

Crossing Boundaries: Experimental Evidence on Access Constraints for Women

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Abstract

Growth is enabled when individuals can access the opportunities offered to them. Yet there are often significant barriers, especially for women, in doing so. This paper provides evidence on the importance of such barriers in the context of skill acquisition. Using experimental evidence from over 243 villages in 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 miles. Over half of this distance penalty is paid simply upon crossing the village boundary and therefore cannot be readily reconciled with time or economic costs associated with travel. Instead it is likely due to non-economic/social costs women face when leaving the perceived safety of their villages. This constraint is not easily financially compensated for: Using exogenous variation in stipend offered, we estimate that an amount equivalent to half of household expenditure would need to be paid to allow women to cross this boundary. Furthermore, we find that there are multiple such boundaries women may have to cross - within the village, crossing one's own settlement also incurs a similar cost. In examining factors that may ameliorate this barrier, we find that the boundary penalty is lower for women who come from more ethnically diverse communities. While informational and social interventions have little impact, we find that providing reliable group transportation helps in addressing the access constraint. This 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.