

# **A novel cash-plus intervention to safeguard sexual reproductive health and HIV vulnerabilities in young women in Cape Town, South Africa**

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## **Background**

Cash plus interventions augment cash transfers with other empowering interventions to influence behaviours. This research assesses the Women of Worth (WoW) program and evaluates the effectiveness of a cash transfer (CT) of ZAR300 (\$22USD22) conditional on attending a 12-session customised empowerment intervention to improve SRH/HIV outcomes in young women (19-24yrs) in Cape Town, South Africa.

## **Methods**

A multi-phase, mixed-methods, quasi-experimental study targeting 10 000 participants in two subdistricts was conducted. Participants were randomised 1:1 to receive the intervention with CT ("cash + care" or C+C) or without CT ("Care"). Phase 1a piloted the intervention, Phase 1b implemented an adapted intervention, and Phase 2 was an open label C+C only scale up demonstration phase. Logistic regression models were fitted with subject-specific random mixed effects, to estimate changes in self-reported HIV, behavioural and structural SRH risks from baseline to (a) end of WoW and (b) follow up (6-30months post-exposure) irrespective of WoW completion. Mixed research methods were used to optimise engagement, evaluate implementation fidelity and determine the pathways of effectiveness for the intervention.

## **Results**

The Women of Worth empowerment programme was implemented with adequate fidelity however adaptative research methods were essential for ensuring a sustained programme. 8765 (87,7%) of the 9995 WoW initiators were evaluated with 904 (10,3%); 4212 (48,1%) and 3649 (41,6%) women in Phases 1a, 1b and 2 respectively. In Phase 1a & 1b, participants in the "C+C" group were 60 times (OR 60.37; 95%CI: 17.32; 210.50.p <0.001) more likely to complete  $\geq 11$  sessions vs the "care" group. Due to high "care" group attrition, study arm estimates were pooled and showed a 3-fold (p <0.001) increase in the employment status of the Women of Worth completers compared to baseline. Changes in SRH behavioural risk factors were mixed, positively impacting experiences of gender-based violence, transactional sex and forced sex and increased uptake of contraception and STI treatments at programme completion. There was no measurable impact on self-reported HIV status. Employment status was sustained to a 2.5-fold increase (p <0.001) at a median of 15 months [IQR:13,3;17,8]. The pathway of effect for the programme was likely through the building of self-determination.

## **Conclusion**

A conditional CT contributed to retention of urban, out of school, unemployed young women in Cape Town in a SRH empowerment program which led to self-determination, and improved prospects for employment.