A Multifaceted Approach to Increase Women's Empowerment in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Fieldwork: Marakuja Kivu Research, Innovative Hub for Research in Africa (IHfRA)

Sample: 2,039 women

Target group: Women and girls Adults

Outcome of interest: Earnings and income Employment Post-conflict recovery Empowerment Household finance Self-employment Violence Women's/girls' decision-making Gender attitudes and norms Attitudes and norms Gender-based violence Health outcomes Mental health Profits/revenues Savings/deposits

Intervention type: Cash transfers Information Savings Social networks Targeting the ultra poor model Social protection Empowerment training Norms change Engaging men in gender norms change Graduation approach Hard skills Unconditional cash transfers Vocational training (TVET)

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Partner organization(s): Women for Women International (WfWI), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

Multifaceted interventions have contributed to poverty alleviation in different contexts, but more evidence is needed on their effectiveness in conflict-affected settings or when they are targeted at women. Researchers evaluated a multifaceted program for women experiencing extreme poverty in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a region facing protracted conflict. The intervention had positive and enduring effects on women's consumption, employment, finances, and empowerment, and small positive impacts on health outcomes. Study participants were no more or less likely to experience intimate-partner violence on average. Including a men's engagement component in the program did not change the interventions' effects.

Policy issue

Poverty is a multidimensional problem that may require a multidimensional response—that is, one that addresses its several drivers simultaneously. Interventions that provide a holistic set of services and financial support to people experiencing extreme poverty have sustainably improved living standards by tackling several barriers to poverty eradication. However, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of multifaceted anti-poverty interventions in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where program impacts may be limited by insecurity, limited governance, disrupted markets, destroyed assets, and personal displacement.

Multifaceted interventions may also have different impacts if targeted at women, by potentially increasing women's access to resources, affecting resource allocation within the home, and increasing women's bargaining power. Alternatively, a gender-

targeted approach may induce partner backlash to women's financial autonomy and, consequentially, increase intimate-partner violence. Can a multifaceted program for women experiencing extreme poverty in the Democratic Republic of Congo improve their indicators of consumption, employment, finances, health, and empowerment? Does including a men's engagement component for spouses and male household members make the program more effective?

Context of the evaluation

This study took place in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a region that has faced conflict and instability for over 25 years. The DRC is one of the world's poorest and most gender-inequitable countries, ranking 179th out of 189 on both the Human Development Index and Gender Inequality Index.

Women in DRC are particularly affected by poverty and local conflicts, which further exacerbates gender inequality. For instance, women are 6.7 times more likely than men to be subsistence entrepreneurs and often have limited ownership of assets, lower personal income, and rarely receive inheritance. Congolese women are also exposed to abuses that have been exacerbated by conflicts, including the use of rape as a "weapon of war" and sexual violence. In South Kivu, the province where the study was conducted, almost half of the women have experienced physical violence and 35 percent have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.

In this evaluation, researchers drew a sample of women aged 18-55 years old from four communities in South Kivu. Eligibility criteria for participation included experience with war or conflict (e.g., surviving violence, being displaced) and social and economic vulnerability (e.g., extreme poverty, facing restrictive traditional practices).



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Details of the intervention

In collaboration with Women for Women International (WfWI), researchers evaluated the impacts a multifaceted poverty alleviation approach targeting women on indicators of income, empowerment, and health in the DRC. WfWI grouped 2,000 women into cohorts of 25 and randomly assigned cohorts to one of three groups:

- *Stronger Women Stronger Nations program (500 participants)*: Over twelve months, women received a bundle of services through the Stronger Nations Stronger Women program (SWSN), comprised of informational training, skill-building, resource provision, and connection to networks. The informational training focused on the value of women's work, benefits of saving, health education, and women's rights and decision-making. The skill-building component provided training in numeracy and a chosen vocational skill (e.g., agriculture, sewing). Women also received a US$10 monthly cash stipend (US$120 total), formal and informal savings vehicles (e.g., savings and loans associations, microfinance institutions), and referrals to health, legal, and financial services. Participants connected with other women through safe spaces for women, women-led social and economic groups, and a letter exchange with foreign supporters. The trainings were given to groups of 25 women in 2-5 hours of weekly sessions over the course of the intervention.
- *SWSN + MEP (500 participants)*: In addition to women receiving the SWSN intervention, the spouses or male household members of the women in this group joined a men's engagement program (MEP). MEP consisted of 16 weekly discussion groups facilitated by male community leaders who had been previously trained on topics including intimate partner violence and women's economic empowerment, rights, and health. Couples identified by WfWI staff members as high-risk for disputes or violence were also invited to join a couples' dialogue session and a two-hour session with up to 25 couples on topics such as roles and responsibilities in a marriage, women's rights, and making commitments to reduce household conflict.
- *Comparison group (1,000 participants):* Participants were scheduled to receive the intervention after the end of the evaluation.

At the end of the 12-month program (endline) and one year later (follow-up), researchers measured the impact of the program on consumption, employment, finances, women's empowerment, and mental and physical health.

Results and policy lessons

The SWSN program improved women's consumption, employment, finances, and women's empowerment, particularly for more vulnerable women. Participants' health outcomes also saw positive, though modest, improvements. While intimate-partner violence (IPV) remained the same on average, it decreased for participants who were at high IPV risk before the program and increased for women at low risk. The additional MEP component made the program no more or less effective. Generally, the SWSN program's impacts remained similar one year after the intervention and did not fade out, suggesting that it is possible to empower women experiencing extreme poverty in fragile settings with high gender inequality.

Consumption: Overall, effects on consumption were meaningful, long-lasting, and extended beyond participants. Households spent more on both food (an increase of 15 percent at the end of the program and 5 percent one year later) and non-food items (an increase of 20 percent at the end of the program and 13 percent one year later), relative to the comparison group.

Households reported owning more livestock and other assets, like furniture, electronics and tools, as measured by indices created by the researchers. The asset and livestock indices increased by 0.16 and 0.12SD at program end and 0.06SD and 0.22SD one year later, respectively. Clothing purchases increased too, especially for women but also for men and children, suggesting higher bargaining power among women and an extension of impacts to other household members.

Employment and finances: Women worked, earned, and saved more, and these impacts did not fade over time, suggesting that higher earnings and savings were not driven only by the cash transfer component.

Participants' gross earnings increased by 19 percent at program end and 35 percent one year later (US$0.2 and US$0.47 increases per week relative to US$1.08 and US$1.32 in the comparison group) Their partners' earnings raised by even more, with a 62 percent increase at program end (US$0.72 per week).

Participants' business costs also increased by 47 and 85 percent at follow-up (US$0.18 and US$0.32 increases relative to US$0.38 in the comparison group), and their net earnings raised by 20 percent at the one-year follow-up, suggesting an expansion of entrepreneurial activities and a subsequent increase in profits. Consistently, self-employment grew from 12 percent in the comparison group to 19 percent one year after the program, an increase that reflects some women entering into employment and some switching from wage- to self-employment. In fact, women worked 1.5 more hours per week one year after the program ended, an 18 percent increase relative to 8.2 hours in the comparison group.

At the one-year follow up, SWSN participants were twice more likely to save, with the share of women with monetary savings raising by 37 percentage points from 36 percent in the comparison group. Savings balances almost tripled, increasing from US$4.80 in the comparison group to US$13.

Women's empowerment: Women who participated in the SWSN program demonstrated higher levels of autonomy, more sense of control over their lives, and short-term improvements in ideas of the role of women in society, though some women experienced more intimate-partner violence (IPV).

Despite the fact that the women's income increased less than their spouses' earnings, participants experienced increments of 0.18SD and 0.21SD in a women's empowerment index at program end and one year later relative to the comparison group. At the one-year follow-up, a sub-index of women's participation in household decision-making increased by 0.16SD, and a metric of their sense of control over their lives raised by 0.14SD relative to the comparison group. While a pro-women attitudes index increased by 0.19SD at program end, the effect dissipated one year later. By the end of the program and a year later, IPV decreased for women who were at high IPV risk before the program, but increased for women at low risk.

Mental and physical health: One year after the end of the program, participants experienced a small improvement on a health index relative to the comparison group. However, the index's components—depression, anxiety and physical health—did not change individually. This result suggests that some program features such as physical exertion, stress, reduced leisure time, or higher IPV, may have offset the benefits of increases in food consumption.

Cost-benefit: WfWI implemented the program at a cost of US$354 per participant. Based on increases in annual consumption of US$109 at endline and US$63 one year later, researchers estimated a benefit-cost ratio of 368 percent and an internal rate of return of 20 percent—large returns compared to other graduation-style programs.

Policy influence: In response to the positive effects of SWSN on women's well-being, WfWI has been working to expand the number of participants in five conflict-affected countries where the program has been implemented. WfWI has also adapted the MEP component to increase its impacts, through curriculum updates and the expansion of topics and activities offered in the MEP. Further, WfWI has modified SWSN with the purpose of better preventing VAW, by adding topics to the women's curriculum, expanding the MEP, and investing in community-level advocacy activities to target social norms that tolerate and even encourage VAW.