

A photograph of a smiling woman with short dark hair, wearing a colorful patterned top, sitting between two young children. The child on the left is a girl with curly hair wearing a light blue shirt, and the child on the right is a boy with curly hair wearing a light blue shirt and blue pants. They are all sitting outdoors in front of a large tree with green leaves.

RESEARCH IN BRIEF: **LINKING** *children's wellbeing with women's empowerment*

**THIS
MEANS
THE
WORLD**

“If we are not aware about our own rights, how we ensure our own wellbeing? ... When educated, we can know all about our rights, get employment opportunities and make a better life for ourselves.”

– Pinky, 16, a World Vision program participant (Nepal)

We know that supporting women’s empowerment and accelerating gender equality are vital to a country’s development.

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right; it’s also essential for raising safe and healthy children. That’s why, thanks to new research, World Vision is demonstrating how gender equality and women’s empowerment are prerequisites for children’s wellbeing.

WE KNOW EMPOWERED WOMEN CREATE STRONGER COMMUNITIES. SO WHY THE RESEARCH?

World Vision engages communities around the world to support women’s empowerment and address the power dynamics and structures that reinforce gendered inequalities and expose women and girls to violence. As part of this work, World Vision Australia recognised a need to better understand **why women’s empowerment is so vital to the wellbeing of children.**

Knowing that women’s empowerment and gender equality influence the opportunities, health and happiness of children is not enough; we need to understand the pathways behind this connection. World Vision has compiled important evidence to clearly demonstrate how:



1. The wellbeing of girls and boys is influenced by their mother’s wellbeing and empowerment;



2. Gender inequality in families and communities negatively impacts girls and boys throughout their lives; and,



3. Adolescent girls and boys face even more pressure to follow harmful norms and practices, affecting their wellbeing and development.

Our research draws on evidence from internationally recognised external literature, including analyses of survey data and quantitative and qualitative studies.

This new body of evidence will help development workers understand how the links between women’s empowerment and children’s wellbeing influence their work. They’ll be better placed to prioritise measures to support women’s and girls’ empowerment and gender equality alongside child wellbeing, including across such areas as child protection and participation, economic development, education, health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene.



(Cover) Channels of Hope for Gender encourages respectful relationships between girls and boys. Vanuatu, 2017.

As a mother of 7, Esperance’s ability to make and act on decisions for herself and her family will be critical to her children’s future. Burundi, 2018.

WHAT WE FOUND

For women and girls to be truly empowered, their agency and voice must be recognised. They must have access to services and opportunities; the freedom to make decisions and participate in society; and a sense of wellbeing and inclusion in equitable systems. These seven conditions – or ‘empowerment domains’ – were used in our research to define women’s empowerment, drawing on World Vision’s *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Theory of Change*.

WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT MEANS



1. Agency



2. Voice



3. Access



4. Decision making



5. Participation



6. Wellbeing



7. Equitable systems

Links were found between all seven empowerment domains and the wellbeing of children. We found that:

A woman’s education level is strongly linked to positive education outcomes for her children.

More education correlated with an increase in the child’s years of schooling. Research found a mother’s level of education also influences her daughter’s school enrolment; mothers with a basic education are also more likely to educate their children, especially their daughters.

Women and girls who eat well have healthier children.

We found that women receiving adequate nutrition before, during and after pregnancy, resulted in better nutrition for their children in utero and early infancy, leading to healthier growth in children. Inversely, poor nutrition in women and girls is linked to low birth weights in infants, which leads to higher neonatal illness and mortality rates.

Women with higher education levels are more resilient and healthier – along with their children.

Literacy and educational attainment in women and girls are associated with positive outcomes such as delayed marriage, increased contraceptive use, higher body mass index and better economic outcomes. Our research also found that higher levels of education, including the ability to read and more years of school attendance, have positive benefits for children such as lower infant mortality rates, higher probability of survival past five years, increased breastfeeding and higher immunisation rates. Mothers are also more likely to purify water, recognise and seek treatment for common illnesses in their children and more likely to give their babies and toddlers more nutritious food.

Children are healthier when their mothers have the power to make decisions for their family.

Data suggests that women who freely make decisions within their households have greater influence on food budgeting and allocation. In some countries and regions, where men make decisions about food production and purchase, women and girls often lack access to nutritional food, while in others, women and girls tend to eat last and least. Other studies show that the greater a woman’s autonomy in her household, the greater the wellbeing and nutrition of her children. A woman’s household agency was even found to have a positive effect on her children’s physical growth.

When women have economic opportunities and the freedom to decide how to spend their income, they support their children's health, nutrition and education needs.

In many nations, women are more likely than men to spend the income they control on food, healthcare and education for their children. Greater economic opportunities for women can also influence the value that families and communities place on girls, increasing support for girls' education.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and violence against children in any community directly affects the wellbeing of women and girls, as well as child health.

IPV has immediate and long-term physical, sexual and mental consequences for women and girls. It influences women's wellbeing and participation in families, communities and societies, as well as their mental health, which in turn impacts the health and wellbeing of their children. Children can experience short and long-term impacts from witnessing IPV, even when they are not physically or sexually harmed themselves. ***A child exposed to violence, either as a victim of abuse or as a witness of IPV, may be more likely to experience or perpetrate violence later in life***, and those born to women who experience IPV are more likely to experience psychosomatic complaints, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, insomnia, self-harm and aggressive behaviours.

Harmful traditional practices rooted in gender inequality, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting, have devastating, lifelong impacts on girls, women and their children.

Girls who marry early face a higher risk of adolescent pregnancy, of dying in childbirth, of suffering intimate partner violence, and of psychiatric disorders in adulthood. Their children are also more likely to die within their first year. Girls who undergo female genital mutilation are at increased risk of infection, haemorrhage and shock immediately after the procedure. Mutilation also increases a woman's risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. Women are at increased risk of miscarriage, stillbirth and bacterial infections. Newborn deaths are also higher.

Stigma around periods means disrupted schooling for girls.

Schools that lack menstrual hygiene facilities, supplies, support and education force many girls to stay home. Gender-based norms and stigmas around menstruation and sanitation compromise the health of girls and can expose them to violence. These stigmas also influence the feelings girls associate with menstruation and, for some, limit the social support available to them.

Adolescence is a critical life stage for the wellbeing of girls and boys.

In adolescence, the differences between genders are increasingly marked. From ages 12 to 18, both girls and boys experience strong enforcement of gender norms by parents and peers, within schools and through other community and social institutions. Gendered differences between girls and boys become increasingly marked in adolescence; gender norms for girls expose them to higher risk of poor mental health, intimate partner violence and sexual violence. Early adolescence (10-14 years) is a window of opportunity to build positive and equitable gender norms and work with boys and girls to become positive role models of change.



Joyce teaches children about respectful relationships between girls and boys at Sunday school, using World Vision's Channels of Hope for Gender approach. Vanuatu, 2017.



Faduma Abdikadir, and her daughter Hawa Hirsi Farah, in front of their house. Mothers have major influence on whether girls undergo FGM. Somalia, 2021.

HOW IS WORLD VISION SUPPORTING THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS?

World Vision has identified gender inequality as a key driver of extreme child vulnerability. That's why gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are so critical to achieving our goal for sustained child wellbeing. We're also strengthening our commitment to gender equality as part of our current global strategy, [Our Promise Phase Two: Going Further than We Imagined](#) (2021-25). Meanwhile, a revised organisation-wide Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy is guiding deeper integration of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) across all programming, advocacy, communications, marketing, fundraising and institutional practices.

We work with women and girls to strengthen their agency and foster an enabling environment. We collaborate with community members – women, girls, men and boys – and work alongside relevant government entities, UN agencies, international and local NGOs, civil society, churches and multi-faith actors to build and sustain equitable social norms, relations, structures and policies. This includes work that addresses diverse forms of violence against women and girls, such as [female genital mutilation](#), [child marriage](#) and [intimate partner violence](#).

"Gender equality remains the greatest human rights challenge of our time."

– António Guterres, UN Secretary-General

CHANGE IN ACTION

World Vision uses several approaches to address gender inequality and empower women and girls. Here are some highlights from the field:

Empowering women through increased income and jobs

- We help women increase their income and access new opportunities, resources and services, including access to finance. Key to this is our work engaging the private sector on the business case for gender equality and inclusive business models that include women as consumers, employees and producers. We also engage men as allies in women's economic empowerment in their communities and households by addressing harmful social and gender norms about women's roles as economic actors, their workloads and status in the family, enabling them to succeed and thrive. **Women's Economic Empowerment** is an official supporting approach within the World Vision International Livelihoods Sector Approach to improve women's economic advancement, access and agency, as well as promoting more equitable systems. Examples of this approach can be found in [Bangladesh](#) and [Sri Lanka](#), where a [holistic approach](#) has supported women and people with disability to participate in and benefit from more inclusive markets.

Engaging men and fathers

- We engage men to work alongside their partners through **male engagement or MenCare groups**. Originally designed in collaboration with international NGO Promundo, the groups bring fathers and couples together to critically reflect on societal norms and beliefs that perpetuate unequal gender and power dynamics in their families. The model has been adapted to support women's economic empowerment, as well as to support women and girls through reliable access to food and nutrition. In Bangladesh, for example, this approach has been adapted and implemented in projects funded by the [USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, Global Affairs Canada \(GAC\)](#) and the [Australian Government](#).

Protecting and empowering children

- World Vision's [Safe and Nurturing Schools](#) approach works to address violence in schools, including gender-based violence against girls, while our [IMPACT+](#) youth clubs foster positive skills, behaviours and attitudes in adolescents, encouraging them to get involved in their communities. Originally developed by World Vision partner New Horizons Foundation, a Romania-based NGO specialising in youth development, IMPACT+ clubs support young women and men to learn about gender, violence, power and discrimination, healthy relationships and sexual education. Meanwhile, World Vision's global campaign [It Takes a World to End Violence against Children](#) works to address context-specific forms of violence against children, including child marriage, child trafficking and sexual violence.

Reducing violence against women with faith and community leaders

- World Vision works with faith leaders and faith communities through its [Channels of Hope for Gender](#) and **Child Protection** approaches, which address religious and social norms that limit the ability of women and girls to make choices in their lives without fear of violence or stigma. In [Vanuatu](#), World Vision supports faith and community leaders through workshops, mentoring, peer support groups and specialist training. These support leaders to model positive gender norms and relationships, promote gender equality and anti-violence messages and safely manage and respond to cases of violence in consultation with local protection service providers. Leaders also facilitate [small group therapy](#) for men who use violence.
- To complement World Vision's long-standing work with Channels of Hope, we've launched a new tool and counselling program, [Becoming One](#). Designed in partnership with the International Rescue Committee, Becoming One aims to prevent violence against women by providing faith leaders with practical tools to encourage positive behaviour change in families. The tool covers communication, emotional regulation, shared control over finances and household duties, sexual consent and pleasure.



Adolescent girls are at higher risk of violence, early marriage and mental health issues. World Vision's sponsorship program works to empower girls and boys. Ghana, 2019.

WHERE TO NOW?

For the first time, World Vision has an evidence base that shows how gender equality and women's empowerment are prerequisites for children's wellbeing. This research underscores the importance of global efforts to increase the agency and voice of women and girls, whether by focusing on the economic skills and enterprises of women or the education of girls. Empowered women and girls drive positive change within their families, communities and societies.

Thanks to this research, we've identified additional areas to explore through further study and programming. These include working with women to ensure their wellbeing, while also engaging them in their role as primary caregivers; addressing intimate partner violence alongside child protection efforts; and ramping up our work in women's economic empowerment and the empowerment of adolescent girls and boys.

Our findings are complemented by recent research conducted by World Vision's Middle East and Eastern Europe Regional Office (MEERO). Empowered Women, Empowered Children collected and analysed primary data to see how women's empowerment directly relates to their children's well-being, looking at both [fragile states](#) and [transitioning economies](#). This evidence base has helped to highlight strengths, areas for improvement and strategic entry points to strengthen gender equality programming among girls, boys, women and men within World Vision's existing work.



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Acting collectively is central to women's empowerment. Bangladesh, 2018.

LEARN MORE

Want to learn more about this research?
Find the literature review and full research bibliography [here](#).



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