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.

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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

depending on the levels of literacy supported? And what are the main reasons for the observed trends in literacy acquisition?

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section offers a brief overview of the evidence on girls' education and literacy acquisition for girls globally and in Pakistan, with particular emphasis on poverty and the intersectionalities of poverty and gender. The next section describes the *Siyani Saheliyan* programme as well as the context of the study. Following this, the methods of the study are presented, with particular emphasis on how literacy is measured, the indicators for socioeconomic disadvantage, and the analytical strategy to capture changes in literacy over time. The voices from various stakeholders, which were recorded as part of the primary qualitative data collection effort for an independent evaluation of the *Siyani Saheliyan* programme, are also presented. After exploring the main findings, the chapter concludes with some of the main takeaways of the evidence and lessons to support literacy formation for girls in poverty in the context of Pakistan.

LITERACY FORMATION, GENDER AND POVERTY GLOBALLY AND IN PAKISTAN

There is substantial evidence both globally and from Pakistan to suggest that girls' education is a highly worthwhile investment (Aslam & Rawal, 2021). Women's education has been linked to better health outcomes, not only for the women themselves but also for their children, across many Low-and-Middle Income Countries (DiCesare et al., 2013). A study from Pakistan (Aslam & Kingdon, 2010) has found that whilst father's education is positively associated with the 'one-off' immunisation decision, mother's education, particularly mothers who have completed primary schooling or more, is more critically associated with longer term child health outcomes, such as weight and height. The channels through which the latter works specifically is through more educated mothers having greater health knowledge, being more empowered within the home, being able to participate in the labour market, and having greater exposure to media.

Investing in women's learning also reaps immense economic benefits (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2011). In Pakistan, improved literacy has been noted to have a remarkable effect on women's earnings. For instance, working women with high levels of literacy earn 95% more than women with weak or no literacy skills (UNESCO, 2012). There is also evidence to suggest that educated women are more empowered to take greater economic roles within their families and tend to reinvest 90% of what they earn into their own families (Bourne, 2014). In Pakistan (Andrabi et al., 2012), evidence suggests that more educated mothers also spend more time with their children on educational activities and in helping their children with homework. There is a clear intergenerational learning gradient whereby children of mothers with higher levels of education achieve greater literacy outcomes.

Despite all these direct and indirect benefits of educating girls, the persistent and dire state of girls' education continues. Girls continue to miss out on schooling particularly as they enter adolescence and throughout their teenage secondary education years. This is also the time in their lives when they are at highest risk of early marriage, gender-based violence, early pregnancy, immense burden of unpaid work, harmful child labour and other damaging life events which will have consequences not only on their own economic and life outcomes but also that of generations to come (Durrani & Halai, 2018; Aslam & Rawal 2021). The reasons behind this are multifaceted and complex. Whilst these may vary by context across the globe, girls appear to face similar barriers in accessing quality education, in continuing to

transition and completing key education levels (Aslam & Rawal, 2021). The factors that tend to drive girls away from education and into marriage or labour include the following: economic insecurities, cultural and religious gender-based norms, school availability, school distance, and school quality as well as costs of schooling (Durrani et al., 2017). The constraints faced by girl's personal capability to learn come from the home and the community, the school and the classroom, as well as the wider policy and system within which they reside (Durrani, 2008; Durrani & Halai, 2018).

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have exacerbated the risks and inequalities for girls both globally and within Pakistan. These inequalities are likely to deepen already dire poverty levels and widen the existing gaps in economic, social, health and education outcomes (Sharma, 2020). In addition to a significant health crisis, many families are facing an unprecedented financial upheaval due to the pandemic which may force them to resort to more child labour simply to meet a subsistence existence. Not only are girls more likely to face learning losses due to protracted and intermittent school closures as they have to engage with most household chores, but they are also ultimately more likely to drop out as well.

Pakistan was among the first countries in the world to institute widespread school closures as a result of COVID-19. Schools in Sindh were closed from February 27, 2020. School closures in the rest of the country started from the weekend of March 14, 2020. Since then, there have been further disruptions with schools closing and reopening through staggered arrangements several times at the time of writing this chapter. Studies in Pakistan based on earlier crises have revealed that the effects of school closures can be detrimental and can persist for many years. In Pakistan, an entire cohort of students aged 3-15 years at the time of the 2005 earthquake had lower academic scores four years later despite large remediation efforts (Jishnu et al., 2020). Globally, the World Bank estimates that exclusion and inequality will likely be exacerbated since the already marginalized and vulnerable groups are more adversely affected by the school closures (Azevedo et al., 2020). Geven and Hasan (2020), in their estimate of learning losses in Pakistan due to the pandemic-related school closures note the following: income losses in the country due to the pandemic could lead to sharp dropouts and whilst the data do not allow a disaggregated gender analysis, the authors note that "historical evidence suggests that girls may drop out at higher rates" (p. 7). Even the most optimistic estimates suggest that every child is going to suffer a learning loss in the country and 'learning poverty', the share of children who do not learn to read and understand a simple text by age 10, is likely to go up to 79% from an already high estimate of 75%.

Previous evidence from Pakistan demonstrates that these consequences are likely to be borne more disproportionately by girls. Alcott and Rose (2015) note that there is a large gender gap in enrolment in Pakistan, 60% of those who have never been to school in rural areas are girls and that girls are over one and half times as likely to be out of school as boys. This disadvantage in access is even more pronounced for girls from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, a substantial number of poor girls in Pakistan have never attended school, though once they are in school, they have a good chance of completing it. Therefore, one of the biggest hurdles is getting girls into school. In addition, girls face differential treatment with respect to schooling in household where there are boys. For instance, when having to choose between which of their children to pay for and send to fee-paying private schools, parents are more likely to pay for their son's education (Bizenjo, 2020). Finally, the wealth gap in learning is exacerbated by gender in Pakistan (Bizenjo, 2020; Akmal & Pritchett 2020). Overall, one of the biggest hurdles in Pakistan is getting girls into school and ensuring they stay there. Other evidence from the country seems to suggest that once children are in schools, even rural government schools, often

presumed to house the most disadvantaged pupils and hence ineffective in imparting learning, *can* make progress in learning (Aslam et al., 2019).

Girls with disabilities also face a 'double disadvantage' in terms of schooling outcomes. Earlier evidence from Pakistan suggests that a large number of youth with disabilities had never attended school in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in Pakistan and that this was even more pronounced for girls (Singal et al., 2011). However, more recent evidence by Singal et al (2020) suggests that the gender gap in disability and education is less marked and there is also evidence that wealth gaps have also declined. In fact, the authors note that "…. children with disabilities living in the poorest households have the same conditional probability of being enrolled in school relative to other children" (p.11). The study also finds that when children are attending school,, both boys and girls who have been identified as having any functional difficulty have the same probability of recognising single digits or learning the alphabet as other boys and girls without functional difficulties. This seems to suggest that once girls, no matter what type of disadvantage they might face, are enrolled in school, can be retained within the system, and given the opportunity to learn, they may progress as well as their counterparts.

Interventions that have adopted a multifaceted approach to combat and target all of the underlying factors that may prevent girls from accessing schooling or completing it have tended to be more effective than those that focus on education purely without concurrently considering other outcomes (Aslam & Rawal 2021). Cash transfers and financial incentives have been used as a means of encouraging girls' education whilst aiming to reduce child marriage with varying success. The Punjab Female School Stipend Program (FSSP) in Pakistan, which was launched in 2003 by the government of Punjab as part of a package of education reforms financed by the World Bank and other organizations, has shown improvements in girls' enrolment in middle school as well as benefiting adolescent girls progression through and completion of middle school, delaying marriage and having fewer births by age 19 (Center for Global Development, 2015; Chaudhury & Parajuli, 2010)). It has been argued that the programme's "impressive gains resulted from several factors, chief among them the targeting strategy, programmatic design, political will, and complementary supply-side reforms. Of great significance was the priority the FSSP placed on tackling gender inequity…" (Bourne, 2014). The FSSP is being revamped and rolled out from 2021-2022 as the Waseela-e-Taleem (WeT) Secondary School conditional cash transfer (CCT) under the national social protection program, Benazir Income Support Programme (The Nation, 2021). The program's implementation will begin in fiscal year 2021/22 through provincial mechanisms to offset girls' learning and access challenges.

Overall, as indicated by this review, being out of school or dropping out early means that girls will have very low chances of accessing basic knowledge and skills that they need to lead productive lives. They are also likely to face barriers in accessing meaningful employment, well-being, poverty reduction, and breaking the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. The literature proposes that once they are in education, girls in Pakistan should be able to close the attainment gap in literacy and other academic skills. There is no evidence, to our knowledge, that has robustly examined second chance opportunity programmes for girls who are out of school in Pakistan, link this to poverty, and understand the reasons behind continuing challenges for literacy formation. This chapter aims to shed some insights by focusing on the *Siyani Saheliyan* Programme.

PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION: SIYANI SAHELIYAN (SS)

Siyani Saheliyan is a FCDO-funded programme, which has been implemented in three selected districts of Southern Punjab by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) Pakistan. The *Siyani Saheliyan* programme aims to offer a 'second chance' to more than 35,000 adolescent girls who are out of school. The programme targets girls who have never been enrolled or have had limited school exposure. A key goal of the programme is to establish a comprehensive scalable programme for access, transition and retention for primary and post primary education, skills and livelihoods for marginalised girls in Pakistan. Therefore, selected girls are supported for access, completion and transition into schooling over a twenty-six-month intervention period through developing their functional literacy, numeracy and vocational skills.

The implementation of the programme took place in the districts of Muzaffargarh, Rahimyarkhan and Bahawalpur in South Punjab. These three districts are ranked by the Multidimensional Poverty Index (PSLM 2019-20) as poor by combining the 3 dimensions of education, health and household wealth. The programme was implemented between June 2018 and March 2020 and has been scaled up from April 2020 to March 2021.

In addition to skill development, the programme offers flexible schooling options as well as linkages with mainstream schools where beneficiaries of the programme can transition and continue with their formal education. The three strands of the programme are:

1. **Remedial/Accelerated Learning/Bridge programmes** at primary, middle and secondary levels
2. **Technical Vocational and Educational Training (TVET)** which includes skills/livelihoods and financial literacy training.
3. **Life Skills Based Education** which is a cross-cutting strand which provides training to all girls enrolled in both the remedial as well as the vocational strands. It is a 60-hour program which aims to equip adolescent girls with core life-skills.

In terms of the specific target population, the programme is designed for girls aged 9-19 years who have had limited access to formal education and have dropped out due to various forms of marginalisation including disability, ethnicity/caste, extended family responsibilities, among other reasons. The programme also targets girls aged 9-14 years who have never enrolled in schooling. These are the most vulnerable girls, usually including many who have faced displacement, emergency and conflict. In the first phase (2018-2020), the programme reached 21,490 girls – 16,690 for remedial learning, 2,300 for vocational skills and 2,500 for seed grants. Seed grants are viewed as a mechanism for sustainability and scale of impact. ITA has awarded seed grants to 13 partner organisations to scale up the skill development and literacy components in rural areas. Sustainability is being supported by capacity building of these organisations and by increasing efforts to connect them to potential financing options. The evidence presented in this chapter comes mostly from the academic programmes which supported literacy formation in Urdu, as well as numeracy and second language acquisition such as English.

METHODS

Sampling and Data Collection

Data used in this chapter was collected by ITA for monitoring and evaluation purposes of the *Siyani Saheliyan* programme. This includes quantitative data collected at different points in time from three hub schools as well as from the 159 out of 415 partner schools that the programme was offered at. Four tools were used as part of this data collection, two of which are used in this chapter: the household survey and assessments for literacy which differentiates the levels previously achieved by girls who were out of school and targeted by the programme. The household survey collected basic socio-demographic information from which we identified indicators of poverty.

Literacy was measured for CPB, STP and STM using appropriate tools linked to the National Curriculum and assessed at the beginning, middle, and towards the end of the programme. Information for the long-term middle programme was only collected at baseline and end line. Different arms of the intervention had different durations as well as levels of intensity, as the programme aimed to capture the diverse learning needs of girls who have been out of school. This is described in more detail below.

In addition to the monitoring and evaluation data, primary qualitative data gathered as part of the independent evaluation of the SS programme is also presented. These data were collected to triangulate the findings of the quantitative analysis and to explore anecdotal cases of programme beneficiaries further. These qualitative primary data were collected at the national, district and school/hub levels with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions being conducted across a range of stakeholders who engaged with the SS programme in different ways. The instruments aimed to garner the perspectives of a range of different stakeholders including the implementers of SS (ITA), government representatives at the national and district level, representatives at the school level, parents and the girls themselves who were the direct programme beneficiaries.

Despite the qualitative nature of the primary data collection, the aim was to arrive at a sample which was representative of the population, all schools where the SS programme had been launched, and a proportionate stratified random sampling approach was adopted. A total of 25 schools and 3 Hubs were sampled across the three districts, 12 in Rahimyarkhan, 7 in Bahawalpur and 6 in Muzaffargarh. Within each school, a series of interviews were conducted. These included interviews with head teachers, teachers, participant girls' focus group discussions and parents' focus group discussions. Girls were randomly selected to take part in focus group discussions. It was also ensured that the selection of girls to take part in the focus groups was not influenced by the advice of teachers or head teachers although there were many suggestions made as to which students would be more interactive. The survey team also selected students from every row of the class to ensure diversity within the sample of students. For this chapter, qualitative data from interviews with the girl beneficiaries as well as evidence from headteachers, teachers, parents and SS staff are reported.

Qualitative data collection took place during October 2019 – January 2020. The main topics discussed with the girls themselves pertained to their overall experiences in participating in the programme, the challenges associated with recruiting as well as retaining girls in remedial programmes, lessons learned as well as unintended consequences. Other interviews covered similar issues. A rigorous set of rules and procedures were followed to ensure compliance with the ethical principles which include but are not limited to the following: (1) integrity and quality of the research design; (2) fully informed consent of research staff and participants; (3) voluntary participation and upholding of participant's rights; (4)

confidentiality and anonymity of participants (5) avoidance of harm to the participants; and (6) independence and impartiality of research.

Furthermore, both ITA and the research staff who conducted third party evaluation of the programme maintained a high standard of protocol throughout the duration of the study. The data collection did not proceed without explicit approval from the respondents. The partner organizations have previously worked extensively with adolescents, and researchers have been trained on working with adolescent girls in these contexts. ITA has a robust child protection policy in place, aligned to its core values and strategic goals, where ethical considerations such as respect, commitment, responsibility, sensitivity and accountability are well-embedded. As with the other service delivery and research projects implemented by ITA, this study was also carried out in accordance with all components of the policy to safeguard and protect the rights and interests of all participants.

MEASUREMENTS OF LITERACY IN URDU

In order to capture the different levels of literacy acquisition for girls who were supported by the programme, several instruments had to be designed. These instruments capture the foundations of literacy, from letter and word identification, basic reading, as well as listening and writing, to the more advanced skills which include grammar and comprehension. Literacy in mother tongue, Urdu, is the focus of this evidence, due to the importance of mother tongue literacy for the acquisition of literacy in a second language (Ball, 2010; Bühmann & Trudell, 2008; McKenzei & Walker, 2013).

Functional Literacy and Numeracy/Chalo Parho Barho (CPB)

The *Chalo Parho Barho* (CPB) or Teaching at the Right Level (TARL) strand caters to the needs of girls who were never enrolled in school due to various reasons outlined above. Girls (aged 9-14) attending this strand of the programme undergo an intensive burst of a three-month functional literacy and numeracy course which is designed using student learning outcomes from three subjects, Mathematics, English and Urdu, of Grades 1 – 3 (lower primary) through Activity Based Learning (ABL). Literacy acquisition in Urdu was measured through four main areas. The first area was reading ability, starting from the most basic identification of letters and moving to reading simple words and sentences. The second area was listening and writing. In this section girls were asked to listen to common words and write them. The third area was word level writing, which contained more complex words and the final area was sentence level writing, which included the formation of sentences. From this assessment we developed an 18-point scale to measure the extent to which CPB has increased literacy acquisition in Urdu. Points were allocated for each of the nine questions in the three sections on the following basis: 0 points if the girl was marked as a 'beginner', 1 point if the girl attempted the question but was incorrect and 2 points if the girl attempted the question and it was correct. This scale is used to indicate if there were gains made across the literacy in Urdu test from baseline to end line. Overall, while only 4% of girls were achieving 10 points or above at baseline, this increased to 86% of girls at midline and 96% at end line.

Short Term Primary

The Short-Term Primary (STP) strand is offered to girls who either dropped out from grade 4 or 5. This is a 6-month course using remedial and accelerated learning curriculum, which is a condensed form of Pakistan's National Curriculum (2006) of grade 5 geared towards preparing students for the provincial school-based examination. For this strand of the programme, literacy acquisition in Urdu was measured in eight main areas: antonyms, masculine and feminine words, tenses, sentence making, object identification, common nouns, reading comprehension and paragraph writing. This assessment was not adaptive, so girls tried all sections of the test. This means that girls who could not answer a specific question were not awarded any marks for that question and moved on to the next question. This resulted in a 20-point scale which measured the extent to which STP has increased literacy acquisition in Urdu. Like CPB, we estimate substantial gains made across literacy from baseline to end line. For instance, 46% and 57% of girls were achieving 10 marks or above at baseline and midline, respectively. However, there is a noteworthy increase between midline and end line, with 97% of girls achieving 10 marks or above at end line. As the assessment was not adaptive, and it cannot be assumed that each item has the same level of difficulty, an Item Response Theory (IRT) approach was adopted to develop the scale for literacy acquisition. IRT produces a score on the basis of the responses of each girl to the items that she completed while taking the difficulty and discriminating power of each item into account. The model therefore describes the probability that girls will answer in a specific way to an item. IRT therefore considers a latent or underlying proficiency level. This new scale is used in the estimation models to demonstrate if there are differences in achievement according to the socioeconomic background of the girls.

Short Term Middle

The Short-Term Middle (STM) strand is for girls who either dropped out from grade 7 or 8. This is a 6-month course using remedial and accelerated learning curriculum, which is a condensed form of Pakistan's National Curriculum (2006) of grade 8 geared towards preparing girls for the provincial examination. For this strand of the programme, literacy acquisition in Urdu was measured in nine main areas. These included: singular plural, word completion, word meaning, use in sentence, sentence correction, separate verb, reading, application writing and summary of poetry. Once again, there were varying numbers of marks available for each question, and the total marks available was 24. Girls attempted every question. Those who could not answer the question were not awarded any marks for that question and moved on to the next question. Using this 24-point marking scheme, there are significant improvements in literacy achievement over the course of the programme. More specifically, only 25% and 28% of girls achieved a score of 20 or over at baseline and midline, respectively. By the end of the programme 82% of girls achieved this score. Once again, as the assessment was not adaptive and we cannot assume that each item is of equal difficulty level, an IRT approach was adopted to develop a literacy scale for the empirical analyses.

Long Term Middle

The Long-Term Middle (LTM) strand is for girls who either dropped out from grade 6 or 7. This is a 12 to 18 month course using also remedial and accelerated learning curriculum, which is a condensed form of Pakistan's National Curriculum (2006) of grade 8 geared towards preparing students for provincial

examination. Literacy in Urdu for this strand of the programme was measured in 13 main areas. These include common noun, proper noun, sentence correction, interrogative words identification, emphasis words identification, sentence correction, rhyming words identification, what is tercet, interjection, comprehension and essay or dialogue writing. This scale shows there is a substantial increase in the proportion of girls in the LTM programme achieving higher marks in literacy in Urdu between baseline and end line. More specifically, while only 16% of girls achieved a score of 25 or above at baseline, 30% of girls achieved this at end line. For this assessment an IRT approach was also adopted to develop a literacy scale for the empirical analyses.

MEASUREMENTS OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND OTHER RELEVANT INDICATORS

Household socioeconomic status (SES) was measured using parental education and paternal employment. These are common indicators of poverty which have been used previously in the context of Pakistan (Alcott and Rose, 2015; Akmal and Pritchett, 2021). Maternal and paternal educational background was measured through the two binary questions: *have you ever gone to school?* Paternal employment status was measured through the binary question: *are you employed/involved in any revenue generation activity?*

In addition, other factors of relevance from the household survey were included when estimating progress in literacy for girls who have been out of school, particularly within the context of the provinces of Punjab where the intervention took place. These included the age of the girl learner, as well as for the size of the household in which she lives, as this could affect the intrahousehold chores which are assigned to young girls and hence their ability or inability to fully participate in education. There are many other confounding factors, but this analysis is constrained by the availability of information collected in the household survey. Like any other survey, it is not possible to capture all the information as this takes time from the respondents. What is important in this research, is that the survey was designed by ITA and hence contains questions relevant to the context.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: REFLECTIONS FROM GIRLS, PARENTS, TEACHERS, HEADTEACHERS AND OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The primary data collected from the different stakeholder interviews was coded using a coding framework addressing the key research questions and the data sources pertaining to the study. The coding framework allowed triangulation, integration and synthesis of different forms of qualitative data including interview transcripts and project documents etc. Once the data were coded, they were manually analysed, and the synthesised findings presented based on the analysis framework. These findings were then reported using a narrative approach to collate and present the qualitative results according to specific themes. However, only some critical qualitative findings that pertain directly to the questions being discussed in this chapter are presented here. In terms of some of the key findings from the qualitative data, it was quite apparent that financial constraints on households and long distances to schools were a fundamental deterrent to not only girls attending school but also teachers going to work and attending training safely. There was evidence from qualitative data that this programme has raised awareness of the importance of education in general and educating girls in particular. There was a recognition from interviewed stakeholders that

as a result of this programme, not only were girls more aware of the benefits of schooling and their own abilities but that the wider household, be it their parents or their siblings, and also the wider community were noted to have become more aware of the value of educating a girl.

Interviewed girls have suggested that this programme has given them an opportunity to "*prove their mettle"* and that it has enhanced the belief about the benefits of an educated mother both on her own children and on wider society. Interviewed girls reported that as a direct result of participating in this programme, they felt that they were able to raise their voices more, that they had gained self-confidence, obtained knowledge about their rights and a recognition of their talents. As one girl indicated "*My self-confidence gave me security*". Girls across the three districts reported feeling more empowered to make life decisions and more confident that they could have a more secure future as a result of participation in the SS programme. Participants also noted that their resilience had improved and that their perceptions on how they can face life's challenges were more positive. In particular, the provision of self-defence classes, which were provided as part of the life-skills programme, were highlighted as a contributing factor to this improved confidence.

Respondents also recognised that the programme had created a passion for education amongst them and had resulted in them learning about the importance of education. The programme has been attributed by respondents with the benefit of encouraging the participants to not only study now but study further and aspire to better jobs and employment. Interviewed girls recognise the benefits that this education will also provide to the household as a whole but even to younger siblings getting educated, which is an important intergenerational transmission of education. Parents were also positive about the value of the programme, with one parent noting: *'Now we proudly tell everyone that our daughters have passed 8th standard and they will keep studying to become teachers. Girls are very happy and content, they want to get educated and employed.'*

Based on focus group discussions and evidence garnered from the rich qualitative data, whilst some parents were initially very reluctant, this programme, according to parents themselves as well as school staff, resulted in increased parental trust and belief in their daughters. Parental aspirations about daughters' future careers also improved with one parent stating that they now dream of their daughter becoming a doctor and with several parents suggesting that they now aspire to their children achieving higher levels of education than they would have otherwise. In the words of one parent: '*Daughters are not a burden anymore'*. Some even suggested that they wished the programme covered higher levels of education. Parents and teachers also reported that the girls had become more confident as a result of this programme.

The qualitative interviews with teachers and headteachers also revealed that these two groups of stake-holders believed that the SS programme had changed the girls' mindsets and given them the perception that they would in fact be unlucky if they did not get an education. It was also noted to have changed their aspirations with girls now aspiring to be teachers, to study beyond primary and middle levels, and to earn money to help support their families. It was noted by one teacher that this programme has empowered girls and given them a voice. She recounted an anecdote where one girl's engagement was broken off when she enrolled in the programme, but she convinced her parents to allow her to continue schooling. One head teacher noted that girls had started to believe that they are as good as boys and that they can achieve as well as them. This changed mindset as a result of the SS programme was seen as a tremendous contribution to girls' education in these contexts.

In addition, there was evidence that girls' participation in education through this programme had started to shift some community and cultural norms. Some girls, for example, reported that initially reluctant community members, on seeing the benefits of enrolling girls and no negative repercussions

that they had anticipated, such as girls behaviour deteriorating as a result of schooling, enrolled their own children in the programme. This latter element was particularly credited to the fact that the SS programme in addition to the focus on literacy, imparted lessons on morality, on religion and on other key issues of importance to the local context. Whilst some respondents noted that the programme duration was sufficient, others felt that they could have benefited from a longer time period as the speed of the course meant that they found it more challenging to keep up. This suggests that programme duration should also consider the rate at which learners are able to grasp literacy and adjust or provide additional support so that girls can learn in an effective manner.

IMPROVING LITERACY OUTCOMES FOR DISADVANTAGED GIRLS: EVIDENCE FROM QUANTITATIVE DATA

Turning to whether or not gains in literacy are as a result of the socioeconomic circumstances of girls, this study demonstrates that maternal and paternal educational background and paternal employment status provide us with interesting insights about the complexity of poverty, gender and literacy for out-of-school girls within this context (see Table 1). For instance, taking a closer look at the role of education, 36% of mothers of girls enrolled in the LTM programme have some form of formal education whereas only 15% of mothers of girls in the CPB have some education. Similar patterns are found for fathers' education. In addition, a smaller proportion of fathers of girls enrolled in higher levels of the programme, such as STP, STM and LTM, are unemployed whereas the opposite is the case for fathers of girls enrolled at lower levels of the programme, levels which focus on foundational literacy, such as CPB. These basic descriptive data indicate that there is indeed heterogeneity in terms of the socioeconomic background of the households of out-of-school girls and their prior literacy achievements. While it is not possible to contrast literacy achievement across strands of the programme, the study captures whether there is similar progress made over the course of the programme for girls of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 1. Proportion of girls living in households by different socioeconomic indicators

	CPB	STP	STM	LTM
Mother's educational background (educated)	15	23	24	36
Father's educational background (educated)	23	32	38	49
Father's employment status (employed)	68	78	84	79
Number of observations	4,299	1,543	921	855

Source: Monitoring and Evaluation Data from SS Programme 2018-2020.

For girls participating in the CPB/TARL programme, literacy acquisition in Urdu from baseline to midline and end line appears to be significantly influenced by their father's educational background. More specifically, girls whose fathers have no formal education are almost 20 percentage points more likely than those whose fathers are educated to have made progress from baseline to end line. This implies that the CPB programme plays an equity enhancing effect for the most disadvantaged girls. We also see this pattern repeated for those in the LTM programme. Maternal educational background only

plays a significant role for one programme, STM. Here, we see that girls whose mothers are not educated are 8 percentage points less likely to have made progress between baseline and midline. However, this relationship does not appear to be significant between baseline and end line. The father's employment status does not appear to play a significant role in literacy acquisition in Urdu. What is important here is that regardless of the father employment status, girls in the different strands of the programme are making similar progress, on average, on literacy acquisition.

Table 2. Conditional changes in literacy scores over time by socioeconomic status of the household

	CPB		STP		STM		LTM
	BL-ML	**BL - EL**	**BL-ML**	**BL - EL**	**BL-ML**	**BL - EL**	**BL - EL**
Mother's educational background (ref: Educated)							
Not educated	0.0779	0.147	1.996	0.465	-0.768**	0.325	-0.242
	(0.0847)	(0.101)	(1.316)	(3.390)	(0.338)	(0.788)	(0.933)
Father's educational background (ref: Educated)							
Not educated	0.0979	0.198**	1.031	-2.889	0.230	0.625	1.545*
	(0.0684)	(0.0802)	(1.388)	(3.229)	(0.270)	(0.779)	(0.905)
Father's employment status (ref: Employed)							
Not employed	0.0616	0.0765	2.902	-2.525	-0.273	0.360	-0.346
	(0.0595)	(0.0654)	(2.210)	(5.484)	(0.364)	(1.263)	(1.005)

Source: Monitoring and Evaluation Data from SS Programme 2018-2020. Notes: Results obtained from ordinary least squares regression using literacy as the main outcome variable. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Asterisks ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at 1, 5 and 10% level, respectively. All models are conditional on region, age and household size.

CONCLUSION

Literacy continues to be a key foundation for further academic skills acquisition. Literacy in a language that one understands is even more central. Programmes for literacy enhancement for disadvantaged children require a deep understanding of the context, as well as the relevance of the content for the learner. Such is the case of the *Siyani Saheliyan* programme in Pakistan, a programme which offers literacy and other relevant skills to out-of-school girls. By designing a programme which is culturally relevant and targets literacy acquisition at different levels of competencies, many girls had the opportunity to improve their literacy skills in Urdu.

This chapter uses quantitative data to specifically examine the extent to which the programme increased literacy acquisition equitably. Using longitudinal data collected as part of the evaluation of the SS programme, and literacy measures over time, this chapter reports on the learning progress over time between girls living in the poorest households relative to other girls. For girls at the most basic levels of literacy acquisition, we found that the programme was equity enhancing. In other words, girls from more disadvantaged backgrounds made more progress in foundational literacy acquisition relative to other girls. This pattern was also obtained for girls at the highest levels of literacy learning, those learning literacy for middle school. For girls in the other strands of the programme, and for other indicators

of socioeconomic status, such as paternal employment, we found that all girls made similar progress. In this sense, the programme was equity neutral in enabling literacy progress in Urdu.

Progress in literacy outcomes in Urdu were substantial for all strands of the programme. There are important insights reported as part of the interviews and focus group discussions held with diverse stakeholders, and importantly with the girls themselves. The qualitative findings note that girls' participation in education through this programme had started to shift some community and cultural norms.

These findings suggest that programmes such as the *Siyani Saheliyan* programme have the potential to cause real change in some of the most challenging contexts of Pakistan. Nevertheless, there are some challenges that continue to be present within the context, which participating interviewed stakeholders outlined as preventing the girls, particularly the poorest girls, from having opportunities to further enhance their literacy skills. These include the following: distance from school to home; financial constraints of the household; parental and community perceptions that the education of girls is not valuable and could even be detrimental to, for example, their moral values; education being considered more important for boys than for girls; child work in and out of the household and early marriage. Future programmes in this context that aim to improve literacy would benefit from noting these constraints to ensure that comprehensive programmes continue to be designed that overcome these deep-rooted challenges.

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