Innovations for Poverty Action

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## Building Women's Economic and Social Empowerment

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In this study, IPA researchers studied whether the most vulnerable women could start and sustain small businesses. They evaluated a program by AVSI Uganda, the Women's INcome Generating Support (WINGS) program. WINGS offered extremely poor people basic business skills training, ongoing mentorship, and cash grants with a purchasing power of $375.

WINGS focused on young people in rural northern Uganda, especially women, who lost nearly everything after 20 years of war. Nearly all livestock were stolen, nearly all homes were destroyed, and farm land become overgrown.

16 months after the grants, WINGS participants doubled their microenterprise ownership and earnings. Income gains were about five times the cost of the program. But in spite of these economic gains, WINGS had little effect on social integration, health, or empowerment after 16 months.

The message: the poorest women have high returns to cash, training and supervision. Not only can cash-centered programs help the poorest start and sustain microenterprises, but they do so cost-effectively. Moving ahead, there are ways to improve cost-effectiveness, and programs should note that higher incomes alone may not address women's social and personal challenges.

### Context

Twenty years of war have left northern Ugandans impoverished. For instance, in 2007, AVSI and two IPA researchers surveyed more than 1300 young men and women aged 14 to 35 in northern Uganda, including several hundred formerly abducted by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army. The evidence, along with program experience in northern Uganda, suggested that programs tended to emphasize social and psychological wounds, even though most people were quite resilient. Meanwhile, programs often ignored young people's top priority: economic recovery.

The research also highlighted huge gender gaps in education and income. Women tended to be much poorer and vulnerable than men after the war.

In order to help the poorest raise their incomes, in 2009 AVSI identified 120 small villages that were beginning to rebuild. They asked each community to identify the 15 poorest young adults, with an emphasis on women. The resulting 1800 people were age 27, had just 2.8 years of schooling on average, and 86 percent were women. The most common economic activities were farming and casual labor, and they worked about 15 hours a week for a few dollars in income.

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