Chapter 8
Improving Literacy Outcomes for Disadvantaged Girls Through Empowerment:
The Case of Siyani Sahelian Programme in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Literacy acquisition is important for the formation of higher order skills, further engagement with written forms of knowledge, and deeper participation in society. Yet not all children have the opportunity to acquire literacy skills in their own mother tongue to allow them to continue to advance to these wider benefits of learning. This is particularly the case for girls living in poverty in Pakistan, where about 40% of the poorest girls are out of school compared to 24% of the richest girls not going to school. For those who start school, less than half complete a full cycle of basic education and less than 20% complete secondary schooling. In this chapter, the authors develop evidence for the effectiveness of a remedial learning program—Siyani Sahelian—which aims to support the reintegration of disadvantaged girls into schooling by developing literacy skills in Urdu (among other academic and life skills). The chapter provides evidence of the extent to which the programme supports literacy acquisition in an equitable way, and the main reasons behind the observed trends.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy acquisition is important for the formation of higher-order thinking skills, further engagement with written forms of knowledge and deeper participation in society (Kress, 1997; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Barton et al., 2000). Yet not all children have the opportunity to acquire literacy skills in their own mother tongue to allow them to continue to advance to these wider benefits of learning. This is particularly the case for girls living in poverty in Pakistan, where approximately 40% of the poorest girls are out of school compared to 24% of their richest girl counterparts (ASER, 2019). For those who start school, less than half complete a full cycle of basic education and less than 20% complete secondary schooling (PSLM, 2019-2020). Therefore, girls in Pakistan suffer from exceptionally low levels of literacy and numeracy, unfinished basic schooling, and often face cultural norms that prevent them from accessing schooling or from fully participating in education (Durrani et al., 2017; Durrani and Halai, 2018). For the case of Pakistan, it is important to address the intersectionality of poverty and gender when researching literacy acquisition (Khurshid, 2016).

The situation in the province of Punjab is no different. A recent evaluation of the Punjab Education Sector Programme (PESP2) found that educational access in the province continues to differ by location, socio-economic status and in particular by gender with girls often less likely to be participating in school than boys (Review of Education Sector Performance, PESP2, 2018). The recent PESP2 evaluation also notes that the poorest girls in Punjab are performing the worst and remain the most marginalised. This finding highlights the interrelation between gender, poverty and learning outcomes. There are obvious learning gaps when distinguishing between the richest and poorest girls versus the richest and poorest boys. Therefore, socio-economic disadvantage can have significant implications not only for girls' access to schooling but also for what they learn when they are in school (Naveed, 2021).

Girls who have never been to school or who have dropped out are among the most educationally marginalised (Pritchett and Sandefur, 2020). Yet, not all girls who are out of school are illiterate (Street, 2011). While a significant proportion of girls living in poverty have never been to school and are unable to identify simple letter or words, others have had some schooling experiences prior to dropping out and have been able to achieve some foundational literacy skills (Alcott and Rose 2015). Therefore, programmes designed to support girls who are out of school with literacy acquisition have to adapt to the context and take into consideration the previous literacy acquisition of participating learners. In addition, these programmes should adopt pedagogies that are engaging for girls so that literacy is acquired in a sustainable way. While the existence of such complex programmes is becoming more prevalent in the field, the main question that remains is whether such complex programmes can enhance literacy acquisition in an equitable way, particularly focusing on girls living in the poorest households, and the main ways in which this may be possible.

This chapter presents the case of the *Siyani Saheliyan* programme in Punjab, Pakistan, a programme designed to offer differential support for literacy acquisition to girls who are out of school which considers the educational needs of girls according to their previous academic competencies. In Pakistan, primary education comprises of grades 1 to 5 and middle education comprises of grades 6 to 8. The programme aims to support girls depending on the overall schooling attained prior to dropping out. The programme also includes the enhancement of socioemotional skills by offering a comprehensive course on life-skills based education to each beneficiary. However, this chapter only focuses on literacy acquisition in Urdu. The specific research questions asked in this chapter are: To what extent have girls from the more disadvantaged households benefited from the programme? Does this relationship differ

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