

SUMMARY

Gender Integration Impact in Adolescent Empowerment: The Act With Her Project

Project Background and Approach to Gender Integration

Act With Her (AWH) was a program implemented by Pathfinder International and CARE which reached more than 50,000 10-to-17-year-old adolescent girls and boys in Ethiopia. The program focused on education; bodily integrity; physical health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health; psychosocial well-being; voice and agency; and economic empowerment. The intervention was part of the Gender And Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) initiative, which completed a cluster randomized controlled trial impact evaluation comparing the impact of different AWH program variations. **AWH clearly meets the criteria of a gender transformative investment**, by explicitly aiming to increase the agency of adolescent girls as a primary outcome and measuring changes in agency. Additionally:

- The project drew on multiple sources of **gender expertise** and increased capacity in this area over the course of the project.
- Intersectional **gender analysis** conducted during the first phase of implementation informed future phases of programming.
- The team implemented robust approaches to identifying and addressing both positive and negative **unintended consequences** during project implementation (generally, as well as gender-related).

Gender Integration Insights from Implementation and Evaluation

- **The program was able to achieve impact in challenging contexts with deeply entrenched harmful gender norms and practices.**
- **The impact spanned more domains and was more sustainable when interventions involved boys, caregivers, and the community**, particularly for economic empowerment outcomes and attitudes more favorable toward gender equality.
- Contextual factors and challenges with implementation affected the program's ability to achieve and sustain impact in some communities.
- **The program team gained valuable insights on unintended consequences that can inform future implementation.**
 - » One important learning was that offering a program that targets both boys and girls, but provides asset transfers only to girls, created tension and backlash within communities.
 - » **Another unintended, but positive, consequence observed by the implementation teams was the empowering effect the program had on mentors**, resulting in the diffusion of project impact as they improved their own lives and also helped out others (non-program participants) in their communities.

Highlights of Impact Achieved

Findings from the evaluation showed that **the program was able to achieve impact on increased agency of adolescent girls, as well as improved sectoral outcomes**, in contexts where the program was accepted and supported at the community level. Examples of impact include:

- **Increased agency**, including some girls feeling more confident and empowered to access health services.
- **Knowledge gained** by early adolescents on topics including menstrual health, legal age of marriage, risks of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and places to seek help if experiencing violence.
- **Economic empowerment** through increased control over money and savings.
- **Improved attitudes on equitable gender roles.**
- Limited impact on general health and nutrition outcomes.

Evidence from the impact evaluation and learning from implementation are informing project implementation now led by government agencies in Ethiopia and a replication of the program in Jordan, as well as Pathfinder's strategic thinking on how community-based programming targeting adolescents can be wrapped into their service delivery programs.

Gender Integration Impact in Adolescent Empowerment: The Act With Her Project

This brief was prepared for the Gender Integration Team with the purpose of: (1) Reporting on performance and impact of gender integration in PST investments for GE leadership and (2) Ongoing learning for the GI Team and GenderTech on effective GI approaches across PST sectors. The brief summarizes findings from Act With Her evaluation reports, documents on methodologies, and findings from project monitoring provided by the Act With Her project team, a focus group discussion with key members of the Act With Her global project team, follow-up email correspondence with the team, and a presentation of findings from the evaluation made to the foundation in June 2023.

Project Background and Approach to Gender Integration

Act with Her (AWH) was a program implemented by Pathfinder International and CARE which reached over 50,000 10-to-17-year-old adolescent girls and boys in Ethiopia focused on education; bodily integrity; physical health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health; psychosocial well-being; voice and agency; and economic empowerment. **AWH clearly meets the criteria of a gender transformative investment**, by explicitly aiming to increase agency of adolescent girls as a primary outcome and measuring the changes in agency. The initial research phase of the program in Amhara and Oromia included four layered approaches which were implemented in different communities in order to test the relative impact of different levels of program comprehensiveness on improving outcomes for adolescent girls and boys:

- **Her Spaces**—girls participated in 10 months of weekly mentor-led group sessions with curriculum focused on nutrition, puberty, menstrual health, relationships, negotiation skills, community safety, services (health, justice, and financial), financial management, creating aspirational plans, and discussions on attitudes and norms related to gender equality. Engagement with families and the community were minimal – male relatives were invited to a few of the sessions; the program also included a couple of community sensitization meetings to raise awareness of the program.
- **AWH Essential**—10 months of weekly mentor-led group sessions for girls and the addition of separate groups for boys of the same age with curriculum aligned with the girls' groups, as well as groups for primary caregivers of the girls and boys. There were also four joint sessions of the girls' and boys' groups on topics related to gender equality. The girls' curriculum for AWH (used in *AWH Essential*, *Comprehensive*, and *Comprehensive+* arms) is similar to *Her Spaces* but focuses more deeply on issues related to sexual and reproductive health, sexual and gender-based violence, and harmful traditional practices.
- **AWH Comprehensive**—*AWH Essential* with additional community-level interventions, including regular meetings with key decision-makers and stakeholders to develop locally led processes for discussing and shifting harmful social norms

(e.g., related to child marriage, sexual- and gender-based violence, FGM/C) and a systems-strengthening approach, with activities supporting public sector collaboration across sectors, strengthening implementation of the national School Health and Nutrition Package, improving menstrual health and hygiene management in schools, strengthening accountability through community scorecards, gender and age sensitivity training focused on school-based violence, and establishing school-based 'Roll Back Early Marriage' clubs.

- **AWH Comprehensive+**—*AWH Comprehensive* with the addition of asset transfers, where participating girls could select to receive either school supplies, personal hygiene supplies, or a combination of the two. They received two deliveries of the package over a 10-month period.

The intervention was part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) initiative, which completed a cluster randomized controlled trial impact evaluation comparing the impact of different program variations across the six project domains at three points in time.¹ The research sample for this evaluation includes nearly 2,300 girls aged 10-12 in late 2017, 1,700 boys of the same age, and their primary caregivers. While the project aimed to recruit all adolescents enrolled in the research, not all research participants took part in AWH, and most AWH participants were not part of the research sample. Baseline data was collected in 2017, and subsequent rounds of data were collected in 2019, 2021/22 and in October of 2022, almost three years after the initial intervention had ended.

The project drew on multiple sources of gender expertise and increased capacity in this area over the course of the project.

While none of the global or Ethiopia project teams had full-time gender technical roles, most staff had backgrounds supporting projects related to gender and adolescents. Pathfinder global Gender and Adolescent technical advisors also supported the project as needed, and the project also drew on CARE's gender expertise. Additionally, the project MEL manager began her DrPH at the beginning of the project, focusing on gender norms and violence prevention, and began providing technical support in these areas, eventually becoming the project's gender and violence specialist in addition to her role as MEL manager.

Intersectional gender analysis conducted during the first phase of implementation informed future phases of programming. The MEL manager led the process, using Jhpiego's gender analysis² guidance, along with a number of different methodologies. Data sources included a desk review, as well as project data. Findings were discussed with the implementation team to develop recommendations.

The team implemented robust approaches to identifying and addressing both positive and negative unintended consequences during project implementation. Staff used tracking forms to regularly capture changes and challenges experienced during implementation. Feedback was also regularly collected from a random sample of project participants (mentors, adolescents, caregivers, and systems strengthening participants) using the Most Significant Change approach. These open-ended methods allowed the project team to capture positive and negative unintended consequences, and many of the experiences shared by participants related to gender norms. Issues and challenges uncovered by either of these methods were discussed between the global and Ethiopia teams, who jointly developed solutions. For example, based on feedback gathered through the tracking forms, during COVID-19 the project team developed guidance on the ethics of collecting data on early marriage and violence during times of crisis to share with government partners who had asked for support on these efforts.

Gender Integration Insights from Implementation and Evaluation

The program was able to achieve impact in challenging contexts with deeply entrenched harmful gender norms and practices. The program was implemented in areas of rural Ethiopia with high levels of poverty, poor development outcomes, and high prevalence of harmful gender norms and practices (e.g., high child marriage rates, gender-based violence, FGM/C) which underwent major shocks during the intervention period, including the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability. In spite of these challenging conditions, the program was able to achieve measurable impact in multiple areas.

The impact spanned more domains and was more sustainable when interventions involved boys, caregivers, and the community, particularly for economic empowerment outcomes and attitudes more favorable toward gender equality.³

Contextual factors and challenges with implementation affected the program's ability to achieve and sustain impact in some communities. The types and magnitude of impact were not universally demonstrated, and in some cases, the evaluation even found negative results in intervention communities compared to the control group (e.g., see explanation of health and nutrition outcomes in the following section). Examples of implementation challenges include religious backlash within some communities, security challenges due to conflict, and mentors leaving the program. The program had to be discontinued in a few communities due to some of these challenges, and in some other communities the program activities were suspended and then relaunched.

The program team gained valuable insights on unintended consequences that can inform future implementation.

- **One important learning was that offering a program that targets both boys and girls, but provides asset transfers only to girls created tension and backlash within communities.**⁴ For example, when interviewed for the qualitative evaluation, one boy in an *AWH Comprehensive+* site noted, "Why did they make a gap between the females and the males? We were feeling very angry. Everybody felt angry when they gave solar lamps to the females."¹ These sentiments in the communities may have resulted in less impact of the program on voice and agency of the girl participants in *AWH Comprehensive+* communities, as the quantitative evaluation results showed no impact, with the exception of South Gondar in the first follow-up. Furthermore, girls in *AWH Comprehensive+* communities in East Hararghe reported negative impact on voice and agency compared to control communities at the second round of data collection.
- **Another unintended, but positive, consequence observed by the implementation team was the empowering effect the program had on mentors, resulting in the diffusion of project impact as they improved their own lives and also helped others (non-program participants) in their communities.** For example, in Amhara data collected on a sample of female mentors showed an increase in mentors reporting feeling "very comfortable" speaking in front of others from 50 percent at baseline to 84 percent at endline and increased those reporting having a business or income generating activity from 16 percent at baseline to 41 at endline.⁵ Pathfinder's project learning brief on engaging mentors also notes, "[...] several mentors were not only enlisted by AWH girl participants to help them cancel their marriages, but mentors also described instances where they proactively stopped a child marriage or female genital cutting (FGC) in the broader community [...]"⁶

Highlights of Impact Achieved

Findings from the evaluation showed that the program was able to achieve impact on increased agency of adolescent girls, as well as improved sectoral outcomes in contexts where the program was accepted and supported at the community-level. Examples of impact include:

- **Increased agency:** Immediately following the program, girls reached through all intervention approaches had strongly significant higher levels of voice and agency (measured using the Index of Voice and Agency⁷) in South Gondar compared to the control group. Across both regions, there were also a number of cases where significant positive differences from control communities were observed at all three time points. The qualitative data revealed that **program activities such as visits to the community health center resulted in some girls feeling more confident and empowered to access health services:** "If we're in some kind of trouble or want to check up on our health, we can visit the centre. In the previous times I used to be shy to talk to them, but now that they give us a grand tour and give us so much advice, I'm not afraid of them anymore."¹

- **Knowledge gained by early adolescents on topics including menstrual health, legal age of marriage, risks of FGM/C, and places to seek help if experiencing violence:** Strongly significant impacts were observed at first follow-up across both regions and all intervention arms on a knowledge index consisting of indicators measuring whether the girls could answer questions correctly on topics covered by the AWH curriculum. At second and third follow up, the differences between the control and intervention groups did not persist, most likely because in older adolescence when the follow-up data collection occurred, the topics covered in the AWH curriculum become more common knowledge.
- **Economic empowerment through increased control over money and savings:** In South Gondar, girls in two of the more-comprehensive intervention arms scored significantly better on the Index of Economic Empowerment (including measures of: had money she controls in past 12 months, any savings for the future, and proportion of time spent in leisure and school on a typical weekday), and by the second follow-up, girls had higher scores across all interventions arms. (This index was not measured at the third follow-up.) These findings were driven by having money she controls, as well as having savings.
- **Improved attitudes on equitable gender roles:** In South Gondar, significant positive impacts on gender attitudes were observed among both boys and girls, using the Gender Stereotypical Roles Index (including indicators that measure agreement with statements such as 'women should have the same chance to work outside of the household as men'), particularly for the more

comprehensive approaches to the program.⁸ Positive effects were found across both regions in different program variations in each survey round on the Index of Gender Consciousness (including indicators for agreement with statements such as 'I think it is possible to change how people react to my being a girl'). *AWH Comprehensive* showed particularly strong results.

- **Limited impact on general health and nutrition outcomes:** The impact evaluation found a few cases of positive significant results on the Index of Physical Health Nutrition (which includes self-reported indicators for health, proportion of meals yesterday with protein, and hunger because not enough food in the past four weeks) across the four intervention arms in East Hararghe. However, most of the intervention arms resulted in no impact on these indicators, and in South Gondar there were a few cases where intervention groups reported poorer health and nutrition outcomes as compared to the control. The implementors noted that contextual factors most likely played a role in these results, as many of the intervention communities in Amhara were greatly affected by the conflict that broke out in 2020, as well as by a major drought.

Evidence from the impact evaluation and learning from implementation are informing project implementation now led by government agencies in Ethiopia and a replication of the program in Jordan, as well as Pathfinder's strategic thinking on how community-based programming targeting adolescents can be wrapped into their service delivery programs.⁹

References and notes

1. Hamory, J., Baird, S., Das, S., et al. (2024). *Do multi-level adolescent-centric interventions improve girls' capabilities? Mixed-methods evidence from a cluster randomized controlled trial in Ethiopia*. Working paper. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence. www.gage.odi.org/publication/near-term-impacts-of-interventions-aimed-at-adolescent-empowerment-and-gender-norm-change-in-ethiopia/
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3. Pathfinder International. (n.d.). *Mobilizing adult allies for adolescents: perspectives from the frontline*. Pathfinder International, CARE International, and Government of Ethiopia. <https://www.pathfinder.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AWH-Mobilizing-Adult-Allies.pdf>
4. Pathfinder International. (n.d.). *Working with very young adolescent girls and boys: perspectives from the frontline*. Pathfinder International, CARE International, and Government of Ethiopia. <https://www.pathfinder.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/AWH-VYA-Brief.pdf>
5. N=56; data from project monitoring document shared by Pathfinder International team.
6. Pathfinder International. (n.d.). *Engaging mentors in very young adolescent programming: Perspectives from the frontline*. Pathfinder International, CARE International, Government of Ethiopia. <https://www.pathfinder.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AWH-Engaging-Mentors-in-Very-Young-Adolescent-Programming-Brief.pdf>
7. Measured using the Index of Voice and Agency, including measures of participation in decision-making at home and school, comfort having discussions with friends, parents and elders, mobility outside the household and collective action in the community.
8. The Snapshot of GAGE Quantitative Findings on Act with Her in Ethiopia (2019-2022) notes the challenges in measuring gender attitudes and norms and interpreting data from these scales, which should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings (page 10).
9. The program's [legacy report](#), [curricula](#), and [guidance for implementation and adaptation](#) can be found on the included links.

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