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ASPIRATIONS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Evidence from Kyrgyzstan

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Can having higher aspirations, or goals for the future, contribute to the empowerment of women? A growing literature shows that aspirations increase a host of forward-looking economic and political behaviors. High-aspiring individuals tend to be forward-looking and entrepreneurial; they are more likely to save, take up new technologies with potentially large payoffs, operate a small business, and invest in their children's education (Bernard et al., 2014; Dalton et al., 2015; Kosec and Khan, 2016; Kosec and Mo 2017). Such individuals also have higher levels of civic engagement (Kosec and Mo, 2017). As a result, individuals with higher aspirations tend to have higher incomes (Zax and Rees, 2002) and are more likely to hold salaried or white-collar jobs and community leadership roles (Wydick et al., 2013). A failure to aspire has accordingly been proposed as one reason for the persistence of poverty (Appadurai, 2004; Genicot and Ray, 2017).

This has stimulated interest in development interventions to prevent behavioral poverty traps. These often aim to raise the aspirations of either women or men—often by exposing them to role models (Beaman et al., 2012; Bernard et al., 2014, 2015), introducing well-paid job opportunities (Jensen, 2012), or increasing interactions with female peers (Dasgupta et al., 2015).

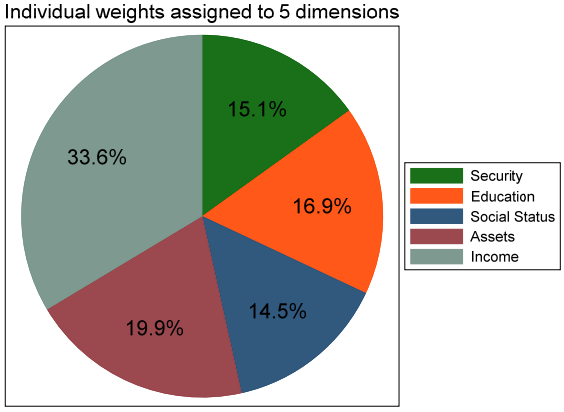
At the same time, a wealth of literature suggests that women's empowerment and involvement in decision-making can be welfare-improving. It can increase household income and asset wealth by ensuring that women are economically active and have high levels of human capital; increase technical efficiency on the farm (Seymour, 2017); and improve health, nutrition, and education outcomes for children (Doss, 2006; Kumar and Quisumbing, 2012; Quisumbing and Maluccio, 2003).

Linking these two literatures, a December 2018 IFPRI Discussion Paper by Katrina Kosec, Kamiljon Akramov, Bakhrom Mirkasimov, and Jie Song posits that one route to women's empowerment may be to raise aspirations—either those of a woman herself, or those of her husband, who often wields considerable influence over her decision-making authority and access to resources.

DATA AND METHODS

To test our hypothesis, we use data on the aspirations, gender attitudes, and reports about women's involvement in decision-making of women and their husbands in 2,529 households surveyed as part of the 2016 round of the Life in Kyrgyzstan Study (LiKS). It is a longitudinal, multi-topic survey of households and individuals in Kyrgyzstan, representative at both national and broad regional (East, West, North, South) levels (Bruck et al., 2014). It covers all seven Kyrgyz oblasts and the two autonomous cities of Bishkek and Osh.

Individual weights assigned to 5 dimensions



We measure aspirations similarly to Beaman et al. (2012), Bernard and Seyoum Taffesse (2014), Bernard et al. (2014), Healy et al. (2017), and Kosec and Mo (2017); we construct an aspiration index which is a weighted sum of respondents' aspirations along five dimensions**: household income, household asset wealth, education level of young family members, individual level of social status, and individual level of security**. Respondents were asked to distribute 100 points across the five dimensions according to personal perceptions of their relative importance. The average number of points assigned to each dimension is displayed graphically to the right. For each individual, taking the share of points that they assign to a given dimension provides the weight for that dimension. This allows us to create five weights that sum to 1. To calculate the aspiration index, we normalize aspirations in each dimension by subtracting the country-level average and dividing the difference by the standard deviation. We then sum up the five dimensions, weighting each according to the importance respondents placed on it.

To examine the relationship between aspirations and women's empowerment, we estimate the following specification:

$$E_{ijsk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 A_{ijsk} + \beta_2 \boldsymbol{X_{ijsk}} + \beta_3 \boldsymbol{Y_{jsk}} + \beta_4 \boldsymbol{Z_{ijsk}} + \beta_5 \boldsymbol{G_{jsk}} + \beta_6 \boldsymbol{W_{ijsk}} + \varepsilon_{ijsk}$$

where *i* indexes couples, *j* indexes households, *s* indexes communities, and *k* indexes the oblast (i.e. region). A_{ijsk} is individual *i*'s aspiration index; it is a weighted average of aspirations in five dimensions: household income, household assets, education, individual social status, and individual security. $\boldsymbol{X_{ijsk}}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y_{jsk}}$ are vectors of household- and individual-level demographic controls. $\boldsymbol{Z_{ijsk}}$ is a vector of *current*, normalized levels of each of the five dimensions of the aspiration index. They capture what the individual and their household have already achieved in these five areas. $\boldsymbol{G_{jsk}}$ are geographic controls, including oblast fixed effects and a rural area dummy. $\boldsymbol{W_{ijsk}}$ is comprised of a quadratic in each of the five weights the individual assigned to the five dimensions of aspirations. Since the emphasis which members of one's community place on each of the five dimensions may influence one's gender attitudes, we further compute the average share of points, or weight, placed on each dimension by members of one's community, and include in. $\boldsymbol{W_{ijsk}}$ a quadratic in each.

The outcome, E_{ijsk}, is a measure of women's empowerment: either 1) an egalitarian gender attitudes index, or 2) a consensus index on women's decision-making power. We construct the first using normalized responses to nine questions measuring the extent (on a 1—4 scale) to which the individual has egalitarian gender views. We examine attitudes of both the wife and her husband. We construct the second by coding 17 dummy variables for both the wife and husband agreeing that women are involved in making 17 different decisions; we then normalize each and average these normalized values. To better understand which decisions aspirations influence, we also construct 4 sub-indices on four domains of decisions: marital decisions, major economic decisions, financial management decisions, and non-financial decisions.

Instrumental variable approach: One of the empirical challenges confronting our analysis is the endogeneity of aspirations to women's empowerment. We thus use *community-level* data on the relative importance of the five domains of aspirations to construct a "predicted" aspiration index, to serve as an instrumental variable (IV). It uses an individual's own aspirations in each domain, but uses community-level average weights in place of own weights. Our identifying assumption is that this linear combination of community weights only affects women's empowerment through its effect on the individual's own aspiration index. Importantly, we explicitly allow community-level average weights, and individuals' own weights, to affect women's empowerment by controlling for a quadratic in each (i.e. through inclusion of $\boldsymbol{W_{ijsk}}$) in all specifications.

RESULTS

We find strong empirical evidence that raising aspirations is one route to empowering women. Higher aspirations on the part of husbands predicts more egalitarian gender attitudes for both the husband and his wife. However, higher aspirations on the part of wives may be an even more important predictor of women's empowerment. In particular, higher aspirations on the part of wives predict both more egalitarian gender attitudes (for both the husband and his wife) as well as greater involvement of women in household decision-making, as agreed by both the wife and her husband.

Egalitarian Gender Attitudes

Table 1 presents IV results on the effects of aspirations on gender attitudes of both wives and husbands. For wives (column 1), the results suggest that a one standard deviation—or 0.509 unit (see Table 2)—increase in the wife's aspiration index results in the wife having a 0.056 point higher egalitarian gender attitudes index, equal to a 0.11 standard deviation increase. Similarly, a one standard deviation increase in the husband's aspiration index results in the wife having an approximately 0.11 standard deviations higher egalitarian gender attitudes index. For husbands (column 2), the effect of a one standard deviation increase in the wife's and the husband's aspiration index is a 0.09 and 0.11 standard deviation increase in the husband's egalitarian gender attitudes index, respectively. Aspirations seem to powerfully affect gender attitudes.

Table 1 Effects of aspirations on gender attitudes of wife and husband, IV results

	Egalitarian gender attitudes index	
	(1) Wife	(2) Husband
Wife's aspiration index	0.110**	0.083**
	(0.049)	(0.041)
Husband's aspiration index	0.106***	0.101***
	(0.040)	(0.037)
R^2	0.304	0.251
First-stage F-stat	934.1	934.1
N	1,732	1,732

Women's Involvement in Household Decision-making

For a given decision, if both a husband and his wife agree that women are among the main decision-makers, the likelihood that women have a meaningful role is measurably higher than if only one of the two reports such involvement. Indeed, Ambler et al. (2017) find that spousal agreement that women are involved in decision-making is most positively associated with beneficial outcomes for women—compared to agreement that only men make decisions, or any type of disagreement. In Table 3, we show that wives' aspirations are a strong predictor of women's involvement in decision-making, while husbands' aspirations are not. The point estimate suggests that a one standard deviation—or 0.509 unit—increase in the wife's aspiration index increases the consensus index of women's decision-making power by 0.06 points, which is 0.08 standard deviations of this variable (column 1).

Upon further disaggregating women's decision-making into four sub-indices (columns 2-5), we find that women having higher aspirations increases their involvement in financial management and major economic decisions, but not in others. A one standard deviation improvement in the wife's aspiration index contributes to a 0.083 unit, or 0.10 standard deviation increase in the sub-index of consensus on women's involvement in financial management decisions. The effect size of a one standard deviation increase in aspirations on major economic decisions is 0.056 units, or 0.07 standard deviations.

Table 2 Summary statistics for wife and husband

	Wife			Husband		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Aspirations index (AI)	1736	-0.019	0.509	1736	-0.002	0.527
Egalitarian gender attitudes index	1735	0.041	0.523	1733	-0.095	0.48
Consensus index of women's decision-making power	1734	0.061	0.72	1734	0.061	0.72
Consensus index of women's decision-making power on marital decisions	1286	0.064	0.926	1286	0.064	0.926
Consensus index of women's decision-making power on major economic decisions	1732	0.055	0.759	1732	0.055	0.759
Consensus index of women's decision-making power on financial management	1731	0.058	0.825	1731	0.058	0.825
Consensus index of women's decision-making power on non-financial decisions	1720	0.029	0.897	1720	0.029	0.897

Table 3 Effects of aspirations on spousal agreement on women's involvement in household decision-making

	Consensus index	Marital decisions	Major economic decisions	Financial manage-ment decisions	Non-financial decisions
Wife's aspiration index	0.118*	0.046	0.111*	0.164**	0.139
	(0.061)	(0.067)	(0.066)	(0.072)	(0.086)
Husband's aspiration index	0.078	0.085	0.074	0.097	-0.016
	(0.052)	(0.071)	(0.051)	(0.060)	(0.087)
R^2	0.446	0.462	0.361	0.432	0.311
First-stage F-stat	928.6	785.5	919.9	926.9	929
N	1,734	1,286	1,732	1,731	1,720

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We find that having a husband who sets ambitious goals predicts more egalitarian gender attitudes for both the husband and his wife. Higher aspirations on the part of wives also predict more egalitarian gender attitudes (for both the husband and his wife), but they additionally predict greater involvement of women in household decision-making, agreed by both spouses. This suggests that efforts to fuel either men's or women's ambition can shift gender attitudes, but that targeting women is the more effective way to actually build women's decision-making power.

By drawing links between aspirations and women's empowerment, this study offers important evidence on the psychological determinants of women's empowerment. Our results also reveal that aspirations failures might be partly responsible for a failure to empower women. They further suggest that interventions which aim to raise aspirations—particularly those of women—may be a promising and low-cost way of changing traditional norms and family roles and expanding opportunities for women. Given the inherent difficulties of changing traditional gender norms, these findings are valuable for policymakers.

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