Theme: Gender Inequality

Highlights on gender from the research department

A generic lesson emerging from the Research Department’s work on gender: Gender inequalities persist with many costs to the economy and society. The gaps can emerge or be closed through a surprising variety of policies, including some that aren’t explicitly designed with gender in mind. However, women sometimes benefit less from a given policy due to persistent constraints in other areas of their lives. These generic points are illustrated by a number of findings from recent research on gender.¹

Poverty is falling faster for female-headed households in Africa

Nearly one in four households in Africa are headed by a woman. Often thought to be poorer, have female-headed households been left behind as aggregate poverty has been falling? This research examines whether their prevalence has been rising over time, what factors are associated with such changes since the mid-1990s, and whether poverty has fallen equi-proportionately for male- and female-headed households. Rising gross domestic product is found to have dampened rising female headship. However, other subtle transformations occurring across Africa—such as changes in marriage behavior, family formation, health, and education—are associated with increased shares of female-headed households. This has been happening alongside declining aggregate poverty incidence. Female-headed households have experienced faster poverty reduction, and as a whole, have contributed almost as much to the reduction in poverty as male-headed households, despite the smaller share of female-headed households in the population.²

Policies targeted to poor households miss many nutritionally deprived women and children

While it is widely understood that poverty is an individual deprivation, household data are almost invariably used to infer individual poverty. In other words, a poor household is assumed to contain poor individuals. Also, antipoverty policies in developing countries often assume that targeting poor households will reach poor individuals. This assumption is tested using nutritional status as a proxy for individual poverty. An assessment for Sub-Saharan Africa reveals that undernourished women and children are spread widely across levels of household wealth and consumption. Roughly three-quarters of underweight women and undernourished children are not found in the poorest 20 percent of households, and around half are not found in the poorest 40 percent. Countries with higher overall rates of undernutrition tend to have a lower share of undernourished individuals in non-poor households. The results are also consistent with evidence of substantial intra-household inequality. To have any hope of

¹ Research Highlights on Gender from the World Bank Research Department (Jan. 2016).
reaching undernourished women and children, policy interventions will either require much more individualized information or broader coverage.³

**For young entrepreneurs, cash grants are just as effective as a training-and-startup capital program**

Formal sector jobs are scarce in low-income settings. To address the problem of unemployed and underemployed youth, policymakers have turned to encourage entrepreneurship. This study evaluates two labor market interventions for women aged 18 to 19 years in three poor neighborhoods in Nairobi (Kenya). The first multifaceted program addresses many potential obstacles to youth entrepreneurship: “micro-franchising” bundles together startup capital, basic training in business and life skills, a pre-planned business model, franchise-specific training, and ongoing mentorship. The second—a single lump-transfer cash grant—is vastly simpler and less expensive to provide. The multifaceted program may relieve human capital and credit constraints, whereas the cash transfer addresses only a potential credit constraint. Income increased for young women in both treatment groups 7 to 10 months after the program ended, but not beyond the second year. The best explanation for this finding is that many young women are “subsistence entrepreneurs,” lacking either the ability or the inclination to substantially expand their enterprises. If true, access to capital (alone) is unlikely to have lasting impacts on well-being. Nevertheless, both programs improved livelihoods for some of the intended population in the short run, and both drove young women toward self-employment in longer-run.⁴

**Tenure insecurity in Africa costs millions in lost productivity by female farmers**

Many African countries rely on sporadic land transfers from customary to statutory domains to attract investment and improve agricultural performance. Malawi underwent such a burst of estate creation in the 1980s. Evidence on the impact of estates on productivity and neighbors’ tenure security suggests that such transfers have come at a high cost. Data from 15,000 smallholders and 800 estates suggest that most estates are less productive than smallholders. Estate development has increased tenure insecurity, with 22 percent of farmers concerned about losing their land and 21 percent fearing encroachment. Fear of land loss, although not exclusively due to estates, is associated with a 12 percent productivity loss for female farmers, which is large enough to finance a low-cost tenure regularization program. And failure to collect realistic land rents implies public revenue losses of up to US$50 million per year.⁵

**Access to the UN Mission in Liberia’s Radio programming increased female political participation**

Five weeks prior to the 2011 general election in Liberia, women in randomly selected villages were organized into groups to listen to radio programs on the electoral process broadcast by the United Nations Mission in Liberia. The field experiment tested the effects of women’s access to politically relevant information through radio broadcasting on their political behaviors and attitudes in a post-war context. The study finds positive effects on female political participation at both the national and local levels. The evidence suggests that the effects manifest themselves through the increased political efficacy of

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recipients and through the communal nature of the information delivery. The study concludes that women’s exposure to politically relevant information through mass-broadcasting, even if brief, can boost participation in public life.6

A baseline report revealed high levels of sexual violence among 13-14 year-old females in Liberia

The International Rescue Committee’s Girl Empower program in Liberia helps females in early adolescence make healthy life choices and decrease risk of sexual abuse. The program offers weekly meetings during which the children learn about life skills and financial literacy. The program also holds monthly discussion groups for participants’ caregivers, and trains local health and psychosocial care providers to improve and expand services for survivors of gender-based violence. This baseline report is part of a cluster-randomized controlled trial, which aims to assess the program’s impact after 24 months. At baseline, 21 percent of the 13-14 year-old females reported having previously had sex. Within this group, 29 percent report their first sexual act was non-consensual. Among all subjects in the study, 37 percent reported having experienced sexual violence, such as being physically forced to have sex, non-physically pressured (coerced/persuaded) to have sex, someone unsuccessfully attempting to have sex with them, and being touched in a sexual way. The levels of nonconsensual first sex and any experience of nonconsensual sex are at the high end of the range reported by the UNICEF Violence against Children Surveys in Swaziland, Tanzania, Kenya and Zimbabwe.7

Gender discrimination lowers the diffusion of agricultural technologies

In a large-scale field experiment in Malawi, men or women in 142 villages were randomly assigned to learn about a new agricultural technology, and then communicate it to others and convince them to adopt it. Although female communicators outperformed men in mastering the new technology, and those taught by women experienced higher farm yields, their ability to encourage adoption among other farmers was limited by gender bias. Micro-data on individual interactions from 4,000 farmers in these villages suggest that female communicators are perceived to be less able, and thus less convincing. While a modest incentive payment helped mitigate these issues, a negative perception bias toward female communicators remained.8


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