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POLICY BRIEF

Non-formal girls' life skills programming

Implications for policy and practice

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Introduction

Research in developing countries demonstrates the importance of life skills for improving a range of outcomes for adolescent girls.¹ These outcomes include improved psychosocial and mental health (e.g., emotional resilience, reduced post-traumatic stress, increased sense of self-efficacy),² sexual and reproductive health³; social relationships (including reduced domestic or intimate partner violence); social networks⁴; and economic assets and opportunities (e.g., access to resources like loans, increased savings levels, earnings, etc.).⁵ Studies also suggest that life skills development is important for increasing girls' sense of control over their lives, as well as their self-confidence and agency.⁶

In addition to improving girls' lives, targeting life skills trainings in combination with the teaching of other skills may lead to overall better societal outcomes. Emerging evidence suggests that teaching a breadth of skills—including academic, vocational, and socio-emotional skills—rather than focusing on a narrow set of skills is key for sustaining successful life outcomes.⁷ Indeed, studies suggest that non-academic skills may be a better predictor of individual economic success in the labor market than academic skills alone.⁸ And, life skills programs that include a focus on issues of gender (e.g., gender rights, gender norms, etc.) and power (e.g., power in relationships) may be more effective at reducing risky health behaviors, reducing rates of early marriage, and increasing pro-gender equality attitudes than programs that do not include such content.⁹

The problem and study details

For marginalized and vulnerable girls in developing countries whose life outcomes are threatened by

poverty and gender-based discrimination, the existing evidence suggests that life skills education is important for arming them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to rewrite their futures.¹⁰ But while education stakeholders recognize this importance—based on the prevalence of life skills programs, curricula, and national frameworks around the world¹¹—we have little sense of the scope of non-formal life skills programs and how non-formal education actors can better deliver life skills programming to the most disadvantaged girls.

The focus on non-formal life skills programming is particularly important for marginalized and vulnerable adolescent girls in developing countries who are more likely to drop out of the formal education system due to early marriage, early pregnancy, financial difficulties, and/or social norms. The 2018 Global Education Monitoring Report Gender Review finds that despite the progress made in gender parity at primary levels of education (with 66 percent of countries having reached parity), only 25 percent of countries have reached parity at upper secondary levels of schooling, when such gender-based challenges are intensified for girls.¹² Even in countries that have reached gender parity across all levels of education, the most vulnerable girls remain out of school. In Ecuador, for instance, 48 percent of indigenous women are illiterate as compared to 18 percent of their nonindigenous counterparts.¹³ Non-formal education actors, including those focused specifically on life skills, are thus key players in ensuring marginalized and vulnerable girls are not further left behind, as education for these populations is sometimes only accessible through non-formal initiatives.

This policy brief is based on a larger study that looked at better understanding non-formal life skills programming. The study included (1) a comprehensive literature review of non-formal life skills programs for girls in developing countries, and (2) a cross-national study of 103 life skills programs in Ethiopia, Lebanon,

and Tanzania. Of the programs sampled, 35 percent were established by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 11 percent were public sector initiatives, and 8 percent were started by public or private donors.¹⁴ Within these programs, the study surveyed 54 program managers and 779 adolescent girls about the design of and their experience with non-formal life skills programming, respectively.

A full report of the study's methodology and findings is available online.¹⁵ Table 1 summarizes the study's key findings. In the remainder of this brief, we reflect on the broader implications of the study for the policy and practice of life skills education in developing countries.

Key takeaways and policy implications

1. Non-formal life skills programs are missing a critical opportunity to serve the most marginalized girls.

Given the non-formal education sector's unique position to provide opportunities for skills development to populations for whom the formal education sector has failed or underserved, the non-formal sector could make an explicit effort on targeting vulnerable participants. Indeed, 57 percent of the programs we surveyed report using no background criteria to target program participants. Of those that do use selection criteria, only 10 percent of programs claim to target girls specifically and just 2 percent claim to target only vulnerable girls. If life skills programs equip youth with tools to face challenges that marginalized girls are particularly vulnerable to, then such programs are missing an opportunity to deliver their program offerings to those marginalized populations. However, our data show that marginalized girls will

not be reached by chance, so programs should be more explicit about targeting them. In our study, for instance, only 5 percent of girls surveyed in Ethiopia were out of school (either having dropped out of or having never been to school). This is particularly alarming as compared to a 49 percent out-of-school rate for adolescent girls of lower secondary school age in Ethiopia.¹⁶ When we look at the vulnerability profiles of all the girls in our survey, just under half met at least one condition of vulnerability.¹⁷ Moreover, 69 percent of girls surveyed said they faced no obstacles to attend their program. Among those who did report experiencing an obstacle, 21 percent reported time to be the biggest obstacle compared to only 1 percent who reported lack of money or distance/transportation as an obstacle, further demonstrating the relatively privileged social and economic status of girl participants. Despite serving some vulnerable girls, programs reported that they do not specifically target the most marginalized. If the goal of life skills education is to transform the lives of those populations, then programs must set specific criteria to make sure that those girls have the opportunity to participate in life skills programs.

2. Programs try to teach a breadth of skills, but there is a lack of definitional consensus of life skills across programs.

Life skills programs are combining several types of skills in their program offerings. In Lebanon, for example, nearly one-third of programs target development in at least 10 different skills. Across all three countries, the most common skills targeted are social and interpersonal skills followed by personal skills.¹⁸ While such an approach is, on the surface, consistent with what the literature suggests may be effective for sustaining successful life outcomes, current program approaches to breadth may be suffering from either a narrow focus on skills for self-improvement (e.g.,



Table 1. Key Findings

Program Methods and Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Programs are serving youth who are easy to identify and easy to reach, and do not always target the most vulnerable girls.• Programs use a variety of methods, particularly participatory methods.• The most commonly taught skills in non-formal life skills programs are social and interpersonal skills.
Program Delivery and Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most life skills program instructors are trained and regularly evaluated. Programs also claim that they are regularly evaluated.• Most life skills programs involve community members in program delivery, but do not always require parental consent to participate.
Program Alignment with Beneficiary Desires	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Program content is generally aligned with the skills that beneficiaries desire.• Participants report greater gains and impact on specific cognitive, health, and personal growth areas in which they exercise high levels of personal agency, than on structural challenges like employment prospects and marriage over which they have little personal control or agency.• Participants are generally highly satisfied with program content, and they prioritize attending trainings.

confidence, emotional regulation) or on livelihoods.¹⁹ Although our study concludes that the skills programs currently teach are generally aligned with the skills that girls report are most relevant to them, more research is needed to understand whether these are the skills girls need to thrive in today's society.

In addition, there seems to be inconsistency in what programs are calling "life skills." Indeed, programs oftentimes conflate specific knowledge areas (like knowledge about preventing pregnancy) with skills (like navigating a health care system to access contraception), sometimes leaving out explicit attention to

developing attitudes (such as toward women's reproductive rights). These problems may stem from a definition issue, where the term "life skills" leads program implementers to focus program design on vocational and technical skills for livelihoods or knowledge of specific life situations (e.g., sexual and reproductive health). Instead, these programs should focus on helping girls to develop a broad range of competencies, like critical thinking or reflective thinking, that allows girls to take what they've learned in these programs and apply it widely to navigate a range of gender-based challenges in their lives.

3. There are gaps in what life skills programs measure.

The lack of definitional consensus discussed above feeds into a larger issue of measurement. There is a gap between what we want to measure and what our assessments are actually capturing. First, because life skills development is different than other content-based education (e.g., literacy, numeracy, and other academic-related skills), measures that capture the underlying processes that demonstrate whether girls can transfer and apply these skills from situation to situation in concrete and, ideally, empowering ways are more desirable and necessary. Research on process-oriented assessments of 21st century skills like problem solving is just emerging, and will be critical to help practitioners move away from relying solely on self-reported measures.

Second, because the ultimate goal of life skills development is to improve girls' life outcomes, researchers and practitioners, as well as donors and other stakeholders, must begin to incorporate longitudinal measures in evaluations of impact in order to better understand the relationship between life skills development and the achievement of life outcomes. For instance, there is little research in developing country contexts about what impact girls' life skills training has on increasing their participation later in life in household decision making or in business or political spheres. While program evaluation is common practice within non-formal life skills programming, improvements in life skills assessment and impact evaluation is needed to ensure the resulting data is useful for policy and action that advances girls' opportunities and strategic needs.²⁰

4. Life skills practitioners may be missing a key opportunity to inform policy to better align with girls' needs.

The emergence of national frameworks for life skills education, and a global movement to more broadly incorporate 21st century skills across national curricula, suggests that policy contexts are ripe for scaling best practices in life skills education.²¹ But, while policy level dialogue on skills may be happening, the country case studies in our larger report indicate that policy framework contexts are not necessarily aligned with the focus of programs that were surveyed, potentially hinting at a policy-practice gap. Although our study did not directly examine the drivers of program content and priorities specifically, our findings suggest that more can be done to ensure policy-practice alignment, with the strategic needs of vulnerable and marginalized girls (and boys) at the center. For instance, while all three countries in our study had adopted a national or regional framework on life skills, the literature review suggests that non-formal life skills programming in these countries may be driven less by the priorities outlined by their national or regional agendas and more by priorities defined by the implementing NGO, their donors, or the communities in which they work.

Nonetheless, such a gap in priorities points to key information that may not be making it into policy-level dialogue: for instance, girls' perceptions of what skills they find most useful to navigate gender-based challenges at home, what aspects of their lives they feel they have or don't have control over, or how their skills development may or may not be changing family and community members' perceptions of their capabilities—all information relevant to ensuring interventions meet their strategic needs that program evaluations could collect, if they have not done so already. Given the proximity of non-formal life skills implementers to individual girls, their families and communities, there



is a unique opportunity for the non-formal sector to build evidence-generating coalitions focused on informing national policy dialogue on girls and skills. This could also help highlight best practices within non-formal approaches to girls' skills development that could be taken up by life skills stakeholders across the education system, bringing us to our next and final policy implication.

5. Formal and non-formal education stakeholders can learn from each other to improve girls' opportunities for life skills development.

To encourage widespread systems and social change for girls, informing the *formal* education sector's approach to life skills development for girls specifically is paramount. Our study's focus on non-formal life skills programs illuminates several areas that could also be relevant for the delivery of life skills education by the formal education sector. First, roughly between 75-90 percent of non-formal life skills programs surveyed claim to provide some sort of pre-course training to program instructors (including donor- or government-provided workshops and seminars) and regular feedback or evaluation of their performance (including field visits, classroom observation, and mentorship). Second, approximately 80 percent of programs claim to utilize some combination of interactive, participatory teaching methods and activities, including discussions, drama, art, and sport. And third, most, if not all, programs claim to take an integrated approach to teaching a combination of knowledge areas (like financial literacy or reproductive health and contraception) and skills (like communication, resilience, and decision-making).²²

These findings suggest that training, evaluation, participation, and integration are key components—if not high priorities—for non-formal life skills program

design and implementation. This could have implications for the formal sector with regard to 1) preparing teachers to act as facilitators or mentors in girls' development of life skills, 2) equipping teachers with the tools to use more participatory pedagogies in their classrooms, and 3) integrating the teaching of life skills into the curriculum and classroom activities rather than treating it as a stand-alone subject. However, more research is needed to better discern what specific approaches by the non-formal sector can and should be leveraged by the formal sector around teacher-facilitator training and evaluation (e.g., what is the content and quality of training, how do teacher-facilitators develop and practice the skills themselves that they are expected to teach, how are teacher-facilitators sensitized to gender and adolescence, etc.).

Finally, it seems that life skills programming offered in formal education settings offer youth the maximum number of hours of exposure due to their integration into the school year; whereas programming offered in non-formal education settings are limited in their program duration. If exposure (duration and intensity) matters in the development of and, perhaps also, the transferability and translatability of life skills into real-world contexts, then non-formal and formal education stakeholders should explore stronger linkages with each other, both in terms of coordinating program content and ensuring continuous and empowering contexts for girls. This is especially critical for catching the most marginalized and vulnerable girls before they drop out of the formal education system.

Conclusion

While it is clear that non-formal life skills programming is important for improving the life outcomes of vulnerable girls, more research is needed to improve program design and delivery. For instance, studies are needed to improve our understanding of what aspects of life skills training programs create positive (or negative) outcomes for girls, and why: the teachers (including selection, training, and teaching methods), curriculum and pedagogy, classroom dynamics and learning environments, meeting time and place, community and parent involvement, or other factors completely. The growth of non-formal life skills programming is hopeful, but the field is challenged by several problems, including participant recruitment, the definition and measurement of “life skills,” and the link between program outcomes and transformative life outcomes for girls. These problems will continue to make it difficult to define policy priorities for countries and organizations aiming to achieve targets under Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5.²³ While our study of non-formal life skills programming has helped to illuminate some insights for both non-formal and formal education actors, we recommend the following to help move the field further.



Recommendations

Improve targeting of participants to reach marginalized and vulnerable girls.

This also means conducting more research with program implementers on how programs could improve their beneficiary selection processes, including what types of recruitment strategies would help program staff overcome challenges in serving the hardest to reach girls.

Design life skills programs that are more intentional about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes girls need to achieve transformative life outcomes and social change.

This would help move the field beyond terminology debates toward the underlying processes that make life skills potentially life changing.²⁴ This also means listening to adolescent girls themselves to better understand the social and structural challenges, barriers, and threats to their lives in order to ensure life skills programs are offering content and opportunities that are aligned with their strategic needs and contexts.

Develop process-oriented measures of life skills.

This would help program evaluators move beyond self-reported measures and program designers to build stronger connections between short- and long-term program outcomes for girls. Better measurement tools and longitudinal data can help illuminate whether girls are actually developing and applying life skills, and to eventually enable stakeholders to discern which skills are critical for vulnerable girls.

Generate more evidence through non-formal sector coalitions to inform girl-centered policy and action.

This also means providing capacity-building opportunities to life skills practitioners in data collection, analysis, and communication.

Create regular opportunities for learning between non-formal and formal education stakeholders for wider systems change for girls.

This means stepping away from siloed approaches to developing girls' life skills to a system-wide approach to ensuring girls enter adulthood with the skills they need to thrive. This includes ensuring policy is informed by evidence-based practice from both formal and non-formal approaches to girls' skills development alike. And that practice is informed by policy that better reflects the lived realities of vulnerable girls and their communities.

Endnotes

- 1 We define life skills as the knowledge (what one knows), skills (what one has), and attitudes (what one believes and values) that constitute a set of competencies (what one can do) that enable youth to adapt to, function, and thrive in society (Kwauk and Braga, 2017).
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- 3 Acharya, Rajib, et al. Broadening Girls' Horizons: Effects of a Life Skills Education Programme in Rural Uttar Pradesh. Population Council, 2009.; Dunbar, Megan S., and et al. "The SHAZI Project: Results from a Pilot Randomized Trial of a Structural Intervention to Prevent HIV among Adolescent Women in Zimbabwe." *PLOS One*, no. November, 2014.; Hadjipateras, Angela, and et al. *Joining Hands: Integrating Gender and HIV/AIDS*. ACORD, 2006.
- 4 Brady, Martha, and et al. *Providing New Opportunities to Adolescent Girls in Socially Conservative Settings: The Ishraq Program in Rural Upper Egypt*. Population Council, 2007.
- 5 Bandiera, Oriana, and et al. *Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa*. 2014, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/economics/people/facultyPersonalPages/facultyFiles/RobinBurgess/WomensEmpowermentInAction0314.pdf>.; Edmeades, Jeffrey, et al. *Improving the Lives of Married, Adolescent Girls in Amhara, Ethiopia*. 2014. Google Scholar, <https://www.icrw.org/publications/improving-the-lives-of-married-adolescent-girls-in-amhara-ethiopia/>.; Kashfi, Farzana, et al. "BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents: Changing Mind-Sets and Going to Scale with Social and Financial Skills for Girls." *Child Policy Insights*, 2012. Google Scholar, [http://www.childwatch.uio.no/news/2012/brac_november_2012\(2\).pdf](http://www.childwatch.uio.no/news/2012/brac_november_2012(2).pdf).; Shahnaz, Rizwana, and Raihana Karim. *Providing Microfinance and Social Space to Empower Adolescent Girls: An Evaluation of BRAC's ELA Centres*. BRAC, 2008.
- 6 Acharya, Rajib, et al. Broadening Girls' Horizons: Effects of a Life Skills Education Programme in Rural Uttar Pradesh. Population Council, 2009.; Ashraf, Nava, et al. *The Impact of Teaching Negotiation on Girls' Education and Health Outcomes: Final Pilot Report*. Innovations for Poverty Action - Zambia, 2013.
- 7 Adhvaryu, Achyuta, et al. *Soft Skills to Pay the Bills: Evidence from Female Garment Workers*. 2016.; Bandiera, Oriana, and et al. *Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa*. 2014, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/economics/people/facultyPersonalPages/facultyFiles/RobinBurgess/WomensEmpowermentInAction0314.pdf>.; Heckman, James, and Tim Kautz. *Hard Evidence on Soft Skills*. 2012.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Amin, Sajeda, and et al. *Delaying Child Marriage through Community-Based Skills-Development Programs for Girls: Results from a Randomized Controlled Study in Rural Bangladesh*. Population Council, 2016.; Bandiera, Oriana, and et al. *Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa*. 2014, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/economics/people/facultyPersonalPages/facultyFiles/RobinBurgess/WomensEmpowermentInAction0314.pdf>.; Haberland, Nicole. "The Case for Addressing Gender and Power in Sexuality and HIV Education: A Comprehensive Review of Evaluation Studies." *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015, pp. 31–42.
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- 13 United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women and the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. *Gender and Indigenous Peoples' Education*. United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women and the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2010, http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/BriefingNote3_GREY.pdf.
- 14 The remainder were established by youth themselves, schools, or some combination of all of the above actors. Interestingly, none of the programs surveyed were community-led initiatives.
- 15 Dupuy et al., *Life Skills in Non-Formal Contexts for Adolescent Girls in Developing Countries*. Chr. Michelsen Institute and The Brookings Institution. 2018. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/6495-life-skills-in-non-formal-contexts-for-adolescent.pdf>.
- 16 UNESCO. *eAtlas of Gender Inequality in Education*. UNESCO. 2018. <https://tellmaps.com/uis/gender/#!/profile/WORLD/ETH>.



- 17 Specifically, 39 percent, 29 percent, and 47 percent of girls surveyed in Ethiopia, Lebanon, and Tanzania, respectively, met one condition of vulnerability. We identify a girl as vulnerable if at least one of the following holds true: she has a disability, is orphaned, is not enrolled in school, lives with people who are not her parents, or has a father who is unemployed. In our expanded definition of vulnerability, we also included a girl who is not a citizen of the country in which she lives (e.g., is a refugee or migrant). In this expanded definition, 88 percent of participants in Lebanon met at least one condition of vulnerability—with citizenship status the most prevalent factor of vulnerability for girls in this country—while still only 39 percent and 47 percent of participants in Ethiopia and Tanzania could be classified as vulnerable.
- 18 Examples of social and interpersonal skills are negotiation, refusal, respect for others and empathy, and examples of personal skills are self-esteem, stress management, and self-awareness.
- 19 The narrow focus on vocational and technical skills is particularly apparent in the literature. See for example, Adoho, Franck, et al. "The Impact of an Adolescent Girls Employment Program: The EPAG Project in Liberia." World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, no. 6832, 2014. Google Scholar, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2420245; FAO. Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS) – Uganda.; Brudevold-Newman, Andrew, and et al. Estimating the Impacts of Microfranchising on Young Women in Nairobi. Innovations for Poverty Action.; Uganda Youth Development. <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/estimating-impacts-microfranchising-young-women-nairobi>. Non-Formal Education and Livelihood Skills Programmes for Marginalised Street and Slum Youth in Uganda. UNESCO, UYDEL. 2006.; Morton, Matthew, and Paul Montgomery. "Empowerment-Based Non-Formal Education for Arab Youth: A Pilot Randomized Trial." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 34, 2012, pp. 417– 25.
- 20 We use needs and strategic needs interchangeably throughout the paper to mean, "the needs that women or men require to improve their position in regard to each other. They place people in greater control of themselves instead of limiting them to the restrictions imposed by socially defined roles. They are long-term (i.e. the aim to improve positions); they also intend to remove restrictions, and are less visible as they seek to change attitudes." European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). Strategic Gender Needs of Women (SGNs). EIGE. 2018. <http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/thesaurus/terms/1397>. . For the theoretical underpinnings of this framework please, see Molyneux, Maxine. Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua. *Feminist Studies*, 11:2. 1985.
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- 22 See, for example, Acharya, Rajib, et al. Broadening Girls' Horizons: Effects of a Life Skills Education Programme in Rural Uttar Pradesh. Population Council, 2009.; Bandiera, Oriana, and et al. Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa. 2014, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/economics/people/facultyPersonalPages/facultyFiles/RobinBurgess/WomensEmpowermentInAction0314.pdf>.; Kashfi, Farzana, et al. "BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents: Changing Mind-Sets and Going to Scale with Social and Financial Skills for Girls." *Child Policy Insights*, 2012. Google Scholar, [http://www.childwatch.uio.no/news/2012/brac_-_november_2012\(2\).pdf](http://www.childwatch.uio.no/news/2012/brac_-_november_2012(2).pdf).; Dunbar, Megan S., et al. "Findings from SHAZI: A Feasibility Study of a Microcredit and Life-Skills HIV Prevention Intervention to Reduce Risk Among Adolescent Female Orphans in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, vol. 38, no. 2, Mar. 2010, pp. 147–61. CrossRef, doi:10.1080/10852351003640849.
- 23 United Nations. Sustainable Development Goals: 17 Goals to Transform Our World. United Nations. 2015. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>
- 24 See Kwauk, Christina and Amanda Braga. *Translating Competencies to Empowered Action: A Framework for Linking Girls' Life Skills Education to Social Change*. The Brookings Institution, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/translating-competencies-to-empowered-action/> for one such framework.



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