



WEBINAR BRIEF | SOCIAL NORMS AND GENDER: WHAT DOES GLOBAL EVIDENCE TELL US ABOUT SHIFTING SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS FOR IMPROVED DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES IN FAVOR OF GIRLS AND WOMEN?

Prepared for: Global Evidence for Egypt Spotlight Seminar Series: A collaboration between UNICEF Egypt and The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab Middle East and North Africa (J-PAL MENA) at The American University in Cairo (AUC)

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL EVIDENCE FOR EGYPT SPOTLIGHT SEMINAR SERIES

UNICEF Egypt and The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab Middle East and North Africa (J-PAL MENA) at The American University in Cairo have partnered to launch a Global Evidence for Egypt Spotlight Seminar Series in Cairo, Egypt. As part of this partnership, UNICEF Egypt and J-PAL MENA at AUC bring together Egyptian policymakers and J-PAL affiliated professors in a discussion on priority policy issues in Egypt. During each seminar, policymakers highlight a particular development priority in Egypt. J-PAL affiliates frame the policy issue from a global perspective and offer evidence-informed insights for improving policy and program design from the database of Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) conducted by J-PAL globally. In dialogue, the panel of policymakers and J-PAL affiliate ground the evidence in the Egyptian context and together explore possible policy solutions.

The fourth Global Evidence for Egypt Spotlight webinar will take place on Tuesday, March 9, 2021 and will focus on the existence of gender and social norms and their effects on development outcomes for girls and women, consider if norms are movable, and discuss behavior change interventions. It will feature representatives from the National Council for Women, UNICEF in Egypt, and J-PAL affiliate Eliana La Ferrara and will foster a conversation between Egypt's policy priorities and the relevant rigorous global evidence, ultimately providing insights into how we can shift gender and social norms to improve the development outcomes and the status of girls and women in Egypt.

ABOUT THE ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO (J-PAL MENA AT AUC)

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a global research center working to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence. Anchored by a network of more than 220 affiliated professors at universities around the world, J-PAL conducts randomized impact evaluations to answer critical questions in the fight against poverty. We build partnerships with governments, NGOs, donors, and others to share this knowledge, scale up effective programs, and advance evidence-informed decision-making. J-PAL was launched at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003 and has regional centers in Africa, Europe, Latin America & the Caribbean, North America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

J-PAL MENA at AUC is J-PAL's seventh regional office and leads J-PAL's work in the MENA region. J-PAL MENA conducts randomized evaluations, builds partnerships for evidence-informed policymaking, and helps partners scale up effective programs.

Our research team evaluates the impact of social programs and policies in MENA, covering a wide range of sectors including social protection, employment, education, and gender. Through online and in-person courses, we train implementers, policymakers, donors, and advocates on how to generate and use rigorous evidence. Our policy team works to institutionalize learning from evidence and disseminate research results to governments and other partners.

ABOUT UNICEF IN EGYPT

UNICEF Egypt is focused on promoting sustainable development with multidimensional equity for children, embodying the fair chance for every child. UNICEF's programme in Egypt contributes to strengthening the knowledge base for more child-sensitive social protection, and improving three fundamental elements of the early childhood years (health, nutrition and development). UNICEF's work on learning and protection covers children of all ages, focusing on the most vulnerable children, children with disabilities and adolescent girls.

UNICEF's work in Egypt contributes to national efforts and priorities and the 2030 National Sustainable Development Strategy, as well as to the United Nations Partnership for Development Framework.

UNICEF recognizes that individual behaviors have complex and interconnected determinants and aims at creating a conducive ecosystem to tackle harmful social norms by focusing on two main drivers of change, namely girls' empowerment and positive parenting. Using the Organized Diffusion of Innovation approach, UNICEF with government counterparts designed the National Girls Empowerment Initiative 'Dawwie' with a participatory human centric approach to engage individuals, communities, media and policymakers. Conceptualized to empower girls and boys, the initiative connects children and adolescents with communities and policymakers to foster positive changes through accessing services, skills, and information contributing to gender equality. Additionally, UNICEF is utilizing positive parenting as a driver of change to tackle underlying causes of social norms such as harmful practices and gender based violence (GBV) through promoting the role of the father as well as promoting positive gender socialization hence focusing on starting the empowerment of girls at birth.

This collaboration is made possible with the support of Allianz.



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THE CONTEXT: Current status of development outcomes for girls and women in Egypt

The economic, social and psychological wellbeing and empowerment of girls and women in a country may provide a useful indicator of a nation's progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and subsequently where it stands with regards to accelerating sustainable development.¹ Globally, more girls are enrolled in primary schools, as global net primary school enrollment rates for females increased from 64 percent in 1970 to 88 percent in 2018.² Meanwhile, women make up half of the total working population as of 2019, with approximately 51.6 percent between the ages of 25-64 actively participating in the labor force worldwide.³ In accordance with the human capital theory of development, barriers to education and employment may result in a loss of economic growth that can lead to substantial improvements in human development indicators, particularly for girls and women.

Egyptian policymakers have achieved progress towards gender equality and girls and women's empowerment throughout the past few decades. Nonetheless, Egypt still has one of the highest levels of gender inequality in the world, ranking 134th out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Report. Though the country's gender indicators have aligned with global trends of increased girl's participation in primary schools, female labor force participation remains very low in comparison to international benchmarks, in addition to persistent issues of gender-based violence, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and domestic violence. Gender social norms can hinder overall wellbeing progress for women by creating direct and indirect barriers to education and employment and perpetuating harmful behavioral practices. Overall, harmful behavioral practices and social norms may be both a cause and effect of disempowerment of girls and women.

Understanding Social and Gender Norms

Social norms are behavioral rules shared by people in a given society or group that define what is considered "normal" and appropriate behavior. However, social norms are dynamic and can change over time, with new norms emerging to replace old ones.⁴ Gender norms are a subset of social norms that relate specifically to gender differences. They are deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs about gender roles, power relations, standards or expectations that govern human behaviors and practices in a particular social context and at a particular time. Gender norms sustain a hierarchy of power and privilege that typically favors what is considered male or masculine over that which is female or feminine, reinforcing a systemic inequality that undermines the rights of women and girls." (UNICEF, 2020)⁶

¹ "Goal 5: Gender Equality," Joint SDG Fund, Accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.sdgfund.org/goal-5-gender-equality>.

Gender norms, such as expectations for extra domestic chores, the prospect of an early marriage, and depictions in educational content of men in positions of power and authority, shape and limit girls' aspirations and wellbeing. Data on time use for youth between 10 and 19 years of age shows that in 2015, a significantly higher percentage of females (64%) than males (27%) dedicated more of their time to performing unpaid work for the household. This limits the time that girls and women have for other activities, including education and learning, engagement in physical activities, and leisure, and can lead to resistance to employ females in some sectors due to limited work experience and perceived dedication to/preoccupation with domestic responsibilities. These disparities can limit girls' and women's access to opportunities, resources, and services, and subsequently restrict their decision-making power.

Gender norms that perpetuate gender-based violence

Gender based violence (GBV), including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, early marriage, female genital mutilations and trafficking, is generally perpetuated by social expectations and acceptance of violence. Below are some social norms and practices that hinder that hinder girls and women's empowerment.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) based on the misinterpretation of religious obligations, medicalization of the practice, and social expectations surrounding family honor and transition to adulthood: Notions surrounding women's bodies as sources of honor or shame are manifested in the continued practice of FGM. Though there has been notable improvement over the past decades in reducing the prevalence of FGM, half of ever-married women still agree that men prefer to marry women that have undergone FGM, slightly more than half believe that it's required by religion, and 46 percent believe that the practice deters adultery.⁷

Child marriage based on norms surrounding girls' and women's societal roles, among others: Despite national efforts to combat child marriages, recent statistics show that 1 in every 20 girls aged between 15 and 17, and 1 in every 10 girls aged between 15 and 19 are either currently married or were married before, with large disparities seen between

² "School enrollment, primary, female, (% net)", The World Bank Data, Accessed February 8 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.NENR.FE>.

³ "Labor statistics on women," International Labor Organization ILOSTAT, Accessed December 18, 2020, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/women/>.

⁴ "Insight Report: Global Gender Gap Report 2020," World Economic Forum, Accessed December 18, 2020, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf.

⁵ "Addressing social norms and gender in support of equity in education," UNICEF, 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/1741/file/UNICEF-ESA-2016-Program-Brief-Education-Social-Norms.pdf>

⁶ "Technical Note on Gender Norms," UNICEF, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/media/65381/file/GP-2020-Technical-Note-Gender-Norms.pdf>

⁷ "Egypt Demographic and Health Survey," Ministry of Health and Population, 2014, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr302/fr302.pdf>.



COVER PHOTO: EGYPT. ©UNICEF/ASSIUT/SAHARA/AHMEDHAYMAN, PAGE 4: EGYPT. EMILY MARIE WILSON | SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

urban and rural areas.⁸ Norms underpinning child marriage include expected girls' and women's societal roles and men's economic value relative to women, economic conditions of the family, transitions to adulthood, family reputation and honor, and religious misinterpretations.

Social acceptance and normalization of sexual violence:

Although sexual harassment was officially criminalized in June 2014⁹ and rigorous national efforts achieved concrete strides, the social acceptability of sexual violence and the culture of survivor-blaming continues to deter women from reporting incidents. The prevalence of the phenomenon hinders girls' and women's mobility and public presence, and affects their ability to pursue education, participate in public activities, and find adequate job opportunities, as their geographical mobility may be limited.

Gender norms that perpetuate economic inequalities

Discrimination in the work force based on prevailing social norms and gender roles: According to the, 2020 Global Gender Gap Report, only 24.7 percent of women in Egypt participate in the labor force, 20 percent of whom are part-time employees, and only 7.1 percent of women are in managerial roles.¹⁰ Studies indicate that gender-based discrimination is prevalent in the private sector in terms of employment, wages, and career progression, with higher incidences of workplace sexual harassment in the private sector relative to the public sector.¹¹ This impacts girls at an early age for girls, as domestic work expectations and discrimination in the workplace condition women to only seek specific work opportunities. As a result, public sector employment continues to be the preferable sector for women due its relative female-friendly work conditions, including suitable working hours, reduced risk of sexual harassment, and access to paid vacations as well as sick and maternity leave.¹²

Egypt's efforts to improve behaviors that limit girls' and women's wellbeing

The Egyptian government has placed gender equality and girls' and women's empowerment as a clear priority in the last couple of years. While there is steady progress across a number of indicators, there is a plethora of opportunities for improving development outcomes for girls and women through pushing forward gender-centered interventions that promote behavior change and improve the status of girls and women in Egypt. Below are some of the measures taken for girls' and women's wellbeing linked to shifting social and gender norms.

Efforts to end violence against girls and women

The National Council for Women spearheaded a national strategy in 2017 titled "National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030" with a focus on political, economic and social empowerment, as well as protection of women.

In July 2020, the Egyptian Cabinet approved a draft law that protects the identities of sexual assault survivors by imposing punishments on any party that discloses their confidential

⁸ "Policy for Action: Ending Child Marriage," NCCM Child Rights Observatory, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/egypt/reports/policy-action>.

⁹ "Egypt, Gender Justice & The Law," UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA and ESCWA, 2019, <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/gender-justice-law-egypt>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Louay Constant, Ifeanyi Edochie, Peter Glick, Jeffrey Martini and Chandra Garber, *Barriers to Unemployment that Women Face in Egypt: Policy Challenges and Considerations* (Rand Corporation, 2020) 13, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2800/RR2868/RAND_RR2868.pdf.

¹² Ragui Assaad Women's participation in paid employment in Egypt is a matter of policy not simply ideology, (Egypt Network for Integrated Development, 2015), 4, https://ehidada.org/app/uploads/2019/07/PB22_women_employment_assaad.pdf

information.¹³ The bill is expected to increase rates of reporting by overcoming survivors' fear of stigma and the perception that reporting would harm their families' honor and reputation.

National efforts that attempt to combat FGM include the National Committee to Eradicate FGM, the Protect her from FGM campaign, the Knocking Doors campaign, and the National Strategy for Empowering the Family and Combatting FGM, among numerous other initiatives.¹⁴

According to the Egyptian Child Law of 2008, the minimum age for marriage for both males and females is 18, yet child marriage continues to be practiced in Egypt as the law just *prohibits* this action and does not criminalize it.¹⁵

Legal measures to report child marriages are lacking, and there is a need for village committees to identify girls at risk and report child marriage cases.¹⁶ While direct preventive and reporting methods are vital in combatting child marriage, the surrounding economic and social conditions can also be better understood and improved to end child marriage.

Women's economic empowerment

As part of the public-private efforts to bridge the economic gender gap, the Ministry of International Cooperation, the National Council for Women, and the World Economic Forum, have launched the Egypt Gender Accelerator.¹⁷ The accelerator aims at preparing women for the world of work after COVID-19, closing enumeration gender gaps between and within sectors, enabling women's labor force participation, and advancing more women into leadership and management.¹⁸

THE GLOBAL EVIDENCE: Insights on Improving the Development Outcomes for Girls and Women through Behavior Change

Gender norms can operate on three different levels, namely through the self-internalization of socially constructed expectations, the manifestation of gendered hierarchies and power dynamics within the family unit, and the restrictions placed on women's roles in society. Evidence from 160 randomized evaluations and quasi-experimental studies suggests that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers should be more intentional when addressing power imbalances and social inequalities based on gender by designing programs that directly target attitudes about gender, in addition to gender mainstreaming across policies and programmes.¹⁹ Cross-cutting takeaways from this evidence include the following:

i. Gender norms can moderate or even block intended program impacts:

Researchers found that gender norms and biases surrounding women's household dynamics, agency, and mobility, among others, can limit the impacts of interventions that aim to support and empower women. Evidence suggests that economic empowerment, legal frameworks, and exposure to new ideas and practices often play interconnected roles in changing attitudes about gender norms.

In Pakistan, loans and business training directed at women had limited impacts on the success of female-owned enterprises, possibly due to social norms that expected women to run businesses from the household with limited interactions beyond the home (Said et al. 2019). Similarly, female business owners in India, Ghana, and Sri Lanka saw little benefits from microcredit programs and business grants if other members of the household also owned businesses. In such households, women directed financial resources earned to their husbands' businesses rather than their own, potentially due to norms expecting men to earn more than women and provide for the family. (Bernhardt et al. 2019). In China, sharing information with women about their voting rights increased their knowledge about voting but had no impact on their voting behavior due to social stigma against women voting and norms that restrict their mobility (Pang, Zeng, and Rozelle 2013).

Use of mass media has proven to have a positive impact on shifting attitudes surrounding gender-based violence, Uganda and Nigeria

Shifting social norms related to gender is challenging, yet attainable. Some evaluations find that mass media programs are promising for changing attitudes about violence against women. In rural Uganda, a media campaign featuring three videos about reporting gender-based violence increased women's likelihood to speak up about their experiences and decreased violence against women in the community (D. P. Green, Wilke, and Cooper 2018). Similarly, an entertainment television series that aimed to discourage domestic violence against women in Nigeria reduced men's probability of justifying domestic violence (Banerjee, La Ferrara, and Orozco 2019).

Classroom discussions can be an effective way to shift gender norms and advance girls' and women's empowerment, India

A study in India found that interactive classroom discussions about gender roles and discrimination improved adolescents' gender attitudes and aspirations, and encouraged more gender equitable behaviors among adolescents. The program decreased discriminatory attitudes, and it led students, especially boys,

¹³ "Egypt Cabinet Approves Bill to Keep Identities of Sexual Assault Victims Confidential," *Ahram Online*, July 8, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/374008/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-cabinet-approves-bill-to-keep-identities-of-.aspx>

¹⁴ "Female Genital Mutilation," UNFPA, Accessed February 8 2020, <https://egypt.unfpa.org/en/node/22544>.

¹⁵ "Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa – Egypt Country Brief," UNICEF MENA Regional Office, IRCW, 2017, 10. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/1796/file/MENA-CMReport-EgyptBrief.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Egypt's Rapid Response to Women's Situation During Covid-19," The National Council for Women, 2020. <http://ncw.gov.eg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/policypapereng.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "What works to enhance women's agency: Lessons from a new literature review," J-PAL, 2020. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/blog/3-11-20/what-works-enhance-womens-agency-lessons-new-literature-review>.

to enact more equitable behaviors. The largest impacts were on attitudes towards employment, gender roles, and education. The short-run effects of the program continued to be present two years after the program ended (Dhar, Jain, and Jayachandran 2020).

Economic empowerment and training reduced husband's perceived social costs about their wives working, India

On norms surrounding economic empowerment, a study in rural India providing women with wages directly deposited in their bank accounts as well as training improved women's attitudes about working and also reduced husbands' perceived social costs about their wives working. Women who trained with a friend had more demand for loans and expanded their business activity more than women who trained alone. This impact was also stronger among women from religious or caste groups with social norms that restrict female mobility (Field et al. 2019).

MEN'S PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIORS CAN LEAD TO SHIFTING DEEP-ROOTED GENDER NORMS, SAUDI ARABIA

Social norms may contribute to the challenges women face when seeking equal economic opportunities. In a study conducted in Saudi Arabia to measure the effects of perceptions of social norms on female labor force participation, researchers found that while 87 percent of men supported female labor force participation, 72 percent underestimated other men's support for women working outside the home. In other words, men misperceived others' opinions, and this led them to discourage their wives from seeking work outside the home.

When men received accurate information on other men's opinions, they often changed their views on whether their wives should work outside the home, which led to a 36 percent increase in the proportion of men who signed their wives up for job matching services. After the intervention, wives of men who received this information were also more likely to have applied for a job outside their homes and more likely to have had an interview. This finding suggests that updating men with accurate information about others' perceptions may help shift social norms and lead to changes in behavior (Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott 2018).

ii. Access to resources alone does not equal control:

Aggregated evidence finds that access to financial resources alone, without addressing household dynamics or gender norms, does not consistently improve gender roles or women's agency. For instance, access to financial resources through business grants, savings groups, and microcredit had limited effects on women's income generation from entrepreneurship and mixed effects on their employment.²⁰

Women's access to financial resources did not consistently lead to their increased influence over household decisions, multiple countries

A study in Uganda finds that women who reported that their husbands treated them poorly did not economically benefit from access to business grants, while women who did not report being poorly treated by their husbands doubled their income (E. P. Green et al. 2015). Results from multiple evaluations also indicate that women's access to financial resources did not consistently lead to their increased influence over household decisions (Ikenwilo et al. 2016; Angelucci, Karlan, and Zinman 2015; Said et al. 2019; Banerjee, Duflo, Glennerster, et al. 2015; Kim et al. 2009; Prillaman 2017; Karlan et al. 2017; Baro et al. 2013; Beaman, Karlan, and Thuysbaert 2014; Jensen 2012; Kotsadam and Villanger 2019; Hoffmann et al. 2017).

Programs that offer resources might be more successful if they employ design features to give women more control over those resources, Zambia and Philippines

Programs that gave women resources were more likely to be successful in improving women's agency if they employed design features, such as digital accounts and privacy features, with mechanisms that gave women more control over those resources. In Zambia, offering women private access to contraceptives increased their contraceptive use relative to women who were offered contraceptives with their partners present (Ashraf, Field, and Lee 2014). In the Philippines, women's access to commitment savings accounts that only they could access until a prespecified date increased their household decision-making power (Ashraf, Karlan, and Yin 2010).

iii. Opportunities to shift gender norms and enhance women's agency change throughout a woman's life:

Cash transfers and access to employment had significant effects on education and women's marriage and childbearing patterns, but little effects on intra-household gender dynamics, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Kenya

The timing of marriage and childbirth seemed more responsive to some economic interventions than household decision-making during marriage. Studies in India (Jensen 2012) and Bangladesh (Heath and Mobarak 2015) show that access to employment had significant effects on women's marriage and childbearing patterns. Similarly, cash transfers conditional on schooling were effective in delaying marriage and/or childbearing among adolescent girls in Pakistan (Alam, Baez, and Carpio 2011) as well as among girls who had dropped out of school in Malawi (Baird et al. 2010). In addition, unconditional cash transfers were effective in delaying childbearing in Kenya (Handa et al. 2015), and in-kind transfers were effective in delaying both marriage and childbearing in Bangladesh (Buchmann et al. 2018) and Kenya (Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2015).



EGYPT. PHOTO: ©UNICEF/2019/DAWWIE ROAD SHOW

Despite having positive impacts on women’s marriage and childbearing decisions, several evaluations find that employment and cash or in-kind transfer programs had little effects on intra-household gender dynamics and decision-making patterns. This suggests that it may be more challenging to enhance women’s agency within a marriage relative to the decision to marry itself. Further research is needed to understand the reasons for this finding.

iv. Programs that address multiple gender constraints are promising but need more research:

Bundled programs that include additional elements focusing on raising awareness of gender dynamics and developing women's soft/life skills had positive effects on women, although more research is needed on which mechanisms were driving impacts and if the full packages of services are necessary. In Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, India and Pakistan, the Graduation approach, a multi-faceted package of interventions that includes social and health awareness, an asset transfers and a consumption support stipend, developed by the NGO BRAC, led to sustained positive changes in income and/or consumption and political participation or awareness among women living in extreme poverty (Bedoya et al. 2019; Banerjee, Duflo, Goldberg, et al. 2015; Bandiera et al. 2017).

Similarly, there is strong evidence that economic interventions such as microcredit, transfers, and savings groups that are coupled with trainings, discussions, or coaching that address gender dynamics explicitly are effective in improving women’s agency by: increasing “power within”²¹ (Pronyk et al. 2006; Gupta et al. 2013; Jejeebhoy et al. 2017), enhancing freedom of movement (Buchmann et al. 2018; Jejeebhoy et al. 2017), reducing intimate partner violence (Kim et al. 2009; Ismayilova et al. 2018; Gupta et al. 2013), increasing participation in collective action (Pronyk et al. 2008), and strengthening social ties (Kim et al. 2009, 2007; Pronyk et al. 2008; Jejeebhoy et al. 2017).

Overall, multicomponent programs deliver higher impacts across more areas. Nonetheless, it is important to interrogate whether bundling multiple components is necessary to achieve the measured impacts, and if it is, to what extent are the benefits greater than the costs of delivering multiple components.

²⁰ “Enhancing Women’s Agency: Cross-cutting lessons from experimental and quasi-experimental studies in low- and middle-income countries,” J-PAL, 2020, https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publication/evidence-review_women%26%23039%3Bs-agency.pdf.

²¹ Internal belief in one’s worth and ability (Kabeer 1999), measured through aspirations, self-efficacy, and attitudes about gender norms. Related to a woman’s belief in her ability to set goals and act on them (Donald et al. 2017), some of these measures are considered subjective and focus on women’s own perceptions of agency (Quisumbing, Rubin, and Sproule 2016).

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THE CASE FOR EVIDENCE: Why Evaluate? What are Evaluations? What are Randomized Evaluations?

Why Evaluate?

The purpose of evaluation is not always clear, particularly for those who have watched surveys conducted, data entered, and then the ensuing reports filed away only to collect dust. This is most common when evaluations are imposed by others. If, on the other hand, those responsible for the day-to-day operations of a program have critical questions, evaluations can help find answers. As an example, the NGO responsible for distributing chlorine pills may speak with their local field staff and hear stories of households diligently using the pills, and occasionally see improvements in their health. But each time it rains heavily, the clinics fill up with people suffering from diarrheal diseases. The NGO might wonder, “If people are using chlorine to treat their water, why are they getting sick when it rains? Even if the water is more contaminated, the chlorine should kill all the bacteria.” The NGO may wonder whether the chlorine pills are indeed effective at killing bacteria. Are people using it in the right proportion? Maybe our field staff is not telling us the truth. Perhaps the intended beneficiaries are not using the pills. Perhaps they aren’t even receiving them. And then when confronted with this fact, the field staff claims that during the rains, it is difficult to reach households and distribute pills. Households, on the other hand, will reply that they most diligently use pills during the rains, and that the pills have helped them substantially. Speaking to individuals at different levels of the organization, as well as to stakeholders, can uncover many stories of what is going on. These stories can be the basis for theories. But plausible explanations are not the same as answers. Evaluations involve developing hypotheses of what’s going on, and then testing those hypotheses.

What are Evaluations?

The word “evaluation” can be interpreted quite broadly and have varying meanings to different people and organizations. Engineers, for example, might evaluate or test the quality of a product design, the durability of a material, the efficiency of a production process, or the safety of a bridge. Critics evaluate or review the quality of a restaurant, movie, or book. A child psychologist may evaluate or assess the decision-making process of toddlers. The researchers at J-PAL evaluate social programs and policies designed to improve the well-being of the world’s poor. This is known as program evaluation. Put simply, a program evaluation is meant to answer the question, “How is our program or policy doing?” This can have different implications depending on who is asking the question, and to whom they are speaking. For example, if a donor asks the NGO director “How is our program doing?” she may imply, “Have you been wasting our money?” This can feel interrogatory. Alternatively, if a politician asks her constituents, “How is our program doing?” she could imply, “Is our program meeting your needs? How can we make it better for you?” Program evaluation, therefore, can be associated with positive or negative sentiments, depending on whether it is motivated by a demand for accountability versus a desire to learn.



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J-PAL works with governments, NGOs, donors, and other partners who are more interested in learning the answer to the questions: How effective is our program? This question can be answered through an impact evaluation. There are many methods of conducting impact evaluations; J-PAL focuses on randomized evaluations.

What are Randomized Evaluations?

A randomized evaluation is a type of impact evaluation that uses random assignment to allocate resources, run programs, or apply policies as part of the study design. Like all impact evaluations, the main purpose of randomized evaluations is to determine whether a program has an impact, and more specifically, to quantify how large that impact is. Impact evaluations measure program effectiveness typically by comparing outcomes of those (individuals, communities, schools, etc.) who received the program against those who did not. There are many methods of doing this, but randomized evaluations are generally considered the most rigorous and, all else equal, produce the most accurate (i.e. unbiased) results.

At a very basic level, a randomized evaluation can answer the question: Was the program effective? But if thoughtfully designed and implemented, it can also answer the questions, “How effective was it? Were there unintended side-effects? Who benefited most? Who was harmed? Why did it work or not work? What lessons can be applied to other contexts, or if the program was scaled up? How cost-effective was the program? How does it compare to other programs designed to accomplish similar goals?”