

# Human Capital, Financial Capital, and the Economic Empowerment of Female Adolescents in Uganda

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**Sector(s):** Education, Health, Labor Markets, Gender, Finance

**J-PAL office:** J-PAL Europe

**Location:** Uganda

**Sample:** 4,888 girls in 150 communities

**Target group:** Women and girls

**Outcome of interest:** Communicable diseases Earnings and income HIV/AIDS Empowerment Self-employment Sexual and reproductive health Age of marriage Women's/girls' decision-making Aspirations Age of childbearing Fertility/pregnancy Gender-based violence Health outcomes

**Intervention type:** Coaching and mentoring Information Preventive health Empowerment training Hard skills Vocational training (TVET) Psychosocial support

**AEA RCT registration number:** AEARCTR-0001558

**Research Papers:** Intentions to Participate in Adolescent Training Programs: Evidence from Uganda

**Partner organization(s):** BRAC

For adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa, economic concerns and health-related challenges are interlinked. In Uganda, researchers examined the impact of a combination of life skills and vocational training on female youths' health knowledge, risky behaviors, and engagement in income-generating activities. Results indicate a significant increase in income, knowledge about reproductive health, and consistent condom use, and a reduction in nonconsensual sex and pregnancy. However, the program had no impact on sexually transmitted infections.

## Policy issue

In sub-Saharan Africa, 60 percent of the population is younger than 25 years old, and young people account for the majority of the region's poor and unemployed. For adolescent girls, such economic concerns are compounded by health-related challenges such as higher risk for STDs and HIV infection as well as early marriage and pregnancy. These economic and health issues are clearly linked: teen pregnancy and early marriage can limit girls' education and labor market participation, while the lack of future

labor market opportunities can reduce the incentives for investing in girls' education and lead to marriage and childbearing earlier in adolescence. If girls can be equipped with both life skills and vocational training, it may reduce their incentives to marry and bear children early, and empower them in the labor market. However, other barriers may also stand in the way of the economic empowerment of young girls, and more evidence is needed on the effectiveness of such programs.

### **Context of the evaluation**

Uganda has the second-lowest median age in the world and one of the highest rates of young women out of the labor force. At all ages, women have higher unemployment rates than men, and this is especially pronounced in younger age groups. Women in Uganda bear the primary responsibility for both subsistence agriculture, especially food production, and domestic work, yet decision-making at the household level continues to be male-dominated. The adolescent girls who participated in this study were 16 years old on average, and 71 percent of them were enrolled in school. Twelve percent were already married and 11 percent had at least one child. Fifty-one percent of adolescent girls reported always using a condom if they are sexually active. Before the study began, more than 18 percent reported having had sex unwillingly in the past year.



A young girl waits in a health center in Uganda.

### **Details of the intervention**

In partnership with BRAC Uganda, researchers examined the impact of a combination of life skills and vocational training on female youths' health knowledge, risky behaviors, and engagement in income-generating activities. From a sample of 150

communities served by one of 10 existing BRAC branches, researchers randomly selected ten communities in each branch to receive the Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents Program (ELA) in 2008, while five communities in each branch served as a comparison group.

ELA provided female youth aged 14-20 with life skills and vocational training at adolescent development clubs that were open five afternoons per week so that both girls in school and out of school could attend. Each club had a mentor, a young woman slightly older than the club members, who led club activities. Mentors were selected by local BRAC staff and are paid a small lump sum for their work.

The clubs' life skills training covered sexual and reproductive health, menstruation, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS awareness, family planning, and rape. Other topics included management skills, negotiation and conflict resolution, leadership, and legal knowledge on women's issues such as bride price, child marriage, and violence against women. Vocational skills training was also provided and focused on helping adolescent girls establish their own small enterprises. It offered a series of courses on hairdressing, tailoring, computing, agriculture, poultry rearing, and small trades operation. The clubs also hosted popular recreational activities such as reading, staging dramas, singing, dancing, and playing games, and served as a space in which adolescent girls could meet, socialize, and privately discuss issues of concern.

## **Results and policy lessons**

Twenty-one percent of eligible female youth living in treatment communities and aware of ELA participated in the program. Preliminary results indicate that the program significantly increased HIV and pregnancy-related knowledge among sexually active female youth, relative to youth in comparison communities. Among those who were sexually active, ELA increased the proportion of girls who always use a condom during intercourse by 13 percentage points (25.3 percent). Despite the increase in condom use, the program did not have any impact on STDs. This finding is in line with the results from another recent study in Kenya, which found that standard HIV/AIDS and sexual health education did not reduce STIs among adolescent girls.

The program enabled girls to become more empowered in their relationships with men, resulting in a 6.1 percentage point reduction (44 percent) in girls reporting having had sex unwillingly relative to the comparison group. It also significantly reduced childbearing. Two years after the program began female youth in ELA communities were about 2.7 percentage points (26 percent) less likely than their counterparts in comparison communities to report having at least one child.

ELA also increased girls' income from self-employment. Female youth in ELA communities were 6.8 percentage points (72 percent) more likely to be engaged in an income-generating activity and increased their monthly consumption expenditures by 41 percent. Finally, the program also shifted some of the girls' attitudes and aspirations about employment, marriage, and childbearing. Female youth in ELA communities were more likely to believe that women should earn money for their families and were 7.2 percentage points (18 percent) more likely to not be worried about finding a good job in adulthood. The program also increased girls' ideal age for marriage and childbirth.

Bandiera, Oriana, Robin Burgess, Markus Goldstein, Selim Gulesci, Imran Rasul, and Munshi Sulaiman. 2010. "Intentions to Participate in Adolescent Training Programs: Evidence from Uganda." *Journal of European Economic Association* 8(2-3): 549-60.

Oriana Bandiera, Niklas Buehren, Robin Burgess, Markus Goldstein, Selim Gulesci, Imran Rasul, and Munshi Sulaiman. "Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa." Working Paper, July 2017.