EMPOWERING GIRLS TRIGGERS THEIR BROTHERS TO COMPETE

EVIDENCE FROM A LAB-IN-THE-FIELD EXPERIMENT IN UGANDA

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KEY MESSAGES

• Through an experiment in Uganda, we find that empowering adolescent girls triggers a surge in their brothers' competitiveness. This suggests that programs targeting adolescent girls' empowerment can have spillovers effects on their brothers and shift gender dynamics in the community.

• Understanding preferences for competition is important because competitiveness is a predictor of labor market outcomes. If we understand what factors influence these preferences by gender we will be able to design programs to inclusively improve labor market outcomes.

HERE’S WHAT WE DID

To examine gender differences in preference for competition, the World Bank’s Africa Gender Innovation Lab, in collaboration with researchers from the University of Maryland and Columbia University, launched a lab-in-the-field experiment within a randomized control trial of BRAC’s community-based Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) program in Uganda.

The ELA program simultaneously provided vocational and life skills training for girls aged 14-20. An impact evaluation of ELA\(^1\) showed that it empowered girls along economic and social dimensions: the program increased girls’ participation in self-employment, improved girls’ control over their bodies, and shifted deep rooted gender norms held by adolescent girls in communities that participated in the program.

Four years after the implementation began, we used a lab-in-the-field experiment to compare communities that received ELA with those that did not. The aim of this experiment was to test whether girl's empowerment would have a direct impact on girls’ or boys’ competitiveness.

To measure preferences for competition, we implemented the experimental protocol of Niederle and Vesterlund (2007). More specifically, participants were asked to select a compensation scheme before performing a simple task, from which we identified their taste to compete. They either chose to be paid according to a competitive tournament scheme or a noncompetitive piece-rate scheme. The experiment was designed to control for a host of factors such as individual differences in ability, overconfidence, risk aversion, and altruism.

\(^1\) Bandiera at al. 2015

HERE’S WHAT WE FOUND

EMPOWERING GIRLS MAKES THEIR BROTHERS MORE LIKELY TO COMPETE

In communities that participated in ELA, having an additional sister (relative to a brother) corresponds to a 9 percentage point increase in the likelihood of a boy entering the experiment’s competitive tournament. Conversely, in communities that did not participate in ELA, having an additional sister corresponds to a 9 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of a boy entering the experiment’s competitive tournament. This finding is in line with previous research that documents that the presence of sisters is associated with decreased tournament entry for adolescent boys in urban Japan, using a similar experimental protocol.  

These results reflect the impact of gender equality on intra-household dynamics. In Uganda, sons are at an advantage as families follow patrilineal inheritance and customary traditions. Thus, boys may not feel the need to compete with their sisters for scarce resources. By empowering their sisters and raising the marginal return from investing in daughters (relative to sons), ELA changes this and forces boys to increase their competitiveness.

The results of the experiment are notable for two main reasons: (1) they contradict the conventional wisdom that personality traits, such as competitiveness, are not malleable; (2) they indicate that there may be spillover impacts on boys in programs that target adolescent girls only. However, it is important to keep in mind that existing research shows that gender differences in competitiveness are sensitive to environmental factors such as social norms, family experiences, and age – so interventions should be tailored to fit the specific contexts in which they are implemented.

GIRLS AND BOYS ARE EQUALLY COMPETITIVE

In contrast with evidence from developed countries, we find that young men and women in Uganda are equally competitive. About one-third of boys and girls in our sample chose to compete. This evidence is in sharp contrast with the Niederle and Versterlund’s study of university students in the United States, in which only 35 percent of women chose to compete compared to 73 percent of men.

INCREASED EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS DOES NOT LEAD TO INCREASED COMPETITIVENESS OF THE GIRLS THEMSELVES

While the program empowered girls, it did not increase their taste for competition. There was no statistically significant difference between the preference to compete of the girls who had taken part in the ELA program and those who did not. However, empowerment did significantly embolden them to make their own choices in their personal lives and professional trajectories.

CONCLUSION

Our findings highlight the impact of gender equality on gender differences in competitiveness: when boys are faced with more empowered sisters, they increase their competitiveness. This suggests that the benefits of adolescent girls’ empowerment programs may spill over beyond the participating girls themselves to their brothers. More work needs to be done to understand if the changed behavior in brothers will have persistent effects on girls in the future.


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2 Okudaira et al. (2015)