Designing Cash Transfer and Graduation Programs to Support Women's Economic Activity: Synthesis of Recent Literature

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Innovations for Poverty Action

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SYNTHESIS OF RECENT LITERATURE

Introduction

Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty, given inequitable gender dynamics that may limit ownership of productive assets, decision-making, control over money, and access to markets. A number of interventions—including graduation programs and cash transfers—have emerged as effective tools to alleviate poverty and improve well-being. However, less is known about how these interventions can simultaneously enhance household well-being while improving women's empowerment. To better understand how cash transfers and graduation programs can improve the lives of women, this review summarizes the impact of these programs, as well as variations in design and delivery, on economic, and non-economic outcomes among female recipients.

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Methodology

This review examines recent evidence on cash transfers from 2016 onward following the seminal publication of Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? (Bastalgi et al. 2016) and from 2015 onward for Graduation literature, following the publication of A multifaceted program causes lasting progress for the very poor: Evidence from six countries (Banerjee et. al 2015), with a few exceptions. Interventions include graduation programs, which are detailed in a subsequent section, and conditional or unconditional cash transfers if at least one arm of the study was pure cash. The majority of studies in the sample are randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that target women, with some quasi-experimental methods considered where relevant. All studies take place in low- or middle-income countries and have publicly available datasets. A majority of both cash and graduation evaluations reviewed take place in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The review examines the impacts of each study across economic outcomes, where measured, including income, consumption, assets, savings, and labor market participation. Non-economic outcomes including health, food security, psychosocial well-being, gender empowerment, and education are also examined, where measured.

Throughout the review, the term 'treatment' is used to describe groups receiving the intervention(s) being tested. The term 'control' is used to describe a comparison group that does not receive any intervention, commonly referred to as a 'pure control.' Instances where a study does not include a pure control will be noted in the text.

Cash transfers may be provided through graduation programs, alone or in combination with other interventions. As such, we review the evidence for cash transfer programs as a standalone intervention for lessons on improving the lives of women. The insights may also help inform the design and delivery of graduation programs for the purpose of improving gender outcomes. The synthesis includes 15 studies (10 programs[1]) assessing cash transfer programs for women. Only four studies (three programs) randomized the cash transfer recipient gender, so while we note differential outcomes by recipient gender when present, we are unable to draw conclusions about the impact of targeting. All outcomes were measured within a few months of the last cash transfer unless otherwise noted in the text. As such, we cannot report on whether the effects were sustained long-term for most of the evidence.

Elements of cash transfer programs such as the size of the transfer, distribution frequency, and duration varied across projects. Across all programs included in the review, the average total value of cash transfers was USD 314. A study in India that provided transfers for just six months fell far below that average at a total of USD 48 (Almås et al. 2020). The total value of transfers provided in South Africa and Zambia was significantly higher than the average at USD 720 and USD 528, respectively, given the longer programmatic duration (Kilburn et al. 2019; Bonilla et al. 2017; Hjelm et al. 2017; Natali et al. 2016).

For the purposes of this review, interventions that target women living in extreme poverty and can be understood as graduation programs were considered. This includes programs with at least three of the following five components: cash transfers (consumption support), asset transfers (cash or in-kind), access to savings and credit, training, and coaching. "Standard" graduation models referred to in the review are those that include all five components, while "adapted" models are those that add or remove components. Researchers have been exploring whether all components of a standard graduation program are necessary by testing the effects of removing or isolating interventions. The wide range of adaptations presented in the literature, from removing consumption support and assets to group-based livelihoods and the addition of psychosocial interventions, did not allow for direct comparison and conclusive findings; these studies also have limited long-term results beyond three years post-intervention.

The synthesis includes 22 studies (16 programs) assessing graduation programs for women.[2] For each outcome area, the review first presents evidence from standard programs, including long-term follow-ups from Banerjee et al. (2015).

Adaptations that test short to medium-term impacts of individual components of the graduation program or a pure cash component relative to a "standard" or "adapted" program are then presented. Given that few RCTs test a common graduation program against comparable treatments, the table below has been developed to guide the interpretation of results across studies.

While comprehensive cost data for both standard and adapted programs was limited, data for the values of consumption support and asset transfers were available, in nominal terms, for a majority of the studies reviewed. When provided across both approaches, consumption support was given in either weekly or monthly installments with monthly values averaging approximately USD 10. Across all studies reviewed, asset transfers averaged approximately USD 188 in value.[3]

Summary of Reviewed Studies

Intervention Study Type	Studies	Geographic Spread (# of studies)
Cash transfers	15 (10 programs)	South Asia (4); Sub-Saharan Africa (11)
Graduation	22 (16 programs)	South Asia (6); Middle East and North Africa (1); Sub-Saharan Africa (15)
"Standard" Graduation	7 (3 programs)	South Asia (6); Middle East and North Africa (1); Sub-Saharan Africa (15)
"Adapted" Graduation	15 (13 programs)	South Asia (6); Middle East and North Africa (1); Sub-Saharan Africa (15)

The table in the Appendix details all graduation and cash transfer studies in this review and outlines the specific components of the interventions.

The Impact of Cash Transfers on Economic Outcomes

KEY FINDINGS & RESEARCH GAPS

- The evidence does not indicate that providing cash transfers to women versus men differentially affects outcomes, though this is based on only four studies that randomized recipient gender.
- Evidence for women's economic empowerment is limited, as household-level measures may hide gender-based power dynamics within the household that impact expenditure decisions. Available evidence suggests that cash transfers provided to women improve economic outcomes in some contexts.
- More evidence is needed on how cash transfer programs can be designed and implemented to optimize economic outcomes for women.

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CONSUMPTION

Cash transfers provided to women lead to increases in household consumption in all but one of the included studies. Only two studies randomized the recipient gender and neither found a differential impact by the recipient.

Cash transfers randomized to either the husband or the wife in Kenya led to significant increases of 23 percent in overall household consumption with no significant difference between the two recipients (Haushofer et al. 2016). Three years after the transfers were completed, recipients of cash treatment increased consumption by 25 percent with no difference between genders (Haushofer et al. 2018). In India, cash transfers were provided to either the husband or wife but there was no treatment effect on household expenditure (Almås et al. 2020).

Female cash transfer recipients' daily per capita consumption was 25 percent higher than nonrecipients in Nigeria (Bastian et al. 2017). Evidence from the Child Grant Program in Zambia found that transfers provided to women increased monthly per capita expenditures by 10 ZMW, an increase of 20 percent (Hjelm et al. 2017). Total and food per capita household consumption increased significantly, between four and five percent, as a result of a conditional cash transfer for high school girls and their caregivers in South Africa (Kilburn et al. 2019). The transfer also significantly increased young women's economic well-being[4] by 0.15 points. In Bangladesh, both cash and cash combined with behavior change communication (BCC) led to significant increases in household wealth as measured by per capita consumption and assets, though increases were significantly larger for the cash combined with BCC (Roy et al. 2018). An unconditional cash transfer in Uganda had no impact on consumption (Sedlmayr et al. 2020).

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SAVINGS, INVESTMENT & PRODUCTION

Cash transfers provided to women support improved savings, investment, and production outcomes in some contexts. Evidence on the impact of recipient gender is inconclusive.

Three studies randomized recipient gender and found mixed effects for measures of savings, investment, and production. In Kenya, assets increased by USD 302 Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and monthly revenue increased by USD 16 PPP for cash transfer recipients with no difference by gender (Haushofer 2016). Three years after the transfer program ended, asset holdings and revenue increased by USD 416 PPP and USD 20 PPP, respectively, with no differential effect by recipient gender suggesting the transfers had a sustained benefit over time (Haushofer 2018). In India, cash transfers had no effect on total savings or income regardless of recipient gender (Almås et al. 2020). In Burkina Faso, cash transfers were randomized as conditional (linked to child school enrollment and preventive health check-ups) or unconditional and distributed to either women or men (Akresh et al. 2016). Cash transfers to fathers led to significantly more household investment in livestock and cash crops, with no differences by conditionality. There were no effects on the value of household assets or differences by recipient gender. More research is needed to understand how recipient targeting may impact economic outcomes.

Studies that did not randomize recipient gender found generally positive outcomes, with one exception. Evidence from the Child Grant Program in Zambia found that transfers provided to women increased women's probability of saving cash by 23 percentage points after 24 months and by 10 percentage points after 36 months (Natali et al. 2016).

Additionally, the transfers boosted diversification into non-farm enterprises traditionally operated by women, partly driven by increased savings generated by the cash transfer. The transfers also raised ownership of non-productive assets by an average of 0.7 items (Hjelm et al. 2017). In Nigeria, cash transfers significantly impacted female employment, increasing the likelihood of being economically active by 14 percent (Bastian et al. 2017). Women receiving cash transfers were 11 percent more likely to work in a non-farm business, bought twice as much raw material for their businesses, and experienced an 80 percent higher profit in their businesses. The value of animal stock and household assets was also significantly higher than non-recipients. An unconditional cash transfer in Uganda had no impact on assets or cash inflows (Sedlmayr et al. 2020).

The Impact of Cash Transfers on Non-Economic Outcomes

KEY FINDINGS & RESEARCH GAPS

- Cash transfers in combination with another intervention—such as behavior change communication (BCC)---may be more successful than cash alone in improving a range of outcomes, including violence reduction, female empowerment, and child growth and health. However, more evidence is needed as it is unknown how recipient gender interacts with these effects.
- Evidence for cash transfers' effect on women's empowerment is mixed but suggests targeting women alone is insufficient to reduce gender inequities. Complementary interventions, such as information and awareness-raising sessions, may be necessary to enhance the impact of cash transfers on women's empowerment outcomes in safe and sustainable ways.
- Cash transfers for women may improve psychosocial well-being in some contexts, but the evidence is mixed.
- Cash transfers that vary the recipient gender seem to have no impact on education outcomes, while conditional cash transfers linked to school enrollment outperformed unconditional transfers.

HEALTH & FOOD SECURITY

The gender of the recipient does not seem to have a significant influence on household health or food security outcomes while one study finds mixed evidence of a gender effect on child health and growth.

Researchers in India found no differential effect on the health or nutritional content of food expenditure (Almås et al. 2020). All cash transfer recipients, regardless of gender, had improved food security in Kenya while there was no difference in health outcomes (Haushofer et al. 2018). Recipient gender had mixed impacts in Burkina Faso (Akresh et al. 2016). Transfers given to mothers led to a significant reduction in child infections, while transfers to fathers resulted in increased children's height-for-age Z (HAZ) scores during a difficult agricultural production year.

The growth effects were only present at the midline, and there were no treatment or differential effects at the endline.

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Authors noted that culturally in Burkina Faso and West Africa more generally, fathers are seen as responsible for providing the family's food, which may lead them to prioritize more and better food with additional resources such as cash transfers.

Cash alone may be insufficient for improving child growth based on two studies that compared cash to a cash plus BCC treatment. It is unknown how recipient gender interacts with these effects given limited evidence.

Information on infant and child feeding practices, proper hygiene, and health practices may enable recipients to better leverage cash transfers for improved child growth. In Bangladesh, cash combined with BCC improved children's HAZ scores and reduced the prevalence of stunting while cash alone had no impact (Ahmed et al. 2019). Similar effects were found in Myanmar: Cash alone had no impact on child growth, while cash combined with BCC led to a 13.5 percent reduction in stunting (Field and Maffioli 2021). The only other study to assess child growth found that cash provided to fathers in Burkina Faso led to improved HAZ scores at the midline but there was no effect at the endline.

PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

Cash transfers for women may improve measures of psychosocial well-being in some contexts, but the evidence is mixed and draws on a variety of outcome measures.

Results from the one study that randomized recipient gender indicated that improvements in mental health were not significantly different between female and male recipients. In Kenya, female cash recipients experienced a large and significant increase of 0.44 SD on the index of psychological well-being,[5] driven by reductions in stress and increases in happiness, life satisfaction, and optimism (Haushofer et al. 2019). Women whose husbands received the transfer also experienced a significant 0.40 SD increase in the psychological well-being index. Three years after the program ended—while there were no significant differences between female and male recipient households—recipients of any cash transfer had increased psychological well-being (Haushofer et al. 2018). Cash transfers provided to women in Nigeria boosted self-reported happiness and life satisfaction, though this impact disappeared once transfers stopped (Bastian 2017). A conditional cash transfer for high school girls in South Africa found no average treatment effect but young women from the poorest households at baseline had greater hope (0.14 SD, $p<0.05$), and lower depressive symptoms (−0.12 SD, $p<0.10$) than those from the top half at baseline (Kilburn et al. (2019).

Three studies found no impacts. Cash alone had no impact on women's poverty-related stress in Nigeria (Cullen et al. 2020). In contrast to the adapted graduation programs, an unconditional cash transfer alone in Uganda had no impact on psychological outlook or any social outcomes (Sedlmayr et al. 2020). Evidence from the Child Grant Program in Zambia found no evidence that transfers provided to women affected their stress levels (Hjelm et al. 2017).

The mixed findings may be attributed to the various outcome measures used across studies. For instance, Haushofer et al. 2018 measured stress through cortisol levels in saliva, Hjelm et al. 2017 used the Perceived Stress Scale and Cullen et al. 2020 used an index measure of worries to assess stress. The lack of consistent outcome measures make comparative analysis difficult.

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Evidence for cash transfers' effect on women's empowerment is mixed but suggests targeting women alone is insufficient to reduce gender inequities. Programs should be designed with additional features beyond targeting to enable gender outcomes in addition to poverty reduction goals.

Researchers in India randomized unconditional cash transfers to women or men and found that targeting transfers to women had a significant and positive impact on their decision-making across all eight domains, suggesting women are more empowered (Almås et al., 2020). Evidence from the Child Grant Program in Zambia found that transfers provided to women resulted in women making more sole or joint decisions (across five out of nine domains). However, qualitative evidence from women revealed that if there was a disagreement, men—as the head of the household and primary decision-maker—would still have the final say (Bonilla et al. 2017). Thus, despite an increase in measures of decision-making, actual shifts in empowerment were constrained by existing gender norms. In Kenya, while female recipients experienced large and significant initial increases in female empowerment[6] (Haushofer et al., 2019), treatment effects were no longer detected three years after the transfers ceased (Haushofer et al., 2018).

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Cash transfers provided to women did not improve women's bargaining power in Nigeria, measured by comparing the amount she could give a close relative with and without consulting her husband (Bastian, 2017).

Cash transfers in combination with other interventions that indirectly address inequitable gender norms may be more effective in some contexts for empowerment and reducing violence.

Cash alone in Bangladesh had no impact on women's control over money, probability of working or intimate partner violence against women, but the combination of cash and BCC led to a 26 percent reduction in physical violence and significantly improved women's control over money and probability of working (Roy 2018). As key decision makers on food purchases, husbands and mothers-in-law were invited to participate in some of the BCC sessions—which focused on Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) and did not cover gender issues—to help create a supportive household environment for child nutrition and reduce restrictions on women's attendance. In Nigeria, cash delivered to women led to a six percentage point increase in sexual violence (Cullen et al. 2020). However, when cash was delivered to women alongside a community-level livelihoods program[7], sexual violence decreased by 13 percentage points relative to the control group. Neither intervention impacted emotional or physical violence. Evidence on mechanisms suggests increases in IPV were driven by husbands' backlash against the wife's cash transfer, which challenged traditional masculinity norms. However, in the community livelihoods program, because whole communities benefited from the intervention, cash given to women boosted their bargaining power without threatening masculinity norms. While neither of these programs explicitly addressed gender issues in the activities, they did help to facilitate a more supportive environment for women by engaging men and highlighting the benefits of cash for the entire household in Bangladesh, and providing benefits to the broader community in Nigeria.

Evidence from one study in Kenya suggests targeting women instead of men for transfers may be more effective in reducing violence.

Female recipient households experienced a significant reduction in physical and sexual violence by 0.26 SD and 0.22 SD, respectively, as measured by an index (Haushofer et al. 2019). Male recipient households experienced a significant reduction in physical violence, though the effect is smaller than what was observed for female recipient households and the treatment average. There was no effect on sexual violence.

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EDUCATION

Recipient gender seems to have no impact on education outcomes, while conditional cash transfers linked to school enrollment outperformed unconditional transfers.

Two studies compared conditional and unconditional cash transfers, with similar results. A two-year cash transfer in Burkina Faso improved school enrollment, attendance, and grade progression but had limited impacts on learning outcomes (Akresh et al. 2016). When comparing conditional to unconditional transfers, the conditionality led to a significant difference in increasing enrollment. There were no significant differences according to the gender of the recipient.

An unconditional cash transfer for young females in Malawi had no impact on education and learning outcomes in the short term or two years after the end of the program (Baird et al., 2019). The conditional cash transfer led to a 0.6-year increase in the highest grade completed among girls who were dropouts at the start of the intervention (baseline dropouts). There was no impact among girls enrolled in school at the start of the intervention (baseline schoolgirls). Both baseline dropouts and schoolgirls experienced improved learning outcomes (English reading comprehension, math, and cognitive skills) at the end of the program, but these did not translate into increases in scores on tests of basic labor market skills two years after the program.

Two studies compared the effects of recipient gender on education outcomes and found no significant differences. Three years after cash transfers ceased in Kenya, recipients of any cash treatment—regardless of gender—had significantly greater education outcomes (education expenditures and children in school) than nonrecipients (Haushofer et al. 2018). In Burkina Faso, cash transfers led to improved school enrollment, attendance, and grade progression regardless of recipient gender (Akresh et al. 2016).

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The Impact of Graduation Programs on Economic Outcomes

KEY FINDINGS & RESEARCH GAPS

- Consumption - The standard graduation model generates long-term increases in consumption. Adaptations to the model improve consumption in some contexts but the evidence is mixed with limited long-term results.

- Income - The standard model demonstrates significant and positive long-term effects on income and earnings. Adaptations to the graduation model that focus on lighter-touch economic components—including removing the asset transfer or consumption support and/or prioritizing financial training, savings support, and capital over other components—show positive and significant impacts on income. However, reducing the intervention to assets or savings only results in limited to no impact. While non-economic add-ons that target the household such as couples training and child well-being sensitization show promising impacts on incomes.

- Savings - The standard graduation model has produced significant impacts on savings behaviors and balances, though sustainable long-term impacts require further research. Adaptations to the graduation model show that impacts on savings outcomes can be achieved with fewer components. Further research on the isolated impacts of savings groups across contexts would bolster this evidence.

- Assets - The standard graduation model shows significant, long-term positive impacts on assets, though they tend to vary over time. Results also suggest that initial asset holdings may be an important targeting criteria to secure long-term gains, as well as targeted support to curb short-run asset-consumption tradeoffs. Adaptations to the graduation model show impacts on assets can still be achieved despite removing economic inputs, including consumption support and asset transfers. Non-economic additions including gender-sensitive family coaching and couples counseling also show positive impacts. More evidence is needed to determine the necessary components for sustainable impacts.

- Labor Market Participation - The standard graduation model shows significant impacts on labor market outcomes, including shifts to more stable and productive occupations for participants over time. However, further research on the long-term impacts of these programs in contexts outside of South Asia is needed. Adaptations to the graduation model, particularly those that streamline the intervention by removing a key component, show similar impacts on occupational choice and labor market participation.

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CONSUMPTION

The standard graduation model generates long-term increases in consumption.

In India, Banerjee et al. (2021) found per capita consumption for Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP) households in West Bengal to be USD 0.60 per day (0.6 standard deviations) higher than the control group at both years seven and ten.

Balboni et al. (2021) followed 6,000 recipients of the BRAC TUP program in Bangladesh over 11 years and found that households above a modest asset threshold at the start of the program experienced negative consumption outcomes until four years after the transfer, at which point consumption gains turned positive and significant. Analyzing only short-run consumption impacts in this context would have missed this important pattern and the likely tradeoffs being made between consumption and asset investment. Short-run impacts would have suggested that those below the threshold—given low initial asset holdings—would have outperformed those above. However, this does not hold long-term. This evidence suggests the presence of a poverty trap—an asset threshold above which households continue to accumulate wealth and take on better occupations on a pathway out of poverty and a reverse effect for those below the threshold. Based on these results, those most likely to escape poverty are willing to forego short-run consumption in favor of longer-term investments.

Adaptations to the graduation model improve consumption in some contexts, but the evidence is mixed, with limited long-term results.

Rahman et al. (2021) adapted the traditional grants-only transfer in the TUP Bangladesh program to instead include a hybrid model of grant and soft loan (with a relatively lower interest rate at approximately 20 percent compared to a standard 27 percent microfinance interest rate) and a two month grace period. The hybrid approach was randomized to relatively less vulnerable households than the traditional grants-only program, which targets ultra-poor households. The hybrid approach led to an increase of 14 percent and 40 percent in food and non-food expenditures, respectively, relative to a control group. Bandiera et al. (2017) evaluated the grants-only TUP model and found no significant short-run effects (after two years) on consumption expenditure but results did turn positive at the four-year mark. This approach demonstrates the importance of effective targeting mechanisms to calibrate the intensity and cost of support provided.

The Women for Women International program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) generated considerable increases in consumption of nondurable and durable goods as a result of the full program, even without the asset transfer. Non-food expenditures increased by 13 percent after year one and by 20 percent two years after the program. Food consumption increased by 5 percent and 15 percent during the same periods (Angelucci et al. 2022).

In Uganda, the AVSI Foundation's Graduating to Resilience (G2R) program was implemented in both refugee and host communities and was designed to test the performance and cost-effectiveness of three variations to the program: 1) the standard program with weekly hour-long individual coaching sessions, later reduced to bi-weekly sessions; 2) the standard program with weekly two-hour long group coaching sessions; and 3) the standard program with individual coaching and no asset transfer. Average monthly consumption per capita increased by 18 percent for households that did not receive an asset and 25 percent for those that received the standard program with an asset and either individual or group coaching. There were small and statistically insignificant differences between the impacts of individual and group coaching across welfare indicators, however, the group model was implemented at a 13 percent lower cost and therefore outperforms individual coaching in a cost-benefit analysis. Across all outcomes measured in this study, treatment effects were consistently larger and statistically significant for households that received the standard program with either coaching modality compared to households that did not receive an asset transfer (Brune et al. 2022).

A government-led graduation program in Zambia adopted the traditional graduation model in an attempt to isolate the impacts of the financial and human capital components. The evaluation tested three treatments: 1) the full package of support (training and mentorship in addition to financial capital), with half of this arm randomized to receive consumption support; 2) a financial capital arm (cash asset transfer and access to savings groups only); and 3) a human capital arm (training and follow-up mentoring only). The full program arm and financial capital arm produced similar results, significantly increasing consumption by 20 percent on an annualized basis, 16-18 months after the first grant disbursement.

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Both arms also increased food and non-food consumption with a 32 percent decrease in skipping meals. In addition to the influx of capital from the grant funds, these effects appear to be driven by an increase in both income-generating activity and business profits from petty trade and agriculture. Results show no effect of the randomized consumption support on top of the full package for any of the main outcomes measured. Similarly, the human capital arm shows no consumption benefits compared to the control (Botea et al. 2021).

A lighter-touch graduation model was tested in Ethiopia with participants of the government's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP4)[8]. The Strengthen PSNP4 Institutions and Resilience (SPIR) program provided either a bundle of productive assets—in cash or the equivalent value in poultry—as well as training and access to savings groups, or only the training and savings groups, with no productive asset. No coaching was provided, though a variation of core[9] or enhanced nutritional supports[10] were provided to recipients of both models. At three years post-baseline, neither program produced impacts on consumption and household food security (Leight et al. 2023).

In Ghana, researchers tested whether a productive asset or access to savings groups alone could generate similar impacts to those seen from the full standard program. The evaluation included the standard Graduating from Ultra-Poverty (GUP) program with and without savings groups, a savings group-only (SOUP) arm with a 50 percent match, an asset-only (AO) arm, and a control group. The savings-only arm showed positive and significant short-run impacts on consumption and financial inclusion; however, no substantial changes were observed over the long run. The asset-only arm showed no effect across the five indices of economic well-being (asset value, consumption, financial inclusion, food security, and income) at both two years and three years. GUP with and without savings demonstrated long-run consumption effects, however, the difference was not statistically significant (Banerjee et al. 2022).

In Uganda, Blattman et al. (2016) evaluated the WINGS program in two phases. The first phase tested their adapted model, which removed consumption support, against a version that also encouraged the formation of group Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs). Phase two of the evaluation tested varying the frequency of supervisory visits or coaching with three treatment arms (1) no supervisory visits; (2) one to two supervisory visits, focused primarily on commitment to invest; or (3) all five supervisory visits to provide investment support as well as advice on business management. In the first phase, the adapted program (without consumption support or group savings encouragement) resulted in a rise in household consumption by almost a third, to roughly USD 1.25 PPP per day compared to a control group. Over the life of the program, this impact corresponded to a USD 465 PPP increase in nondurable consumption—roughly a quarter of the USD 1,946 PPP standard program cost, a modest return on investment. In the second phase, both supervisory arms tested did not result in significant increases in non-durable consumption or durable assets. Results from the Sedlmayr et al. (2020) study in Uganda show impacts on consumption for the Village Enterprise Microenterprise Program, which also removed consumption support and tested the model with and without a savings component. These findings are driven predominantly by gains in food and beverage consumption, while the remaining are attributed to gains in cash income.

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INCOME

The standard graduation model shows positive and significant long-term impacts on income and earnings for participant households.

In India, Banerjee et al. (2021) found positive effects on income at three, seven and 10 years. TUP households earned 0.17 SD more than the control group by year three, growing to 0.3 SD by year seven and sustaining until year 10, at which point the average income in the control group was USD 497 compared to USD 680 in TUP households. In Bangladesh, Balboni et al. (2021) found an initial relative decline in net earnings for ultra-poor households in BRAC's program as they re-invest more of their income directly into their asset holdings. However, after seven years, their earnings increased significantly, driven almost entirely by net earnings in self-employed work.

Adaptations to the graduation model that focus on lighter-touch economic components— including removing the asset transfer or consumption support and/or prioritizing financial training, savings support, and capital over other components—show positive and significant impacts on income. However, reducing the intervention to assets or savings only results in limited to no impact. Non-economic add-ons that target the household—such as couples training and child well-being sensitization—show promising impacts on incomes.

Streamlining economic components, either by removing consumption support or assets or providing capital, training, and savings without additional support shows positive impacts on incomes when compared to the standard model. BRAC's hybrid model of soft loans and grants in Bangladesh increased per capita income by 19 percent and the value of productive assets by 135 percent compared to the control (Rahman et al. 2021). These findings are consistent with results from the grants-only model which found that women's earnings increase by 21 percent after four years (Bandiera et al. 2017). In Uganda, Blattman et al. (2016) found that the program arm that encouraged Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA) formation doubled the treatment effect on earnings, with the income index 0.15 standard deviations greater, compared to those who received the standard package. AVSI's program in Uganda resulted in an increase in average monthly incomes of USD 124 PPP for recipients who did not receive an asset and USD 136 PPP for those who received an asset and either individual or group-based coaching, compared to a pure control group that did not receive any intervention, averaging USD 94 PPP per month (Brune et al. 2022).

In Zambia, the full package and financial capital arm had nearly equivalent impacts resulting in a 70 percent increase in business profits and a 50 percent increase in engagement in income-generating activities. While most households had already participated in agriculture, there was a 50 percent increase in selling crops for profit and a 60 percent increase in crop incomes. In this context, a streamlined package of financial capital and training alone generated substantial impacts on income, comparable to the full package (Botea et al. 2021). In Kenya, Gobin et al. (2016) evaluated a group-based enterprise model, without consumption support, and found that after one year the model increased income by 34 percent for participant households. Women for Women International's adapted model in DRC removed the asset transfer, yet still found increased earnings and business costs. Higher business costs suggest investment and expansion of business activities and is coupled with an increase in profits and a rise in net earnings by nearly 20 percent. Angelucci et al. (2022) also found spillovers within the household, as partner's incomes increased by 62 percent, even larger than the 19 percent increase seen for female participants. The evaluation finds that increases in partners' incomes occurred in households that also experienced a reduction in intimate partner violence, indicating that either spousal cooperation may have increased as a result of the program or female participants transferred monetary resources to their partners in exchange for a decrease in violence.

When the intervention is reduced to a single component, impacts tend to diminish. In Ghana, the GUP program, with or without savings, had persistent income effects at 0.22 standard deviations. The asset-only arm showed no impact on any measures of economic well-being, while the savings-only (SOUP) arm showed some short-term economic impacts though benefits did not persist in the long run absent a savings intervention (Banerjee et al. 2022).

Non-economic adaptations and additions targeting the household show promising impacts on income. In Malawi, Bedi et al. (2022) evaluated a gender-targeted graduation program and an added couples training component (Umodzi). They found that total income was significantly higher for all graduation households, with those that received couples training having the highest increase—55 percent higher than the comparison group that did not receive any intervention. This was driven largely by business income, marginally outperforming both female and male-targeted households, which showed similar impacts on household income and consumption.

In Burkina Faso, removing consumption support and adding family-based coaching improved income effects when compared to the standard approach. Trickle Up's Economic Strengthening Program model removed consumption support but tested the addition of a monthly gender-sensitive family coaching component aimed at all household members. The Economic Strengthening Plus child wellbeing sensitization increased investment and income for those engaged in all IGAs at 12 and 24 months compared to the control. Investment increases were highest after year one, at 300 percent, reducing to 100 percent at year two. Returns on those investments were highest and income effects were strongest for women in the Economic Strengthening Plus arm compared to the standard arm, as returns from livestock and crop enterprises continued to grow for those households during this follow-up period (Karmili et al. 2020).

In Niger, Bossuroy et al. (2022) tested capital and psychosocial constraints within a multidimensional government program targeting ultra-poor women and found differential impacts on livestock and agricultural incomes. All participating households received monthly government cash transfers and a core set of components including savings groups, coaching, and entrepreneurship training. The three arms of the evaluation included a 'Capital' arm which added a lump-sum cash grant; a 'Psychosocial' arm with added life-skills training and community sensitization on aspirations and social norms; and a 'Full' arm combining both cash and psychosocial interventions. All arms resulted in increases in total household and beneficiary revenues and incomes both at the midpoint and endpoint. These outcomes were largely driven by livestock and agricultural revenues with fewer contributions from off-farm businesses. Harvest revenues showed greater increases for those in the Psychosocial arm (USD 91.1) compared to the full arm (USD 80) and Capital arm (USD 31.55). This points to the use of cash grants to accumulate livestock, while the psychosocial components influenced agricultural activity and revenues. Cash grants also appeared to have a greater impact on investments in a recipient's earnings, while the psychosocial interventions showed greater indirect impacts and spillovers to both beneficiary and household revenues (Bossuroy et al. 2022).

In Ethiopia, the SPIR program found that participants who received a cash or poultry asset transfer experienced small, positive impacts on agricultural incomes. No other impacts on incomes were found across treatment arms (Leight et al. 2023).

SAVINGS

The standard graduation model has produced significant impacts on savings behaviors and balances, though sustainable long-term impacts require further research.

In Afghanistan, an RCT of the standard Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP) graduation model implemented by the Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA) saw savings increase by 2,195 percent or USD 106 PPP from USD 5 PPP and a decrease in household indebtedness by 53 percent (USD 733 PPP) largely as a result of increased income from the livestock asset transfer and increases in labor market participation (Bedoya et al. 2019). In India, at 10 years post-intervention impacts on savings were positive and economically meaningful at 0.12 SD, although not statistically significant (Banerjee et al. (2021).

Adaptations to the graduation model show that impacts on savings outcomes can be achieved with fewer components, though further research on the specific impacts of savings groups across contexts would bolster this evidence.

Graduation households, both from the hybrid model and the grants-only approach, in Bangladesh, produced statistically significant effects on savings: households were 22 percentage points more likely to have savings compared to the control, and the value of that savings increased to 73 percent of the control group mean at follow-up. The program also increased outstanding loan balances from BRAC microfinance (74 percent of participants after repayment of the soft loan) at twice the rate of control households, increasing financial inclusion among the target population without decreasing loans from other sources. A majority (95 percent) of the soft loans were used to purchase productive assets (Rahman et al. 2021).

In Zambia, the full package and financial capital arm resulted in substantial increases in savings, more than doubling control values Botea, et al. (2021). In Niger, all three arms, full package, psychosocial, and capital, resulted in increases in both savings group participation and amount saved at endline ranging from USD 20, USD 11, and USD 15, respectively (Bossuroy et al. 2022).

The Women for Women International program in the DRC adapted the intervention by removing the asset transfer and still found significant impacts on women's savings. The number of women both engaged in savings groups and having monetary savings doubled as a result of the program. While savings balances nearly tripled increasing from USD 4.8 to USD 13.0. The program also showed impacts on risk tolerance, increasing by ten percent among treated households (Angelucci et al. 2022).

In Kenya, Gobin et al. (2016) found the group-based enterprise model, without consumption support, resulted in positive and statistically significant impacts on savings at 131 percent higher compared to the control, one year after the program. In Uganda, Blattman et al. (2016) found that savings among WINGS participants more than tripled, increasing by UGX 107,344 (USD 54). However, the program overall had little impact on participant's broader financial autonomy. In Ethiopia, the lighter-touch set of interventions– providing savings groups and training only–did produce a significant increase in savings at the endline (three years after the baseline), but no impact on other indicators of economic welfare. When provided an asset, either cash or poultry, households had large positive effects on financial inclusion, including an increase in the probability of credit access by 8-10 percentage points and a probability of reporting any savings increasing by more than 30 percentage points (Leight et al. 2023).

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In Ghana, after two years, GUP plus savings group households saved USD 12.9 more than the sum of the independent arms of GUP with no savings and savings only (SOUP) with no savings match. SOUP households also experienced short-term impacts on savings balances compared to the control, though effects did not persist after the savings intervention ended or in long-term follow-ups. This is an indication of the importance of the savings collection platform. However, researchers also found an income effect, given that GUP households were able to double their savings balances in the absence of a formal savings intervention (Banerjee et al. 2022).

Sedlmayr et al. (2020) found that savings groups alone in Uganda did little to encourage savings; however, they did spark microenterprise activity and increase social capital.

Non-economic add-ons to the program show promising impacts. In Burkina Faso, Karmili et al. (2020) found that women in both the standard and plus treatment arms had greater savings after 12 and 24 months of the program, relative to women in the control groups with the plus treatment outperforming the standard arm by between 2,246 and 12,204 CFA at 12 and 24 months, respectively. However, overall household financial security was significantly stronger for participants who received additional gender and child-sensitive family coaching compared to the standard Economic Strengthening Program package. In Malawi, Bedi et al. (2022) found that the female-targeted standard graduation package in addition to couples training outperformed the female- or male-targeted standard package alone (no couples training). Households who received the female-targeted package and couples training had the greatest monthly savings gains at five and 17 months.

ASSETS

The standard graduation models show significant, long-term positive impacts on assets though they tend to vary over time. Results also suggest that baseline asset holdings may be an important targeting criteria to secure long-term gains, as well as targeted support to curb short-run asset-consumption tradeoffs.

In India, Banerjee et al. (2021) found treatment effects on assets remained positive at the 10-year mark (0.35 SD), but smaller than in year seven, with results linked to graduation households diversifying income sources–out of livestock and on-farm micro-enterprises and into labor income.

The poverty trap study by Balboni et al. (2021) in Bangladesh found that the size of the transfer in this context impacted further asset accumulation. Households initially above the threshold experienced a large divergence over time and were able to diversify assets toward land and more productive activities compared to those below the threshold. Individuals for whom the transfer was not large enough to push them past the threshold lost 16 percent of their asset values in four years while those above the threshold accumulated 14 percent. Younger recipients also tended to forego consumption in the short term in order to invest in asset accumulation, resulting in significant differences in asset holdings over time.

Chowdhury et al. (2021) conducted a study evaluating the varying outcomes of the standard BRAC Bangladesh program and found positive and significant effects on wealth accumulation and heterogeneity in impacts on assets with higher asset gains demonstrating an opposite consumption effect. The findings suggest that baseline assets, including productive, non-productive, and savings balances, and the role of women in household decision-making are important factors influencing program effectiveness. Targeting households with specific asset ownership criteria and customizing coaching could improve program outcomes.

Adaptations to the graduation model show impact on assets can still be achieved despite removing economic inputs, including consumption support and asset transfers. However non-economic additions—including gender-sensitive family coaching and couples counseling—also show positive impacts. More evidence is needed to determine the necessary components for sustainable impacts.

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A program testing a hybrid grant and soft-loan asset disbursement in Bangladesh significantly increased land ownership—rising 70 percent relative to the control group mean at one year after the two-year intervention cycle—as well as substantial positive effects on the value of livestock and poultry (Rahman et al. 2021), which is in line with effects seen in the grants-only model.

In Zambia, the full and the financial capital arms resulted in substantial increases in assets, with livestock assets showing the most significant increase, driven primarily by pigs (60 percent increase) and goats (200 percent increase) compared to the control group. The human capital arm alone had no discernible benefits compared to control. Similarly, in Niger, households in the capital and full arms produced marginally larger investments and asset values in livestock compared to those in the psychosocial arm Bossuroy et al. (2022).

In DRC, asset and livestock holding indices, including number of durable assets and livestock, increased by 0.16 and 0.12 SD at endline and 0.06 SD and 0.22 SD at follow-up, respectively. These impacts persisted despite the absence of a large asset or capital infusion Angelucci et al. (2022). In Uganda, Brune et al. (2022) similarly tested removing the asset and found the average value of productive assets was between USD PPP $1,105 for households that received assets and USD 819 PPP for those that did not, which outperformed control households with average values of USD 585 PPP. In Kenya, Gobin et al. (2016) found that removing the consumption support from the program still produced an increase in asset accumulation in consumer durables at 29 percent and productive assets at 12.5 percent.

Consumption support was also removed in Burkina Faso, where Karmili et al. (2020) found that women in the standard Economic Strengthening Program arm owned significantly more durable assets—an approximate 300 percent increase—after 12 and 24 months, compared to women in the control group. They also had significantly more productive assets in the form of livestock both in number and value. Women in the Economic Strengthening Plus arm, which included gender-sensitive family coaching, reported a similarly large increase in durable assets after 12 months. They also enjoyed increases in the other assets, the magnitudes of which were greater compared to the women participating in the standard arm after 24 months. In Malawi, all graduation households across treatment arms increased the value of their livestock by between 50 percent and 120 percent relative to the control group, with male-targeted and couples-training (Umodzi) households having the largest gains. Overall asset values also increased for all groups at five and 17 months, increasing at least 18 percent above the control group average. Umodzi households showed the largest gains, outperforming female-targeted households (Bedi et al. 2022).

In Ghana, researchers tested the impacts of a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) intervention compared to and in combination with the standard graduation program and a one-time lump-sum transfer. Combining graduation with CBT led to an increase in asset wealth and significant shifts in economic activities towards livestock management. However, there was limited evidence of impact on any other economic outcomes, and these results do not hold three to four years post-intervention (Barker et al. 2023).

LABOR

The standard graduation model shows significant impacts on labor market outcomes, including shifts to more stable and productive occupations for participants over time. However, further research on the long-term impacts of these programs in contexts outside of South Asia is needed.

Long-run impacts of the Bangladesh program, after 11 years, reveal the presence of a poverty trap and asset threshold above which women increase their total hours worked, have greater occupational choice, and engage in more productive labor market activities. Balboni et al. (2021) found that 96 percent of poor households in this context are forced to misallocate their labor, confuting the assumption that people living in poverty are somehow innately unable to engage in better forms of labor, but rather people living in poverty are trapped in low return occupations due to a lack of assets. The monetary implication of this misallocation is 15 times larger than the one-time "big push" required to move households over the poverty threshold.

Long-run impacts of the standard model in India demonstrated a similar pattern and shift from livestock businesses to non-farm micro-enterprises four years post-intervention. There is also a subsequent shift at year 10 to economic migration, a path that often requires considerable upfront investments for households (Banerjee et al. (2021)). The study did not disaggregate migrant household members by gender.

In Afghanistan, Bedoya et al. (2019) found that the primary female participant increased their total time spent working by 55 percent as a result of the standard model, driven predominantly by increases in livestock-related self-employment activities. This equated to approximately 2.3 additional days per month compared to women in the control group who worked only 4.2 days per month.

Adaptations to the graduation model, particularly those that streamline the intervention by removing a key component, show similar impacts on occupational choice and labor market participation.

The hybrid grants and soft-loan approach in Bangladesh increased the labor supply of working-age women by 0.48 hours per day, representing 50 percent of the control group mean one year after the two-year intervention cycle. This increase was driven primarily through time devoted to livestock and poultry rearing. A similar outcome was observed for men of working age (Rahman et al. 2021).

In Zambia, recipients of both the full package and financial capital arm reduced time spent on petty trade labor, increased time engaged in operating non-farm businesses by seven percent, and increased the number of income-generating activities by 27 percentage points, a 50 percent increase compared to the control group mean. There were no effects seen for the human capital arm (Botea et al. 2021).

In Uganda, the WINGS program (without group savings encouragement) increased non-farm business by 80 percent compared to 39 percent in the control. It also increased employment from 15 to 24 hours per week. In phase two of the study, two supervisory visits increased the likelihood of business operations by 19 percent, and hours of non-farm work per week by 43 percent or 2.2 hours. Adding three additional visits did not result in statistically significant increases in either domain (Blattman et al. 2016).

Angelucci at al. (2022) studied the adapted graduation model in the DRC, which removed the asset, and found a 0.08SD increase in the employment and finances index[11] after one year and sustained at two years post-intervention. Self-employment increased from 12 to 19 percent as a result of a shift away from wage employment. The probability of working for pay or profit increased by 10 percent and—for those already employed—the probability of being self-employed outside of agriculture jumped from 18 to 30 percent. Similarly, hours of work increased by 19 percent or 1.55 hours per week.

In Kenya, the REAP program removed consumption support and employed a group enterprise model. This approach increased business activity, leveraging idle resources, while not diverting all resources from other forms of income. The evidence shows a significant shift in time use from leisure and household activity into non-farm enterprise activity. A majority (95 percent) of enterprises opted to engage in petty trade businesses Gobin et al. (2016).

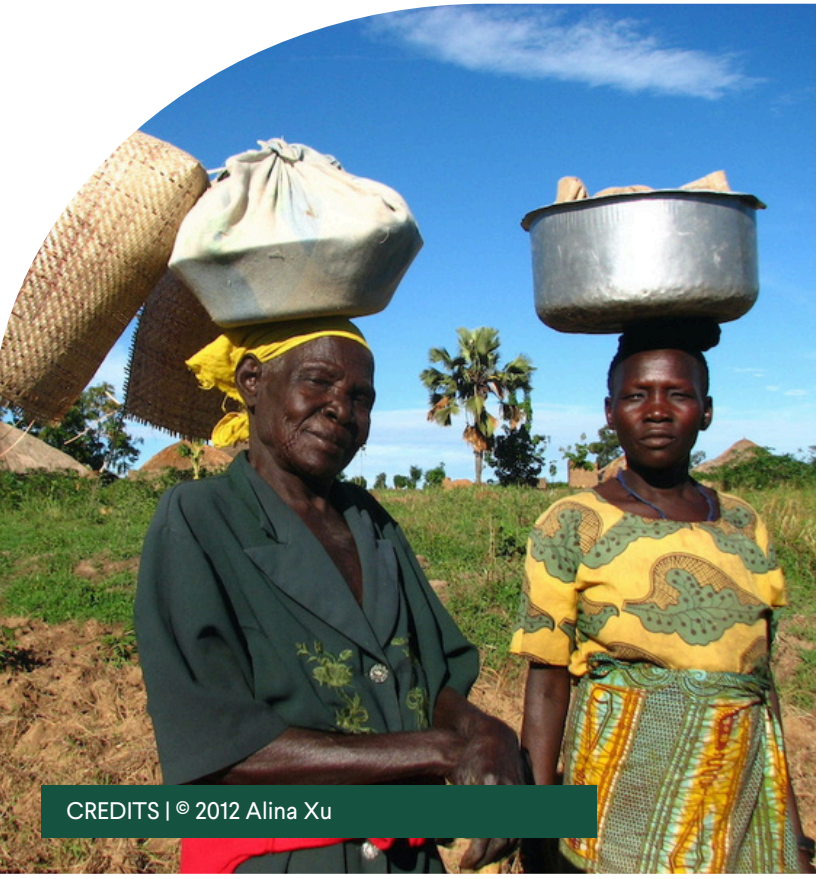
However, Karmili et al. (2020) found no statistically significant changes in labor services for participants in Burkina Faso who received either the full package that removed the consumption support, or the plus package that added child wellbeing sensitization at either the one-year or two-year follow-up.

The Impact of Graduation Programs on Non-Economic Outcomes

KEY FINDINGS & RESEARCH GAPS

- Food Security - The standard graduation model shows significant and lasting impacts on food security in South Asia and promising evidence of impact on infant and young child feeding practices. Adaptations to the graduation model increase impacts on food security but largely do not outperform the standard model.

- Health - The standard graduation model shows limited impacts on health outcomes for participants, while positive child health and nutrition outcomes have emerged in some settings. Adaptations to the graduation model have not resulted in meaningful impacts on health across a range of outcomes. Further research is needed on the integration of health-focused interventions into the approach and the use of common measures.



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- Psychosocial Wellbeing - Among standard graduation models, positive impacts can be seen across a range of psychosocial and mental health outcomes, though long-run evidence is mixed. Adaptations show sustained impacts on psychosocial well-being in the short run. However, long-term evidence is limited and results diminish when reduced to mere transfers alone.

- Female Empowerment - For the standard graduation model, rigorous evaluations on measures of female empowerment in non-economic domains—including agency, autonomy, and political participation—show modest short-run impacts that are difficult to sustain. While the evidence base remains limited, adapted graduation programs that have tested adding gender-intentional components show promising initial results on measures of female empowerment. However, more research is needed on components targeting social norms change and men's engagement.

- Education - While standard graduation programs show some effects on school enrollment—especially in settings with relatively low enrollment rates—there is no evidence of improvements in learning outcomes. Similar outcomes can be seen in adapted graduation programs—with modest spillover effects on enrollment—though there is no clear avenue for impact. These results are consistent with evidence from educational interventions that attendance does not necessarily translate into learning outcomes.

FOOD SECURITY

The standard graduation model shows significant and lasting impacts on food security in South Asia and promising evidence of impacts on infant and young child feeding practices.

Long-term follow-up of the TUP program in India showed strong evidence for improved food security, measured by every household member getting enough to eat every day. Treatment effects increased until year seven and stabilized between years seven and 10. The control group also experienced significant improvements in this same measure by the ten-year mark, increasing from 10 percent at baseline to 70 percent (Banerjee et al. 2021).

Raza et al. (2018) conducted a study on the effects of the TUP program in Bangladesh and found that overall food security increased for TUP participants. However, no spillovers were observed in Other-Poor (OP)—those that were eligible but not selected for the program—or Non-Poor (NP) households. Raza et al. (2018) also discovered considerable impacts on infant and young child feeding practices in treated households. Measures of food intake, such as the probability of securing at least two meals every day, increased from 74 percent to 90 percent in Ultra-Poor (UP) households. These effects were also observed in UP children born after the start and before the end of the program, suggesting possible long-run impacts. Furthermore, the study observed increases in improved sanitation and exclusive breastfeeding practices, noting exclusive breastfeeding extending up to 180 days in comparison to 107 days in control communities, and a spillover effect of 53 days in OP households.

The standard TUP program in Afghanistan led to a 0.49 SD increase in the food security index[12] (Bedoya et al. 2019).

Adaptations to the graduation model show increased impacts on food security but largely do not outperform the standard model.

In Zambia, the full package and financial capital arm significantly increased food security, resulting in a 32 percent decrease in skipping meals, higher frequencies of consuming two or more meals a day, and a reduced reliance on borrowing food. However, the human capital arm only had marginal effects on meals (Botea, et al. 2021). In Niger, Bossuroy et al (2022) found that all three treatment arms (capital, psychosocial and full) significantly improved household consumption and food security although the full arm had the greatest impact.

In Kenya, BOMA's REAP approach, which removed consumption support as part of the standard package and employed a group-based business model, resulted in a positive and statistically significant 21.5 percent increase in food security for treated households (Gobin et al. 2016).

Results from both an annual food security index and the recent food security index in Malawi indicated positive outcomes across all treated households. Graduation households had between 14-16 percent higher annual food security index scores than control households at five months post-intervention. At 17 months, female-treated households, regardless of gender training, maintained an index score 14 percent higher, while male-targeted households had a score only 7 percent higher. Recent food security scores also showed that all graduation households outperformed control households, with scores 22-24 percent higher at five months and 17 percent higher at 17 months post-program. These results demonstrated a significant impact with no discernible differences across arms (Bedi et al. 2022).
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Similar results were found in Uganda, where food security increased among all graduation households in the AVSI program, with food security index[13] scores averaging 0.51 standard deviations higher for the group that did not receive an asset and 0.63 SDs higher for those that did compared to the control group with an average normalized to zero (Brune et al. 2022).

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HEALTH

The standard graduation models show impacts on health outcomes for participants, with positive child health and nutrition outcomes in some settings.

Early results from the TUP program in India in 2016 found significant impacts on the probability that a family member had not missed any work days during the past month due to illness. Individual's self-reported perception of their physical health also increased by six percent (Banerjee et al. 2016). At ten years, the results showed that individuals in the treatment group had Activities of Daily Living Scores[14] more than seven percent larger than those in the control group. Banerjee et al. (2021) found an overall positive trend on the health index, having increased from 0.06 SD at 18 months, to 0.13 SD at year seven, and reaching 0.19 SD by year ten.

Raza et al. (2018) conducted an additional study on the standard BRAC TUP approach in Bangladesh, specifically examining impacts on child undernutrition. Their evaluation discovered significant impacts on ultra-poor children's nutritional status, showing marked improvements in weight-for-height z-scores (WHZ), leading to substantial reductions in the probability of being wasted by 12.5 percentage points. Younger children experienced more significant improvement in WHZ but no additional differential impacts were detected among children studied or their parents. Researchers believe that the absence of significant gender-related heterogeneity may be indicative of the success of social awareness programs, including the TUP, aimed at addressing gender biases.

The standard TUP program in Afghanistan also recorded improvements in child health, exhibiting a 16 percent reduction in the rate of diarrhea in the oldest child under five over a two-week recall period (Bedoya et al. 2019).

Adaptations to the graduation model have not resulted in meaningful impacts on health across a range of outcomes. Further research is needed on the integration of health-focused interventions and the use of common measures.

In Ethiopia, researchers tested the addition of either a core or enhanced nutrition model to a lighter-touch graduation program or the full program with a cash or poultry asset transfer. The enhanced nutrition intervention increased interactions with healthcare workers by 14 percentage points compared to the control group, as well as participation in community health activities by 30 percentage points. Maternal nutritional knowledge also increased. However, neither the core nor enhanced nutrition models resulted in significant improvements in child dietary diversity or anthropometric outcomes. With a notable exception, the cash asset transfer combined with the enhanced nutrition intervention did reduce childhood stunting and served a protective function at a time when child anthropometrics experienced a marked decline across the region (Alderman et al. 2023).

In Uganda, the WINGS program found little evidence of impacts on physical health, mental health, or domestic violence, though a statistically significant 0.5 percent decrease in mortality was found (Blattman et al. 2016).

The Village Enterprise Microenterprise Program in Uganda found no meaningful impacts on health-related outcomes (Sedlmayr et al. 2020).

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PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

Among standard graduation models, positive impacts can be seen across a range of psychosocial and mental health outcomes, though long-run results show variations over time.

In India, an evaluation of the standard TUP program by Banerjee et al. (2021) found that mental health improved by 0.1 SD for graduation households at 18 months, grew to 0.25 SD by year seven, and remained at this level until year ten. The seven-year follow-up study found that individuals' self-reported happiness was ten percent higher among TUP households relative to control and those households were less likely to have experienced prolonged periods of worry. Additionally, the stress index for graduation households at year ten was 0.16 SDs higher (indicating lower stress) for households. Interestingly, these mental health effects were significantly positive at 18 months, and reverted to zero in year seven, suggestive of what researchers call a possible "happiness treadmill". However, at year ten, they are all positive again and surpass results from 18 months. In Afghanistan, the standard approach resulted in an increase in the index of psychological well-being by 0.58 SD and 0.26 SD for the primary woman and man in graduation households, respectively, one year after the program (Bedoya et al. 2019).

Adaptations show robust impacts on psychosocial well-being in the short run, however, long-term evidence is limited and results diminish when reduced to mere transfers alone.

In Niger, results showed widespread improvements across dimensions of psychological and social well-being for all arms. Women's psychological well-being, including mental health, self-efficacy, and future expectations improved for all arms at midline and endline (18 months after the cash grants). At midline, the effects of the Capital and Psychosocial arms tended to be lower than those of the Full arm across the measures of psychological well-being, including mental health. However, results showed a shift over time. At the endline, there was no evidence of a difference between the Psychosocial arm and the Full arm, demonstrating the importance of long-term measures of mental health (Bossuroy et al. 2022). In Zambia, the full program resulted in substantial improvements in perceived levels of happiness and a 0.18 SD increase in the mental health index– a measure of symptoms including depression and exhaustion. The financial capital arm showed similar impacts, if not marginally larger. The human capital arm showed no effects on psychosocial well-being (Botea et al. 2021).

In Uganda, the full program implemented by Village Enterprise, which removed consumption support, resulted in gains in psychological outlook and social conditions within participant communities. Combining transfers with a light-touch behavioral and mindset intervention also improved psychological outlooks (Sedlmayr et al. 2020).

The AVSI Graduating to Resilience program in Uganda found that measures of subjective well-being[15] increased among all treatment groups. These impacts were between 0.44 SD higher for households that did not receive an asset to 0.62 SD higher for households that received the standard program with group or individual coaching, compared to control households among which the average was normalized to zero (Brune et al. 2022).

In the DRC, Angelucci et al. (2022) found positive but limited results on health outcomes with effects at 0.04 SD, sustained at two years. These measures included self-reported scales for mental health including generalized anxiety and depression, as well as a set of questions about Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) to measure physical health. The absence of large or statistically significant health improvements despite large increases in consumption and expenditures suggests that other features of the program may have offset the benefits of improved nutrition.

In Burkina Faso, Trickle Up's model removed consumption support but tested the addition of a monthly gender-sensitive family coaching component aimed at all household members. This included coaching on normative gender beliefs, women's role in the family, and context-specific child protection issues including schooling, trafficking, and forced and early marriage. The Economic Strengthening Plus gender-sensitive coaching treatment showed positive impacts on children's emotional well-being and reduced depressive symptoms at 12 and 24 months compared to the Economic Strengthening and control households. There was also a significant reduction in trauma symptoms among children from Economic Strengthening Plus households and smaller but significant effects on self-esteem compared to the control at 12 and 24 months. Results showed a reduction in poverty-induced parental stress, decreased use of harsh discipline practices, and reductions in children's exposure to hazardous labor and violence at work and home.

This suggests that integrating a psychosocial intervention with economic empowerment initiatives could substantially impact child well-being (Ismayilovaa et al. 2018).

In Ghana, GUP without savings showed limited positive impacts on the mental health index—composed of economic satisfaction, measures of worry and sadness, crying, lack of appetite, disengaging from work, and feeling restless—and no impact on stress or happiness for households in the program compared to control, while the asset-only arm showed a negative impact on mental health (Banerjee et al. 2022). In Ghana, researchers also tested the impacts of a CBT intervention administered over a 12-week period by non-specialist providers. Short-run results, one to three months later, showed a reduction in psychological distress, improvements in self-reported mental and physical health, increases in cognitive and socioemotional skills, and improvements in self-perception of economic status. However, these results did not hold three to four years post-intervention (Barker et al. 2023).

In Uganda, despite gains in social capital, investment, and risk pooling, the added encouragement around community savings had little impact on the mental health of treated participants (Blattman et al. 2016). Similarly, the Feed the Future Nigeria Livelihoods Project (FNLP) tested a community-level livelihoods program, which included access to agricultural extension services, input vouchers, business and financial literacy skills training, livelihoods mentoring, and improved access to financial services alone and in combination with cash transfers to women. Researchers found no impact from either intervention on reduced poverty-related stress (Cullen et al. 2022). In Malawi, Bedi et al. (2022) were also unable to find differential effects on female well-being, both psychosocial and social, at either five or 17 months post-program intervention. However, there were improvements in male well-being, mental health, and measures of social worth for both men in male-targeted households and male spouses in Umodzi households, compared to the control group and the female-targeted households.

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

For the standard graduation model, rigorous evaluations on measures of female empowerment in non-economic domains including agency, autonomy, and political participation show modest impacts that are difficult to sustain.

Results from a 7-year follow-up study on the long-run impacts of the standard Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP) program in India found positive and significant impacts on political involvement at the time of the second endline, though they did not persist (Banerjee 2016). The ten-year follow-up similarly found no effect (Banerjee et al. 2021). In Afghanistan, results one year after the program ended demonstrated significant improvements in women's empowerment across six indicators spanning measures of household finances and expenditures to voice and agency, increasing an average of 0.38 SD. This suggests the potential for significant policy influence, though longer-term results demonstrating sustained impacts are needed (Bedoya et al. 2019).

Evaluations of adapted graduation models that test financial and human capital components alone show few effects on female empowerment outcomes.

In Ghana, Banerjee et al. (2022) found that neither providing savings only nor an asset only, on their own, produced significant and sustainable impacts on secondary outcomes including political involvement and female empowerment[16], with some experiencing significantly less power in decisions regarding food in the household. The full graduation program showed impact at the two-year mark on political involvement and attendance at village meetings in the last year compared to the control, though no evidence of sustained impacts on other downstream measures including female empowerment at three years (Banerjee et al. 2022).

In the government-led program in Zambia, the full package and financial capital arm showed limited impacts on self-esteem and female decision-making. The training and mentoring that was provided in the human capital arm had no impact on any outcomes measured. Reduced institutional capacity for large-scale training and mentorship likely played a role in these findings and presents a key consideration for scaling up the approach. The study also notes that participants may have had higher levels of empowerment at baseline and therefore little room for growth in the decision-making index in particular (Botea et al. 2021).

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While the evidence base remains limited, graduation programs that have tested adding gender-intentional components show promising initial results on measures of female empowerment. However, more research is needed on components targeting social norms and men's engagement.

In Niger, all arms of the government-led program showed significant positive effects on women's social well-being and social capital among their community, including increased financial support, social support, social standing, and collective action. All arms showed increased normative support for women's economic engagement at the midpoint. At the endline, significant impacts were observed in the Psychosocial and Full arms in which the community sensitization targeted social norms directly. This included the screening of a realistic fiction film with non-professional actors from Niger aimed at raising aspirations and fostering normative support for program beneficiaries from the larger community. The film was followed by a facilitated discussion. Similarly, whereas the Psychosocial and Full arms increased social cohesion and community closeness at the endline, the effects of the Psychosocial arm were twice as large as that of the Full and Capital arms (Bossuroy et al. 2022).

In Ethiopia, the SPIR program tested the impact of gender training in VESA groups[17] and an added men's engagement group[18] on men's gender norm attitudes and equitable behaviors. While all treatment groups received the gender training, only those that received enhanced nutrition interventions, both with and without asset transfers, took part in men's engagement groups. At midline, all treatment arms showed significant improvements in both men's engagement in domestic chores and men's gender-equitable attitudes.[19] However, at the endline only those that participated in the men's engagement group sustained or improved outcomes. Results show that without target interventions to reinforce these behaviors, impacts are unlikely to be sustained (Alderman et al. 2023).

The adapted Economic Strengthening Program in Burkina Faso removed consumption support and tested the impact of adding a monthly gender-sensitive family coaching intervention for all household members related to gender norms and women's role in the family, as well as awareness raising on context-specific child protection issues. The economic empowerment approach increased women's involvement in making decisions about their children's well-being but stopped short of impacting women's decision-making power in the household more broadly. Effects were strongest in the treatment arm with the added family coaching Karmili et al. (2021). In Malawi, all female spouses across treatment arms experienced increased economic agency. At 17 months, women in the Umodzi couples empowerment training treatment arm showed the greatest gains, over and above female and male-targeted households. Female-targeted households saw improvements in decision-making on economic activities in the short term when compared to male-targeted households, though those gains were not sustained (Bedi et al. 2022).

In DRC, Women for Women International adapted the model by removing the asset transfer. The study tested their full package compared to a control group and an additional arm testing a Men's Engagement Program (MEP), though it did not produce any impacts across outcomes studied. Angelucci et al. (2022) found the full package increased women's empowerment by 0.18 SD after one year with sustained impacts at year two. Pro-women attitudes, women's participation in household decision-making, and locus of control scores increased, with most impacts still significant at the two-year follow-up. The gains in household decision-making were primarily attributed to women's increased participation in decisions about income generation.

In Uganda, Blattman et al. (2016) found that removing consumption support and encouraging the formation of group Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) as part of a graduation package increased group membership by 12.8 percent, and enhanced social support, social capital, and increased risk-pooling and cooperation among marginalized women. This demonstrates that social capital constraints can be influenced by light-touch external encouragement. However, no impacts were found on women's autonomy and increases were seen in spousal control over finances, associations, and freedom of movement. Phase two of the evaluation tested varying the frequency of supervisory visits or coaching, and results showed that measures of future orientation, community engagement, and financial autonomy were not statistically significant for either supervisory arm.

In Nigeria, Cullen et al. (2022) found that the cash-only treatment resulted in a slight negative impact on the self-esteem of women. The combined cash and livelihoods arm led to sustained increases in women's social status (measured by the likelihood the female is a member of at least one group). However, no impacts were found on self-efficacy and self-esteem. Women in this group were more likely to have joined a group than women in the livelihoods-only arm, suggesting the added benefit of boosting women's bargaining power with cash transfers within these livelihood villages improves social capital. These results may lead to a reduction in IPV seen among respondents.

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EDUCATION

While standard graduation programs show some effects on school enrollment, especially in settings with relatively low enrollment rates, there is no evidence of improvements in learning outcomes. Similar outcomes can be seen in adapted graduation programs, with modest spillover effects on enrollment, though no clear avenue for impact. This aligns with general evidence on education interventions that often fail to translate to learning outcomes. Adaptations to the standard model show modest spillover effects on educational enrollment, but no clear avenue for impact.

In Afghanistan, Bedoya et al. (2019) found that the standard Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP) graduation model increased school enrollment for school-age boys and girls by 5 and 7 percentage points (53 percent to 62 percent and 56 percent to 69 percent), respectively. In the DRC, Women for Women International's adapted program (removing the asset transfer) found spillover effects of the full package on school enrollment for children in treated households. Enrollment for children ages 5-18 increased by 5 percentage points from an average of 71 percent in the comparison group (Angelucci et al. 2022). Both contexts had low baseline enrollment.

References

[1] Only one government cash transfer program is included. The remaining programs are implemented and delivered by NGOs.

[2] Only two programs are government-led; the remaining are implemented by NGOs.

[3] Note that many of the studies in this review removed either the consumption support or asset transfer or reduced their value as a key adaptation.

[4] To assess the overall impact of the CCT on young women's economic well-being, researchers created an index measure that consists of four indicators coded to represent greater well-being: 1) food secure (no food worry past 12 months), 2) always had spending money (past 12 months), 3) never borrowed money (past 12 months), and 4) had savings.

[5] Includes measures of depression, worries, stress, happiness, life satisfaction, and cortisol.

[6] As measured by the female empowerment index which is comprised of the weighted standardized average of a violence index and an attitude index.

[7] Included access to agricultural extension services, input vouchers, business, and financial literacy skills training, livelihoods mentoring, and improved access to financial services

[8] PSNP is a safety net program that provides lean season food and cash transfers to roughly the poorest 20% of rural Ethiopian households.

[9] The core nutrition model included basic behavioral change counseling (BBC) only.

[10] The enhanced nutrition model included support for household-level behavior change communication, recuperative feeding for acutely malnourished children, promotion of male engagement in household tasks, and group therapy for mothers screened for depressive symptoms. Both the core and enhanced nutrition treatments received IYCF and nutrition BCC discussions in Village Economic and Social Associations (VESA) groups.

[11] The employment and finances index included the following measures: employment status, income, labor supply and time use, savings, and risk-taking behavior.

[12] The food security index in this study included the following measures: everyone in the household regularly eats at least two meals a day; no adult skips or cuts the size of meals; and no child skips or cuts the size of meals.

[13] The index includes the Food Consumption Score (FCS), the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), and the households' average length/height-for-age z-score (HAZ) for children under 5 years.

[14] Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) are tasks related to personal care. The ADL score looks at four of these tasks: transfer, bed mobility, toileting, and eating. For ADLs, the total score ranges from 0 to 6. In some categories, only the highest level of function receives a 1; in others, two or more levels have scores of 1 because each describes competence that represents some minimal level of function.

[15] The index includes the Kessler 6 mental health scale (from 0-24; higher = worse) and a life satisfaction question (on an increasing scale from 1 to 10).

[16] The female empowerment measure used in this study includes an index of five variables related to decision making concerning food, school and health expenses, purchases and visiting friends.

[17] The gender training included groups of 20-25 men and women that met approximately every two weeks and took part in six hour-long sessions on the following topics: workloads of men and women, cooperation and shared household work, household decision making, improved listening, communication and understanding skills, engagement of men in childcare work and identifying restrictive norms related to women's mobility.

[18] Men's engagement groups included approximately 16 men, both PSNP and non-PSNP households, in an effort to target an entire community. Groups met twice per month and were trained by a male facilitator on the following eight topics, each lasting two hours each: gender roles, power and early marriage, father's legacy, caregiving, division of caregiving and understanding nutrition.

[19] Men's involvement in domestic tasks was measured using a standardized index composed of three indicators.Men's gender equitable attitudes was also measured using a standardized index composed of three indicators.

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Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. IPA designs, rigorously evaluates, and refines these solutions and their applications together with researchers and local decision-makers, ensuring that evidence is used to improve the lives of people living in poverty.

Appendix: Study Table

Study	Cash (Pure or Plus) or Graduation (Standard or Adapted)	Asset	Technical Training	Consumption support	Savings	Coaching	Other (e.g. health and psychosocial support, infant and young child feeding)
Afghanistan Bedoya et al. 2019	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bangladesh Ahmed et al. 2019	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Cash plus	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Bangladesh Balboni et al. 2021	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bangladesh Chowdhury et al. 2021	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bangladesh Rahman et al. 2021	Adapted	✓ (hybrid grant and soft loan)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Bangladesh Roy et al. 2018	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Cash plus	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Burkina Faso Akresh et al. 2016	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Burkina Faso Ismayilovaa et al. 2018	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓ (monthly gender-sensitive family coaching & component on child mental health)
Burkina Faso Karmili et al. 2020	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓ (child well-being sensitization component)

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Angelucci et al. 2022	Adapted	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓ (men's engagement program)	✓
Ethiopia Leight et al. 2023 Alderman et al. 2023	Adapted	✓ (cash or the equivalent value in poultry)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓ (core nutrition model)
Alderman et al. 2023	Adapted	✓ (cash or the equivalent value in poultry)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓ (enhanced nutrition model & male engagement groups)
	Adapted	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓ (enhanced nutrition model & male engagement groups)
Ghana Banerjee, Abhijit et al. 2022	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓

	Adapted	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Adapted	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗
Ghana Barker et al. 2022	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ (group-based CBT)
	Adapted	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓ (CBT only)
India Almas et al. 2020	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
India Banerjee et al. 2016	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
India Banerjee et al. 2021	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Kenya Gobin et al. 2016	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Kenya Haushofer et al. 2018	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Kenya Haushofer et al. 2019	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Malawi Baird et al. 2019	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Malawi Bedi et al. 2022	Standard(female targeted)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Standard(male targeted)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted(female targeted)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ (Monthly couples training)	✓
Myanmar Field & Maffioli 2021	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗

Niger Bossuroy et al. 2022	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Adapted	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nigeria Bastian et al. 2017	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Nigeria Cullen et al. 2020	Adapted	✗	✓	✓	✓ (access to financial services)	✓	✗
	Pure Cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
South Africa Kilburn et al. 2019	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Uganda Blattman et al. 2016 Phase 1	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗

	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Phase 2	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓ (one to two home visits)	✗
	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓ (five home visits)	✗
Uganda Brune et al. 2022	Standard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ (group coaching)	✓
	Adapted	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Uganda Sedlmayr, R., Shah, A., & Sulaiman, M. 2020	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗

	Adapted	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
	Pure Cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Adapted	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Zambia Bonilla et al. 2017	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Zambia Botea et al. 2021	Standard	✓	✓	✓ (randomized to half of the participants)	✓	✓	✓
	Adapted	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗
	Adapted	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Zambia Hjelm et al. 2017	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Zambia Natali et al. 2016	Pure cash	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗