



What Works Hub
for Global Education



Stories that Shape Us

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Embedding empowering content in government schools

Context

- In Botswana, girls outperform boys at every level of education but this does not translate to the labour market.
- One reason is gaps in economic agency & aspirations:
37% of boys and 30% of girls hold limiting beliefs about girls' potential.

Research Motivation

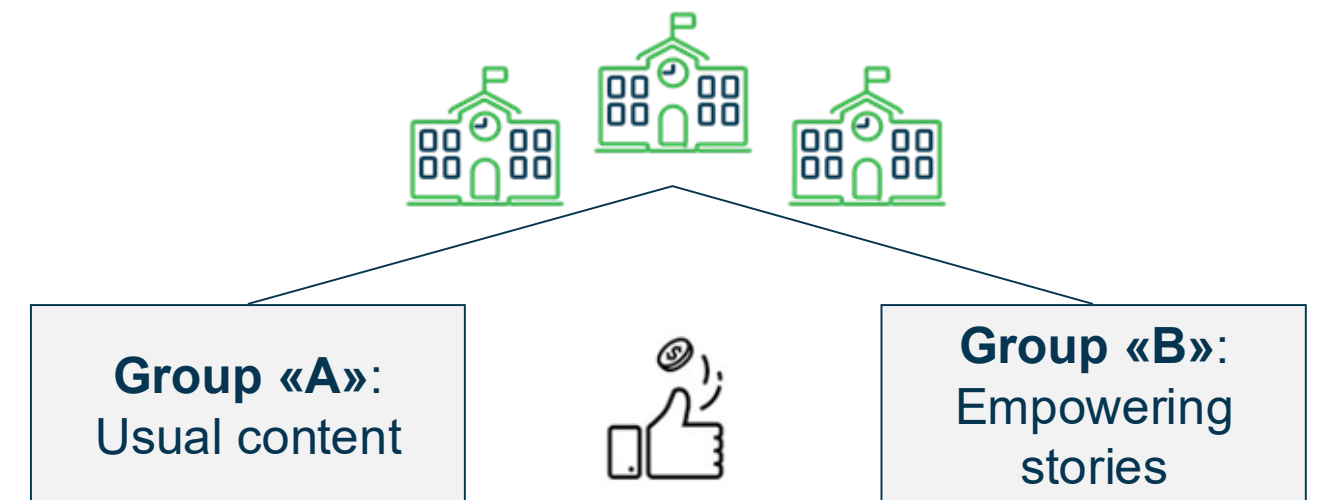
- Stories shape how children interpret the world, often reinforcing stereotypes (Crawford et al., 2024; Adukia et al., 2023).
- Changing the stories children encounter in the curriculum can be a powerful lever for gender equity in education.
- *Yet changing rigid curriculum can be hard, and isolating the effect of empowerment vs more general literacy is challenging.*

Research Contribution

- *We conduct novel experimental tests of empowering stories in the context of an at-scale curriculum in schools in Botswana.*
- We use A/B testing to isolate the effect of empowerment on top of more generalized literacy content exposure.

Does embedding empowering content in a literacy curriculum shift aspirations and gender attitudes of primary school children?

5 rounds of A/B testing



Students (schools): 5616 (100)
Duration: 1 hour daily literacy
Grades: 3–5 (ages 8–11)

Empowering stories affect economic agency & aspirations

A: Usual Content: Teachers use own materials

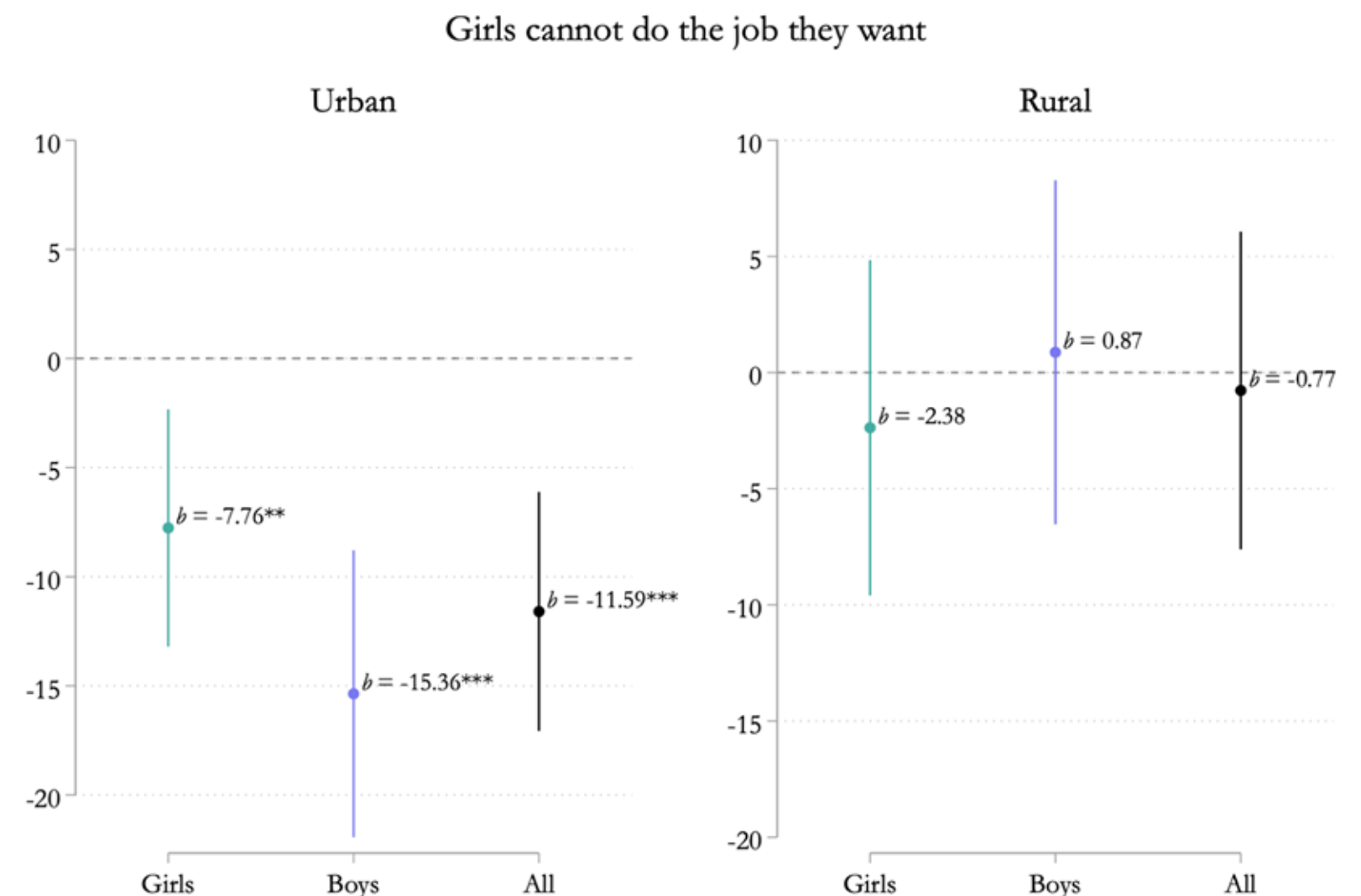
Me and my family always go to my father's farm during the weekend to help with animals and some vegetables. It is a very big farm and it is beautiful. There are so many animals which include goats, cattle, sheep, horses and donkeys. Normally we use horses to look after our livestock.

B: Empowering Stories: Teachers use toolkit

Gorata loved school, but Maths made her worry. She studied hard for her first Maths test, but still got a low mark. She did not give up and decided to work harder. Gorata asked her teacher for more work. Every day she practised. Today, Gorata is a bank teller. She can count in her sleep!

Findings

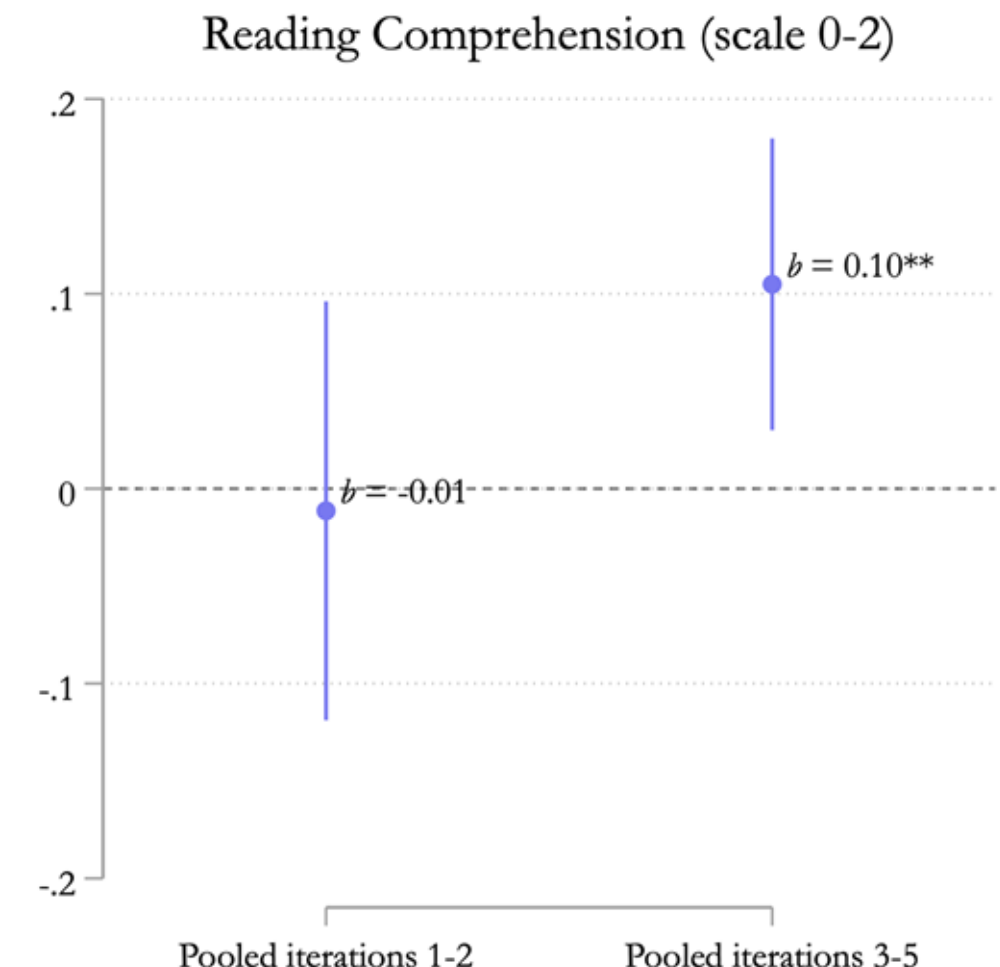
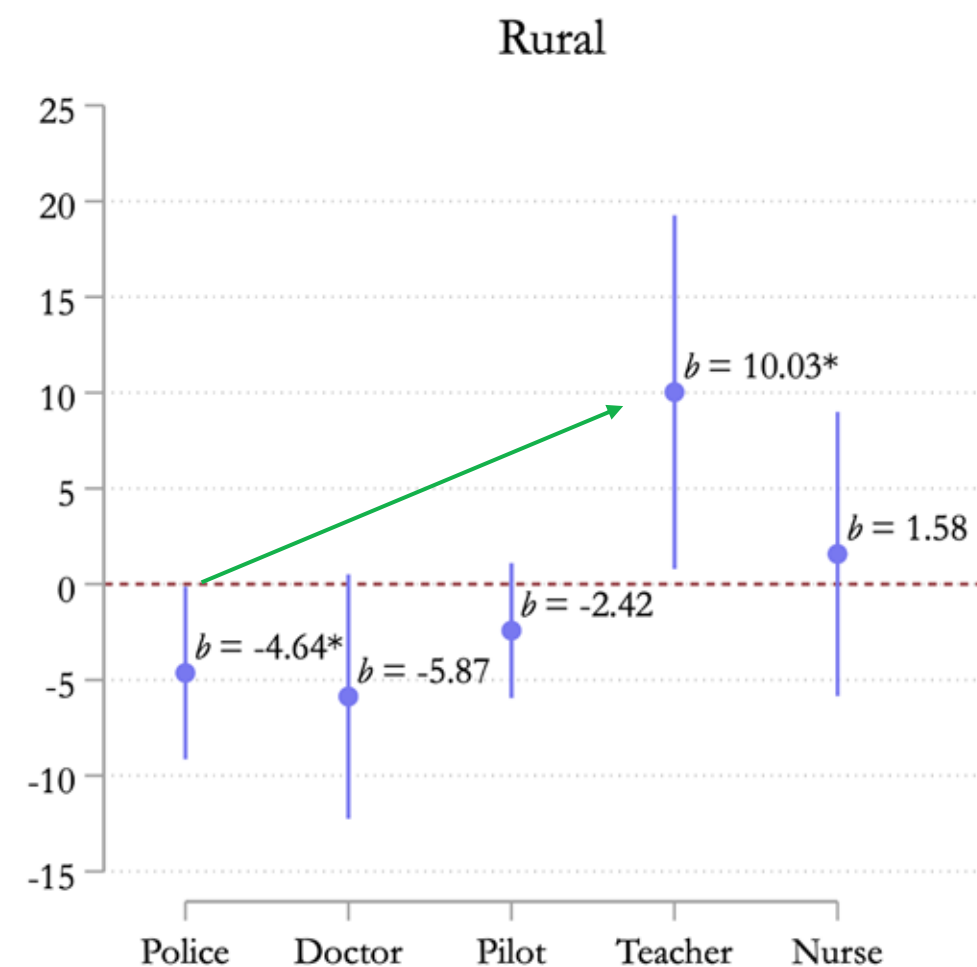
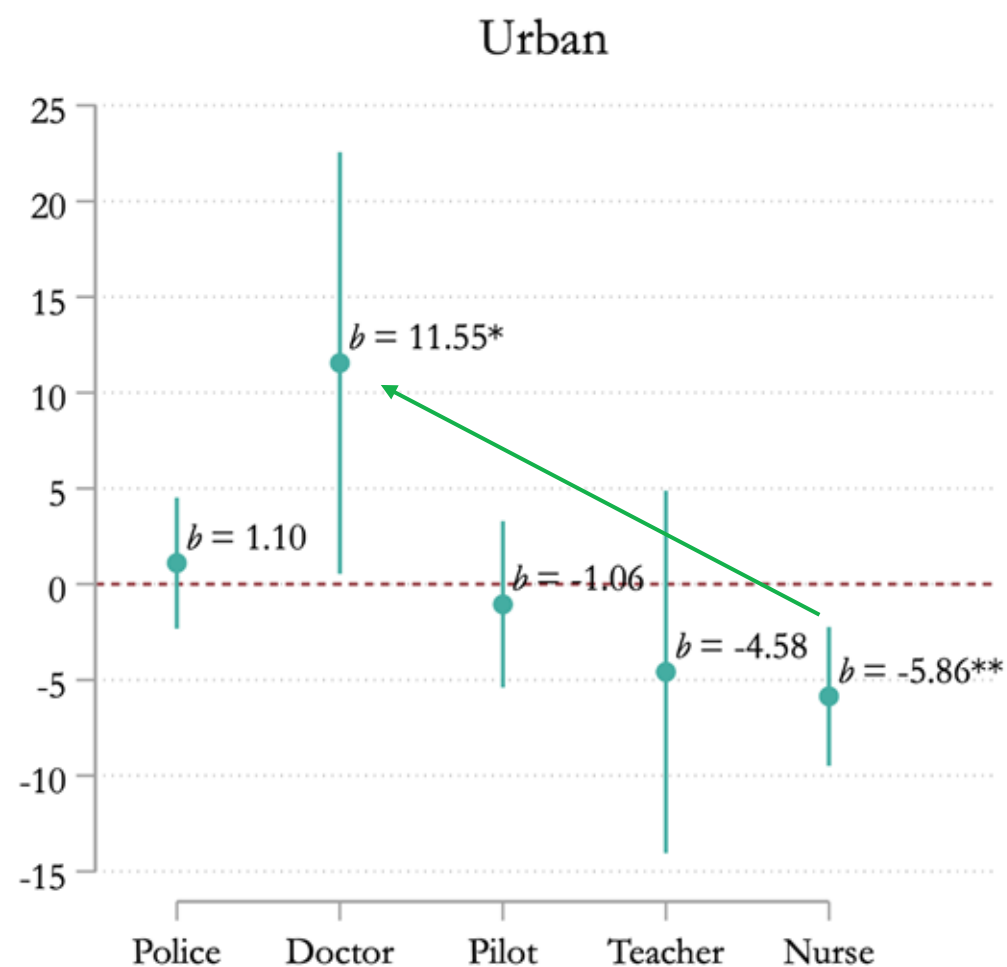
(1) strengthened girls' general economic agency in urban areas where job opportunities are prevalent



Stories result in context-specific empowerment; empowerment and learning can both improve over time

(2) shifted girls' aspirations toward contextually relevant jobs

(3) improved literacy over time (EGRA)



Implications

Curricula shape not only cognitive skills, but also children's mental models.
Low-cost scalable tweaks to a curriculum can promote gender equity and learning.
A/B testing can reveal mechanisms, refine curricula, & optimize cost-effectiveness.



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