

The Female Urban Mobility Advantage in South Asia

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South Asian cities are islands of upward mobility,
especially for women

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Topic at a Glance

Over the past two decades, South Asia has experienced rapid economic growth and urbanisation, expanding the range of economic opportunities in the region. How strongly is access to new opportunities shaped by family background? And does growing up in a city rather than a village change a child's prospects?

Our paper studies these questions through the lens of intergenerational mobility. Economic growth has substantially raised average living standards in South Asia, but evidence from India suggests that intergenerational mobility remains low. That is to say: a child born in 1990 at the bottom of the socioeconomic distribution was no more likely to rise to a higher relative status level than a child born in 1950 (Asher, Novosad, Rafkin 2024).

We examined geographic variation in upward educational mobility. We show that a child born to parents at the 25th percentile of the educational distribution experiences a very different average trajectory depending on where they were born. We use a measure called bottom half mobility, which describes the average education rank of a child born to a father or mother in the bottom half of the education distribution.

We uncover a new stylised fact: upward mobility in South Asia is higher in cities, and the urban mobility premium is substantially larger for daughters than for sons. In most rural areas, daughters of low-SES parents are more likely to experience low SES status as adults than sons—this pattern completely reverses in cities.

Average education rank of a child born in a bottom 50% family



The graph shows the upward mobility difference between cities and villages in each sample country. Cities are islands of upward mobility for women. The female urban mobility advantage is particularly large in Pakistan and India, but absent in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Why are cities so good for the upward mobility of women? We show that cities have higher returns to education for women relative to men, as well as social norms that are more favorable to opportunity for women. Using cross-state variation, these two proximate factors can fully explain the female urban mobility advantage. The higher consumption and income levels in cities relative to village, by contrast, have little explanatory power.

New Insights

Most evidence on geographic variation in intergenerational mobility comes from developed countries. In the United States, for example, cities tend to have lower upward mobility than rural areas. Less is known about intergenerational mobility in developing countries, including how mobility differs between cities and villages as these countries urbanize. We addressed this gap by documenting new stylised facts about the relationship between

urbanisation, gender and intergenerational mobility in South Asia. Our main results are as follows:

- **Cities are islands of upward mobility, especially for women.** Low socioeconomic status is on average persistent. Sons and daughters from less-educated families tend to remain less educated than average, but the persistence of low education is smaller in cities. This urban mobility premium is much larger for daughters than for sons. On average, daughters born to bottom-half families in cities rank 11 points higher than daughters from similar families in villages; the urban mobility premium for sons is only 3 rank points. This is the Female Urban Mobility Advantage (FUMA). The FUMA appears in 41 of the 52 regions studied, covering 90% of South Asia's population.
- **Higher returns to education and less patriarchal norms in cities are the main explanations for the observed female urban mobility advantage.** We examine three possible explanations for the female urban mobility advantage: returns to education, gender norms and household income. Education has a higher economic payoff in cities than in villages, especially for women. Differences in these returns can fully account for the FUMA in the data. Gender norms are also less patriarchal in cities, and daughters have higher mobility in places with more equal norms. These differences explain part of the FUMA, but less than returns to education. Higher household income improves educational outcomes more generally, but explains almost none of why daughters benefit more from cities than sons.

Policy Recommendations

There are four main policy implications arising from our study:

- **Urbanisation is not gender-neutral.** South Asian cities are islands of upward mobility, especially for women. Daughters from less-educated families attain much higher education ranks in cities than in villages, and the urban premium is substantially larger for daughters than for sons. This is a broad feature of urbanising South Asia, rather than a pattern driven by a handful of large cities.
- **Women's education responds to labour-market opportunities.** The female urban mobility advantage is most closely associated with higher returns to women's education in cities. This suggests that expansion of girls' schooling responds to the availability of jobs that reward their skills and education.

- **Raising household income alone is unlikely to close the gender gap in mobility.** Higher income and consumption improve educational outcomes on average, but explain almost none of the additional urban gain experienced by daughters relative to sons. On this evidence, policies that raise rural household incomes, such as cash transfers or agricultural income support, are unlikely, on their own, to close the mobility gap between daughters and sons.

- **Better data is needed to measure and track mobility.** Measuring mobility requires information on both children's outcomes and their parents' socioeconomic position. Only two of the five countries in our sample record parental education for all respondents; in the other three, mobility can be measured only for children who still live with their parents, which is significantly limiting. Adding parent education questions to routine household surveys would allow governments and researchers to track mobility consistently across places and separately for daughters and sons.

Limitations

The following are the main limitations of our paper:

- The findings are descriptive, not causal. We compare cities and villages, but cannot show that living in a city itself causes higher mobility. Families living in cities may differ from rural families in ways we cannot observe. However, our results are unlikely to be driven by selective migration alone, since it is unlikely that child gender is the major factor driving household decisions to move to cities.
- We do not identify which specific features of cities drive the female advantage. Urban areas differ from rural areas along many dimensions, including labor-market opportunities, transport, safety, social norms, and access to information. Further research is needed to determine which of these features causally increase educational mobility and which can be reproduced through policy.
- The paper only covers South Asia. The role of cities in upward mobility, as well as the gender implications, in the rest of the developing world are still not adequately documented.

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