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GLASS WALLS:

EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE ON CONSTRAINTS FACED BY WOMEN IN ACCESSING VALUABLE SKILLING OPPORTUNITIES



Authors

- Ali Cheema
- Asim I. Khwaja
- M. Farooq Naseer
- Jacob N. Shapiro

Women in emerging economies face access constraints, especially those related to travel outside of their communities. These mobility challenges directly hinder their capacity to benefit from training opportunities. This policy brief is based on a research paper that studied the impact of a skills training program implemented by Pakistan Skills Development Fund (PSDF) in rural Punjab. The program design enabled estimating the causal impact of distance and village boundary on program take-up, quantifying the costs needed to offset the distance-induced constraints, and exploring whether women excluded due to boundary constraints would have benefitted similarly from the training. The findings suggest that these barriers are large and not readily reconcilable with standard costs of travel. The results have important policy implications viz-a-viz program design, improving take-up rates, efficacy of group transport, and non-efficacy of information interventions.

BACKGROUND

Barriers to women's physical mobility are a key constraint to accessing education, training, and employment opportunities, not just in Pakistan but also in other parts of the world. Many welfare programs such as literacy, skills training, and health care services, are targeted towards women in the low income areas. However, to benefit from these programs, members of the target population must physically show up to participate in them. In practice, we know that many eligible and deserving individuals fail to participate in these social programs.

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Studies have shown how villagers do not obtain subsidized rice, how widows do not fully claim monthly stipends, and how women are unable to pursue vocational training, despite the potential gains from these programs.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGN

This policy brief is based on a research study that aimed to rigorously unpack and measure the constraints imposed by distance on women's enrollment in vocational skills training. The study was conducted in the context of a rural skills training program in Southern Punjab, where women were offered free training in tailoring skills in response to huge baseline demand in the region¹. The program design was informed by prior work by the Center for Economic Research in Pakistan (CERP) that had revealed women's low take-up rates for vocational courses, despite high reported demand for skills training. Extensive qualitative research had revealed five key constraints to women's participation: distance, finance costs, information gaps, societal norms, and lack of safe and reliable transportation². Each of these constraints was then addressed through various interventions, designed with an objective to increase program take-up. The research design enabled the estimation of causal impacts of each of these interventions, thus helping unpack the mechanisms underlying distance-related access constraints faced by women.

Unlike studies that compare women with men, the authors decided to compare women who were provided with different types of support. Hence, the research design also helped evaluate the feasibility and relative effectiveness of potential solutions.

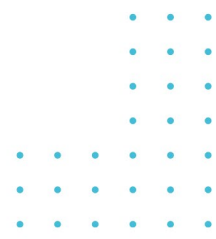
¹ In a representative baseline survey, 74% of female respondents reported that they wanted to learn tailoring skills.

² Childcare, though expected, was not identified as an obstacle, as women relied on family members or were reluctant to accept this service from non-family members.



MAIN FINDINGS

The research found that addressing the distance constraint by establishing a training center in the village increased course enrollment and completion rates **four times**, compared to simply offering a stipend and voucher to attend a training outside the village. This allows us to clearly establish the crucial nature of **mobility barriers** in women's access to labor market opportunities³. Crucially, the study showed that while women's enrollment increased smoothly as the training center was brought closer (as expected due to reduced costs), it jumped sharply once the center moved inside the village boundary.



Moving the center *just inside* the village boundary does not induce a sudden jump in distance, time, tolls or any other fixed or variable costs incurred for the women. Nonetheless, the stipend money required to compensate the women to travel outside the village for training is much larger than the standard travel and opportunity cost of time estimates. This suggests that a key component of access constraints is the non-monetary costs incurred as women step out of their village - this is what the authors refer to as the "**village boundary effect**". This boundary effect also holds for movement across different settlements within a revenue village (*mouzza*). However, no additional boundary effects are found (upon crossing, say, the neighboring village's boundary) once one's own village boundary is crossed.

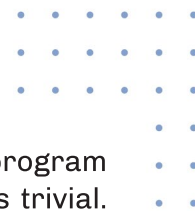
*The compensatory amounts are estimated to be **three times** the generous estimates of additional travel costs⁴ that the median woman in the sample would have to incur in traveling outside her village.*

Another main finding is that safety concerns likely underlie these access barriers. The research estimates causal impacts of three targeted interventions (trainee engagement, community engagement, and safe transport for trainees) on program take-up, while also capitalizing on non-experimental variation.

01	The trainee engagement (TE) intervention provided additional information about the training to potential trainees in a group setting; addressing information gaps.
02	The community engagement (CE) intervention added to the TE intervention by also engaging male household members and community elders in a group setting to discuss and facilitate women's enrollment, trying to tackle societal norms against travel outside the village.
03	The group transport (GT) intervention organized safe transport for women who did not have a training center inside their village, directly targeting the concerns of safe transport.

³The authors carefully measure the causal effect of distance on enrollment by randomizing the training center placement thus creating an exogenous variation in the distance to the training facility.

⁴Fare plus opportunity costs of travel and wait time



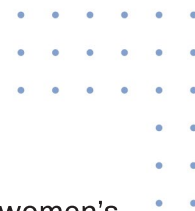
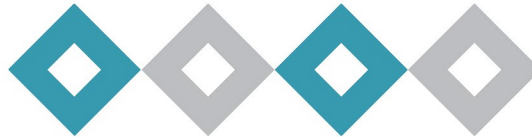
While TE and CE reasonably increased potential trainees' knowledge about the training program and also enhanced their expectations about its quality, the impact on program take-up was trivial. However, a sizable impact of the GT intervention was found. *Between one-half and two-thirds of the boundary effect can be compensated for by offering women secure group transport to the (nearest) training center outside their village.*

Combining these treatment arms along with observational data helped to further unpack the underlying reasons contributing to distance-related access barriers. This exercise yielded strong evidence for perceived safety and security considerations on two fronts. One, while safety concerns do not impact program take-up when the program is offered *within* the village, women who report feeling unsafe are less likely to cross a village boundary for program take-up. Program participation was also found to be lower for women who have to cross relatively underpopulated areas, and such spaces constitute a meaningful share of the boundary effect. Interestingly, the significant positive effect of providing community-vetted, safe, group transport corroborates the underlying mechanism of security concerns as a constraint.

Together, these findings imply that safety concerns arise when women seek to move outside their community to reach training centres. These safety concerns severely hinder their mobility and thus overall access. Even though safety is one of the several possible underlying explanations, evidence suggests that it is an important determinant. Other factors like informational gaps, network effects, and standard costs of travel are relatively less important. The good news is that the research also finds a substantive policy intervention (group transport) that at least partly ameliorates this access barrier.

Finally, the paper shows that the distance constraints have substantial welfare implications. Trained women exhibit large, positive, and sustained gains: significant increase in their tailoring activities, with a more than five-fold increase in clothes stitched, better tailoring skills, increased earnings from tailoring by over 9.5 times (an additional PKR 300 on a base of PKR 35 over a three-month period), a 23 percentage point increase in the likelihood of owning a sewing machine. Importantly, these effects are positive and statistically significant for both in-village trainees who did not have to overcome boundary constraints, and (the far fewer) outside-village trainees who did. This shows how the mobility constraints prevent women who would have benefited from enrolling in the training program, and gained just as much as the women who are able to leave their village for training.





POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research study has demonstrated the binding nature of non-informational barriers for women's access to training opportunities that standard transport, logistics, and opportunity costs of time alone cannot explain. Following are the relevant policy implications of this study:


Addressing Program Take-Up at Design Stage: As mentioned above, skills training has substantial benefits for trainees, and the benefits are similar for the additional women who are able to participate in training once distance barriers are alleviated. This suggests that the women who are unable to overcome access barriers are not selecting out because their realized benefits are lower, but simply because they face large non-economic costs, and excluding these women leaves large unrealized benefits on the table. *Addressing factors limiting take-up in the program design phase, and monitoring responses during implementation have the potential to significantly increase the overall impact on target populations. Lowering barriers to accessing skills training attracts women who equally benefit from the program and should be a priority while designing such programs.*



Overcoming Distance and Boundary Effects: Results show that sizable stipend amounts (much greater than the usual costs) are needed to address the boundary effects. This suggests that the *effectiveness of financial incentives, as a tool, hinges on their capacity to address the shape and size of costs. Thus, careful empirical work is needed to reveal the nature of costs underpinning distance-related barriers within specific contexts and domains.*



Expansion of Local Training Opportunities: Since the boundary effect, rather than participant potential, hinders course take-up and completion, expanding local training opportunities can substantially increase the participation rate and boost the impact of a program. This suggests that *decentralized i.e. local training service is to be preferred, wherever possible, so that no potential beneficiary is excluded.*



Addressing Deep-rooted Norms: The research has highlighted that Community Engagement (CE) and Trainee Engagement (TE) didn't effectively improve program take-up, and only served to improve program knowledge and salience. This indicates that *simply providing information and engaging community members is likely not enough to overcome deeply entrenched conservative attitudes at the societal and household level.*



Group Transport Solutions Go a Long Way: The research also shows that while it may be quite hard to change social norms in the short run, there is room to work around them. It must be noted that the identified constraints are not specifically connected to knowledge or training acquisition. The same access issues that women face in acquiring skills, may prevent them from deploying skills when they have to access markets. Providing a community-vetted and safe transport service substantially mitigated the boundary effect, which community engagement alone could not. *While the tradeoff between in-village training and group transport depends on the economies of scale and logistics, it is crucial that the proposed transport solutions are socially acceptable.*





A Publication prepared by

Rabia Saeed (Research Fellow)

Ayla Rashid (Research Assistant)

Department of Economics, Lahore University of Management Sciences

For information or collaboration,
please reach out at rabia.saeed@lums.edu.pk

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