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Members of a self-help group learn about routine immunization from Jeevika Sakhi. *Photo Source:* Rukmini Devi

Women's groups have emerged as an important intervention strategy to improve gender equality, women's well-being and empowerment, and women's access to opportunities in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). While formal and informal women's groups and collectives have a long history in community development, group-based interventions have only recently become institutionalized and implemented at scale in South Asia and, increasingly, sub-Saharan Africa. For example, group-based approaches to improve access to savings and credit have expanded considerably after initial pilots with microfinance groups in South Asia and

experiments with Village Saving and Loan Associations (VSLAs) implemented by CARE in sub-Saharan Africa.¹ India's National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) aims to mobilize 70 million households into self-help groups (SHGs) as part of the largest women's group initiative in the world.² Although women's groups in sub-Saharan Africa are considerably smaller, they are growing. The Nigeria for Women Project aims to reach 324,000 women across six states in Nigeria using Women's Affinity Groups.³ In Uganda, the sustainable livelihoods subcomponent (Sustainable Livelihoods Program Plus) of the Northern Ugandan Social Action Fund (NUSAF 3) was piloted in nine districts (Kitgum, Gulu, Nebbi, Lira, Masindi, Kotido, Soroti, Butaleja, and Kapchorwa).⁴

In the past few decades, a large body of evidence has emerged examining the effectiveness of different types of women's groups, particularly economic self-help groups, savings groups, and groups that employ participatory learning and action to improve health outcomes.^{5,6,7,8} Most commonly, research has examined the impact of women's groups on outcomes such as access to savings and credit; income, asset ownership, and household expenditures; women's economic empowerment and mobility; political empowerment; and health behaviors and outcomes.^{9,10,11,12}

Although the body of evidence is growing, several evidence syntheses—including the ECWG's portfolio evaluation of the Gates Foundation's investments in women's groups—highlight significant evidence gaps on the impact, cost-effectiveness, implementation models, and scalability of women's groups.^{13,14,15,16,17} The portfolio evaluation also indicated that more uniform data collection and metrics, as well as explicit theories of change, are necessary to address global evidence gaps on women's groups.¹⁸

The ECWG was developed to strengthen, expand, and disseminate the global evidence base on women's groups and support the investments of the Gates Foundation's Gender Equality team. The ECWG includes experts from the American Institutes for Research; the Population Council; the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, at the University of Washington; and Stanford University. In December 2019, Makerere

University, in Kampala, and the Campbell Collaboration will also join the ECWG. We anticipate that Nigerian research partners will join the ECWG in 2020. The ECWG is funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The ECWG aims to (1) generate new evidence in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, with a particular emphasis on India, Nigeria, and Uganda; (2) develop guidelines for measurement and evaluation; and (3) provide technical assistance to the Gates Foundation Gender Equality team, its evaluation partners, and other stakeholders.

➤ Learning Agenda

The ECWG has identified six focus areas for our research and technical assistance in India, Nigeria, and Uganda:

1. Strengthen the **conceptual framing** of women's groups through the development of (a) a meta-framework to guide research, and (b) a working typology to describe and classify women's groups.
2. Conduct research on women's groups' **implementation models** through primary research and secondary analyses.
3. Examine the **costs and cost-effectiveness** of women's group interventions implemented at scale, using secondary data and in-depth case studies.
4. Examine the role and impact of **women's groups in their wider ecosystem**—specifically, how they interact with social protection programs—using secondary data.
5. Conduct **evidence syntheses** and meta-analyses in policy-relevant areas, such as the effect of women's groups on asset ownership, the impact of integrated microfinance and health group interventions, and country-specific evidence syntheses in Uganda and Nigeria.
6. **Improve measurement** in research on women's groups by producing guidance on measuring women's empowerment, costs and cost-effectiveness, and health outcomes.

We will disseminate evidence through peer-reviewed publications and a range of learning products, aligned with the ECWG's broader communication plan to reach researchers and policymakers with applicable evidence. Research teams composed of experienced and emerging researchers will encourage interdisciplinary research and learning on women's groups, as well as capacity building to support research beyond this agenda. Concurrently, we will work to strengthen communities of researchers focused on women's groups in Uganda, Nigeria, and India to create synergies both within and across settings.

➤ Contact Information

For more information on the learning agenda or potential areas for collaboration with the ECWG, please contact the co-principal investigators from the American Institutes for Research and the Population Council:

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