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Biruh Tesfa provides domestic workers, orphans, and migrants in urban Ethiopia with social support, HIV education, and skills

Prepared by Annabel Erulkar, Belaynesh Semunegus, and Gebeyehu Mekonnen

In Ethiopia, the HIV epidemic is increasingly urban and female. An estimated 7.7 percent of the urban population in Ethiopia is HIV-positive, compared with less than one percent of the rural population (MOH 2007), suggesting a generalized urban epidemic and a rural epidemic concentrated among high-risk groups (Myrick and Cassell 2007). Nationally, the female-to-male ratio of HIV infection is 3 to 2, reflecting the heightened vulnerability of girls and women to HIV. Girls who migrate from rural to urban areas may be less protected, more vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse, and less equipped to avoid these abusive situations—all of which may increase the HIV risk.

A study in low-income areas of Addis Ababa found that 45 percent of adolescent girls had migrated to the area. Among these migrants, 87 percent were in low-status jobs, especially domestic work, which is characterized by poor working conditions and low pay, and is dominated by girls and women (UNICEF 1999). Domestic workers participating in Population Council research in Addis Ababa reported working an average of 64 hours in the week prior to the survey, earning an average monthly salary of 52 Birr, or about US\$6 (Erulkar and Mekbib 2007). A more recent Council study of adolescent girls in urban slum areas of Ethiopia found that domestic workers are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse, including nonconsensual sex (Erulkar and Ferede 2009). Furthermore, domestic workers' long working hours and social isolation exclude many from benefiting from mainstream youth programs (Erulkar et al. 2006).

The *Biruh Tesfa* Program

Biruh Tesfa (Amharic for “Bright Future”) aims to address the social isolation of out-of-school adolescent girls aged 10–19, including rural-to-urban migrants, domestic workers, and orphans. Using a group-



based mentoring model, the girls build their social capital and gain access to basic literacy, skills, and information about HIV, reproductive health, and gender-based violence. The project is implemented by the Bureaus of Youth and Sports in Addis Ababa and Amhara regions and the kebele administrations in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Debre Markos, Dessie, and Gondar. The Population Council provides technical assistance and conducted the evaluation of the pilot project in the Mercado area of Addis Ababa.

House-to-house recruitment to reach the most marginalized and invisible

Biruh Tesfa mobilizes out-of-school girls into groups that meet with adult female mentors in community spaces. Female mentors and supervisors

are recruited by the kebele administration and local leaders. Mentors range in age from 20 to 40 years, have a minimum of 12 years of education, are residents in the project site, and are known and respected members of the community. Mentors are trained for one week using a curriculum that includes life skills, HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, gender issues—including gender-based violence—and basic literacy.

Following training, mentors systematically identify out-of-school girls who are eligible for the program. Mentors go house-to-house and conduct an informal listing of household members, including sex, age, and schooling status. Mentors also ask about members of the household who may be nonrelatives, including domestic workers.

Eligible girls (out-of-school, aged 10–19) are invited to participate in the program. Mentors also secure permission from the parents, guardians, or—in the case of domestic workers—their employers, who frequently are not initially in favor of their participation. Mentors are responsible for following up the girls they enroll in the program. If a girl is absent for three or more group meetings, mentors visit the girl's household to learn the reason for her absence. Frequently, the girl's employer has denied her participation, in which case mentors attempt to renegotiate on behalf of the girl.

When the mentors were registering door-to-door, I registered. When I first heard about it, I didn't think it would happen. I thought I would not be able to participate because my employers are very strict and don't allow me to go out. ... [At first] my employer was not willing to let me attend. She said that it is not good to let maids go out, because if they meet each other, they talk about salaries and ask for more money. They will be spoiled and not work hard. My mentor came and asked me why I didn't attend, and I told her... She discussed with my employer and finally convinced her. But I am still not able to come regularly since I have so much work to do.

—Bahir Dar girl, age 19, double orphan,
never been to school, domestic worker

More than information and skills: An identity and affiliation

Girls' groups meet at community halls and facilities, their use donated by the local administration, at a time that is convenient for them. Meetings are held generally three to five times a week. Groups are formed for girls of different ages and educational levels, including those who have never been to school, those with some reading and writing ability, and those with good reading ability. Literacy and numeracy training is tailored to each group's level, and all groups receive life skills and HIV/AIDS and reproductive health education.

All participating girls receive a project identification (ID) card with their photo. For many girls, this simple ID card is the only form of identification they have, and frequently the only picture of themselves that they own. They also receive roughly four exercise books per year and are provided with pens and pencils. Because of their extreme poverty,

many beneficiaries lack even basic commodities such as soap or sanitary napkins. Girls receive approximately four bars of soap a year, as well as locally produced reusable sanitary napkins. In total, each girl receives 95 Birr/US\$7.75 in material support per year. Although seemingly small, these resources are otherwise out of reach of *Biruh Tesfa* beneficiaries (Erulkar et al. 2008).

Providing access to essential services

Because many participants are migrants from remote rural areas, they may never have visited a health facility. Project beneficiaries receive wellness check-ups at local government clinics. Girls in need of basic curative services are provided with medical care free of charge through an arrangement with government health facilities. In addition, the Council is currently building a network of referral facilities from both the public and private sectors in each project site. These facilities will provide subsidized or free services using a coupon referral system, provided by mentors to girls in need of services.

With few friends, family, or other protective structures, domestic workers and other migrants are vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse. Domestic workers are particularly at risk because they often rely on their employers for basic sustenance and a place to live. Victims of exploitation and abuse typically have no source of assistance or support. *Biruh Tesfa* partnered with the Organization for the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Integration of Female Street Children (OPRIFS), which offers shelter and support to children who are victims of sexual violence. With shelters in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar, OPRIFS gives lodging to girls who are victims of violence, which is frequently perpetrated by an employer or family member. Victims receive counseling and legal support and benefit from the friendship of other girls in the shelter. Counselors from OPRIFS also visit the *Biruh Tesfa* groups to teach girls how to reduce their risks and to publicize its services.

Building bridges to safe and productive livelihoods

With low levels of education and limited support networks, domestic workers face challenges in making the transition to safer and more rewarding forms of work. In partnership with the Nia Foundation, each year 40 beneficiaries of *Biruh Tesfa*, mainly domestic workers and orphans, are offered skills training in the beauty industry (hair dressing, skin care, and nail care). Because girls who want to leave domestic work and receive skills training frequently live with employers, beneficiaries of the Nia program are given lodging near the training center and placed in part-time jobs to earn money for food and other necessities. Following completion of the training, graduates are placed in salons so that they can begin to earn money immediately and not have to return to domestic work.

Increasing the involvement of girls with disabilities

In the early stages of the program, mentors determined that recruiting girls with disabilities was as challenging as recruiting domestic workers.

Some parents or guardians do not raise disabled young people to lead independent lives and are reluctant to let them leave a protected home environment. Moreover, once recruited, many disabled girls faced logistical problems, such as transport or accompaniment to the program.

As a result, *Biruh Tesfa* partnered with Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA) to engage its staff as mentors, serving as role models for girls and their families and facilitating recruitment. In addition, EWDNA helps make meeting spaces accessible to disabled participants by constructing ramps, and it provides participating girls with crutches, wheelchairs, and/or accompaniment to and from the sessions. Nearly 200 disabled girls are currently participating in *Biruh Tesfa*.

Serving the most vulnerable girls in urban Ethiopia

By December 2009, more than 17,000 girls had benefitted from the *Biruh Tesfa* program in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Debre Markos, Dessie, and Gondar. Participants are extremely vulnerable: nearly half (47 percent) have lost one or both of their parents; nearly 40 percent have no education; and 73 percent have fewer than five years of schooling. Thirty-two percent are domestic workers, and 25 percent are day laborers.

I escaped and came to Bahir Dar when my father was trying to marry me off... So, I went to a woman I know and told her to take me to Bahir Dar. When I was in the rural area, I heard there was a town named Bahir Dar where people do not fetch water or wood, and life is easy. So she brought me to her daughter's

house [in Bahir Dar] as domestic worker and negotiated to pay me 12 Birr [US\$ 1.00] per month. Even if we agreed on 12 Birr, she never paid me but sometimes gave me clothes.

—*Bahir girl, age 19, domestic worker, three years of education*

I was born in rural Gojjam (Amhara region)... My mother died when I was eight and three years later my father died.... My grandmother took me, but she also died after two years.... My aunt who lives in Addis Ababa brought me here, and she promised to send me to school. After I came, she locked me in her house and didn't allow me to go out. I had to help with the housework. When I came here I was healthy, my legs were normal and I was able to walk. One day when I was working and I fell down and broke my legs. I didn't go to hospital and became disabled. I stayed at home with my aunt and she would insult me, calling me "worthless" and "useless."... Now I am living on the street. Currently I am working petty trade. I started selling candy and chewing gum...

—*Addis Ababa girl, age 16, double orphan, lives in street, petty trader, one year of education*

Evaluation of *Biruh Tesfa* shows early success

The Population Council evaluated *Biruh Tesfa* in its pilot site in Mercato, Addis Ababa. Before implementation, baseline surveys of girls aged 10 to 19 were undertaken in experimental and control communities in Addis Ababa, with follow-up surveys taking place two years later. Surveys measured community-wide changes associated with the project, with a particular focus on social participation and social safety nets. Service statistics tracked participation and provided a profile of beneficiaries.

At baseline, 29 percent of girls in the experimental site reported having "many friends," whereas at endline, 35 percent reported having many friends. In the control site, there was no change in the percentage of girls reporting many friends (21 percent at baseline and endline). At baseline, only 7 percent of eligible girls in Mercato said they had a "safe space" in their community in which to meet female friends. At endline, however, 25 percent of girls reported having a safe space, a statistically significant difference.

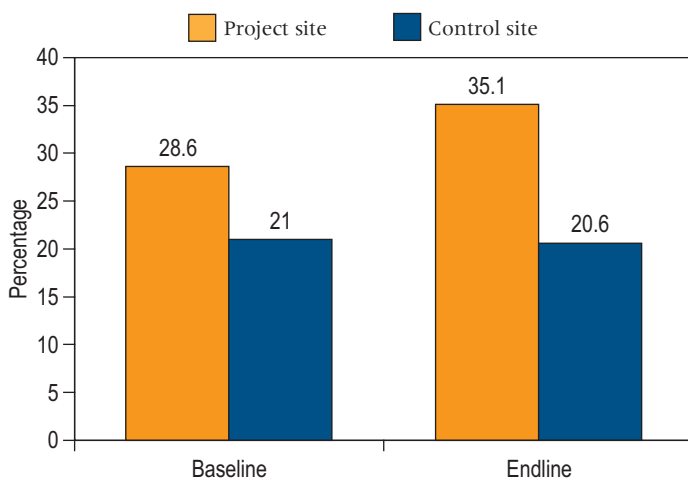
The evaluation included a composite variable reflecting social participation, as measured through friendship networks, making new friends, or participating in girls' groups. At endline, girls in the experimental site were significantly more likely to be considered "socially participatory," compared with girls in the control site. At baseline, girls in the project site were significantly less likely to report social safety nets, such as having someone from whom to borrow money or an alternative place to stay. At endline, no difference was found in social safety nets between girls in the two sites, suggesting that *Biruh Tesfa* improved the status of girls in that area. At endline, girls in the project site were

Table 1 Characteristics of *Biruh Tesfa* membership (n = 17,278)

		Percent
Age group	10 to 14	32.5
	15 to 19	67.5
Orphanhood	Both parents dead	15.5
	Father dead	21.4
	Mother dead	9.6
	Both parents alive	53.5
Years of schooling	None	39.4
	1 to 4 years	33.9
	5 to 8 years	21.2
	9+ years	5.5
Occupation	Domestic worker	32.2
	Day laborer	25.3
	Unemployed	26.9
	Other	15.6
Migrant to the area		65.0
Disabled		3.3

Source: Mentors' registration for December 2009, Population Council.

Figure 1 Proportion of girls reporting having many friends in their neighborhood, at baseline and endline by site



Note: Preliminary Population Council analysis, based on weighted data.

significantly more likely to have undergone voluntary counseling and testing for HIV, compared with girls in the control site.

Interviews with girls highlighted the difference *Biruh Tesfa* made in their lives.

My parents died when I was a child.... I don't remember that time very well. I lived with my aunt until I was 12, and then I came here to live with my uncle and go to school. There was another relative also living with my uncle. One day, that man raped me when I was at home alone, and I became pregnant. When my uncle found out I was pregnant, he threw me out of the house. Then a lady found me, and my child and I are living with her, and I help her with household work.... After I started this program, I learned how to protect myself from violence and what to do if I am victimized. I think that if I had attended this program earlier, I might not have been raped by that person and become pregnant....

—Gondar girl, age 15, double orphan, never been to school, domestic worker

I came here [to the program] with interest and determination. Here I developed confidence and know that I can face my problems and solve them. I believe that, no matter what, if I work hard, I will make it.

—Addis Ababa girl, age 16, double orphan, migrated from Amhara region, one year of education

Biruh Tesfa is now being scaled up to 12 additional cities in Ethiopia. In addition, given the demand for the program by younger girls, mentors are creating groups for younger girls, aged 7 to 9.

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- Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA)
- Nia Foundation
- Organization for the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Integration of Female Street Children (OPRIFS)
- Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)



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