



The Impacts of the Graduation Approach on Health and Women's Empowerment

Introduction

Poverty is not just about lack of money—it's a complex web of challenges that trap families in hardship (Balboni et al. 2021, Barrett et al. 2016). BRAC created the Graduation approach to break the poverty trap by tackling extreme poverty from

all angles. Graduation's impacts on monetary poverty are well known, but impacts on other key outcomes are less understood. Below are key points to understand the impacts of Graduation on health and women's empowerment.

Health and the Graduation Approach



- 1. Poverty affects health in various ways including through poor nutrition, chronic stress, and limited healthcare access.** These factors contribute to long-term physical and psychological consequences, making it harder for individuals to break free from poverty. The effects are particularly severe during early brain development, when nutrition and stimulation are critical for cognitive growth (Carneiro et al. 2021). Without intervention, these disadvantages can compound over time, perpetuating poverty across generations.
- 2. Extreme poverty and poor health create a vicious cycle.** Health emergencies can push families deeper into poverty through lost work and medical debt, while poverty increases health risks through limited access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare services. [The WHO and World Bank estimate](#) that in 2017, healthcare costs pushed over half a billion people into or deeper into extreme poverty.

3. **There is evidence that the Graduation approach leads to increased food consumption, leading to better food security and nutrition.** Comprehensive versions of the programme, as implemented by BRAC, also connect participants to health insurance and services, and provide health education through coaches.
4. **Evidence from rigorous trials has shown that Graduation can lead to long-lasting, meaningful impacts on health, including reductions in malnutrition** (Banerjee et al.

2021, Raza et al. 2018). However, health has not been a key focus of much research.

5. **Findings on Graduation's effect on mortality are forthcoming (as of early 2025).** Evidence from studies of cash transfers suggests that health impacts may grow over time.

Evidence of Impact

While the Graduation approach was not designed with a health focus—nor have studies of the approach been designed to focus on health outcomes—various studies suggest it has positive impacts on a range of health outcomes including child health and nutrition.

A study that measured nutritional impacts of Graduation in Bangladesh using data from a randomised control trial covering 26,997 households and panel data over a four-year period found that participants' children under five were:



Some benefits extended to non-participating households in the community as well. **The nutritional improvements appear to derive from increased duration of exclusive breastfeeding and administration of Vitamin A for children, while food security and hygiene practices are associated with improvements in adults' nutritional status** (Raza et al. 2018).

*In addition, in Afghanistan, Graduation also improved child health – in one study, **the under-five diarrhea rate decreased by 8 percentage points** (Bedoya et al. 2020).*

Not all research on Graduation has found significant health impacts. The landmark six-country RCT published in Science found **only small impacts on health outcomes after one year and those impacts were no longer statistically significant by year two** (Banerjee et al. 2015). However, it is also important to note that these were average impacts across multiple countries. Long-term research in West Bengal, India – **one of the sites of a six-country study – found sustained impacts on health (0.2 standard deviations) approximately eight years after the programme ended.**

Overall, the results suggest that Graduation can have important benefits and reduce malnutrition, but very few studies have delved deep into health outcomes, particularly for children whose improved nutritional status could be an important pathway for intergenerational impacts. Some very early results suggest that adding a focus on reducing stunting to the programme may also grow such impacts. Future research is needed to more precisely measure health impacts, as well as to know if programmes with a health focus have greater impacts on health.

Women's Empowerment and the Graduation Approach



- 1. Women in extreme poverty face unique challenges.** Beyond economic hardship, they battle unequal gender dynamics that restrict their potential: limited asset ownership, constrained mobility, overwhelming unpaid care work, and reduced access to education, healthcare, and markets. Discriminatory social norms further expose them to early marriage, gender-based violence, and exploitation.
- 2. The Graduation approach aims to address both the economic and social barriers women in extreme poverty face.** By targeting resources to women, it aims to equip women to become more empowered, confident, and financially independent, granting them more agency and control over decisions affecting their lives.
- 3. Rigorous research has found that Graduation can increase women's empowerment.** A systematic review found that that social and economic interventions like

Graduation reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) and controlling behaviors, improve women's economic wellbeing, enhance relationship quality, increase empowerment and social capital, motivate new help-seeking behaviors and collective action, diminish social acceptability of IPV, and produce more equitable gender norms (Bourey et al. 2015).

- 4. However, in certain contexts, targeted resources to women has led to blowback from male spouses.** In the DRC, a Graduation programme increased intimate partner violence (Angelluci et al. 2023) and in northern Uganda spouses asserted more control over finances and freedom (Blattman et al. 2016). Including couples and/or family coaching that addresses gender norms and encourages cooperation may mitigate potential for negative effects and increase the economic impacts of the programme (Ismayilova et al. 2018).



Evidence of Impact

A [J-PAL review found positive impacts on women's empowerment](#) in eight out of the eleven studies they reviewed that measured this outcome. For example:

- **In Nepal,** Graduation participants were **40%** more likely to have control over decisions regarding livestock sales and **35%** more likely to control the income earned from livestock (Janzen et al. 2021).
- **In Niger,** Graduation participants had positive sustained effects on an index of women's control over their earnings, productive activities, social support, and social standing (Bossurroy et al. 2022).

Some Graduation programmes have integrated specific gender-sensitive components to evaluate if they produce larger impacts on women's outcomes.

- **In the DRC,** women in a Graduation programme had higher levels of autonomy, more sense of control over their lives, and short-term improvements in ideas of the role of women in society, compared to women in the control group. However, some women experienced more intimate-partner violence (IPV). Including a men's engagement component in the programme did not change the interventions' effects (Angelluci et al. 2023).
- **In Burkina Faso,** a Graduation-style programme increased women's financial autonomy and quality of marital relationships. Women also reported a significant reduction in emotional spousal violence in the past year, with a greater impact on households that also received a family coaching intervention (Ismayilova et al. 2018).

However, not all studies of Graduation-like programmes have found a statistically significant impact on women's empowerment:

- **In Uganda,** researchers found a positive, but insignificant, impact on empowerment from a Graduation-style programme, though the picture is nuanced (Blattman et al. 2016).

- **In Ghana,** researchers found small, insignificant impacts on female empowerment. The paper does not provide an analysis of the findings (Banerjee et al. 2022).

Evidence from Malawi suggests that including a monthly couple's training that covers topics such as how to increase cooperation and mitigate conflict can have a significant positive impact on both economic outcomes and women's empowerment (Bedi et al. 2022).

Similarly, in the Burkina Faso study mentioned above (Ismayilova et al. 2018), adding a gender-sensitive family coaching component to a Graduation intervention led to larger effects on key outcomes including women's empowerment.

To further make sense of the mixed evidence, one might look to a [qualitative analysis](#) by Laslow (2019) that found three key elements that appear to make a difference:

- *Regular and frequent coaching/mentoring.*
- *Group-based activities that allow women a safe space to build social capital and take on community roles.*
- *Involving and sensitising men and boys from the beginning of the programme (a men-only sensitisation in the DRC was not effective, while couples sessions in Malawi and family sessions in Burkina Faso both had positive impacts).*

The author of the qualitative analysis concludes that the potential for these programmes to be truly transformational for women is hindered "by the lack of childcare options as women have to juggle caring for children with added responsibilities from the programme."

This is an area of further inquiry both for research and for programmatic understanding, as for example, a few urban Graduation programmes currently being designed include childcare or creches as a key component of the programme.

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