Champions Rajasthan: A Policy Brief

A collaboration between the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University and the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur

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I. **Project Overview**

The goal of the Champions project is to probe the enduring challenge of female educational disadvantage in India. The research generates an evidence base for enhancing the access of disadvantaged girls to education and to the social, economic, and psychological benefits that education is known to bestow.

**Approach**

The Champions project studies the factors that have enabled adolescent girls in India from underprivileged, low-literacy families to forge a path to personal empowerment through education. In that process, they have had to overcome significant personal, social, and infrastructural barriers. “Champions” are defined as female students in their second year of undergraduate studies whose parents have completed a primary school education or less. The research aims to identify the infrastructural supports, social factors, and public policies that helped these disadvantaged young women reach tertiary education. Rather than focusing on barriers, the project focuses on success or “positive deviance,” where individuals demonstrate above-average outcomes in challenging or adverse environments.1

The Harvard François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights initiated the first phase of the study in Maharashtra in 2012 in collaboration with partners at the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune. The National Commission for the Protection of Children’s Rights, a government-funded human rights commission, provided material support and technical guidance. In Maharashtra, 20 government colleges participated in the research; data was gathered with 425 participants from across ten districts. The findings from this stage informed the research design in Rajasthan.

In 2013 the FXB Center implemented the next phase of the project in Rajasthan in collaboration with partners at the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur. The project involved quantitative data collection from more than 400 Champions (CHs) drawn from 13 colleges across the state. Government colleges were randomly selected from five districts in the state: Banswara, Dholpur,

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Champions: Rajasthan

Jaipur, Jhunjhunu, and Jodhpur. To identify Champions, all female students enrolled in their second year were asked to complete a screening questionnaire. Those students who reported having parents with a primary school education or less were invited to be interviewed. Data was also collected from a comparison group of 223 “non-Champions” (NCs) matched by age, geographical location, and parental education levels. Comparisons between these two groups enabled the research team to isolate the unique contributors to success for the Champions. A subgroup of 25 Champions also took part in a qualitative empowerment workshop. This policy brief is based on the key findings that emerged from Rajasthan.

II. Context

Rajasthan is geographically the largest state in India. Despite considerable investment from the government, gender discrimination (including low levels of female educational attainment) remains pervasive.

India is currently home to almost 300 million young women and girls under 25, who, if empowered to access meaningful education and training, have the potential to be a socially and economically transformative force for the nation. However, at present, beyond the primary level, school retention rates remain unacceptably low. According to official government data, by the end of upper primary school, only 60 percent of the initial cohort are still enrolled, falling to 50 percent by the end of lower secondary school. In Rajasthan, gender-based inequalities are particularly acute. The state has one of India’s lowest child sex ratios at birth, with 870 girls born for every 1,000 boys; it also has one of India’s lowest child sex ratios for ages 0–6, with 883 girls for every 1,000 boys. Rajasthan recorded a female literacy rate of 52 percent in 2011, well below the national average of 65 percent. Against this challenging backdrop the achievement of

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4 Government of India. “Rajasthan Profile.”
these Champions is even more remarkable. Since education has been long considered an unparallelled mechanism for correcting historic gender inequality and is a proven springboard for human development, exploring the successful strategies of these exceptional few provides essential lessons for all engaged in promoting the education and empowerment of marginalized young women.

III. Successes

These young women are a source of inspiration. Their experience shows that with the right support even those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds can forge a path to personal empowerment through education unimaginable for their mothers’ generation.

While Rajasthan’s rates of educational attainment among young women remain below acceptable levels, the state has made some strides in girls’ school enrollment rates and other indicators of gender equality. For example, between 2001 and 2011, the overall female literacy rate showed steady improvement, increasing from almost 44 percent to just over 52 percent, with encouraging signs for the next generation with a female youth (15-24 years) literacy rate of 71 percent and a female adolescent (10-19 years) literacy rate of 82 percent. Some promising evidence of an intergenerational change in the status of women in the state is also emerging from this study:

- **A Remarkable Intergenerational Shift:** Of the 739 second-year students who completed a screening questionnaire across the 13 government colleges, more than half came from households where neither parent had completed secondary school. In fact, 71 percent of Champions’ mothers and 23 percent of their fathers had absolutely no formal education. An additional 16 percent of mothers and 14 percent of fathers had not completed lower primary level. The daughters’ college attendance represents a significant shift in one generation for these families, a manifestation of upward mobility in modern India.

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• **Efficacy of Government Social Schemes:** At the household level, on average Champion families were more likely to have benefited from government assistance in the form of food, pensions, and healthcare than non-Champion families. This indicates that alleviating poverty through household programs at the family level can positively impact girls’ education.

• **A Cohort of Leaders:** In keeping with their limited educational attainment, 91 percent of Champions’ mothers did not work outside the household. Despite limited exposure to female economic participation, Champions did not view a college education as simply a means to secure a better marriage match. In fact, 97 percent reported plans to pursue professional occupations such as teaching and civil service jobs.

• **Empowerment through Education:** The questionnaire included a 32-point scale to measure participants’ sense of personal agency. Questions probed their perceived levels of control over a range of issues such as education, mobility, and marriage prospects. Champions scored an average of 18.9 out of a possible 32 while non-Champions scored 9.5. The scale provided insight into the dimensions of agency and the differences between the two groups. Of non-Champions, 46 percent reported never participating in family discussions with the head of household, compared with 8 percent of Champions. Only 2 percent of Champions felt that they had no control over their future as contrasted to a staggering 55 percent of non-Champions. These statistics reflects the well-established virtuous cycle between continued educational attainment and girls’ sense of personal empowerment.

• **Access to Information:** Television emerged as an important medium for access to information and exposure to the broader society for both the Champion and non-Champion groups: 54 percent of Champions and 73 percent of non-Champions reported regularly watching television. The penetration of this medium represents an opportunity to provide information about government programs, health, and other social issues to a cohort of the population that is often difficult to reach. The Population Foundation’s television series, *I, a Woman, Can Achieve Anything (Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon)*, represents one example of an unparalleled opportunity to challenge deep-rooted social issues among this group.
• **Less Acceptance of Violence against Women:** Both Champion and non-Champion groups expressed more progressive social views than peers interviewed in a large-scale survey conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and the Population Council in Rajasthan in 2007. For example, 94 percent of Champions and 88 percent of non-Champions agreed that it is never acceptable for a man to hit his wife. In comparison, in the 2007 survey, 32 percent of unmarried women 15- to 24-years-old answered that it was acceptable for a man to hit his wife on at least some occasions. 6

• **Low Levels of Violence in Schools:** The survey used a 15-point scale developed by the Population Council to measure the extent to which participants had experienced physical, sexual, and verbal violence in school, whether from peers or from school teachers. Both the Champion and non-Champion groups reported low levels of violence (lower than reported levels in Maharashtra). Surprisingly, non-Champions reported lower levels of violence than Champions with a score of 1.8 out of a possible 15 compared with 2.4 for Champions. Notably, on average those participants that attended government schools reported lower levels of peer violence than their counterparts attending low-cost private schools.

### IV. Policy Implications

According to the data, the primary factors contributing to Champions’ success are family support, teacher mentorship, and personal resilience. We highlight several opportunities, drawn from empirical evidence collected in Rajasthan, to address the challenges facing young women from disadvantaged backgrounds striving to attain a college education.

1. **Familial Support**

   **Challenge**

   The most striking difference between the Champion and non-Champion groups is at the family level. Despite similar socioeconomic profiles, Champions were far more likely to report having

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parents, siblings, and extended families that supported them on their educational journeys than their non-Champion counterparts. In a scale measuring parental involvement in education, parents of Champions scored an average 16 out of a possible 28, compared to parents of non-Champions who scored an average of 6. Champions are far more likely to have parents that provided moral and material support for their daughter’s education. In fact, 97 percent of Champions cited parental support as the most instrumental factor in their educational success. Further, Champions’ parents often shielded their daughters from the community censure directed at their rejection of restrictive gender norms and traditional marriage age. This finding is troubling from a policy perspective: reliance on exceptional families is not a good or universally scalable strategy for social change because it leaves out those who most need support, including those with weak or dysfunctional families.

**Opportunity**

Given the critical role that parental support plays in young women’s educational attainment, targeting educational interventions at the household level is a potentially transformative and underutilized strategy for realizing equitable educational attainment. Some state- and nonprofit-led initiatives have successfully mobilized families and communities to support girls’ primary education. However more could be done to shift the focus beyond the “girl child” to challenge female stereotypes and mobilize grassroots support for young women’s secondary and tertiary education. The Champion group in the empowerment workshop recommended involving teachers and local government officials to engage with parents. The Champion workshop group also recommended mobilizing broader community support for girls’ post-primary education and to rally against deleterious social norms that often prevent education progression, such as purdah and early marriage. Targeted social messaging, school-initiated meetings, and financial

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7 For example, 70 percent of CHs compared with 16 percent of NCs reported having an extremely supportive father and 50 percent of CHs compared with 7 percent of NCs reported having extremely supportive brothers. Relatedly, slightly more than one out of four CHs reported that grandparents were extremely unsupportive of their educational goals, compared with nearly four out of five NCs.

8 Relevant responses include 69 percent of CHs reporting that their parents checked in with them very often to see how they were performing at school, compared with just 6 percent of NC parents.

9 For example, while Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi (the current Prime Minister of India) actively led an annual three-day, statewide, primary school enrollment campaign, targeted at girls. Civil society groups, private companies, village education committees, and parents joined in community activities and committed themselves to ensuring that every child in their villages received at least a primary school education. See UNICEF India, no date, “State-wide School Enrollment Drive Launched in Gujarat,” accessed May 29, 2015, http://www.unicef.org/india/resources_1873.htm.
incentives for families supporting their daughters’ secondary and tertiary education are important and underutilized strategies.

2. Government Education Schemes

Challenge
More than half of the participants reported benefiting from government programs administered at the primary and lower secondary levels—most commonly, the provision of free meals, books, and uniforms. However, although most participants came from low-income and traditionally marginalized backgrounds [Scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC), and Other Backward Castes (OBC)], the number of students that received scholarships was remarkably low. Just 15 percent of Champion participants had received governmental monetary support for their education at the upper primary level increasing to 25 percent at the lower secondary level. Overall far fewer Champions benefited from government education programs, partly because many more Champions attended nongovernment schools where the penetration of government schemes is low due to restrictions on eligibility. The financial hardships experienced by participants’ families to cover the costs of their education grow more pressing as children progress through the education system. For example, 22 percent of Champions reported that their parents had taken out loans to support their education. Relying on parents to secure high-interest loans to enable their daughter to complete secondary school puts a tremendous strain on both individual students and their families.

Opportunity
Champions in the qualitative workshop noted that many students eligible for government assistance are struggling to navigate the unfamiliar administrative terrain. Some Champion participants reported lack of transparency around the application process for grants and scholarships at the upper secondary and college levels as particularly problematic. Increased clarity surrounding the process and targeted assistance at the school level could help more low-income families take advantage of government and scholarship programs that do exist. Although more non-Champions than Champions benefited from educational subsidies, non-Champions still failed to progress beyond the lower secondary level, thus suggesting a need to refocus resources and priorities.
As noted earlier, the lower penetration of government educational schemes among the Champion group can be explained by the fact that, despite being from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds, those who attended low-cost private schools are not eligible for assistance by virtue of their private school enrollment. The government needs to continue addressing restrictions on entitlements for low-income students attending nongovernment institutions. This is increasingly important given the growing number of partnerships with private schools (at the primary level, by requiring them to reserve 25 percent of places for disadvantaged students and at the secondary level, by depending on private schools to help meet the rising demand for secondary education).10

3. Mentoring

Challenge

The need for formalized academic guidance and career mentoring among this group is acute. According to the data, just to progress through the education system, the majority of Champions relied on exceptional teachers for administrative, moral, and on occasion, even financial support. Given the low levels of educational attainment among participants’ parents, and indeed among those of millions of other first-generation learners across India, it is not surprising that students rely upon teachers for help in navigating the academic system. Currently this support is not systematic, thus disadvantaging those not fortunate enough to have had a teacher willing to go beyond the bounds of duty to provide the guidance that these young women require. Many teachers are operating in overburdened and underfunded contexts, thus compounding the mentorship challenge.

In addition to administrative assistance, first-generation learners require formalized early career mentoring. This cohort reported having very little contact with adults outside their immediate family due to restrictions on mobility. This lack of exposure to career mentors limited their access to critical information on which to base their educational choices. In fact, many Champions reported that they chose subjects at the upper secondary and college level based on costs and gender norms rather than on employment interest or subject matter affinity. The majority of Champions were enrolled in liberal arts (BA) degrees without clear career

trajectories. Those from the lowest income categories were significantly less likely to have specialized in non-liberal-arts subjects such as science and technology, which have potential for more secure and better remunerated employment.
Opportunity

Encouraging and rewarding teachers for time invested in supporting female students from economically and educationally deprived backgrounds, both in their engagement with academic pursuits and with the college application process, could facilitate a more equitable system. There are also implications for the private sector. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, particularly in the science and technology sectors, should explore internship programs starting at the secondary level for motivated students, including girls. Offering career guidance and mentorship to young women would address the national technical-skills shortage and ensure that young women receive the training needed to participate in the knowledge economy. Private mentoring initiatives such as those established by the Intel Foundation in India could also serve as models to help more first-generation learners successfully pursue careers in the growing industries of science and technology. The government could take the lead in convening private sector players interested in developing such CSR initiatives; it could provide trainings, examples of good practices, and, eventually, publicity as a reward for successful programming.

4. Life-Skills Education for Adolescents

Challenge

Opportunities to create healthy, caring, and trusting friendships across the gender divide seem nonexistent for today’s Indian adolescents. Champions characterized their relationships with boys as driven by apprehension, insecurity, and fear. Fora for discussing and learning about reproductive and sexual health, sexual attraction and desire, and the complexities of relationships and marriage also appear to be nonexistent. Just half of the participants had ever received sex education. Of those who did receive information on the topic, mothers were cited most often as the primary source (71 percent), followed by teachers (18 percent) and healthcare providers (11 percent). The data suggest that conversations with mothers may have been limited to issues related to menstruation and that information about sex, conception, and sexually transmitted infections was limited. For example when asked if a girl could get pregnant from kissing, 18 percent said yes, 12 percent said no. The majority of participants (70 percent) did not answer the question, suggesting discomfort or unfamiliarity with the topic. The data also show that just one in four Champions and one in twenty non-Champions regularly discuss their romantic
relationships with their mothers. Topics relating to sexuality and sexual orientation are unlikely to be adequately addressed within the family.

**Opportunity**

Life-skills education for adolescents was introduced as a separate subject across 4500 government schools in Rajasthan in 2005 and the subject is now institutionalized within many government schools.\(^{11}\) Widespread establishment of this program in both government and nongovernment schools is essential to ensuring students acquire accurate information about adolescent reproductive and sexual health including HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and other traditionally taboo subjects. Since more than half of the India’s adolescent population is not attending any formal schooling, other mechanisms for addressing these social issues need to be explored. According to the data, many in both the Champion and non-Champion groups watch television every day; therefore television offers an opportunity to reach this traditionally underserved youth population.

5. **Harassment in the Public Sphere**

**Challenge**

Champions are contesting prevailing social norms for girls and young women by spending increased time in the public sphere—at college, on public transport, and in public spaces. For many this exposure is perilous, fraught with dangers of stigma, community censure, and sexual harassment. For example, by the upper secondary level, the majority of the 413 Champion participants regularly experienced unwelcome touching on the journey to or from school. One in ten non-Champions gave harassment as the primary reason that they dropped out of school.

**Opportunity**

Harassment is stressful and intimidating for young women, who are reluctant to report these incidents.\(^{12}\) This issue must be addressed more systematically, or it will likely hamper significant advances in female educational access and mobility, whatever the economic investment in


promoting these goals. The Champion participants in the empowerment workshop provided the following suggestions to enhance public safety for young women:

- Provide safe transportation facilities in rural and urban areas;
- Open more schools and colleges with hostel facilities for girls;
- Install CCTV cameras at crucial public places, such as bus stops;
- Discuss incidents of harassment and violence against women and girls at the panchayat level, as well as in schools and colleges;
- Establish help lines in all towns and gram panchayats to address violence against women;
- Generate awareness about violence and sexual harassment issues as part of the curriculum at the school and college level (girls are often blamed for the violence/harassment they face); and
- Establish Mahila Thana (Women’s Police Stations) in all districts.

6. Technology

Challenge
Just one in three Champions had ever used the Internet. None of the NC cohort had ever accessed it. Internet access and computer skills can open paths to freedom of expression, political engagement, and information about health, education, and economic empowerment. Conversely, in an increasingly technological age, digital exclusion can result in the de-facto denial of range of critical skills.

Opportunity
Investment in programs in government secondary schools to train young women in computer literacy could help address the national technical-skills shortage while also ensuring that these young women have the training necessary to participate in the knowledge economy. Public-private partnerships, fulfilled by corporate social responsibility programs, such as those undertaken by NASSCOM and Google for female technology entrepreneurs, could play a role in bridging the digital divide. 13