

A pilot intervention in the Maldives shows the power of an aspiration-raising, stereotype-breaking workshop on girl's expectations about their future, and that of their parents.

Countries across the globe suffer from high rates of youth unemployment and inactivity. The Maldives are not immune. Despite efforts by the government to increase employment opportunities among young Maldivians, including the establishment of employment quotas for nationals, results have been underwhelming. Young people face barriers such as social and gender norms around women's role in society, absence of role models to look up to, and few jobs perceived as "suitable" for youth, especially for girls. Parental control and influence on youth's decision-making is strong, and depending on the child's gender, parents have different career preferences.

Lack of a job leads many young Maldivians to feel disenfranchised, excluded, and perceived as idle and disconnected from the fabric of society. In the case of young women, they often see their options as very limited, and end up leaving school, and starting a family, at an early age. We set out to test whether we could change girls' perceptions of their future possibilities through a workshop with an unconventional twist – in a country where soccer is traditionally male-dominated, the workshop was led by a female soccer player.

The Project

In a pilot intervention with 21 young girls aged 14-16 in the island of Nolvivaranfaru, in the Haa Dhaalu Atoll, the World Bank - in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) - tested whether a five-day workshop with seven modules centered around soccer could have an effect on girls' job aspirations, expectations, and tolerance towards gender stereotypes. *Why soccer?* We wanted to show female role models who had found success in a traditionally male-dominated field. During the workshop, girls had one soccer training session per day led by a member of the female national football team, and a total of seven skills training modules aimed at:

- bringing female role models to light,
- changing social norms,
- expanding mental models, and
- breaking gender stereotypes.

A module with parents on social norms was also included (see box 1).

Box 1.

Workshop modules:

1. Social & Gender Norms,
2. Growth Mindset,
3. Making and Problem Solving,
4. Leadership and Networking,
5. Career Information, Advice & Guidance,
6. Basic Financial Skills,
7. Self-Awareness.

Given the small number of school age girls, it was not possible to randomize entry into the program. Thus, we also collected data in the island of Nolvivaramu, located in same Atoll, to gauge the effect of the program using a difference-in-difference quasi-experimental method. Although such a small sample can inevitably compromise the conclusions drawn from this pilot experiment, as well as prevent the findings from being extrapolated, we found valuable lessons from this pilot to inform future interventions in the Maldives and other countries facing similar challenges.

The Results



Young girls' level of tolerance around gender stereotypes decreased.

Our findings show that girls who attended the workshop became less tolerant of limiting gender stereotypes. For example, girls that received the training disagreed with statements that argued that educational and labor opportunities for boys were more important than for girls. Moreover, girl's perception of the role women should have in the labor market improved. Girls agreed with statements that argued that women should work even if their husbands earned enough, and even if they have children.



The set of options young girls aspire to, or expect to become, was broadened.

Young women who attended the training and the soccer sessions were more likely to change their labor expectations. Specifically, they were more convinced about the possibility of getting their desired job. Moreover, we observe that girls significantly delayed the age they expect to get married.



Targeting parents proved impactful.

Parents who initially were skeptical and hesitant about their girls attending the training were invited to one session on social norms at the beginning of the workshop. Those that attended the session, expressed great satisfaction with the course and thought that it had a positive impact on their daughters.



Policy Implications

Expectations and aspirations, as well as gender stereotypes, are not fixed, and require a creative approach.

Interventions addressing social norms and the lack of role models have the potential to break mental models and broaden young people's options. For instance, exposing young girls to role models in non-traditional occupations can be key to changing mindsets and allowing young girls to consider such occupations. One innovative aspect of this intervention was the use of soccer – typically a male-dominated sport – and bringing a member of the female national football team to lead the sessions. These conveyed the message that women and girls can do anything they set their mind to, as the choice of soccer by itself was a break from gender stereotypes.

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In the presence of strong norms and perceptions in the community, interventions must target parents and other key members of the community.

The intervention worked in part because it targeted multiple stakeholders – both parents and girls. Unexpectedly, the fact that it was around soccer also sparked the interest of boys, who asked whether they could also get some of the training. By the end of the week, the boys who were initially ridiculing girls for playing a sport for boys, were giving tips and helping in the final game. Thus, the inclusion and involvement of parents and other members of the community is key to the success of interventions for youth.

About eMBeD

The Mind, Behavior, and Development Unit (eMBeD), the World Bank's behavioral science team in the Poverty and Equity Global Practice, works closely with project teams, governments, and other partners to diagnose, design, and evaluate behaviorally informed interventions. By collaborating with a worldwide network of scientists and practitioners, the eMBeD team provides answers to important economic and social questions, and contributes to the global effort to eliminate poverty and enhance equity.

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Last Update: May 15th, 2019