

RESHAPING ADOLESCENTS' GENDER ATTITUDES: ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO DISCUSS GENDER EQUALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

A series of interactive classroom discussions about gender equality over two and a half years increased students' support for gender equality and led students to enact more gender-equitable behavior in the state of Haryana, India.

Featuring an evaluation by Diva Dhar, Tarun Jain, and Seema Jayachandran



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Gender inequality is an issue across all societies and it is particularly challenging in low-income countries. In India, the gender gap begins at birth as the practice of sex-selective abortion is widespread. Among children 0–6 years old, there were 109 boys for every 100 girls according to the 2011 census. This inequality continues throughout a woman's life, evidenced by the barriers a woman faces in receiving an education, accessing health care, participating in the labor force, and having full autonomy over key life decisions like marriage and childbirth.

Economic development alone seems unlikely to achieve gender equality, as many gender gaps persist despite economic progress. Increasingly, researchers are considering the role of cultural norms in perpetuating gender inequality. Research shows that even long-held norms can be changed. For instance, exposure to female politicians elected through gender quotas reduced gender bias in India.¹ Addressing gender norms at an early age may have an impact not only on adolescents throughout their life but also on their parents and future generations.

To test if adolescents' gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors can change through discussion and persuasion, researchers Diva Dhar (University of Oxford), Tarun Jain (Indian School of Business), and Seema Jayachandran (Northwestern University; Chair of J-PAL's Gender sector) conducted a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of a school-based program by Breakthrough, an Indian nongovernmental organization.

KEY RESULTS:

Students expressed more progressive gender attitudes. The program made students' gender attitudes more progressive, or aligned with more gender-equal views. Students who initially held gender discriminatory attitudes changed their views to be more gender-equal in 14 percent of cases.

However, the program had no impact on girls' educational and professional aspirations. Girls' aspirations were already high and comparable to boys before the program.

Both boys and girls changed their behavior, but girls may have faced greater external constraints to enacting change. Behavior became more gender equitable by 0.46 standard deviations for boys, but only by 0.21 for girls. Boys reported doing more chores, but girls did not report doing fewer chores.

Parents' gender attitudes, on average, had no impact around how the program affected gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors.

The program changed students' perceptions of social norms about women pursuing employment and university education. Additionally, the program increased the likelihood that students perceived that their community held more progressive social norms.

EVALUATION

According to the last government census in 2011, the state of Haryana had the most male-skewed sex ratio among all Indian states, with 861 girls for every 1,000 boys. Sparked by the Government of Haryana’s interest in evaluating policies to reduce gender inequality, researchers partnered with Breakthrough, a human rights organization based in India that works to promote social change. Breakthrough designed and implemented a curriculum around promoting gender equality. They engaged closely with education officials, school principals, and teachers to ensure the curriculum was relevant and feasible for schools to potentially incorporate into the normal school curriculum.

From a sample of 314 government schools, researchers randomly selected 150 in which to implement the program, while the remaining 164 served as a comparison group. The sample included both single-sex and co-educational schools, with nearly 15,000 students in grades 7–8 surveyed. The program targeted secondary school students between 11–15 years old, as adolescence is believed to be a critical time for development when students are still forming their own attitudes and are mature enough to reflect on complex issues.

Breakthrough’s program, titled *Taaron ki Toli* (Gang of Stars), aimed to promote awareness of gender-based discrimination, change gender-biased perceptions and attitudes, raise aspirations, and provide tools for students to enact behavioral change. Sessions included interactive classroom discussions on household chores and learning skills like communication. Outside of the classroom, students completed homework assignments, such as writing stories or discussing gender with family members, in addition to activities like optional Breakthrough clubs. The curriculum used both economic and human rights-based reasoning to demonstrate the importance of valuing girls.



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For example, participants learned that a girls’ education has long-term benefits for their future children, in addition to being a fundamental human right.

Beginning in the 2014–2015 academic year, Breakthrough hired fifteen, mostly male, facilitators who visited schools roughly every three weeks. Over two and a half years, facilitators conducted twenty-seven 45-minute long sessions during the school day.

Four to nine months before the program began and one to six months after the program ended, researchers conducted surveys that asked students about their gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors (Table 1). Responses were aggregated into corresponding indices. Additionally, before the program started, researchers surveyed a subsample of parents to understand how parental attitudes influenced the program’s impact.

TABLE 1. DEFINING OUTCOMES

OUTCOME	DEFINITION	SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS
Attitudes	Views on what is right and wrong, such as whether women should work outside the home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think women should be allowed to work outside the home? • Should boys be allowed to get more opportunities and resources for education than girls? • Should daughters have a similar right to inherited property as sons?
Aspirations	Goals for one’s life, such as pursuing higher education or a career. Researchers expected the program to change aspirations for girls only.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever discussed your education goals with your parents or adult relatives? • What occupation do you expect to have when you are 25 years old?
Behaviors	Actions strongly shaped by gender norms, such as chores or interactions with peers of the opposite sex.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the past week, did you cook/clean/wash dishes? • Are you comfortable talking to children of the opposite gender who are not related to you inside and outside school? • Are you allowed to travel to school alone or with friends?

RESULTS

Students expressed more progressive gender attitudes.

The program improved gender attitudes, as measured by the gender attitude index, by 0.25 standard deviations, and had equal impacts on boys and girls. The largest impacts were on attitudes towards employment, gender roles, and education. To put this in context, students who initially held gender discriminatory attitudes changed their views to be more gender-equal in 14 percent of cases.

However, the program had no impact on girls' educational and professional aspirations.

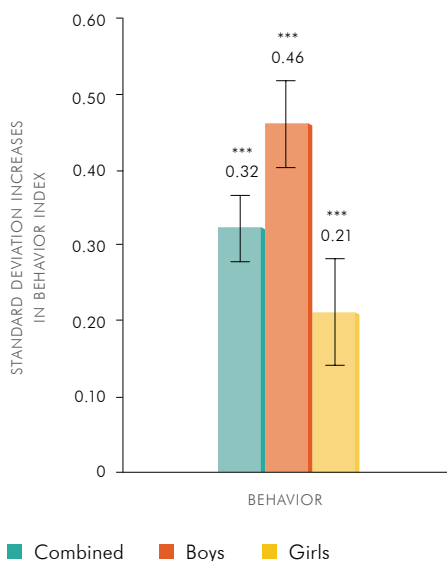
Girls' aspirations were already high and comparable to boys before the program, with 84 percent of boys and 80 percent of girls reporting that they discussed their education goals with a parent.

Both boys and girls changed their behavior, but girls may have faced greater external constraints to enacting change.

On average, the gender-specific behavior index increased by 0.32 standard deviations. This effect was greater for boys than girls: a 0.46 standard deviation increase for boys compared to 0.21 for girls (Figure 1). In practice, this meant that boys reported doing more household chores, while girls did not reduce their number of chores. These results suggest that although boys and girls easily adopted more progressive attitudes, girls may have faced more constraints turning attitudes into behavior change. Boys can decide to help more with household chores, while girls need, and may not receive, their family's consent to do fewer chores.

FIGURE 1. IMPACT ON BEHAVIORS

The program led to more gender-equitable behavior for both boys and girls, behavior change was greater for boys than girls.



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

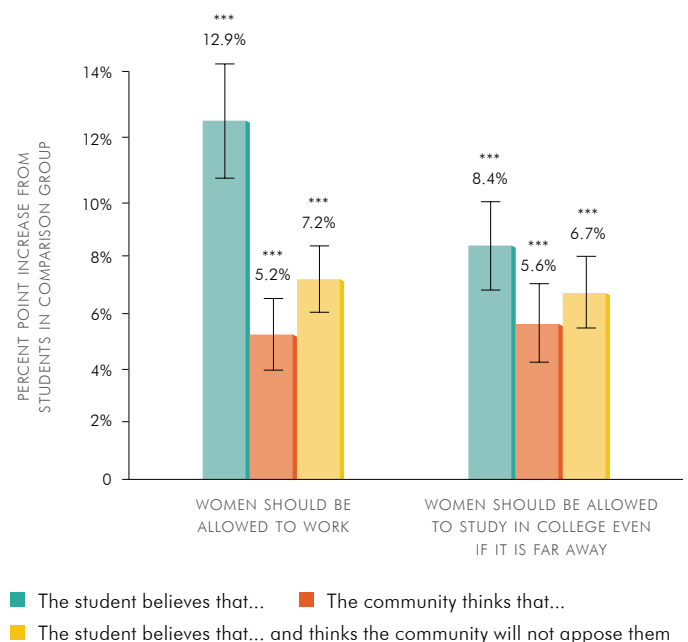
Parents' gender attitudes had no impact on how the program changed students' gender attitudes, aspirations, or behaviors. Before the program, around 37 percent of mothers were illiterate, and 29 percent of mothers worked outside of the home. However, having more progressive or conservative parents had no impact on the success of the program, on average.

The program changed students' perceptions of social norms about women pursuing employment and university education.

Students in Breakthrough's program adopted more progressive attitudes about gender roles for work and education compared to students not in the program. After the program, the likelihood that a student believed that women should be allowed to work or attend college, even far away from home, increased by 12.9 and 8.4 percentage points respectively (teal bars, Figure 2). In addition, students were more likely to perceive that their community holds gender progressive views about work and education (orange bars, Figure 2). The combination of these views—holding both progressive views personally and believing that the community shares those views, or at least will not stand in opposition—is likely needed for people to change their behavior. In fact, the program also had a positive impact on this combined view (yellow bars, Figure 2). However, this effect was smaller than the effect on personally holding a progressive view alone (yellow bars compared to teal bars in Figure 2). Therefore, despite students' personal beliefs changing, sometimes community norms may restrict them from acting upon these beliefs.

FIGURE 2. IMPACT ON SOCIAL NORMS

The program made students' personal attitudes towards social norms more progressive but had a smaller effect on their perceptions of the communities' view on and support of more progressive social norms.



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

POLICY LESSONS

Individuals' gender-biased attitudes and norms can be changed to become more gender equal. Through interactive classroom sessions over two and a half years, Breakthrough prompted students to discuss gender equality. The program made students' gender attitudes and perceptions of gender norms more progressive. Other studies have shown that exposure to female leaders,² television programming,^{3,4} mother's labor force participation,⁵ having daughters⁶ or sisters,⁷ or serving with women in the military⁸ also reduced gender-biased attitudes. However, change may be more difficult for other aspects of gender preferences. For instance, Breakthrough's program had no impact on girls' professional or educational aspirations.

Girls may face greater external constraints to actualize changed attitudes into action. After the program, boys more easily translated new gender attitudes into behavior change, perhaps because they faced fewer external constraints. However, girls may require consent, such as from family members, to change their actions.

Future research is needed to explore the effectiveness of similar programs in different contexts. This evaluation occurred in an Indian state with particularly severe gender discrimination, but a similar program in places with less gender discrimination may have different impacts since these norms may be more malleable or entrenched.

ONGOING RESEARCH

Researchers are evaluating whether program effects will persist into adulthood. They will study whether these changes in attitudes and behavior persist two years after the program ended, as well as if girls are more likely to be enrolled in schools. Additionally, five to ten years after the end of the program, they will measure educational attainment, occupational choice, marriage, and fertility among both female participants and the wives of male participants.

Featured Evaluations: Dhar, Diva, Tarun Jain, and Seema Jayachandran. "Reshaping Adolescents' Gender Attitudes: Evidence from a School-Based Experiment in India." NBER Working Paper No. 25331, December 2018.

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¹ Beaman, Lori, Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, Esther Duflo, Rohini Pande, and Petia Topalova. 2009. "Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Bias?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124 (4): 1497–1540. <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2009.124.4.1497>.

² Beamen et al. 2009.

³ Jensen, Robert and Emily Oster. 2009. "The Power of TV: Cable Television and Women's Status in India." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124 (3): 1057–1094. <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2009.124.3.1057>.

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⁷ Healy, Andrew and Neil Malhotra. 2013. "Childhood Socialization and Political Attitudes: Evidence from a Natural Experiment." *The Journal of Politics* 75 (4): 1023–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381613000996>.

⁸ Dahl, Gordon, Andreas Kotsadam, and Dan-Olaf Rooth. "Does Integration Change Gender Attitudes? The Effect of Randomly Assigning Women to Traditionally Male Teams." NBER Working Paper No. 24351, February 2018.

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a network of affiliated professors around the world who are united by their use of randomized evaluations to answer questions critical to poverty alleviation. J-PAL's mission is to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence.

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