



POLICY BRIEF



Can Graduation Programs be Gender Transformative?

Multifaceted social protection programs have been shown to significantly enhance the material wellbeing of the poor and ultra-poor, globally. To what extent have these improvements meaningfully changed the lives of poor women in non-material ways?

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Multi-faceted programs, including those referred to as graduation programs, have shown considerable promise for graduating poor and ultra-poor households out of poverty. The logic is simple. The poor and ultra-poor face multiple constraints and resolving one constraint at a time will hinder long-term program effectiveness. Most graduation programs, globally, include some combination of short-term consumption support (or are linked to an existing cash transfer program), asset transfer, savings program, skills training, coaching or mentoring and health and/or education information.

KEY RESULTS

- Pre-existing socio, economic, institutional and environmental conditions matter, especially favorable gender norms and the quality of spousal relationships
- Gender transformational approaches to targeting must recognize multiple sources of marginalization
- Coaching programs can be especially beneficial for addressing gender norms and improving women's agency, but rolling out this component is expensive and context specific
- Engaging with men (especially husbands) and gender sensitization of local staff are key to ensuring gender transformative change
- Graduation programs recognize that the lack of affordable childcare is likely to constrain the transformational potential of their interventions

These programs, by and large, have significantly improved the material wellbeing of households around the world, as documented in Banerjee et al. (2015) who evaluate the impacts of graduation programs in 6 countries. Although these programs typically target women, either disproportionately or exclusively, their effects on women's non-economic outcomes are both relatively understudied or show mixed results. Yet, among graduation practitioners, and the international development community more broadly (Global Affairs Canada, 2018), there is both a recognition that promoting women and girls is critical for poverty reduction and that efforts need to move beyond simply providing them with cash or assets.

To explore the potential of graduation programs to transform the lives of poor and ultra-poor women and girls, we conducted a review of the evidence of the effects that these programs have had on non-economic outcomes. The review considers both quantitative and qualitative work, combined with insights obtained through conversations with practitioners, to evaluate the current state of knowledge and to identify knowledge gaps.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Conceptual framework

Why would graduation programs potentially be gender transformative? To understand this question we must first establish what we mean by gender transformative. Most discussions of gender transformative change (CGIAR, 2012; Hillenbrand et al., 2015; and Population Council, 2019) understand this concept to mean improvements to women's empowerment and wellbeing beyond material improvements. Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment to include the notions of agency (e.g. autonomy, bargaining, goalsetting and the ability to meet those goals), resources and achievements. It is understood to be a process.

Similarly, gender transformative change can be conceptualized as resulting from a theory of change. Hillenbrand et al. (2015) adapt the framework in Rao and Kelleher (2005) in which change occurs brought about in four different domains: (1) improved access to resources and opportunities, (2) women's and men's consciousness, (3) Informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices and (4) formal laws and policies. In other words, gender transformational change requires change in both formal and informal spheres, and from the individual, household and community (system-wide) spheres. Graduation programs, generally speaking, were

initially designed to relax constraints pertaining to access to resources and opportunities, by providing consumption support, asset transfers, access to savings and training (e.g. asset use, health), which can map intuitively into achievements. These interventions may also, in theory, indirectly improve agency, consciousness and norms, though (soft-) skills training, coaching and mentoring may be especially useful in these respects.

FIGURE 1: GRADUATION PROGRAMS AND THEORIES OF CHANGE

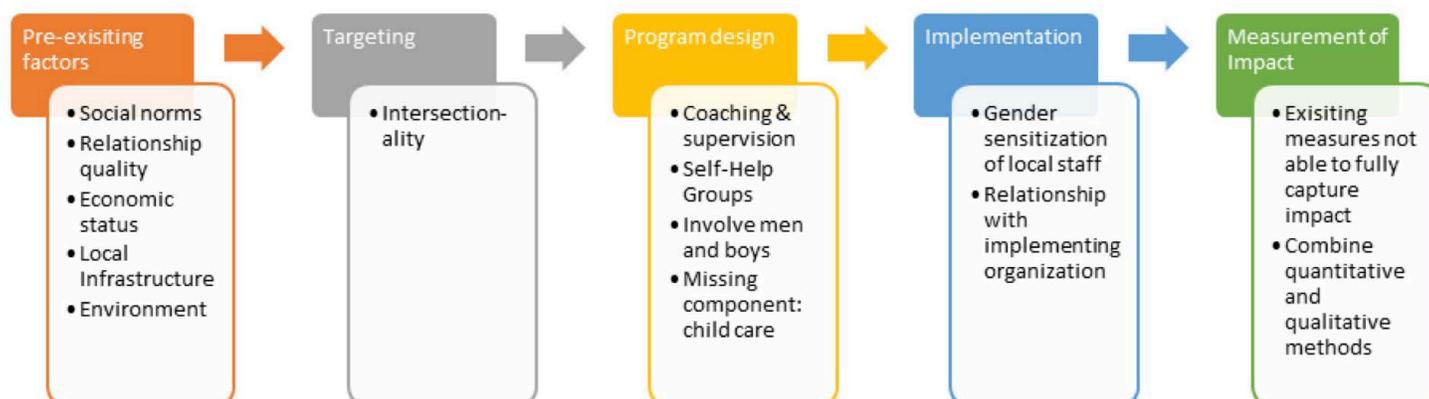


Methods

We conducted a review of the quantitative and qualitative literature that evaluates the effects of graduation programs on women's non-economic outcomes. To be included in the review, studies had to meet the following criteria. First, they had to consider at least one non-economic outcome related to women's empowerment, agency, autonomy, bargaining power, mental health and psychosocial outcomes or political participation. Second, papers had to be published in peer reviewed journals or reputed article repositories. Third, the papers required sufficient methodological detail to assess the quality of scientific contributions. We complemented this search with select high quality research reports.

This search yielded 10 quantitative and 5 qualitative papers, and 2 papers reporting both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Most of the quantitative studies reviewed employed randomized control trials, while the qualitative studies used a combination of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and participant interviews. We complemented this literature review with information from technical reports and discussions with Graduation program practitioners. Based on this review, a number of key issues emerged. These are organized into 5 stages: (1) Pre-existing factors, (2) Targeting, (3) Program design, (4) Implementation and (5) Measurement.

Figure 2- Making graduation programs gender transformative, by stage



LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

Pre-existing conditions

Pre-existing conditions can be especially important in determining whether a program will be gender transformative or not. Some of the specific pre-existing conditions that have been found to make a positive difference are: socio economic status, psychosocial factors (agency in decision-making, self-confidence and self-esteem), gender norms, the quality of the spousal relationship, local infrastructure (including public services) and the physical environment. Some graduation programs have been successful at addressing some of these issues by mapping out, for example, existing social norms and power dynamics and working with trusted local partners.

Targeting

Though most graduation programs explicitly target women, they are not always able to reach the most vulnerable. Many programs explicitly target women who are physically able to work. Other programs find it difficult to reach those who also belong to other marginalized groups (such as religious or ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, sexual orientation). Indeed, some of the most vulnerable self-exclude from programs because of stigma. However, it is not clear that a graduation program is the optimal solution to all poverty situations – for example, for those that are physically unable to work, an asset transfer or skills training is not appropriate and regular consumption support may be preferable.

Program Design

Two components common to many graduation programs have been identified as being particularly effective of affecting gender transformative change. First, coaching, mentoring and/or soft-skills training are touted as being the “X-factor” (Devereux et al., 2017) as they can be designed to directly target social norms, and provide gender sensitive training to all household members around aspirations, gender roles within the household, sexual health and reproductive rights. This component is costly, however, especially when delivered through repeated in-person visits. Second, self-help groups (often set up as part of the savings component) have been linked to changing power dynamics within the household and act as a safe space for peer support on personal, social and economic issues. Meanwhile the lack of access to childcare may constrain the full potential for these programs to yield long-term transformative change if women continue bear the disproportionate share of care.

Implementation

Graduation programs recognize the need to gender-sensitize local staff, especially where gender norms are deeply entrenched and where intersectional issues are particularly strong. Moreover, a good relationship between implementing partner and local stakeholders is key to a successful implementation, as the lack of trust and skepticism are cited as binding limitation, especially in remote and isolated locations. Engaging early with local authorities and early and frequent visits to beneficiaries facilitates the effectiveness of program delivery.

Beware of potential unintended negative effects

Like most social-protection or anti-poverty programs, graduation programs may have unintended effects. Care should be taken to minimize these when they are negative. Specific examples, though not unique to this class of program, are potential backlash from spouses, hostility between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, reinforcement of traditional gender roles and price (or other general equilibrium) effects resulting from the injection of cash and assets in local economies.

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

While there are a few attempts at identifying the effects of specific components, there is still much that might be learned by unpacking the different components, especially coaching and women's groups as highlighted by the qualitative evidence. However, quantitative evaluations are often hindered by identification issues in conducting impact assessments on bundled programs. Yet a better understanding of the contributions of the individual components versus the bundle and the magnitudes of their effects will be important as policymakers and donors are looking to take these programs to scale, especially given the costs of certain components (e.g. coaching).

The qualitative literature and technical reports have identified intersectionality and pre-existing conditions as influential for program success. The quantitative evidence ought to push on investigating heterogeneous impacts of programs by considering the quality of the spousal relationship, the role of multiple sources of marginalization, local infrastructure and physical environment, and differential effects by socio-economic characteristics.

This brief was prepared by Sonia Laszlo for Fundación Capital and is based on the paper "[The Gender Transformative Potential of Graduation Programs](#)" and the [policy brief](#) of the same name, both authored by Sonia Laszlo.

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