

POLICY LESSONS ON EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

GENDER INNOVATION LAB FEDERATION EVIDENCE SERIES

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GENDER INNOVATION LAB FEDERATION

The Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) Federation is a World Bank community of practice coordinated by the Gender Group that brings together the Bank's five regional GILs: Africa (AFR), East Asia and Pacific (EAP), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Middle East and North Africa (MNA), and South Asia (SAR). Together, they are conducting impact evaluations of development interventions to generate evidence and lessons on how to close gender gaps in human capital, earnings, productivity, assets, voice and agency. With over 188 impact evaluations in 66 countries completed to date, the GIL Federation is building the evidence base for governments, development organizations, and the private sector to increase uptake of effective policies that address the underlying causes of gender inequality.

Adolescent girls face multiple challenges that restrict their horizons. They have to make decisions about employment and fertility at an early age with limited access to formal education and under restrictive social norms. Domestic responsibilities limit their time in school and educational achievement, in turn curtailing their ability to enter the labor force. **The GIL Federation is generating rigorous evidence on what works, and what does not, in empowering adolescent girls.** This note presents evidence on five key findings.

FINDING 1. CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR GIRLS CAN FACILITATE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS

Studies of the Africa GIL show that creating safe spaces for girls where they can receive job or life skills training and complementary interventions is an effective policy across a variety of contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹ An influential randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted in Uganda by the Africa GIL and academics finds significant effects of a multifaceted program that provided skills transfers in adolescent clubs serving as safe spaces for girls. The study finds that four years after the intervention, adolescent girls in treated communities were more likely to be self-employed, and there was a sharp reduction in teen pregnancy, early

marriage, and the share of girls reporting sex against their will in comparison to girls in control communities.² The Africa GIL evaluated a similar program in Sierra Leone during the 2014 Ebola epidemic, which demonstrated the protective effect of safe spaces during a crisis.³ The study shows that in areas where girls had access to the clubs, the drop in school enrollment was half as large as that in areas where girls did not have access to the clubs. In severely affected areas, the program generated a reduction in the time girls spent with men and an increase in time they spent at school and engaged in income-generating activities. It led to a complete reversal of the impact that the Ebola epidemic had on pregnancies in severely affected control areas. The study also finds that the impact of the intervention was driven by younger girls (ages 12-17), while older girls in the treatment group (ages 18-25) were more likely to report unwanted sex and transactional sex than girls of a similar age in the control group. The study argues that men shifted their attention to older girls as younger girls were less available. It is worth noting that these increases in unwanted and transactional sex for older girls did not translate into an increase in pregnancies, probably due to the fact that the program also led to an increase in the use of contraception.

Preliminary results from RCTs the Africa GIL is finalizing in Uganda, Sierra Leone, and South Sudan indicate multifaceted programs that create safe spaces for girls are effective either in terms of promoting girls' education economic, sexual, and reproductive health outcomes or

in terms of dampening the negative effects of a crisis or conflict. However, an evaluation of a similar program in Tanzania does not find any impact on these outcomes.⁴ Qualitative research suggests that the lack of effects can be linked to resource constraints affecting the quality of implementation. Club meetings and trainings were held in public spaces, with lower-quality materials; mentors were not appropriately trained; and supervision was less frequent, which led to lower participation among girls.

FINDING 2. CASH TRANSFERS OR SCHOLARSHIPS ARE EFFECTIVE AT KEEPING GIRLS IN SCHOOL AND DELAYING MARRIAGE

Financial resources labeled for girls' education (in the form of conditional cash transfers or scholarships) can positively affect girls' schooling outcomes. When girls stay longer in school, they usually marry at an older age and reduce their fertility.

In the Philippines, the EAP GIL evaluated the long-term impacts of a national conditional cash transfer program targeted at mothers of girls ages 12-14.⁵ The transfers were randomly allocated at the barangay level (administrative unit). The study shows that girls whose mothers received the conditional cash transfer program for 1.5 years experienced reductions in fertility and delayed marriage until their twenties, in comparison to girls whose mothers lived in control areas not selected for the transfers.

In Niger, the Africa GIL studied a three-year scholarship program targeting girls in middle school as part of the Sahel Women Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project. The RCT finds that the program improved girls' educational outcomes, reduced their likelihood of dropping out of school, postponed marriage, and increased their life satisfaction.⁶ Girls in villages assigned to receive the program were 53 percent less likely to drop out of school and 49 percent less likely to be married than girls in villages not assigned to receive the program.

FINDING 3. LIFE SKILLS TRAINING WITH MENTORS AND PEERS CAN IMPROVE GIRL'S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Several factors influence whether girls complete secondary school, avoid teenage pregnancy, and develop the life skills, attitudes, behaviors, and

relationships that will set them on a path to healthy and productive adulthood. The Africa GIL conducted an RCT to evaluate the Sisters of Success (SOS) program in Liberia, which aimed to support girls' transition into adolescence and adulthood by delivering life skills training through mentors.⁷ Girls aged 12-15 in the treatment group were matched with a volunteer woman mentor from their community who delivered a life skills curriculum focused on building social and emotional skills. The control group was not offered any intervention.

The program led to improvements in girls' interpersonal relationships with peers and parents and increases in their educational attainment (both in primary school completion and secondary school enrollment) four years after the program. These impacts were already observed the first year after the program and persisted more than four years after the end of the program. They were detected in both survey data and administrative records. These effects were concentrated among the younger girls (ages 12-13 at baseline), suggesting that supporting girls as they are transitioning into adolescence may yield greater impacts. No effects were observed on sexual activity or pregnancy.

The LAC GIL supported an RCT in Brazil to measure the effects of a peer-led life skills training focused on reproductive health and goal setting.⁸ High school students served as peer educators to disseminate knowledge. Different selection criteria to choose these peer educators were randomized across schools using social network data elicited at baseline. In one-third of treatment schools, peer educators were selected according to their network centrality. In another third of treated schools, the most popular students, according to their peers' ranking, served as educators. In the remaining schools, students chosen by the school administration disseminated information. Overall, the intervention significantly increased contraceptive use, reduced teenage pregnancy, and increased intended post-secondary school enrollment. Because different types of peer educators reached different students, effects differed by treatment arm. Notably, the treatment had smaller impacts when peer educators were selected by the school rather than by one of the network-based methods.

Finally, an RCT by the EAP GIL tested two versions of a socio-emotional skills training program teaching growth mindset and self-management in Indonesia. The more intensive version of the program, which was designed to help students integrate lessons learned into their daily lives and learn from their peers, improved girls'

resilience and challenge-seeking on a task-based measure. It also increased the number of study strategies used by girls and boosted their aspirations to pursue vocational education.⁹

FINDING 4. PHONE-BASED OUTREACH CAN BE A LOW-COST AND EFFECTIVE WAY TO IMPROVE ADOLESCENT'S MOTIVATION AND ASPIRATIONS

The economic and educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had adverse effects on adolescent well-being around the world. Low-cost interventions, such as phone-based outreach, have proved to be effective at mitigating those effects.

In Bangladesh, the SAR GIL conducted an RCT to estimate the effects of a phone-based outreach program designed to foster a growth mindset among adolescents to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on their motivation.¹⁰ Adolescents in the study

were enrolled in grades 7 and 8 across 109 schools prior to the onset of the pandemic. Adolescents from 73 schools were randomly assigned to participate in the program, while adolescents in the other 36 schools served as a control group. The evaluation finds that the phone outreach was associated with a 9 percent increase in adolescent motivation and aspirations across all genders. The program mitigated the reduction in university aspirations for girls who suffered more from this than boys during the pandemic.¹¹

Another low-cost alternative is the use of text messages. The LAC GIL conducted a pilot study in Ecuador where sexual and reproductive health education was implemented via text messages.¹² In line with Finding 3, the program used peers to send the information, and was successful at reducing teenage pregnancy and increasing adolescent girls' self-reported educational aspirations as well as school continuation.





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ENDNOTES

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