The Population Council designs and evaluates programs that give girls the skills to improve their social, economic, and educational outcomes and put them on a path to healthy, productive adulthood.

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GIRLS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES FACE SERIOUS OBSTACLES

ONLY 1 IN 5 girls in sub-Saharan Africa will be enrolled in secondary school.

14 MILLION girls under age 18 worldwide will get married (38,000 today; 13 in the past 30 seconds).

1 IN 5 girls worldwide will have given birth by age 18.

THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF INVESTING IN GIRLS ARE UNDENIABLE

RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT:

Girls with eight years of education are four times less likely to be married as children.

If a mother has five years of schooling, her children are 40% more likely to live past the age of 5.

Women and girls invest 90% of the income from their work into their families.

4X

40%

90%

SOURCES: Data from Population Council, UNESCO, UNFPA, United Nations Foundation, World Bank, and WHO.

COVER PHOTO: © RICHARD LORD
GIRLS LEADING THE WAY

by Peter J. Donaldson

By the time Tigest turned 12, her family in the rural Amhara region of Ethiopia found it too costly to keep her in school and felt she was ready for marriage. In 2012, Tigest joined Berhane Hewan (Light for Eve), a Population Council initiative to provide unmarried adolescent girls with support to stay in school and provide communities with information on the negative consequences of child marriage. Since then, Tigest has remained in school and her parents have agreed to postpone her marriage.

This year, Berhane Hewan received first prize in a UNFPA contest to identify good practices related to adolescents and youth. The project, conducted in collaboration with the Ethiopia Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, has reached more than 20,000 girls. Council researchers are examining which aspects of the program are the most cost-effective ways to reduce child marriage.

The Council is building a large body of research evaluating programs to improve the lives of adolescent girls. In Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Tanzania, and Zambia, more than 42,000 adolescent girls are participating in randomized, controlled trials—the gold standard of research—to evaluate different interventions. We are beginning a five-year project to study ways to improve the well-being of 100,000 poor and vulnerable girls in six states of northern Nigeria. Study findings will help governments and NGOs invest their resources in areas that will make the biggest difference in the lives of these girls.

In this issue of Momentum, you will read about how the Council is collecting evidence about how to help girls delay marriage (page 4), new data that challenges conventional wisdom about migrant girls (page 6), effective ways to address violence against girls (page 8), evidence about the impact of pregnancy on girls’ schooling (page 10), and how another Council-supported program improves educational opportunities for the poorest girls in Upper Egypt (page 12). On pages 14–15, Alejandra Colom, who oversees the Council’s programs in Guatemala, describes her work, and Dr. Andrea Edlow, a donor to the Council, talks about her support.

A POPULATION COUNCIL program has produced significant delays in child marriage and increases in school enrollment.

The Population Council designs and evaluates programs that give girls the skills to improve their social, economic, and educational outcomes, safeguard their reproductive health, and put them on a path to healthy, productive adulthood.

When a girl learns to read, write, do numbers, and safeguard her health, there is a multiplier effect that improves her family’s and her community’s chances for the future.
THE PROBLEM  Child marriage abruptly ends a girl’s childhood and disrupts her education, forcing her to take on roles for which she is not emotionally and physically ready. The practice—which occurs before a girl reaches age 18 and sometimes as young as age 5—not only violates a girl’s human rights and endangers her health, but also often anchors her in poverty. In many cases married girls are forced into sex, and they are likely to become mothers before their bodies and minds are mature. Many girls who marry early have a husband who is considerably older, and have limited or no household authority. If current trends continue, between 2011 and 2020 more than 140 million girls worldwide will become child brides.

THE PROGRESS  Population Council research in Ethiopia demonstrated that it is possible to increase the age of marriage in locations where child marriage is entrenched. Through a partnership with local government in the rural Amhara region, where rates of child marriage are among the highest in the world, unmarried adolescent girls were provided with school supplies to encourage families to keep them in school and unmarried. Community-based mentors and village priests also worked to raise communities’ awareness of the dangers of child marriage. Families were also promised a conditional cash transfer (in the form of livestock) if a girl remained unmarried and in school. An evaluation of this approach found that girls aged 10–14 were 90 percent less likely to be married in the area where the program was implemented than girls in the area that did not have the program, and three times more likely to be in school. Council researchers are now implementing multiple approaches in different districts and collecting data on associated costs. The results of the research will give the Ethiopian government information regarding how to expand successful approaches across the country. The Council is also collaborating with governments and local NGOs to introduce these approaches in Burkina Faso and Tanzania.

THE IMPACT  In Ethiopia, the Population Council conducted one of the first rigorously evaluated projects with the explicit objective of increasing the age at marriage. The Council is one of the few organizations whose programs, in collaboration with local partners in sub-Saharan Africa, have demonstrated significant delays in marriage and increases in school enrollment.

DONORS AND PARTNERS  Amhara Regional Bureau of Women, Children, and Youth; Ethiopia Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs; Tabora Development Foundation Trust; US Agency for International Development

The Council’s work has raised the profile of adolescent girls as key players in global health and development and demonstrates success in delaying child marriage.
Girls on the Move makes key recommendations for improving the lives of girls who migrate. These include: filling critical evidence gaps to shed light on migrant girls’ experiences and to evaluate and improve programs; connecting girls to safe places to stay, services, and networks upon arrival; creating time and space for migrant girls to meet with peers, mentors, and support networks; and maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks of migration for adolescent girls by increasing their visibility in policy engagement and advocacy efforts.

The full report can be downloaded at www.popcouncil.org/GirlsOnTheMove

DONORS AND PARTNERS The Nike Foundation, United Nations Foundation
THE PROBLEM  According to UN Women, about 150 million girls under age 18 are victims of sexual violence every year. Effects can be emotionally and physically devastating. Long-term health effects can include sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancy. Violence can also limit a girl’s opportunity for education if a school is unsafe, hindering a girl’s prospect of earning a sustainable income.

THE PROGRESS  The Council works to identify the causes and consequences of gender inequality and GBV, and conducts and evaluates programs that build the protective assets of adolescent girls. In two countries, the Council is working to strengthen girls’ skills, knowledge, and safety nets in an effort to reduce their experience of violence. In Guatemala, the Council, with local and international partners, started Abriendo Oportunidades (Creating Opportunities) to provide vulnerable indigenous Mayan girls with skill-building, mentorship, and leadership opportunities. One example is an activity called “safescaping,” in which girls use GPS technology to map safe and unsafe areas in their communities and present the maps to community leaders to prompt discussions about improving girls’ safety.

Work is also being done in Bangladesh to create safe spaces and increase GBV awareness. Three years ago, the Council began the Growing Up Safe and Healthy (SAFE) project, which refers girls who report abuse within the home to joint health and legal services in a one-stop setting. SAFE also offers sessions for women and girls on how to protect themselves against sexual and reproductive health risks and GBV.

THE IMPACT  Both of these projects engage directly with girls to strengthen their social networks, resources, and safety nets to reduce their vulnerability to violence. Communities in Guatemala have responded to girls’ safescaping maps by establishing safety commissions to track girls’ safety throughout the year and by institutionalizing safescaping via the Ministry of Education. The Council’s work in Bangladesh is the first of its kind to focus on consent and choice as critical parameters in asserting sexual and reproductive health rights among girls. Evaluation results are anticipated in 2014.

DONORS AND PARTNERS  Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands; The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b); Marie Stopes/Bangladesh; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; UK Department for International Development; We Can End All Violence Against Women/Bangladesh

PROTECTING GIRLS FROM GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

PHOTO BY PHIL BORGES

The Council works to reach girls at the highest risk of gender-based violence (GBV), to identify safe spaces for them, help them develop safety plans, and protect them as they seek health and legal support.
THE EFFECT OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY ON GIRLS’ SCHOOLING

The Population Council conducted a study to determine the extent to which school dropout among girls in sub-Saharan Africa is related to pregnancy.

THE PROBLEM
More than 14 percent of girls aged 15–19 in sub-Saharan Africa get pregnant, and in Malawi one in every four teen girls has had a child. Girls who get pregnant do not complete as many years of schooling as those who do not get pregnant. Would these girls who became pregnant have left school anyway for other reasons? Without a better understanding of this situation, it is difficult to create effective programming to prevent teen pregnancy and keep girls in school.

THE PROGRESS
Since 2007, the Population Council has conducted the Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Study, a multi-year survey following 2,649 adolescents who were aged 14–17 when they were first interviewed. The students enrolled in the study are from two districts of Malawi, a country with high primary school enrollment, but where more than one-third of girls aged 20–24 gave birth before the age of 18. Data from this study illuminate the various reasons girls drop out of school.

THE IMPACT
The study found that among girls who were sexually active, those who became pregnant had been doing just as well in school as those who did not become pregnant. “That finding suggests that these students were as committed to school as their peers who were sexually active and did not get pregnant,” said Barbara Mensch, the Council’s senior study researcher.

The study also found that girls who left school because of childbearing were less likely to return than those who left for other reasons. Young mothers wanting to reenroll faced many barriers, including extensive paperwork and rules that prevented reenrollment until six months after giving birth. “If we can increase access to family planning for sexually active adolescents, we might reduce school dropout related to pregnancy,” said Council researcher Erica Soler-Hampejsek. “And eliminating barriers to reenrollment is essential to getting young mothers back into school where they can gain skills and knowledge they urgently need.”

DONORS AND PARTNERS
THE PROBLEM  In rural Egypt, the transition to adulthood is especially hard for girls because they have limited opportunities outside the home and often marry before age 18. While Egypt has made significant gains in school enrollment over the past decade, many girls, particularly in rural Upper Egypt, never enroll in school or drop out after one or two years.

THE PROGRESS  Launched in 2001, the Council’s program, Ishraq (“Sunrise” in Arabic) began as a pilot in four communities of Upper Egypt. Ishraq enrolled 278 girls and provided them with safe spaces to learn, play, and grow and a second chance for education. The program, for 12–15-year-old out-of-school girls, offered an informal setting for learning, and helped girls build their self-confidence. The girls met at youth centers, which had traditionally been male-only venues. Ishraq also offered girls an opportunity to play sports, helping them build and maintain friendships with other girls and become physically fit.

In the past decade, Ishraq has reached 3,321 girls in 54 villages and more than 5,000 family members and community leaders. The Council has expanded the program to enable girls to obtain official identification cards, which are often needed for accessing services.

THE IMPACT  The Council’s evaluation of Ishraq demonstrated a remarkably positive effect on girls’ lives. Girls improved literacy, developed life skills, increased self-confidence, had greater mobility and participation in the community, and built social support with other girls. Eighty-eight percent of Ishraq girls were able to write their sibling’s name, compared to 36 percent of girls in the control group; one-third of Ishraq girls planned to pursue further education, compared to 5 percent in the control group; and 71 percent of Ishraq girls had more than one nonrelative friend, compared to 44 percent in the control group.

Ishraq also improved family attitudes toward gender equality, girls’ participation in decisionmaking, girls’ mobility, and participation in sports. More than 80 percent of program participants who took the national literacy exam passed, with more than half of those girls going on to formal schooling. Today, Council staff members are working with Ministry of Youth and Ministry of Education officials, school administrators, and parents to support Ishraq girls and to replicate the program in new communities, even in Egypt’s challenging political environment.

DONORS AND PARTNERS  Adult Education Agency, Caritas, Centre for Development and Population Activities, The Dickler Family Foundation, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, The Ford Foundation/Egypt, Ministry of Youth, National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, Nike Foundation, Save the Children, UK Department for International Development
A CONVERSATION WITH

ALEJANDRA COLOM
PROGRAM COORDINATOR IN THE POPULATION COUNCIL’S GUATEMALA OFFICE

With a background in conservation and sustainability, how did your career evolve to encompass reproductive rights and gender issues?

I believe that people’s ability to exercise their reproductive rights is a key component to a healthy, sustainable environment. Women suffer disproportionately from the effects of a degraded environment: for example, women walking longer distances in search of water for cooking and washing, or women with large families dealing with natural disasters. Environmental issues are interconnected with women’s reproductive health. My prior work centered on local populations’ relationship with natural resources, and the consequences of growing population pressure on these resources. As a result, I decided to approach conservation and sustainability by focusing on adolescent girls’ rights and health, and educational, social, and economic opportunities to help empower girls to create healthy, economically productive communities that count on sustainable natural resources.

Why do you think that there is a growing interest in adolescent girls in the developing world?

Organizations and policymakers are paying attention to statistics and research that demonstrate that countries cannot develop unless they increase their investment in girls and close the gap that separates vulnerable girls from the rest of the population. Girls’ rights are more visible now, but relevant girl programming that is tailored to specific settings is needed to reach the most vulnerable populations.

What do you consider to be the greatest challenge in your work to empower girls in Guatemala?

Empowering girls requires investments in health, education, and the justice system, but also confronting prejudice and discrimination. These injustices are often described as “cultural differences” as a way to avoid discussions about economic inequality, racism, and policies that have segregated and hurt rural populations.

What is a success that you are proud of?

Some funding is wasted on programs that are not responsive to local needs. I would say that our program, Abriendo Oportunidades—a national program providing the most vulnerable indigenous Mayan girls and young women with professional mentorship and leadership opportunities—is one of the most responsive in Guatemala to input from adolescent girls. Proof of this is the high level of acceptance among mothers and the girls who participate.

What do you wish people knew about the Population Council?

The Council is different from other organizations because its interventions are evidence-based. Programs are designed through proven methodologies, and research activities are conducted under strict standards. Our rights-based approach to working with vulnerable girls and adolescents is different from others because it addresses issues that compromise the health and well-being of participants in a culturally relevant way.

ANDREA EDLOW
COUNCIL DONOR AND OB/GYN AT TUFTS MEDICAL CENTER IN BOSTON

I was interested in women’s health and empowerment at an early age. In high school in New Mexico, I worked with Planned Parenthood to study sex education. I saw that women’s ability to stay in school, and ultimately to achieve their personal goals and full potential, depended on accurate knowledge of how to prevent pregnancy and on the availability of effective contraception. In medical school, obstetrics and gynecology was a natural fit for my long-standing commitment to women’s health.

The Population Council’s mission aligns with my personal beliefs and work as an OB/GYN. The ability to decide if and when to have children has a direct impact, not only on the lives of women planning their families, but on the economic and moral strength of the societies in which these women live.

I know from my experience working with women that the choice of contraceptive is a personal one and there is no “one size fits all.” What may work for a 45-year-old woman in Boston, may not work for a 20-year-old in Zambia. The availability of a wide variety of contraceptives is crucial to ensuring that women can find the method that works best for them.

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The pendulum seems to be swinging away from a woman’s right to self-determination, both in the US and abroad. Whenever I feel down about attempts to restrict women’s access to family planning and safe abortion, I remind myself of what Martin Luther King said: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” My generation is now tasked with actively bending the moral arc toward justice, so as not to reverse the progress achieved by our mothers’ generation. It is our obligation to take up this cause.

My mother-in-law, Mary Edlow, has dedicated her career to helping vulnerable women improve their circumstances, so the Population Council’s mission fulfilled the interests and priorities of my in-laws, Ken and Mary. I am grateful for their generous support of the Population Council.

The Council blends research and development with local and global outreach. It recognizes that women’s access to family planning resources and HIV prevention products is critical to the success of all members of society, including men, women, and children. Supporting the Population Council is for everyone and benefits everyone.
Investing in the Poorest Girls in the Poorest Communities Helps Families, Communities, and Nations Build Healthier and More Productive Futures.

The Population Council’s research in more than a dozen countries demonstrates that when girls like Dina are given mentoring, social support, health information, financial literacy, and educational opportunities, they can begin to overcome poverty and thrive. Excluding adolescent girls from school, community participation, and meaningful livelihoods has a substantial negative impact on economic growth. By supporting the Council today, you help us and our partners conduct research to promote program and policy change to help girls lead more productive and healthier lives.

Sign up for the Population Council e-mail list:
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More than 3,000 girls have participated in the Ishraq program for 12–15-year-old out-of-school girls in rural Upper Egypt—the least developed and most economically disadvantaged region of the country—with mentors and safe spaces for informal learning and sports. The program, launched in 2001, is one of the Council’s original girls’ empowerment initiatives.

“Because I love to learn and wanted to know how to read and write, I decided to join Ishraq. The promoters were about the same age as we are, so we were not afraid of them and they treated us well. We needed someone we can trust to talk to about personal issues that we can’t discuss with our mothers. I was surprised to learn that circumcision is harmful to girls. I watched sports only on television, but I really wanted to practice sports for real. It is only through Ishraq that this dream came true.”

—DINA, ISHRAQ PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE POPULATION COUNCIL
The Population Council confronts critical health and development issues—from stopping the spread of HIV to improving reproductive health and ensuring that young people lead full and productive lives. Through biomedical, social science, and public health research in 50 countries, we work with our partners to deliver solutions that lead to more effective policies, programs, and technologies that improve lives around the world. Established in 1952 and headquartered in New York, the Council is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization governed by an international board of trustees.

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For additional information, contact:
development@popcouncil.org
877-339-0500

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