

Glass Walls: Experimental Evidence on Access Constraints Faced by Women*

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Abstract

Individuals progress when they are better able to access the opportunities offered to them. Yet many, especially women, often face significant barriers in doing so. This paper provides evidence on such access constraints in the context of skill acquisition. Using experimental evidence from rural Pakistan, we show that physical distance poses a significant hurdle. Women whose villages are randomly selected to receive a training center are more than three times as likely to enroll and complete a skills development course than women who have to travel an average distance of just a few kilometers. Over half of this penalty is paid simply upon crossing the (virtual) village boundary and therefore cannot be readily reconciled with time or economic costs associated with travel. Instead, this “boundary effect” is likely due to non-economic/social costs women face when temporarily leaving their village. This constraint is costly to compensate. Using exogenous variation in stipend offered, we estimate that an amount equivalent to half of monthly household expenditure would need to be paid to allow women to cross this boundary. In examining interventions that may ameliorate this barrier, we find that while informational and social interventions have little impact, providing reliable group transportation goes a long way in addressing this access constraint. Our results further suggest the boundary effect is due to social perceptions that constrain women’s agency and mobility: It is lower for women who enjoy more influence over domestic affairs, have fewer dependents, higher social status, and are from more ethnically diverse communities. Our work suggests that while non-economic obstacles faced by women are indeed substantial, policy interventions attuned to the local context can offer feasible ways to ameliorate them.

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