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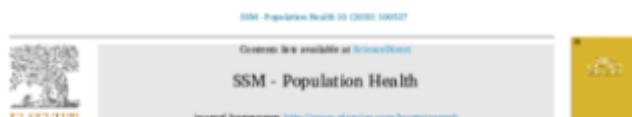
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Article

Girl Empower – A gender transformative mentoring and cash transfer intervention to promote adolescent wellbeing: Impact findings from a cluster-randomized controlled trial in Liberia

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ABSTRACT

Background: We evaluated Girl Empower – an intervention that aimed to equip adolescent girls with the skills to make healthy, strategic life choices and to stay safe from sexual abuse using a cluster randomized controlled trial with three arms: control, Girl Empower (GE), and GE+.

Aims: To evaluate the impact of the intervention on adolescent girls aged 13–14 in Liberia, facilitated by local female mentors. In the GE+ condition, a cash incentive provides an effort recognition for girls' participation in the program.

Methods: We evaluated the impact of the program on seven pre-specified domains using standardized indices: sexual violence, schoolgoing, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), psychosocial wellbeing, gender attitudes, life skills, and protective factors.

Findings: Dropout rates were high in both GE and GE+, with the average participant attending 10–20 out of 32 sessions. At 24 months, the estimated effects of both GE and GE+ compared to control, on sexual violence, schoolgoing, psychosocial wellbeing, and protective factors were small (≤ 0.22 standard deviation (SD)) and not statistically significant at the 0.05 level of confidence. However, we found positive statistical interactions between treatment (GE: $\beta = 0.398$ SD, $p < 0.05$; GE+: $\beta = 0.308$ SD, $p < 0.05$; GE+ × GE: $\beta = 0.101$, $p < 0.05$).

Interpretation: GE demonstrated no sustained improvements in several important domains, including SRH, but did reduce sexual violence among the target population.

Violence against women (VAW) and children (VAC) are global epidemics that have lifelong impacts on the health and welfare of individuals, families, and communities. The epidemics are closely linked; VAW and VAC result in severe mental health problems and exposure to VAC predicts female experience and male perpetration of future partner violence (SPV) during adulthood (Gondwe, Ison, García-Moreno, & Colomina, 2010). Because of their age, however, adolescents may not have access to supportive interventions, most of which are aimed at supporting either married adult females or younger children; adolescent girls may therefore not have access to violence prevention or response services (Hallberg et al., 2017; Rose & Hallman, 2010). Liberia, the

setting for this study, has a history of armed conflict during which women suffered greatly (Ugurel et al., 2002; International, 2012), high levels of intergenerational and marital violence (DV) continue to occur, particularly in areas where one high conflict event and fatalities during the civil war (Gibbs, Colantonio, Robertson, & Becker, 2013).

Programs designed to work specifically with adolescent girls as a unique subpopulation began to appear in the early 1990s in the HIV field and early 2000s more generally (Guimond & Hallman, 2008; Gibbs, Jochim, & Kerr Wilson, 2017). Some of these (estimated by Guimond & Hallman, 2008; Murray, Coggeshall, Berry, & Page, 2017) have shown favorable impacts on sexual health behaviors, HIV and other

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Girl Empower—A gender transformative mentoring and cash transfer intervention

to promote adolescent wellbeing: Impact findings from a cluster-randomized controlled trial in Liberia

Violence against women and children are closely linked global epidemics that have lifelong impacts on human welfare. This study examines the impact of adding cash transfers to a mentoring intervention targeted to girls in early adolescence. Girl Empower has positive impacts on some important outcomes, but is ineffective in protecting girls from sexual violence. Cash transfers, tied to attendance, enhanced program impacts on child marriage, teen pregnancy, and risky sexual behavior. Future research is needed to understand whether cash affects these outcomes directly or through an interaction effect.

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