

# The Impact of Mentoring and Life Skills Training for Adolescent Girls: Lessons from a Randomised Evaluation in Rajasthan

**In Rajasthan, India, a school-based mentoring and life-skills curriculum programme run by non-governmental organisation Room to Read shows reductions in school drop-out and improvements in school progression and enhanced life skills among adolescent girls.<sup>1</sup>**

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This brief summarizes the findings of a randomized controlled trial conducted by researchers Eric Edmonds (Dartmouth College), Ben Feigenberg (University of Illinois, Chicago), and Jessica Leight (American University).

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Throughout the developing world, there are substantial gender differences in school attendance and performance. Even where parity in attendance exists, girls continue to be disadvantaged by the curricula, classroom dynamics, teaching methods, and responsibilities outside the classroom. Positive role models can also be scarce in settings with pervasive gender discrimination, and girls often face a variety of hurdles to achieving their potential.

To test whether life skills training and mentoring by older female role models can improve the progress of girls through secondary school, enhance life skills, and improve academic performance, researchers Eric Edmonds (Dartmouth College), Ben Feigenberg (University of Illinois, Chicago), and Jessica Leight (American University) partnered with Room to Read to evaluate life skills education and mentoring delivered via the Girls' Education Programme in Ajmer, Rajasthan.



## Key Results

- GEP reduced drop-out and improved grade progression.
- GEP enhanced girls' life skills, and we particularly observe large and significant effects on self-reported measures characterizing social and emotional support, equitable gender norms, and future planning.

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### **Intervention: Room to Read's *Girls' Education Programme (GEP)***

**The Girls' Education Programme (GEP) is built around a life skills curriculum which has been developed with attention to the skills and attitudes girls need to unlock their potential, achieve their personal and community goals, make informed choices about their lives, and strengthen their agency.** The curriculum emphasises the development of ten skill categories:

- Self-confidence
- Expressing and managing emotions
- Empathy
- Self-control
- Critical thinking
- Decision-making
- Perseverance
- Communication
- Relationship building
- Creative problem solving

As part of the intervention, girls apply these skills to simulations involving time management, education, physical and emotional protection and rights, health, and community involvement. GEP evolves as girls age (starting in grade six and ending at the end of secondary school) and regularly revisits topics, adapting to stay age appropriate and relevant.

The curriculum is implemented in school by a Social Mobiliser (SM), typically a woman from the area, who conducts activities with enrolled girls, including life skills classes. The SM acts as a mentor and female role model and plays the role of a wise, caring adult. These women have completed secondary and post-secondary schooling, and they are employed full-time by Room to Read.

**This evaluation focused on the life skills sessions and mentoring delivered by the social mobilizer.** Every other week, SMs conduct life skills sessions with participants during part of the school day. In addition to this, the SM also conducts monthly mentoring sessions during school hours. The sessions are aimed at helping the girl troubleshoot difficulties in her life, develop long-term goals in schooling and career, enhance her agency, boost her self-confidence in life skills areas needing additional work, and develop peer solidarity.

In preparation for this role, the SM receives 16 days of training before beginning in the classroom, with an additional 8 days of training at the start of each subsequent year. As part of the training for the mentoring component specifically, the SM is trained in recognizing challenges that girls face and is oriented on additional support services that might be suitable for helping girls to overcome these challenges.

## Evaluation

From 2016-2019, researchers partnered with Room to Read to evaluate the first two years of the Girls' Education Programme (grades six and seven) in Ajmer, Rajasthan. A pool of 119 schools were identified as eligible<sup>2</sup> to receive the programme. The researchers categorised each eligible school as low or high quality, based on a school quality index constructed using measures of teacher experience, teachers' educational attainment, and classroom and school infrastructure quality. The researchers then randomly selected schools from each category to either receive the programme, i.e. be in the treatment group, or to be in the comparison group. This procedure was designed to ensure that treatment and comparison group schools were of comparable quality. 60 schools were assigned to the treatment group. The remaining 59 schools served as the comparison group.

*Outcomes and Measurement* The researchers surveyed girls and their caregivers to understand the effects of GEP on the primary outcomes. Quantitative data on these outcome measures was collected at the beginning and end of the evaluation. From a sample of 2,459 girls enrolled in the study, the researchers were able to survey 2,387 girls (97.1%) at the end of the evaluation. In addition to survey-based measures, certain life skills were captured through tasks designed to provide activity-based measures of these outcomes.<sup>3</sup> To measure cognitive skills and academic achievement, the research team administered a cognitive test to surveyed girls. The project timeline is summarized below (Fig 3).<sup>4</sup>

Administrative records from schools and Room to Read were also collected throughout the evaluation period. Additionally, qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted in a sub-set of communities, with the aim of understanding better the channels through which GEP changes attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making processes for girls, teachers, parents and other stakeholders.

## Results:

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<sup>2</sup> The eligibility criteria included the requirements that the schools had enrolled girls in classes 6 through 8, had between 16 and 32 girls in class 5, did not have any other NGOs providing life skills curricula to students, and had a classroom in acceptable condition in which a life skills class could take place.

<sup>3</sup> The three task-based measures were: a choice experiment designed to characterise future discounting, a mirror drawing task intended to measure perseverance/grit, and a scavenger hunt designed to measure self-agency as well as perseverance.

<sup>4</sup> The results reported below correspond to a simple specification estimate without baseline controls; outcomes of interest are regressed on a dummy for treatment assignment and strata fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered at the level of the school.

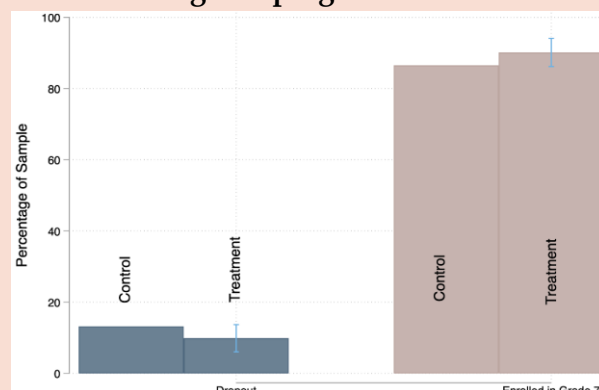
**GEP reduced drop-out and improved grade progression** (Fig 1). The average drop-out rate in the group receiving GEP was 25 per cent lower than the drop-out rate of the comparison group. Girls in GEP were also 4.3 per cent more likely to progress to the next grade. These results were statistically significant at the ten percent level. There were, however, no substantive improvements in school attendance.

**GEP improved girls' understanding and expression of life skills** (Fig 2). In the survey-based life-skills outcome measures, girls in GEP reported improvements in social and emotional support and empowerment. They also demonstrated more equitable gender norms in terms of their perceptions of the importance of girls' education, and they showed clear evidence of increases in future planning. The observed shifts correspond to an increase of approximately 0.05 and 0.1 standard deviations in life skills indices relative to the control group, and estimates are generally significant at the five percent level.

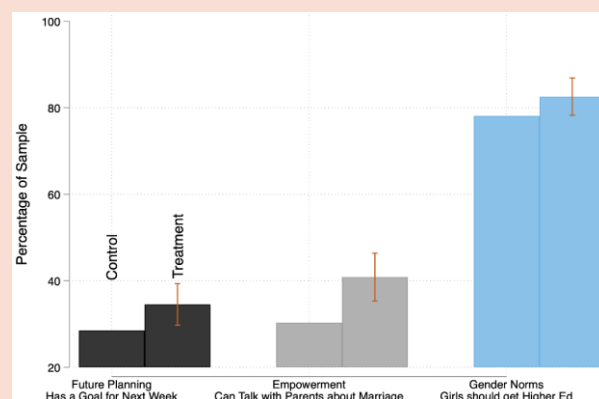
**Lastly, the improvements in life skills did not seem to be associated with substantive changes in cognitive skills in the first two years of the program.** There were also no significant changes observed in child engagement in labor inside or outside the home, child time allocation, or child marriage over this two-year horizon. However, this evaluation only captures short-term impacts of a limited version of GEP. As such, an important caveat is that the evaluation is not structured to examine longer-term impacts on outcomes such as secondary school completion or on other long-term life outcomes that are explicit GEP goals.

**Qualitative work** highlighted that girls benefited from building a community of mutual support that reinforced their interest in schooling. Our qualitative findings also emphasized improvements in goal setting: girls who participated in GEP could now articulate goals and strategies for reaching those goals.

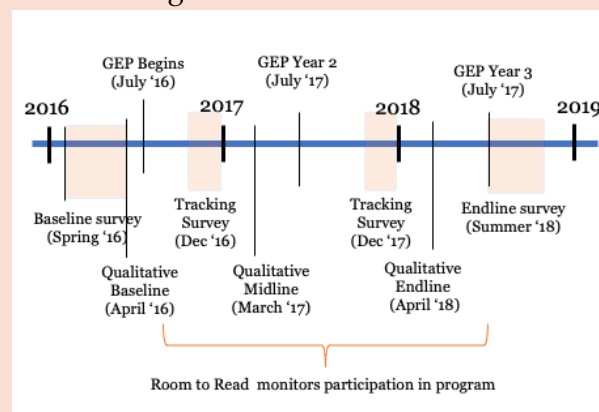
**Fig 1. GEP reduced drop-out and improved grade progression**



**Fig 2. GEP improved girls' understanding and expression of life skills**



**Fig 3. Evaluation timeline**



## Policy Lessons

**The findings from this evaluation highlight the potential of life skills education for girls to increase girls' progression through school and strengthen life skills.** Despite a setting with few professional opportunities for women, early marriage norms and low public visibility of women, these findings present reasons to be optimistic about the possibility of teaching life skills to adolescent girls in schools and for the act of teaching those life skills to help girls stay in school.