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## GIL TOP POLICY LESSONS ON EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Overlapping crises such as climate change, the ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, regional conflicts and rising global food insecurity exacerbate the inequalities faced by adolescent girls, making them particularly vulnerable in these critical times. For many girls, these circumstances force them to make decisions about employment and their fertility at an early age, limits their access to formal education, and further exposes them to restrictive social norms. Additionally, domestic responsibilities limit adolescent girls' time in school and educational achievement, in turn curtailing their ability to enter the labor force.<sup>1</sup> With 60 percent<sup>2</sup> of the total population of Africa under the age of 25, investing in empowering adolescent girls is critical to accelerate economic growth and reduce intergenerational poverty.

Several impact evaluation studies conducted by the Africa Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) across Sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated the potential of girls' empowerment programs to positively influence the life trajectories of young women, even across a variety of contexts.

<sup>1</sup> Bergstrom, Katy; Ozler, Berk. 2021. *Improving the Well-Being of Adolescent Girls in Developing Countries*. Policy Research Working Paper, No. 9827. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

<sup>2</sup> *Charts of the Week: Africa's changing demographics.*

### ABOUT THE AFRICA GENDER INNOVATION LAB

The Africa Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) conducts impact evaluations of development interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, seeking to generate evidence on how to close gender gaps in earnings, productivity, assets, and agency. The GIL team is currently working on over 80 impact evaluations in more than 30 countries in Africa with the aim of building an evidence base with lessons for the region.

The impact objective of GIL is increasing take-up of effective policies by governments, development organizations, and the private sector to address the underlying causes of gender inequality in Africa, particularly in terms of women's economic and social empowerment. The Lab aims to do this by producing and delivering a new body of evidence and developing a compelling narrative, geared towards policymakers, on what works and what does not work in promoting gender equality.



## WHAT WORKS TO EMPOWER ADOLESCENT GIRLS?



### CREATING SAFE SPACES

Creating safe spaces for girls to receive job or life-skills trainings that are tailored to an adolescent girl's environment and experience has been shown to be effective across a variety of contexts.

#### POLICY IN ACTION: SAFE SPACES IN UGANDA

In Uganda, the non-governmental organization BRAC implemented a multifaceted program: Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescent Girls (ELA) to create community-based girl-only clubs, which became hubs for delivery of vocational and life-skills trainings for adolescents aged 13 to 20. The program had positive impacts on income and on girls' decision-making power over childbearing, marriage, and sexual activity. After 4 years, the girls in the ELA program were 34% less likely to have a child and 62% less likely to be married. Moreover, girls were 30% less likely to have had sex against their will over the previous 12 months. Economically, they

were 48% more likely to engage in income-generating activities, and reported self-employment earnings three times higher, compared to the baseline average. At a cost of US\$18 per eligible girl (US\$85 per participating girl) per year, the program not only worked but also was cost-effective. Implementation of the program in other contexts has shown the importance of high-quality execution for these results to be achieved.<sup>3</sup>

#### POLICY IN ACTION: SAFE SPACES IN CONFLICT AFFECTED AREAS

After the successes in Uganda, a similar program was designed for Sierra Leone. However, Sierra Leone was hit with the 2014 Ebola epidemic during the program implementation. Quarantines were imposed which limited travel, halted market activity, and closed schools. Health services were repurposed to fight the epidemic—and medical services on sexual and reproductive health were severely reduced. In light of these circumstances, the program was redesigned to understand if and how the ELA clubs might help safeguard adolescent girls and young women aged 12 to 25 in a crisis environment.



Working with village leaders, a World Bank team categorized communities into high- and low-disruption areas to determine how the crisis and the program might have impacted the resilience of girls in both types of communities. Though the measures taken were critical to contain Ebola, they did have strong, negative effects on adolescent girls. In high-disruption communities with no ELA programming, younger girls were 17 percentage points (pp) (32% of the baseline mean) less likely to return to schools after they were reopened and spent an average of 1.3 additional weekly hours with men. Girls in the high-disruption communities were also more likely to become pregnant.

In contrast, the girls in the ELA program experienced different outcomes. The school enrollment decline in high disruption communities was reduced by half when the girls were exposed to the clubs. In all types of communities, both younger (12 to 17) and older girls (18 to 25) who participated in the clubs spent less time with men. In high-disruption communities, pregnancies outside of wedlock also decreased by 7.5 pp (82% of the baseline mean). However, in areas highly disrupted by the

Ebola crisis, older girls reported increases in unwanted and transactional sex. The authors hypothesize that as younger girls enrolled in the ELA program and spent less time with men, older girls were more likely to be targeted by men. Nevertheless, the ELA program increased the ability of older girls to mitigate some of the risks associated with transactional sex, as they were more likely to use contraceptives and pregnancy rates did not increase.<sup>4</sup>

An evaluation of a program very similar to the ELA program, and implemented by the same organization, in South Sudan also suggests that the girls affected by the crisis in fact improved schooling outcomes. Similarly, the results suggest a positive impact of the program on girls' probability of engagement in income-generating activities and the probability of saving as well as other measures of socio-emotional wellbeing in areas not affected by conflict. However, treated girls in areas not affected by conflict were also less likely to have been engaged in transactional sex or experience sex against their will but are more likely to have married as a teen about a year and a half after the end of the program.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Bandiera, Oriana; Buehren, Niklas; Goldstein, Markus; Rasul, Imran; Smurra, Andrea. 2019. *The Economic Lives of Young Women in the Time of Ebola: Lessons from an Empowerment Program*. Washington, D.C: World Bank Group.

<sup>5</sup> Niklas Buehren, Shubha Chakravarty, Markus Goldstein, Vanya Slavchevska, Munshi Sulaiman. 2017. *Adolescent Girls' Empowerment in Conflict-Affected Settings: Experimental Evidence from South Sudan*. Washington, D.C: World Bank Group.



### POLICY IN ACTION: ENSURING THE QUALITY OF IMPLEMENTATION IN TANZANIA

While the ELA program was found to be effective in Uganda, South Sudan, and Sierra Leone, the same positive effects were not replicated in Tanzania: the standard community-based girls' clubs had no impact on employment nor income. Qualitative research suggests that resource constraints negatively affected the quality of implementation in this context: club meetings and trainings were held in lower-quality public spaces, with lower-quality materials that likely reduced club members' interest in regular participation. Inadequate provision for the training of new mentors and less frequent supervision also contributed to the lower implementation quality. The contrasting results suggest that, despite the strength of the core model, adapting and scaling the intervention across different contexts requires continuous learning, adequate training of mentors and close, regular supervision.<sup>6</sup>

### TAKING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION INTO ACCOUNT

Careful program design that is tailored to the specific needs of adolescent girls is critical to consider for programs targeting young women. Indeed, trainings for

young women that take the constraints that may restrict girls from attending the sessions into account have been demonstrated to be effective. For example, these might include free childcare or transportation that allow young women with children, or limited means, to attend.

### POLICY IN ACTION: REMOVING CONSTRAINTS TO SKILLS TRAINING IN LIBERIA

In Liberia, the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project offered a year-long employment program, including six months of trainings—which included socio-emotional skills, as well as either vocational or business skills training—and six months of follow-up support. Free childcare was provided during the classroom trainings—as well as savings accounts, a stipend for transportation, and a completion bonus. The program was geared toward young women, between the ages of 16 to 27, who had been out of school for at least a year. Compared to non-participants, young women in the program had strongly positive employment and earnings outcomes: employment increased by 47%, and earnings increased by 80%. Along with the economic outcomes, participants gained other elements of empowerment: access to money, self-confidence, and anxiety about circumstances and the future were positively impacted.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Buehren, Niklas; Goldstein, Markus; Gulesci, Selim; Sulaiman, Munshi; Yam, Venus. 2017. *Evaluation of an Adolescent Development Program for Girls in Tanzania*. Policy Research Working Paper, No. 7961. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

<sup>7</sup> Adoho, Franck; Chakravarty, Shubha; Korkoyah, Jr, Dala T.; Lundberg, Mattias; Tasneem, Afia. 2014. *The impact of an adolescent girl's employment program: the EPAG project in Liberia*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.



## POLICY IN ACTION: CHALLENGING RESTRICTIVE GENDER NORMS IN SOMALIA

A gender norms training program called CHOICES, implemented by the NGO Save the Children, targeted young adolescent girls and boys (aged 10-14 years) in Somalia. CHOICES is a component of the Challenging Harmful Attitudes and Norms for Gender Equality and Empowerment in Somalia (CHANGES) project. The CHOICES training curriculum was designed to raise awareness of societal expectations that enable gender inequality through mixed-gender activities such as drama, poetry, and debate competitions. The program consists of ten 2-hour sessions delivered by two trainers (male + female) over the course of three months in an after-school program.

A recent impact evaluation of the CHOICES program in Somalia showed that the CHOICES gender norms program led to a shift towards more gender egalitarian attitudes among both adolescent girls and boys in- and out-of-school. Trained adolescents were less likely to succumb to peer pressure to conform when stating their attitudes in public, leading to a greater public expression

of gender egalitarian ideals. The program also led to improvements in adolescent mental health and increased the likelihood of boys' involvement in domestic chores. Program impacts occurred in a relatively short timeframe and were maintained two years post-intervention. A complementary gender norms intervention to parents also led to an increase in both mothers' and fathers' gender egalitarian attitudes, especially with respect to a girl's right to education but had limited additional impact on the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents.<sup>3</sup>



## PROVIDING SCHOLARSHIPS TO KEEP GIRLS IN SCHOOL

Across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in secondary school, and they face a higher risk of dropout. Reducing the cost of schooling through cash transfers and in-kind transfers has been found to be effective at increasing girls' enrollment and attendance in different contexts and could potentially be effective at delaying marriage and/or pregnancies.

## POLICY IN ACTION: SCHOLARSHIPS IN NIGER

In Niger, a component of the Sahel Women Empowerment

and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project offered scholarships and some tutoring to adolescent girls (aged 13 on average) from vulnerable rural households upon admission to middle school. Compared to non-participants, girls who received the scholarship and tutoring program were 50% less likely to be married in the summer following their third year of middle school. The program also improved educational outcomes and wellbeing: girls who received the program were 53% more likely to remain enrolled in school and reported a higher degree of life satisfaction. The intervention raised girls' educational and professional aspirations for themselves as well as their parents' aspirations for their daughter, suggesting that the intervention's effects are likely to last beyond the mere duration of the scholarship.



### HARNESSING THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP

Mentors can play a positive role in girls' lives, helping them transition into adolescence and adulthood, adopt healthy behaviors, build confidence and self-esteem, and navigate decisions about schooling, employment, and fertility. At critical junctures in girls' development, mentors can help to nudge them in positive directions.

#### POLICY IN ACTION: MENTORING PROGRAMS IN LIBERIA

Implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Sisters of Success (SOS) program in Liberia was designed to harness the power of mentorship by linking mentors with girls' groups to deliver life skills trainings—including socio-emotional skills—to young adolescent girls between the ages of 12-15. The program aimed to support girls' transition into adolescence by promoting healthy behaviors, fostering confidence and self-esteem, increasing girls' knowledge and practice of their rights, developing savings and financial literacy habits, increasing girls' community participation and involvement, and working towards their own personal development goals.

Results from the program's impact evaluation showed that the girls offered the mentorship program were 4% more likely to have completed primary school and 3% more likely to have enrolled in secondary school compared to girls who did not receive the program (Koroknay-Palicz and IRC, 2016). In addition to the boost in school enrollment, girls in the clubs improved the quality of their relationships with both their peers and their parents. These impacts were already observed the first year after the program and persisted more than four years after the end of the program. Moreover, the younger girls, between ages 12 and 13, experienced larger impacts— suggesting that supporting girls as they are transitioning into adolescence may yield greater impacts. The program resulted in no effects on sexual activity nor pregnancy.<sup>9</sup>



### ENGAGING BOYS TO PROMOTE IMPROVED SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH OUTCOMES

As the peers of millions of girls and important advocates in their communities, boys play a critical role in adolescent girls' development. The joint education and dissemination of safe sexual and reproductive health practices to both girls and boys can help promote informed sexual decisions.

#### POLICY IN ACTION: USING SPORTS PEDAGOGY TO ENGAGE BOYS IN TANZANIA

In Tanzania, an intervention targeting both males and females sought to reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) by focusing on females in adolescent empowerment clubs run by BRAC. The program offered females a goal setting activity designed to improve their sexual and reproductive health outcomes and simultaneously provided their male partners a soccer intervention, which educated and inspired young men to make better sexual and reproductive health choices.

Both interventions effectively reduced female reports of IPV, with larger impacts observed among females who were already sexually active at baseline. In terms



of mechanism, the soccer intervention improved male attitudes around violence and risky sexual behaviors, while females in the goal setting arm took more control of their sexual and reproductive health by exiting violent relationships. Both of these mechanisms generated IPV reductions and were found to be cost-efficient, with costs of around \$41 per female for the boys' intervention and \$38 for the goal-setting intervention. The findings suggest the need for continued research pertaining to SRH as adolescents transition into adulthood.<sup>10</sup>



## SCALING UP PROGRAMS THAT WORK

GIL's evidence has played a crucial role in shaping and expanding various programs in Africa, including two World Bank regional initiatives: the Sahel Women Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Regional project (SWEDD) and the East Africa Girl's Empowerment and Resilience (EAGER) Program.

Since the early design stage of the SWEDD project, GIL collaborated with the project team, offering technical assistance based on GIL's own rigorous global evidence related to adolescent girls' projects. Notably, GIL's input significantly influenced the design of several innovations incorporated into the SWEDD project, which spans nine countries with plans for expansion into three additional West African countries. These innovations include the development of safe spaces curricula following international best practices and the introduction of boys' clubs alongside girls' clubs, among other innovations. As of June 2023, the SWEDD project had positively impacted nearly 1 million girls through interventions aimed at keeping them in school, enhancing their life skills and knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, and expanding their economic prospects.

Regarding the EAGER program, currently in the design phase, GIL's evidence is playing a pivotal role in refining the program's knowledge base and operational objectives. The EAGER program aims to advance human capital development by keeping girls in school, promoting a smooth transition from school to work, facilitating the economic inclusion of young women in the workforce, and strengthening institutional capacity through the establishment of policies, services, and a knowledge hub promoting gender equality. The program aims to reach 2 million girls by increasing their access and retention in schools, support 170,000 young women's productivity in the labor market, and shift gender norms of nearly 7 million change agents (such as traditional leaders, parents, and boys) by 2029.

Similarly, GIL evidence has influenced the World Bank Tejaswini project in India, which uses safe spaces as a platform to offer a package of activities for girls aged 14 to 24, including community-based social support, life skills (including reproductive health), business skills and vocational training. The project has successfully expanded the social, educational, and economic opportunities of over 1.1 million adolescent girls and young women over its 7 years of implementation.

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