

RIGHT ON THE MONEY

Making the case for rights-based investments in adolescent girls

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Key findings

To create a fairer, more prosperous and gender-equal world there is the need to invest more in adolescent girls. This brief summarises two pieces of research showing how strategic investments in a package of 'accelerator' interventions for adolescent girls can support significant returns across educational attainment and learning, health promotion and violence prevention, and girls' participation and decision-making.

First, drawing on findings from 28 cost-benefit analyses, we provide a comprehensive synthesis and analysis of the expected rates of return for adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, cash transfers, and parenting programmes globally (see Figure 1a) – based on significant existing evidence of the importance of these interventions for health, poverty, education, violence and empowerment.¹⁻³ Our analysis indicates that investing USD 1 billion in these interventions is likely to achieve more than a four-fold return on investment.

Second, we provide a national-level analysis of the far-reaching and gender-transformative impacts from scaling-up the same three services in Kenya (see Figure 1b). Our findings indicate that over ten years, an investment of USD 234 million in adolescent girls, would avert 120,000 teenage pregnancies, 2,660 new HIV infections, 5,920 instances of child marriage, 8,510 cases of sexual violence, and 54,400 cases of emotional or physical violence. Additionally, this investment would support an extra 226,000 years of schooling and lead to a USD 886 million return from increased labour market productivity.



Figure 1a. Summary of expected return on investments

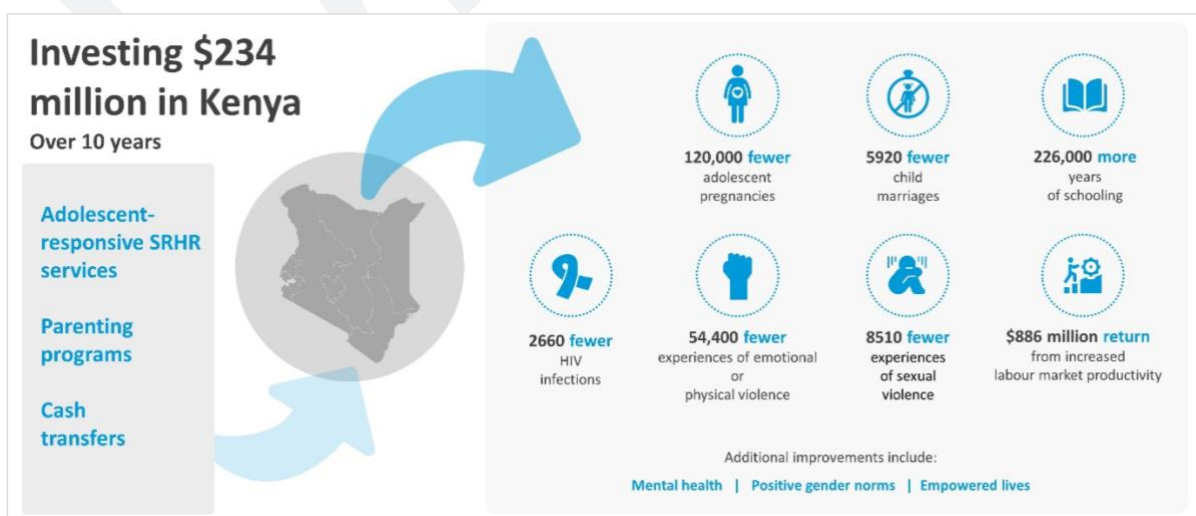


Figure 1b. Summary of cost, impacts, and return of investing in adolescent girls in Kenya.

A new way of thinking about investments in adolescent girls

There is evidence that investing in adolescent girls is not only the right thing to do in terms of promoting gender equality and the rights of girls and women, but also the smart thing to do economically.⁴⁻⁷ However, in a context where global overseas development assistance (ODA) spending on adolescent girls is flatlining and even declining, it is key that investments in new interventions achieve the greatest impact possible.^{8,9} Our research fills a knowledge gap for evidenced investments in adolescent girls by focusing on a simple evidence-based package of interventions that governments and development partners can prioritise for addressing a wide range of outcomes at a relatively modest cost. This approach differs from previous research in this field that has modelled more extensive lists of interventions, which while transformative, would be a great deal more expensive.⁷

We provide novel evidence on the expected cost and impact of a combination of three effective interventions for adolescent girls: adolescent-responsive SRHR services, cash transfers, and parenting programmes.¹⁰ This package of interventions can promote gender transformative outcomes by strengthening core asset-based resources that are fundamental for supporting adolescent girls' wellbeing, including economic security, access to healthcare, and social support (see Figure 2). The focus on these interventions is also consistent with results from a recent online poll of 590,000 adolescent girls and boys, and young women and men which highlighted five policy priorities for adolescent girls: economic security, school access and skills, comprehensive sexuality education, classes for parents and caregivers, and financial literacy.¹¹

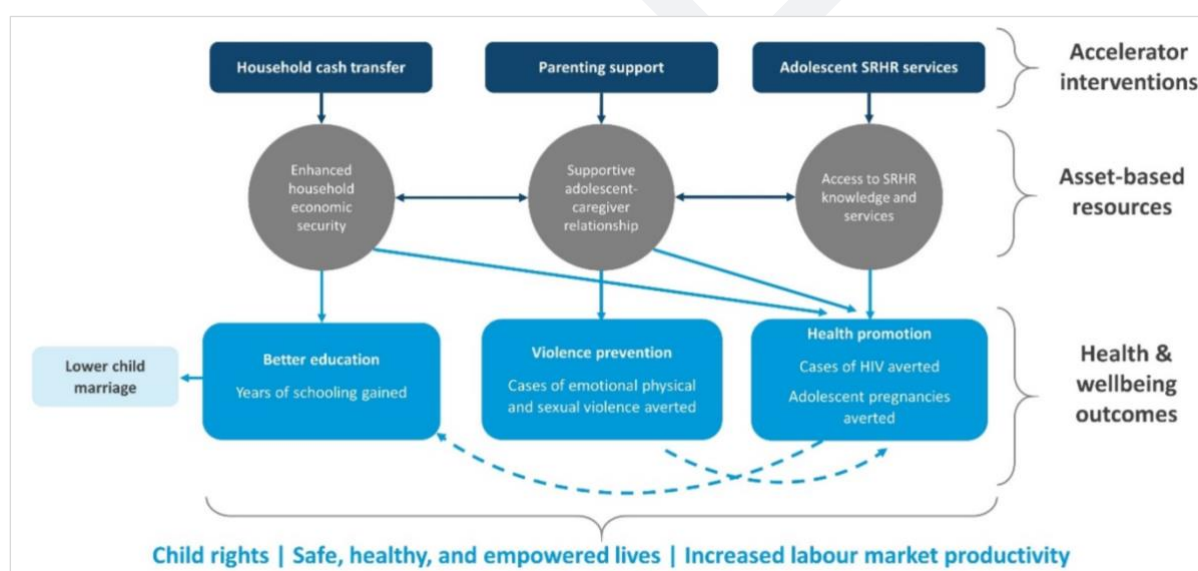


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for calculating returns on investment for adolescent girls.

There is substantial evidence showing the importance of economic strengthening interventions including cash transfers for improving adolescent girls' educational enrolment and attendance and delaying sexual debut.¹² Adolescent health services can also promote uptake of services, improve contraception use, reduce child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, and increase educational attainment.^{13,14} Additionally, research underscores the effectiveness of parenting programmes for reducing adolescent violence victimisation and improving mental health.¹⁵ Parenting programmes can also be adapted to transform gender imbalances by promoting positive gender norms and socialisation.¹⁶ Whilst putting an economic value on girls' wellbeing can help with the allocation of scarce resources, it's important to highlight that not everything that counts can be counted. For example, impacts of interventions on girls' agency, giving them greater voice, choice and control, are difficult to quantify. Therefore, the returns of modelled interventions in this research are likely to be an under-estimate of the real benefits of investing in adolescent girls and women.

Estimating the global return on investment in adolescent girls

Global estimates provide valuable insight into the possible impact from investing in effective interventions to improve adolescent girls' health and wellbeing. Aiming to inform what the return might be of investing USD 1 billion in adolescent girls, we conducted a comprehensive literature review to identify all published benefit-cost ratios for our selected interventions across low- and middle-income countries. Bringing together these analyses, we found that investing USD 1 billion in a combination of cash transfers, parenting, and sexual reproductive health programmes in low- and middle-income countries, may be expected to return benefits between to USD 3.9 and USD 4.5 billion in terms of reduced maternal and infant mortality, averted sexually transmitted Infections, improved child nutrition, child development and human capital accumulation, household consumption and income, employment opportunities and earnings, mental health and crime reduction. This gives a global benefit-cost ratio between 3.9 and 4.5. This estimate assumes that the invested amount is divided equally between the three programmes, that the invested amount of each programme is distributed across world regions based on their share of the total global population of adolescents, and that in the case of regions without evidence on one of the above three programmes, we take the average benefit-cost ratios of similar programmes around the world as a proxy. For details on the methodology see the longer paper on the SSRN pre-print repository.¹⁷

Estimating the social, economic and health returns from multisectoral programming for adolescent girls in Kenya

Having undertaken analyses of global rates of return, we then refined the methods to look at investments in one particular country, Kenya, as an example of how this analysis can be applied at a national level. While significant progress has been made to promote policies, standards, and guidelines that respond to adolescent needs, the prevalence of multiple risks remains high¹⁸⁻²⁰. Harmful gender norms and inequalities mean that adolescent girls also face greater risks, compared to their male peers²¹. Adolescent girls experience rates of new HIV infection that are six times higher than adolescent boys, and completion of secondary education, a cornerstone of empowerment, also remains elusive for most adolescent girls^{22,23}. While there is wide variation across regions, nationally, 23% of girls are married before 18, and the rate of adolescent pregnancy is 15%^{24,25}.

We used economic modelling methods to evaluate the expected cost and gender-specific impacts of a scaling up a combined package of adolescent responsive SRHR services, the national cash transfers for orphans and vulnerable children programme, and gender-responsive parenting programmes across Kenya. Our impact model compared two scenarios between 2024 and 2034. An unchanged policy scenario, and an intervention scenario with progressive scale up of i) adolescent SRHR services through improvements to 2320 primary healthcare facilities, training of 3,740 community health workers, and training of 15,600 peer providers; ii) the national cash transfer for orphans and vulnerable children programme to 333,000 additional families; and iii) parenting support to 122,000 adolescent girls and their caregivers across Kenya over the next 10-years. All programmes reached their highest coverage by 2029, and then maintained at that level until 2034.

We found that over ten years, our Intervention scenario would cost USD 234 million dollars, and compared to an unchanged scenario, would avert 120,000 teenage pregnancies, 2,660 cases of new HIV infection, 5,920 cases of child marriage, 8,510 cases of sexual violence, and 54,400 cases of emotional or physical violence; while supporting 226,000 additional years of schooling, and resulting in USD 886 million dollars in increased labour market productivity. Through parenting support, we would also expect to see significant improvements in adolescent mental health that would be critical for wellbeing. However, we were unable to estimate the magnitude of this impact. Full details of our methodological approach are also available on the SSRN pre-print repository.²⁶ We use an education transition model similar to that used by UNESCO, Avenir Health's health impact assessment model Spectrum, and our own peer-reviewed violence model to estimate the expected cost and gender-specific impacts of selected interventions. We sourced model parameters for impact from published evidence on adolescent SRHR services, cash transfers, and parenting support; for costs from the published literature and Global Parenting Initiative, and demographic and health statistics from the 2022 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, and the 2019 Violence Against Children Survey.²⁷⁻²⁹

Priority recommendations based on these reviewing these findings and with UNICEF Gender Programme colleagues

1. Significant scale up of global overseas development assistance investment in combination packages of interventions with multisectoral impacts to accelerate adolescent girls' rights, aligned with adolescent girls' priorities. Combining cash transfers, SRHR and parenting is not the only model but is one such evidence-based model that has strong potential for impact at scale.
2. Conduct national analyses of the expected returns of investing in combination packages of interventions with multisectoral impacts for adolescent girls using economic modelling methods that allow for the evaluation of packages, and for achieving multiple outcomes simultaneously.
3. Ensure that policymakers and decision-makers are clear that "what can be counted is not all that counts" - adolescent girls have spoken clearly about the importance of investing in their leadership, agency and advocacy, and tackling the root causes of gender inequalities. Investments in these areas are a critical part of a holistic agenda to advance adolescent girls' rights and empowerment today and over the life course.

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