

# Ultra-Poor Graduation Program Delays Teen Motherhood and Boosts Savings for Girls in Bangladesh

Seventeen years on, BRAC’s program shows lasting intergenerational impacts—reducing teen motherhood, raising savings, and reshaping girls’ futures

**Munshi Sulaiman** (BRAC University)  
**Shaila Ahmed** (BRAC University)

**Sheikh Touhidul Haque** (BRAC University)  
**Marzuk A. N. Hossain** (BRAC University)



*The Lasting Impact of BRAC’s Ultra-Poor  
Graduation Program in Bangladesh, 17 Years  
Later*

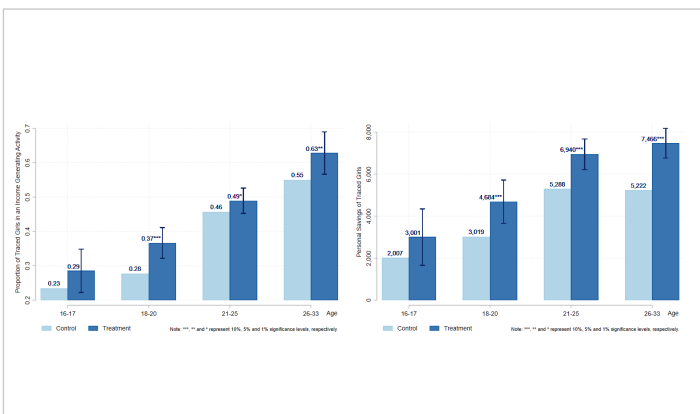
Follow us on Twitter! Find @glmlic

## Topic at a Glance

Graduation programs reduce extreme poverty, but rigorous evidence on intergenerational effects remains scarce. This study revisits BRAC’s 2007 Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) randomized trial in Bangladesh with a 2024 follow-up to assess whether parental exposure improves outcomes for children now aged 16–33. We examine whether UPG enhances offspring’s economic mobility, human capital, and family formation—evidence crucial for evaluating the long-run returns and value for money of big-push anti-poverty models. Using an intent-to-treat design with household surveys and tracing of baseline children, we find persistent cross-generational gains: offspring—especially daughters—show higher labor force participation and greater personal savings; teenage childbearing declines; and treated households sustain higher consumption and livestock assets 17 years on. However, the impact on occupational mobility is minimal, largely due to limited human capital accumulation. Overall, graduation delivers durable gains, though complementary measures may be needed to safeguard girls’ education.

## New Insights

- **Lasting Poverty Reduction for Families:** Treated families continue to maintain higher consumption (by about 23%) and have accumulated more assets (for example, owning over 40% greater livestock value) than their control group counterparts. Older girls traced from treated households also experienced the highest absolute income increase (by about 83%) compared to their control group counterparts. These sustained gains validate the need for a “big push” graduation approach in reducing extreme poverty over the long run and demonstrate its potential to break the poverty trap.
- **Delayed Childbearing, Despite Little Change in Marriage Age:** Girls from UPG beneficiary households did not, on average, marry significantly later than their peers. The likelihood of being married by 2024 and the average age at marriage were similar in both treatment and control groups. However, girls from the treatment households were markedly less likely to become teen mothers. While 35% of girls aged 16–17 in 2024 from the control group had given birth, the rate was 26% in the treatment group—representing a nine-percentage-point reduction in teenage childbearing.
- **Greater Economic Empowerment of Young Women:** Girls from UPG households grew up to be more economically active and financially independent than their peers. They were five percentage points more likely to be engaged in any income-generating activities, with 48% of treated young women working in the past year compared to 43% of controls. Many contributed to family farms or small businesses initiated through the program. Importantly, these young women also accumulated significantly higher personal savings—on average, 37% more (BDT 6,178 vs BDT 4,514) than girls from control households. These impacts on income and savings were observed across all age groups except for the youngest. Greater economic participation and higher personal savings indicate enhanced financial inclusion and agency among daughters of ultra-poor households who benefited from the program.



Caption: UPG Endures After 17 Years: Higher IGA, Bigger Savings, delays first births for Girls

- **Small but Significant Negative Impact on Schooling due to Low Returns to Formal Education:** An unintended negative impact was observed on girls' education. They completed about 0.28 fewer years of schooling compared to the control-group girls—a small but statistically significant difference, given that the average schooling among all girls was just seven years. However, this schooling gap was mainly seen among older daughters who were of school age during or shortly after the intervention. Improved family economic conditions may have prompted some girls to leave school early, possibly to work in new family enterprises. In contrast, the youngest girls (toddlers during the program) did not experience any schooling loss.
- **Persistently Low Formal Employment Rates:** Despite higher work participation, young women's employment remained almost entirely in informal sectors. Only about 15% of women in both groups held any formal wage job, with no significant difference between treatment and control groups. The program did not significantly increase salaried employment for the girls, reflecting continued barriers such as limited education, skill mismatches, and scarce formal jobs in rural areas. In essence, daughters of UPG families were more likely to be working, but not in substantially better-paying formal jobs; most are self-employed or work in family businesses or agriculture. This outcome underscores that while the program boosted livelihoods, it alone could not transform the broader labor market realities these women face.

The 17-year Bangladesh UPG study demonstrates that comprehensive graduation programs can generate modest yet lasting intergenerational benefits, particularly for girls. Children from assisted households grew up with greater economic empowerment and decision-making power, including the ability to delay childbirth. Girls' improved savings, workforce participation, and reduced teen fertility suggest that targeting ultra-poor households can create lasting effects across generations. These results validate investments in multifaceted "big push" programs and highlight their potential to produce sustained social impact across generations.

## Policy Recommendations

The Ultra-Poor Graduation program can be considered an intervention for long-term and intergenerational poverty reduction. However, to fully realize this potential, policies must build on its gains while addressing areas of weaker impact. The program increased savings, work participation, and delayed first births for girls; yet schooling outcomes and pathways into formal jobs remained limited. To strengthen mobility, scale-ups should integrate an "education-to-work safeguard"—including school retention stipends, mentoring, second-chance classes, and flexible apprenticeships linked to employers. Expanding youth

financial inclusion and engaging communities to shift norms around early marriage and dowry are also critical. BRAC already works to provide continued access to financial services in the post-intervention phase, but further impact could be achieved by connecting participants with skills-training opportunities for the youth and programs that address social norms.

## Limitations

Although the original RCT provides a strong basis, the 17-year follow-up is influenced by the later roll-out of the intervention to the control group after 2011, limiting interpretation to intention-to-treat effects and potentially underestimating the true impact. Additionally, external validity is context-specific (Bangladesh, BRAC model), so the findings may not generalize to urban areas or regions with weaker market conditions.

Policy risks: The feasibility of offering new services beyond the 2-year UPG intervention may be limited by the availability of existing mainstream services.

Read more → [g2lm-lic.iza.org/projects/policies-welfare/measuring-the-long-term-impact-of-reducing-childhood-poverty/](https://g2lm-lic.iza.org/projects/policies-welfare/measuring-the-long-term-impact-of-reducing-childhood-poverty/).

*G<sup>2</sup>LM|LIC is a joint program by IZA and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) – improving worldwide knowledge on labor market issues in low-income countries (LICs) and providing a solid basis for capacity building and development of future labor market policies.*