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Power, practice, and potential: Social protection and adolescent girls

GIRL Center

Cash Transfer and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Research Collaborative

UNICEF

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POWER, PRACTICE, AND POTENTIAL: SOCIAL PROTECTION AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Highlights of event held on Tuesday, March 12, 2024, in New York.

Cohosted by: Population Council's GIRL Center, Cash Transfer and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Research Collaborative, and UNICEF.

Watch a recording of the event [here](#).





POWER, PRACTICE, AND POTENTIAL: SOCIAL PROTECTION AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Girls' economic well-being is critical for a safe transition to adulthood. Social protection can turn the tide for adolescent girls by allowing families to invest in girls' health and education. There is promise in integrated social protection, such as combining cash transfers with additional services or programming.

On March 12, 2024, the Population Council's [GIRL Center](#) in collaboration with [UNICEF](#) and the [Cash Transfer and IPV Research Collaborative](#), cohosted an event on the sidelines of the [68th Session of the Commission for the Status of Women](#) (CSW68). The event brought together practitioners, researchers, adolescent girls, and representatives of governments and bilateral and multilateral organizations. Evidence on the impact of social protection and cash plus programs was highlighted. A panel of experts shared perspectives on evidence and critical actions needed to empower adolescent girls through cash plus social protection programs.

Key insights and recommendations from the event:

- Multi-stakeholder engagement is critical for effective delivery of social protection and cash transfer programs. Various government ministries should be involved to provide integrated interventions that cover education, life skills, health, and economic needs for adolescent girls.
- The design, implementation, and evaluation of cash transfer programs should be tailored to the gender dynamics within community settings, while ensuring collaboration with civil society, local leaders, and community-based groups such as women's organizations.
- Gendered vulnerabilities should be considered in the cash transfer programs' design and implementation phases for better outcomes for adolescent girls.
- Evidence on the impact of cash plus social protection programs and multidimensional investments for adolescents should be shared with policymakers and actors, for the scale up of social protection programs.

[Patricia Vaughan](#), Interim Co-President and General Counsel at the Population Council, gave the welcome remarks highlighting the Council's commitment to generating evidence for the empowerment of girls and women. Three priorities were stated: the power of investing in girls in their early adolescence, the need to invest in social protection and cash transfers while including other interventions such as life skills education, and the power of multisectoral collaboration for adolescent girls' empowerment.

Professor Tia Palermo, from the [Cash Transfer and IPV Research Collective](#) and the University at Buffalo, kicked off the presentations by summarizing three reviews of social protection programming and adolescents. [Evidence](#) presented from one global review showed that adolescent-sensitive noncontributory social protection programs can improve several outcomes, including school attendance, food security, health services utilization, and safe transitions to adulthood. A second global [review](#) found that social safety nets can reduce violence against children, especially sexual abuse and exploitation among adolescent girls. Finally, a third [systematic review](#) found that programs for adolescents in Africa combining economic components with health or life skills components can improve economic security,



sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and HIV knowledge and testing. Overall takeaways from the evidence presented suggest that stakeholders working on integrated social protection programming should first ensure that the core components of these programs (for example, cash transfers) are well designed and meaningful (well targeted, adjusted for inflation, predictable payments, and so forth) and then ensure that complementary programming is tailored to gender dynamics within community settings (achieved through collaboration with civil society groups) and involves different government ministries to facilitate scale-up and integration into overall government strategy for poverty reduction and gender equality.

[Dr. Karen Austrian](#), Director at the GIRL Center, gave the second presentation which focused on the [Adolescent Girls Initiative—Kenya](#) (AGI-K), a cash plus program aimed at increasing education rates and delaying marriage for adolescent girls. AGI-K, implemented in two phases (2014-2019 and 2022-2023), reached more than 11,000 adolescent girls between the ages of 11 and 15. Evidence from two randomized controlled trials evaluating program impact showed that for girls who were out of school when the program started, there were long-term impacts on increasing school enrollment and decreasing child marriage and pregnancy as much as four years after the end of the intervention. The second phase of the program focused on implementation via government structures and demonstrated similar impact on education outcomes after 16 months. Future priorities for the program include embedding cash plus social protection programs in ongoing community health programs and leveraging the national momentum on community health systems to scale up cash plus initiatives for adolescent girls.

Willie Chisapa Kaputo, National Coordinator, Keeping Girls in School (KGS) Initiative at the Ministry of Education, Government of Zambia, shared evidence and best practices from the [Girls Education and Women Empowerment and Livelihoods Program](#) (GEWEL). The cash plus social protection program reaches the most marginalized families in Zambia. One of the program's success factors has been the use of a combined social cash transfer to families and school fees payments for girls. [A review of the program](#) showed significant impact in supporting families in meeting their basic household needs and reducing incidences of school dropout. The program has grown since 2017 to reach over 94,000 adolescent girls in 2023.

The panel of experts shared best practices from cash transfer programs across different countries. The discussion was moderated by Valerie Chlafer, a student at Baruch College in New York City.

Lauren Whitehead, Social Protection and Gender Lead at [UNICEF](#), emphasized that social protection is a right for households, children, and adolescents. She noted that multisectoral responses within cash transfer programs are effective because they address multiple barriers faced by adolescent girls, including access to education and health, and that considering the life course and lived experience of an adolescent is critical for the success of social protection interventions. The [Ujana Salama](#) program in Tanzania stood out in the discussion, as it targeted households that received support from the government and linked members of those households to other support services, such as access to contraception, training on sexual and reproductive health, prevention of gender-based violence, and economic empowerment for adolescents. The program targeted both adolescent girls and boys, hence



the outcomes were unique for adolescents, including increasing gender-equitable attitudes and decreasing rates of sexual violence.

Willie Kaputo, in addition to his earlier intervention, shared best practices from the design of the [GEWEL](#) program. He stated that multisectoral collaboration is critical in identifying adolescent girls and households for inclusion in the cash transfer programs and complementary social protection services. The Ministry of Education therefore works with stakeholders from different departments, including social protection, health, and community development. In addition, programs tailor themselves to unique cultural practices by working with local leaders and religious leaders, while creating awareness of the benefits of the program for better ownership and sustainability.

Professor Palermo reiterated that social protection programs have positive outcomes such as violence prevention for women, children, and adolescent girls. [Evidence from South Africa](#), a program that supported adolescent girls and caregivers, contributed to the reduction of IPV among adolescents between the ages of 13 and 20 by 34% and delayed sexual debut. In Tanzania, the [Ujana Salama](#) program reduced sexual violence among adolescent girls by 5% and reduced perpetration of physical violence among adolescent boys by 6%. The program improved gender-equitable attitudes among boys, HIV testing, and mental health. [In Mozambique, an adolescent-sensitive program](#) implemented by the government targeting women and adolescent mothers with children between the ages of 0 and 2, provided cash transfers to households and community-based care management. The program had notable results such as: reduction in IPV by 38% and increased mental health decision-making and economic security. Due to the high success of the program, there was commitment by the government to scale it up nationally.

Rachel Mason, Gender and Social Protection Lead at the [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office](#) (FCDO), spoke about FCDO's commitment to gender mainstreaming within all their programs and ensured that 80% of programming will have a gender-equality focus by 2030. FCDO is supporting governments in over 20 countries to implement social protection programs such as Zambia's GEWEL program and gender-focused programs in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, among others. Further, funding of research programs and longitudinal studies focusing on adolescent girls is ongoing to prioritize adolescent girls' needs, including sexual and reproductive health, ending violence, transition to employment, and education. The office is shifting its approach by engaging communities and adolescents directly, to better contextualize the social protection cash plus programs, and viewing gender more holistically by engaging men and boys.

In conclusion, there is great promise in integrated social protection programs, such as the combination of cash transfers linked to additional services or programming. These programs should be designed and implemented through a gender lens, within the context of communities and lived experiences of adolescents, and with the involvement of multiple sectors such as education and health.

CONTACTS

Dr. Karen Austrian
GIRL Center Director
kaustrian@popcouncil.org
Twitter: [@KAustrianPC](https://twitter.com/KAustrianPC)

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About the [GIRL Center](#): The Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center is one of [Population Council’s](#) innovation hubs that envisions a gender-equitable world where girls and boys make a healthy and safe transition into adulthood and reach their full potential. Launched in 2017, the research hub drives evidence-based action with a suite of tools, interventions, and dashboards, including the [Adolescent Data Hub](#), the [Adolescent Atlas for Action \(A3\)](#), the [Evidence for Gender and Education Resource \(EGER\)](#), the [Adolescent Girls Community of Practice \(AGCoP\)](#).