



## The Economic Lives of Young Women in the Time of Ebola: Lessons from an Empowerment Programme



### Intervention

Declining poverty rates across the world substantially reduced gender inequality and strengthened women’s agency by increasing access to education and labour markets. Yet, a range of persisting disadvantages puts these hard-earned gains in peril of being swiftly erased or even reversed by external shocks, as evidenced during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone.

BRAC uses an integrated approach to build a platform to voice young girls’ concerns and build their capacity to overcome the barriers by facilitating their labour force participation and increasing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) awareness. In partnership with IPA, the World Bank and UNICEF, BRAC implemented the *Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA)* programme in Sierra Leone from 2014 to 2016. It served 4,800 in- and out-of-school girls 12 to 25 through 160 ELA clubs in Port Loko, Kambia, Moyamba, and Pujehun.

The ELA programme draws on the lessons learnt in Bangladesh where 9,000 clubs have been reaching over one million girls since 1993. Designed for the pre-Ebola context, the programme operated through safe clubs set up in the villages and opened five afternoons a week. Senior girls from the community were trained to run the clubs and act as mentors. They hosted life-skills and SRH training which was the only component rolled-out before the Ebola. Livelihood training on income-generating activities (IGAs) and financial literacy by entrepreneurs and professionals had to be postponed until 2015 when schools reopened. Girls above 17 benefited from vocational training and at 18 they were offered microfinance loans to capitalise on acquired skills.



### Research

*The Economic Lives of Young Women in the Time of Ebola: Lessons from an Empowerment Programme* (Bandiera et al., 2019, [World Bank Working Paper No. 8760](#))



### Method

A *randomised controlled trial (RCT)* method enrolled 5,775 girls into control and treatment arms to assess the impact on their SRH, income, and sense of agency. To capture the considerable heterogeneity, findings were disaggregated by: (i) high and low (Ebola) disruption treatment areas and (ii) treatment younger (12-17) and older cohort (18-25) at the baseline.



▼ **82**  
% out-of-wedlock pregnancy

▼ **2**  
hours away from men

▲ **29**  
% use of contraceptives

▲ **10**  
hours spent on learning

▲ **Halved**  
failure rate of re-enrolment in post Ebola

▲ **9.5 & 5.1**  
pp younger & older girls combined school and work

While the adolescent girls in Sierra Leone were one of the worst sufferers of the Ebola crisis, girls under the ELA programme strongly showed resilience to many of the outbreak's shocks. Young girls in highly-disrupted ELA villages cut the **out-of-wedlock pregnancy rate** by 7.5 percentage points (pp) which is equivalent to **82% reduction** from the baseline mean. This significant impact was possible not only because of what the girls learnt through the life-skills training, but also because of the way they spent their time during the Ebola crisis. Both older and younger ELA girls spent on average 3 hours a week in ELA clubs which made them allocate around **2 hours a week more away from men**. The programme furthermore offset the rise of unprotected sex by 43%, which also contributed to decrease in unwanted pregnancy.

The unavailability of young girls, on the other hand, created a sexual vacuum that seemingly led more number of older girls to use transactional sex as a coping strategy. Nevertheless, this did not translate to higher fertility as the intervention significantly increased their **use of contraceptives** by 14 pp which is a **29% rise** from the baseline mean.

The clubs protected human capital accumulation, which is pivotal for future labour market opportunities. In the case of young girls in high-disruption villages, around 73% of the reduction in literacy (99% in numeracy) skills were offset as they spent **10 hours more per week** learning and nearly 5 hours less on chores. For older girls, ELA clubs offset 93% of the loss in numeracy skills.

Ebola forced the adolescents to leave school and look for IGAs. But the ELA programme dramatically countered the school-to-work transition for young women in high disruption villages. **The 16pp fall in re-enrolment** in school in post Ebola control group was halved in ELA villages (8.1pp). Since younger girls were engaged in the ELA clubs instead of spending their time with men, fewer experienced out-of-wedlock pregnancies, which in turn enabled them to continue with learning and, thus, making re-enrolling in school easier.

ELA girls, irrespective of their age, were better at simultaneously **attending their schooling** and **IGAs** by **9.5 pp** in case of younger girls and by **5.1 pp** for older girls. Their overall sense of agency and long-term aspirations enabled them to choose better and even multiple options. While younger girls expanded their business networks by 46 pp, older girls doubled their engagement in credit or finance networks as opposed to the control mean.

## ➤ Way Forward

The multifaceted ELA programme proved as a potential policy for promoting and protecting girls' ability to choose and exert agency over their body even in times of severe socio-economic disruption. The findings are broadly in consistent with the ELA [evaluation in South Sudan](#) (Buehren *et al.*, 2017) during the 2013 civil war. Similarly, the ELA [evaluation in Uganda](#) (Bandiera *et al.*, 2020) found model transferable across countries, scalable and cost-effective with minor adjustments. For future studies, age-specific life-skills curricula could balance out results across cohorts while multi-arm evaluation could deepen understanding of mechanisms through which ELA clubs deliver gains.