

Adolescent Transition to Adulthood in Urban Poverty: A Theoretical Analysis of the Girls Empowering Girls (GEG) Programme in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

Objective: Adolescence is a critical life stage, yet for many girls living in urban informal settlements, the transition to adulthood is disrupted by poverty, school exclusion, genderbased violence, and limited access to social protection. This article analyses the girls empowering girls (GEG) programme in Kampala as an adolescentresponsive urban social protection model.

Methods: A theorydriven programme analysis was conducted based on a secondary data regarding program implementation and from GEG Cohort II (2022-2025), covering 803 adolescent girls across Kampala's five divisions. Data sources included enrolment records, mentorship logs, casemanagement files, referral registers, and education and vocational tracking tools. Analysis applied a programme logic model and mechanismsofchange framework informed by general strain theory, resilience theory, social learning theory, and ecological systems theory.

Results: The programme reached highly marginalised girls, 92% of whom were out of school at enrolment. Outcomes included school reentry (574 girls), vocational enrolment (211), sustained mentorship engagement (51,069 sessions), increased completion of SRHR and protection referrals, and reduced reliance on highrisk survival strategies. Evidence indicates improved psychosocial wellbeing, helpseeking behaviour, and future orientation among participants.

Conclusion: Findings demonstrate that layered, cashplus social protection interventions can meaningfully alter adolescent transition pathways in urban poverty contexts. GEG provides a scalable framework for integrating adolescents particularly girls into national social protection systems in Uganda and similar lowresource urban settings.

Keywords: *Adolescence; Urban Poverty; Social Protection; Resilience; Girls; Uganda*

Introduction

Adolescence is a pivotal life stage marked by identity formation, increased autonomy, and social role transition. However, in low-income contexts, especially urban informal settlements, this period is characterised by accumulated risks rather than opportunity [1]. In Kampala, Uganda's capital, rapid urbanisation has led to the expansion of informal settlements such as Kisenyi, Katwe, Kamwokya, Bwaise, Kabalagala, Banda and Makerere Kivulu, where poverty, overcrowding, and weak social protection systems expose adolescents to structural and social vulnerability [2,3]. These risky environments accelerate premature adulthood while denying young people access to education, safety, and opportunity [4].

Adolescent girls are disproportionately affected due to gendered power inequalities, socio-economic marginalisation, and cultural expectations that tolerate violence, economic dependency, and early sexual debut [5].

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Adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by alcohol-related harms due to entrenched gender power imbalances and socio-economic marginalization. Limited economic opportunities, dependence on male partners, and exposure to coercive environments increase vulnerability to exploitation, transactional sex, and violence. Social norms often silence girls and restrict help-seeking, while alcohol-fueled contexts heighten risks of abuse, poor mental health, and school dropout, reinforcing cycles of inequality [6,7]. Many girls face pressures that interrupt education and push them into high-risk negative survival strategies such as transactional sex, cohabitation, child labour, and early marriage [8]. These experiences limit their capacity to transition safely to adulthood and perpetuate intergenerational poverty. Despite this, existing national programmes such as the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), Emyooga and the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) largely exclude adolescents, especially girls, from targeted social protection [9,10].

In response to these gaps, the Girls Empowering Girls (GEG) programme was piloted in Kampala as an urban social protection model. The programme addresses adolescent vulnerability through a layered intervention combining mentorship, cash transfers, life skills, referral pathways, and service linkage.

This paper analyses the theoretical basis, mechanisms of change, and policy relevance of the GEG model within Uganda's urban poverty context. Using a social protection lens, the analysis demonstrates how targeted interventions can reduce exploitation, promote education continuity, and strengthen adolescent resilience. The study contributes to scholarship on adolescent development and programme design in African urban contexts by providing practical and conceptual insights for scaling adolescent-responsive interventions. This paper examines how layered social protection interventions can alter adolescent transition pathways in urban poverty contexts. This paper is structured with a background, theoretical framework, programme description, project objectives, methodology, limitations, findings and discussion

Background: Adolescent transition in urban poverty

Adolescence is widely recognised as a critical developmental stage that shapes health, education, and socio-economic outcomes across the life course [1]. In high-income settings, this period is associated with gradual independence, guided decision-making, and structured support systems. However, in low-income urban contexts such as Kampala's informal settlements, adolescent transition is disrupted by economic deprivation, family instability, and limited access to essential services [2,3]. These structural barriers compress the space between childhood and adulthood, forcing young people, particularly girls, into premature adult responsibilities.

Urban poverty and social exclusion in Kampala

Kampala's population is growing rapidly, with over 60 percent of residents aged below 25 years [3]. Urban migration driven by rural poverty leads many youths into informal settlements where work is scarce, housing is insecure, and access to services such as healthcare, education and safety is severely limited [11]. These unregulated urban environments lack formal protection systems, making adolescent girls vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation, violence, and school dropout [8,12].

Gendered vulnerability and risk pathways

Urban poverty intersects with gender inequality to intensify risk among adolescent girls. Studies in Uganda show that school dropout, early sexual debut, teenage pregnancy, and gender-based violence are more prevalent among girls living in urban settlements than in rural areas [5]. Household poverty often drives girls into transactional sex as a survival strategy, exposing them to exploitation, coercion, and health risks including HIV and STIs [8,13]. Social norms that normalise male dominance and silence female agency further reduce girls' decision-making power and access to justice [9]. From the UAPA [6] baseline, gender dynamics, alcohol use, and structural vulnerability intersect to intensify harm among vulnerable populations. Alcohol is highly normalised, with men's drinking socially accepted while women and girls bear disproportionate consequences, including exposure to gender-based violence, economic deprivation, and exploitation. In informal settings, alcohol-fuelled environments increase risks of coercion, transactional sex, and abuse. Social norms reinforce silence,

stigma, and tolerance of violence, limiting reporting and access to support. Easy availability of cheap, informal alcohol further drives early initiation and harmful use, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of vulnerability, inequality, and social harm.

Adolescence as a window of opportunity

Despite high vulnerability, adolescence is also a period of resilience and potential. Research demonstrates that timely intervention during adolescence can significantly alter life trajectories, particularly when psychosocial support, education continuity, and economic empowerment strategies are combined [14,15]. In African contexts, delays in socio-economic independence have been conceptualized as “waithood” a period in which youth are ready for adulthood but lack the opportunities to transition fully [4]. For girls in Kampala’s slums, waithood is not passive but defined by daily struggle, risk negotiation, and limited support structures.

Theoretical framework

This study applies a multi-theoretical lens to explain adolescent vulnerability in urban poverty and the mechanisms through which the GEG programme generates change. The ecological Systems Theory was dominant complemented by other theoretical perspectives are used to guide the analysis: General strain theory, resilience theory, social learning theory, and ecological systems theory.

Ecological systems theory [16]: Ecological systems theory highlights that adolescent outcomes are shaped by multiple interconnected systems family, school, peers, and the broader socio-economic environment. Vulnerability cannot be addressed at the individual level alone; systemic structures must change. GEG links girls to schools, health centres, legal aid, and financial services, and caretaker positive parenting; creating a protective network that addresses risks across systems and caretaker positive parenting. This integrated approach demonstrates how community-based interventions can alter risk environments. Other complementary theories were general strain theory.

General strain theory [13]: General strain theory explains how structural stressors such as poverty, school exclusion and violence can lead to risky coping behaviours. Among adolescent girls in Kampala’s informal settlements, blocked opportunities and economic strain often push them into survival strategies such as transactional sex, early marriage, or labour exploitation [8]. These coping mechanisms increase vulnerability to abuse and limit long-term development. By providing predictable cash transfers and strengthening access to services, the GEG model reduces economic strain, therefore lowering engagement in harmful coping strategies. This aligns with Agnew’s argument that reducing strain decreases risk behaviours.

Resilience theory [14,17]: Resilience Theory emphasises the ability of individuals to adapt positively despite adversity. In contexts of social disadvantage, protective relationships and life skills enhance coping capacity. Adolescent girls in Kampala often lack supportive adult figures and safe spaces for personal development [12]. Through peer-to-peer mentorship, group support and life skills, GEG builds socio-emotional competence and helps girls set goals, regulate emotions, and navigate pressure key markers of resilience. The programme demonstrates that resilience is not an individual trait but an outcome of supportive systems.

Social learning theory [18]: Social Learning Theory explains how behaviour is learned through observation and reinforcement. In informal settlements, girls are often exposed to peer groups involved in crime, transactional sex, or substance abuse, which normalise risky behaviour. GEG’s peer mentorship model introduces positive social modelling, replacing harmful influences with constructive behaviour. Mentors demonstrate alternative pathways through education, training, and safety planning, helping reshape expectations and behaviours over time.

Programme description-The GEG model

The girls empowering girls (GEG) programme is an urban social protection and empowerment initiative designed to address the multidimensional risks faced by adolescent girls living in Kampala’s informal settlements. Implemented in high-density, underserved

communities, the programme responds to entrenched structural barriers including poverty, school exclusion, gender-based violence, early pregnancy, harmful alcohol and drug exposure, and limited access to youth-friendly services.

GEG targets adolescent girls aged 10 - 19 years who are out of school or at risk of dropping out, living in poverty, exposed to exploitation, or socially excluded. The programme adopts an integrated, rights-based approach that combines safe spaces, life skills education, psychosocial support, SRHR information, protection from violence and exploitation, and pathways back to education or livelihoods. By strengthening girls' agency, resilience, and social capital, GEG addresses both immediate protection needs and longer-term empowerment outcomes.

The programme was funded by The Belgium Government and implemented through a strategic partnership involving UNICEF Uganda, Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), and Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL) as the lead executing partner. This collaboration leverages UNICEF's child protection and adolescent development expertise, KCCA's mandate and reach within urban informal settlements, and UYDEL's more than three decades of experience delivering youth-centred, community-based interventions. Together, the partners ensure that GEG is locally grounded, safeguarding-compliant, and aligned with national priorities on gender equality, urban resilience, and adolescent wellbeing, while generating scalable lessons for urban girls' empowerment in low-resource settings.

Programme objectives

The overall goal of GEG is to enable safe transitions to adulthood among vulnerable adolescent girls by enhancing their wellbeing, agency, and access to protective systems. Specifically, the programme aims to:

- Reduce risk of sexual exploitation, alcohol, drug abuse, and violence.
- Support re-entry into education and vocational training.
- Strengthen life skills, self-efficacy, and goal-setting.
- Improve access to SRHR, psychosocial, and protection services.
- Promote financial literacy and economic empowerment.
- Strengthen referral and protection mechanisms in urban communities.

Programme structure and delivery

GEG is delivered through a three-pillar model.

Pillar 1: Empower - Peer mentorship

Peer mentors provide weekly mentorship sessions focusing on life skills, confidence-building, and psychosocial support. Mentors also conduct home visits, mediate with caregivers, and guide girls in developing personal goals and action plans. This pillar builds self-belief and trust key components of resilience [14].

Pillar 2: Engage - Education and service linkage

This pillar reintegrates girls into school and vocational training and links them to supportive services, including SRHR care, counselling, legal aid, and child protection case management. Through structured referral pathways, girls are connected to rights-based services that reduce vulnerability and increase safety [16].

Pillar 3: Enable - Cash transfers

Each participating girl receives a small but regular cash transfer defined by the recommended minimum expenditure basket (MEB) to reduce economic pressure and enable school continuity or training. Cash is complemented by financial literacy and savings group (VSLA)

participation, strengthening long-term economic resilience. This aligns with social protection evidence that cash-plus models are more effective than cash alone [19].

Programme reach

The programme operates across Kampala's five divisions (Kawempe, Makindye, Rubaga, Nakawa and Central Division), using a community-based delivery model. Each mentor supports an average of 15 - 17 girls, ensuring consistent follow-up and guidance. GEG is designed for scalability through integration with existing local government structures.

Methodology

Study design: This study employed a qualitative, theorydriven programme analysis rather than an experimental or quasiexperimental impact evaluation. The approach was selected to examine how and why the GEG intervention functions within complex urban poverty environments, consistent with utilisationfocused and realistinformed programme analysis approaches.

Data sources: Secondary data were drawn from GEG programme implementation between 2022 and 2025, including: (i) beneficiary enrolment and vulnerability screening tools; (ii) peermentorship session logs; (iii) education reentry and vocational training registers; (iv) cashtransfer and financialliteracy records; and (v) casemanagement and referral documentation for SRHR, GBV, disability, and psychosocial services. Triangulation across sources was used to enhance reliability.

Analytical framework: A logicmodel framework was applied to map programme inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Mechanisms of change were interpreted through four complementary theoretical lenses: General Strain Theory (economic stress reduction), Resilience Theory (psychosocial capacitybuilding), Social Learning Theory (peer modelling and behavioural change), and Ecological Systems Theory (multisystem service integration).

Limitations: Findings are based on programme monitoring data and selfreported outcomes rather than independently verified longitudinal measures. While triangulation strengthens credibility, causal attribution is limited. Future mixedmethods and longitudinal research is recommended.

Findings and Results

This section presents evidence from Cohort II of the GEG programme (2022 - 2025), demonstrating programme reach and outcomes across education, protection, financial resilience and psychosocial wellbeing. A total of 803 adolescent girls across Kampala's five divisions participated in this cohort.

Programme reach by division

The programme reached girls in all divisions of Kampala through a network of 52 trained peer mentors. On average, each mentor supported 15 - 17 girls, enabling consistent follow-up and trust-building.

Vulnerability profile of beneficiaries

The vulnerability assessment revealed that:

- 92% were out-of-school girls.
- 4% were girls living with disabilities.
- 3% were teenage mothers.
- 1% were refugee girls.

This confirms that GEG reaches girls facing layered vulnerabilities across social exclusion, disability, and protection risks. School exclusion emerged as the most significant risk factor, reinforcing findings from UBOS [3] and UNICEF [5] on urban adolescent marginalization.

Programme outputs

Percentage calculated out of the total 3,134 achievements, excluding mentorship sessions.

Output Area	Achievement	Percentage
School re-entry: Primary and secondary	574 girls	18.3%
Vocational skilling enrolment	211 girls	6.7%
Cash transfers delivered	803 girls	25.6%
Financial literacy through VSLA	728 girls	23.2%
SRHR service referrals	128 cases	4.1%
GBV and child protection case support	122 survivors	3.9%
Life skills training	312 girls	10.0%
Digital literacy training	223 girls	7.1%
Disability referrals	33 girls	1.1%
Total, excluding mentorship sessions	3,134	100%

Note: Mentorship sessions were excluded from the percentage calculation because they are counted as service sessions rather than individual girls or cases. However, the programme delivered a very strong mentorship component, with 51,069 mentorship sessions conducted, demonstrating sustained guidance, psychosocial support, and follow-up for participating girls.

The programme registered strong achievements across education, livelihoods, protection, health, and life skills. Notably, 803 girls received cash transfers, 574 girls were supported to re-enter primary and secondary school, 728 girls benefited from VSLA-based financial literacy, and 51,069 mentorship sessions were delivered. The programme also strengthened access to SRHR, GBV, child protection, disability referral, digital literacy, and vocational skilling services.

Behavioural change indicators

Programme records show positive behavioural transformation among participating girls, linked to the combined package of education support, cash transfers, mentorship, life skills, vocational skilling, SRHR referrals, GBV response, digital literacy, and financial literacy through VSLA participation. The achievements recorded in the table point not only to service delivery, but also to improvements in confidence, decision-making, protection, and future orientation among beneficiaries.

One key behavioural change was the decline in reliance on transactional sex, especially among girls who benefited from cash transfers, vocational skilling, financial literacy, and VSLA support. The provision of economic support reduced immediate financial pressure and helped some girls meet basic needs without depending on risky relationships. This contributed to improved self-protection and reduced vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

The programme also recorded an increase in referral completion for SRHR, counselling, GBV, child protection, and legal aid services. A total of 128 SRHR service referrals, 122 GBV and child protection cases, and 33 disability referrals were supported. This indicates improved awareness of available services and greater willingness among girls to seek formal support instead of remaining silent or relying only on informal networks.

Mentorship played a central role in behaviour change. The delivery of 51,069 mentorship sessions created regular contact between girls and trusted mentors. This strengthened help-seeking behaviour, emotional support, confidence, and problem-solving. Through mentorship, girls were encouraged to report abuse, stay in school, avoid harmful peer influence, and make safer life choices.

The programme also contributed to improved future planning and career focus. The re-entry of 574 girls into primary and secondary school, together with 211 girls enrolled in vocational skilling, shows that many beneficiaries began to reconnect with education and livelihood pathways. In addition, 312 girls received life skills training and 223 girls received digital literacy training, improving their confidence, communication, self-esteem, and readiness for future employment or enterprise.

Financial independence also improved through VSLA-based financial literacy, which reached 728 girls. This helped beneficiaries learn saving, budgeting, group participation, and basic money management. These skills are important for reducing dependency, strengthening decision-making, and building resilience against future economic shocks.

Overall, these results suggest that the programme strengthened agency, resilience, protection, and self-reliance among vulnerable girls. However, the programme also experienced some challenges. A number of children dropped out when relatives migrated back to rural areas. A few girls became pregnant, while some refugee beneficiaries returned to their home countries and could no longer be traced. These cases highlight the need for stronger follow-up systems, family engagement, pregnancy prevention support, refugee tracking mechanisms, and flexible community-based mentorship to sustain gains among mobile and high-risk beneficiaries.

Discussion

This analysis shows that adolescent vulnerability in Kampala's informal settlements is largely structural rather than individual. The Girls Empowering Girls (GEG) programme was effective because it addressed the intersecting economic, psychosocial, relational, and institutional drivers that shape girls' transition to adulthood. By combining predictable cash support with mentorship, life skills, counselling, and service referral, GEG reduced immediate survival pressures while strengthening agency, resilience, and access to essential services.

The programme's impact can be explained through a social ecological lens. Girls' vulnerability is not produced by personal choice alone, but by interacting risks at household, peer, community, and institutional levels. Poverty, school exclusion, family instability, gender-based violence, weak protection systems, and limited access to health and education services combine to increase risk. GEG responded to these risks through a layered "cash-plus" model that moved beyond short-term relief to address wider social determinants of adolescent wellbeing.

First, predictable cash support reduced economic strain at household level. In informal settlements, poverty often pushes girls into harmful coping strategies such as transactional sex, exploitative labour, early cohabitation, or school dropout. By helping families meet basic needs, cash support created space for girls to remain in or return to school, participate in training, and focus on personal development. This aligns with General Strain Theory, which suggests that persistent deprivation and blocked opportunities increase the likelihood of harmful coping behaviour. Reducing economic pressure therefore becomes a protective intervention, not merely a welfare transfer.

Second, mentorship emerged as a central mechanism of change. Trained peer mentors provided emotional support, guidance, encouragement, and consistent follow-up. These relationships strengthened girls' self-confidence, problem-solving ability, emotional regulation, and future orientation. Mentorship also functioned as a form of social learning. Girls observed and internalised positive behaviours modelled by mentors, including non-violent communication, perseverance, financial responsibility, help-seeking, and goal-setting. This reflects Social Learning Theory, which emphasises the importance of credible role models and reinforcement in shaping behaviour.

Third, GEG strengthened resilience by helping girls develop coping skills and a sense of possibility. Many participants had experienced repeated shocks, including poverty, violence, school interruption, family breakdown, and stigma. Through life skills, counselling, and goal setting, girls began to shift from short-term survival thinking toward future planning. This is particularly important in urban poverty contexts, where instability often undermines adolescents' ability to imagine and pursue long-term goals. The programme therefore supported both practical and psychological transitions toward independence.

Fourth, the programme improved access to rights and services. Many girls were previously disconnected from education, sexual and reproductive health services, vocational training, psychosocial support, and protection systems. Through structured referral pathways, GEG bridged girls to services that they would otherwise struggle to access because of poverty, stigma, limited information, or weak institutional responsiveness. This confirms the importance of addressing vulnerability across multiple ecological levels rather than treating adolescent risk as an isolated behavioural problem.

Policy implications

- **The findings have important policy implications:** Uganda's social protection system has historically focused on children, older persons, and extremely poor households, with limited attention to adolescents as a distinct risk group. Yet adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by heightened exposure to school dropout, exploitation, early pregnancy, violence, substance use, and labour market vulnerability. Evidence from GEG suggests that adolescent-responsive social protection is feasible and effective in low-resource urban settings. Adolescents, especially girls in informal settlements, should therefore be recognised as a priority group within national social protection frameworks.
- **The findings also support scaling of integrated cash-plus models:** Cash alone is insufficient to address the complex risks facing adolescent girls. The strength of GEG lies in combining economic support with mentorship, counselling, life skills, and service linkage. This combination produced stronger protection, behavioural, and developmental outcomes than any single intervention could achieve independently. Scaling similar models through local government structures, schools, community development systems, and trusted civil society organisations could strengthen Uganda's response to adolescent vulnerability.
- **Institutionalising mentorship is particularly important:** Peer mentorship is relatively low-cost, community-based, and capable of producing sustained psychosocial benefits when supported by training, safeguarding, supervision, and monitoring. Embedding mentorship within child protection, youth development, and community development systems would improve continuity and reduce dependence on short-term project cycles.

Finally, the study highlights the need to strengthen urban social protection. Urban poverty differs from rural deprivation because it is shaped by informal work, housing insecurity, weak social networks, violence, and high exposure to exploitative environments. Policy responses must therefore integrate social protection with education, vocational training, SRHR, mental health, and GBV services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, GEG provides strong evidence that adolescent-responsive social protection can alter life trajectories for highly marginalized girls. Its integrated design addresses economic vulnerability, psychosocial distress, harmful norms, and service exclusion simultaneously. Scaling and institutionalising such approaches are not only a protection priority, but also a strategic investment in gender equality, human capital, and inclusive urban development in Uganda.

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