

Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme (AGEP), Zambia

Zambia's Adolescent Girls Empowerment Program (AGEP) helped adolescent girls in avoiding early marriage, sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy while building their health, social and economic assets. The programme reached more than 11,000 girls in rural and urban locations in the country from 2013 to 2016 as part of a randomised controlled trial. The intervention comprised of three components:

Safe spaces: Safe spaces were weekly girls' group meetings, in which 20 to 30 girls met with a mentor—a young woman from their community who was hired and trained—for short training sessions on a variety of topics as well as an opportunity to discuss together their experiences in the past week.

Health vouchers: Participants received a health voucher redeemable for a package of general wellness and sexual and reproductive health services at partner public and private healthcare providers.

Savings accounts: Developed the Girls Dream savings accounts for AGEP girls. The accounts had very low minimum opening balances, and any amount could be deposited or withdrawn with no fee.

The programme saw mixed results. However, it provided significant lessons to improve the effectiveness of similar programmes

- “Safe Spaces” alone are insufficient for sustained changes for vulnerable girls. Programs to empower girls must be girl-centred, but they also need to engage the broader community.
- Most vulnerable adolescent girls may not attend a safe space-only programme. Programme implementers must ensure that they have the systems and budgets in place to track who is and is not, participating. They will need to include adaptations to their programmes to address the needs of those sub-segments of the population (e.g., out of school, economically most disadvantaged.)
- Savings accounts can positively influence savings behaviour – both formal and informal – and have positive effects on girls' self-efficacy. Programmes working with adolescent girls as to the feasibility and important impact of integrating financial literacy training and access to savings opportunities into more traditional health-related programming.
- Efforts to empower girls and improve their health and wellbeing should address social norms at the girl, household, school, and community levels.
- Even when well-designed, pervasive poverty can limit the success of health and nutrition interventions. Underlying economic constraints at the household level may need to be addressed to see longer-term change for girls.
- Programmes that seek to improve health outcomes for a wide range of vulnerable adolescents need to address underlying economic and socio-cultural constraints, for example through social cash transfers, educational support or social norms change campaigns, both to increase participation and to improve the likelihood that the programme results in longer-term health changes.

Source: Austrian, Karen, Erica Soler-Hampejsek, Paul C. Hewett, Natalie Jackson Hachonda, and Jere R. Behrman. 2018. Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme: End line Technical Report. Lusaka, Zambia: Population Council.