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INTEGRATING ADOLESCENT LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES WITHIN A REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH PROGRAMME FOR URBAN SLUM DWELLERS IN INDIA

Background

In India, adolescent girls have less schooling, fewer opportunities to work and earn money, and more limited mobility than adolescent boys. Girls' time use contrasts starkly to boys', with girls spending far more time on household chores than their brothers. With few other viable options, marriage continues to happen early for girls. Nearly one in four girls is married by age 15 and close to half are married by age 18. Livelihood activities could help reframe the second decade of girls' lives from a period when they are often confined to the home and devoted to preparation for marriage and childbearing to a time when they can develop as individuals and gain knowledge and skills that are the foundation for a more productive adulthood. By offering an alternative that enhances social status, such activities may help delay marriage and provide young women with greater control over their sexual and reproductive lives. Although a wide variety of livelihood programmes for adult women exists in India, they rarely include adolescent girls. Of those that do, few employ rigorous scientific methods to evaluate programme impact.

Description of Project

The project was conducted in slum areas of Allahabad, the sixth largest city in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh. The Population Council, in collaboration with CARE-India, tested the feasibility and impact of adding four livelihoods and life-skill components to a reproductive health programme for adolescent girls (both school-going and out-of-school) aged 14-19. Using a quasi-experimental pre- and post-test design that contrasted the experimental group with a comparison group of adolescents, the project investigated whether the intervention: increased girls' physical mobility and contact with individuals outside the family; enhanced girls' skills development and sustained use of these skills; altered work aspirations of girls and encouraged more progressive gender role norms; reduced gender differentials in time use; and increased girls' reproductive health knowledge.

The baseline survey, conducted in May 2001 among more than 3,000 adolescents aged 14-19 and their parents, revealed substantial differences between boys and girls with respect to mobility, time-use patterns, savings and work experience, and reproductive health knowledge.

All girls in both experimental and control areas received reproductive health education from peer educators; these group sessions, with approximately 20 girls per group, were held weekly for 710 weeks. Only participants who lived in the experimental area, however, were provided with: counselling about savings formation and livelihoods; training in vocational skills; assistance with opening...
savings accounts; and follow-up counselling and assistance.

These livelihoods components were offered to participating girls in the experimental areas following completion of the reproductive health sessions. The courses arranged by the project included tailoring, pot decoration, mehndi (painting of hands or feet), candlemaking, creative painting, rug weaving, mending and embroidery, beekeeping, food preservation, and basic cooking. Girls who were interested in enrolling in the classes were assisted in several ways, for example, by helping them complete the application form, having the project staff speak to their parents about the course, or even subsidising the course fee. Most courses were also offered on Sundays for school going girls who could not attend training courses during the week. Over the course of 10 months, 19 vocational courses were offered, each typically lasting 12 weeks, although some ran for several months. At least one vocational course was completed by 487 girls, and almost 80% completed two or more courses.

Peer educators also discussed various savings options available in the community and girls were assisted in opening saving accounts. Around 250 girls opened savings accounts in their own name. Because of simpler procedures and lower initial deposit requirements than banks, all the accounts were opened in a post office. In many instances, once accounts were opened family members gave girls money for depositing in their accounts. However, since girls were reluctant to go alone to the post office, many did not continue to actively use their savings accounts.

Findings from the Evaluation

Although the livelihoods programme was acceptable to parents and feasible to implement, the project had only a small effect on the behaviour and attitudes of adolescent girls in the experimental slums. The greatest changes between the baseline and the endline surveys were found in those outcomes that most closely reflected the content of the intervention. Girls in the intervention group were significantly more likely to have knowledge of safe spaces, be a member of a group, score higher on the self-esteem and social skills index, be informed about reproductive health, and spend time on leisure activities, than the matched control respondents. No programme effect was found on gender role attitudes, mobility, work expectations, time use, or labour market work, likely because of the short duration of the intervention, as well as the limited number of times that groups convened. (Note that group formation was not a primary goal of this programme). Although the girls showed interest in opening savings accounts and are by law permitted to do so, staff at the post office are male and frequently express their reluctance to work with adolescent girls; thus programme staff had to act as intermediaries in order for girls to access savings accounts.

Lessons Learned

While a short-term intervention cannot alter the structure of opportunities available to adolescent girls, it can raise awareness, social skills, knowledge of safe spaces and group identification. However, in order to reduce deeply entrenched gender disparities and enhance girls' ability to have a greater voice in influencing their lives, it would be desirable for future projects to spend considerably more time with participants, and with key community members, including parents, bank and postal workers, and others.

Reference