Analyzing and Addressing Gender Gaps throughout the Life Cycle

Women face barriers during their entire life, resulting in gender gaps in education, skills, labor force participation, wages, wealth, and agency. Closing such gender gaps is now a global policy priority, underscored by its prominence in the Sustainable Development Goals. DIME has been working across thematic areas to identify gender gaps and barriers in different developing country contexts and is designing, assessing, and implementing comprehensive approaches to alleviate them. Our work is motivated by the realization that closing gender gaps that lead to women’s empowerment is a desirable outcome that has a direct impact on almost every facet of economic development.

Exciting Questions and Enlightening Answers

The DIME gender program targets four broad key areas: (1) women’s access to economic opportunities, with a focus on investments in education, skills development, and training; access to markets and services; violence in public spaces; and access to quality, decent paid work; (2) women’s access to property, finance, and capital; (3) the burden of unpaid care and work; and (4) women’s agency. DIME’s current gender portfolio has more than 31 impact evaluations (IEs) that analyze interventions targeting women and over 82 IEs that study the effects of gender-neutral interventions on women’s outcomes (see Figure 1) using a combination of conventional and digital data sources, as shown in Figure 2.

Theme 1: Women’s access to economic opportunities

Investment in education, skills development, and training. Increasing women’s access to economic opportunities begins with investments in their human capital through education, relevant skills development, and training. We found evidence demonstrating this progression while working with female microentrepreneurs with relatively low levels of education in Mexico. A business literacy course led to significant improvements in women’s managerial
skills—so much so that the program, which was evaluated in five states, is in the process of being expanded to nine new states in Mexico. In the Dominican Republic, an ongoing IE is studying the impact of financial literacy and a job skills program targeting women on management of household finances, savings, credit, use of formal sector financial products, formal employment, and entrepreneurship.

Violence in public spaces and access to markets and services. Women’s access to economic opportunities is affected by constraints on their physical mobility. One such constraint is violence against women in public spaces—a pervasive and deep-rooted problem that restricts women’s access to markets and services. DIME’s work in Brazil finds that women face harassment 1.5 times every week during their daily commute on public transit and estimates that women are willing to pay a premium of 10 percent of the daily travel fare to avoid harassment. One way to reduce such incidents and the associated costs to women is to design urban infrastructure in a way that is gender aware. DIME has an ongoing IE in Dar es Salaam that aims to develop a safety response system in the bus rapid transit and assess the impact of such a design intervention on women’s use of public transport, the incidence of harassment, and their physical and economic mobility.

Access to quality, decent paid work. The extent to which employment is empowering depends on the type and quality of work, along with the income it generates. DIME has evaluated the effect of many large-scale Labor-Intensive Public Works program on women’s employment, earnings, and well-being. Projects across Côte d’Ivoire, the Arab Republic of Egypt, and Tunisia find that women gain more from such programs than men and retargeting such programs to women increases their effectiveness.

Theme 2: Access to property, finance, and capital
Access to and control over assets—physical and financial—and capital are crucial for women’s financial security intra-household bargaining power, and in promoting entrepreneurship. An ongoing project in Haiti is examining the impact of matching grants that support agricultural production along with other training given to women. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, and Tunisia, DIME is supporting new cross-country evaluations of unconditional “cash injections” to vulnerable women to assess their impact on long-term consumption and labor market outcomes. Comparisons will also be made to those who merely participate in short-term labor-intensive works.

Theme 3: Addressing the burden of unpaid care and work
The burden of unpaid care and domestic work is nearly exclusively borne by women. Factoring in this constraint when designing policies is crucial in designing gender-relevant policies. An evaluation of a vocational training program in Malawi found that family obligations limited participation and skills development for young women. Recognizing such constraints and the social norms that restrict women from working outside their homes, a program in Nigeria provides apprenticeships to women in their homes. The associated IE will evaluate the impact of a package of interventions to promote entrepreneurship on human capital, labor market, economic welfare outcomes, and socio-psychological welfare. Our work in transport, as part of the ieConnect program, recognizes differential travel patterns for women due to their home production responsibilities and aims to inform infrastructure design in several countries across Africa to take that into account.

Theme 4: Women’s agency
The ultimate goal of DIME’s gender work is to empower women to reach their potential. To achieve this, we also examine women’s social and political engagement. In Liberia, DIME is investigating the effects on rural women’s political attitudes and voting behaviors of providing them with access through United Nations Radio to programming related to elections. The results point to an increase in women’s political participation on both a local and national level. In Zimbabwe, we looked at the effects of an intervention that favors horizontal pressure exerted by communities and civil society, rather than top-down vertical pressure from formalized institutions such as government, to promote gender inclusion and empowerment in village-level governance. We also design and assess gender-transformative policies that affect the underlying social norms causing the gender differences. For example, we are measuring the effect of entertainment education programs on social norms regarding sexual behavior in Nigeria, girls’ aspirations and adolescent pregnancy in Brazil, and substance abuse in Mexico.

Going Forward
Our future work will focus on building knowledge about what works to increase women’s economic participation, skills acquisition and female entrepreneurship. We will strengthen our partnerships with the Global Practices to make our work even more operationally relevant. We will also develop strong external partnerships to capitalize on synergies, align joint efforts, and build the foundations of a global approach to achieve the common goal of eliminating gender inequality.

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