthening the relationship between education and empowerment.

Action Area 2: Identify the mechanisms driving impact of successful empowerment programs. Many programs contain a multifaceted approach to improving girls' empowerment, agency or aspirations (i.e., safe rooms, life skills and financial literacy) which can be important and are frequently beneficial. However, more research is needed on the mechanisms driving the impacts and achieving the outcomes so that there's a better understanding of the elements contributing to change. Context is important in understanding and achieving impacts, and as we've seen, not all similarly designed programs achieve equitable results in different places.

Action Area 3: Don't just focus on the girls. As limited evidence has shown for both empowerment and aspiration programs, efforts should be cross-generational and include men and boys. Interventions that seek to change societal beliefs require a conscious effort that expands beyond just girls so that these behavioral changes become embedded within the community and home structures as well.

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Action Area 4: Remove gender biases from the classroom. Schools and communities must combat the many forms of gender bias present in and around schools. Hire more female teachers and school leaders in areas where they are underrepresented and support teachers, particularly female teachers, to feel empowered. Placing more female teachers in upper grades and STEM subjects who can demonstrate success of and encourage high aspirations will help give girls access to strong role models.

Action Area 5: Make empowerment a central—not an additional—goal of schooling. Empowerment should be viewed as part of the academic and learning process rather than an after-school add-on. Programs should define how their activities foster empowerment and complement other activities, as well as be explicit about how activities link to the attitudes, skills, networks, and experiences needed to foster empowerment later in life.

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