



INCREASING WOMEN'S FINANCIAL AUTONOMY AND EMPOWERMENT

Learning Brief

About Digital Sub-wallets & Household Dialogues

The Challenge

There is significant evidence that financial services and structures have huge impacts on the economic empowerment and livelihoods of women and the well-being of their families, particularly when those services are made accessible directly to the women, and not through their partners and other power holders in their families. Equal participation in decision making at household level coupled with access to banking services increases women's capacity and likelihood to save, reduces their risk of loss of income and improves their financial stability, resilience to shocks, and safety. Women have specific financial needs such as financial and digital illiteracy and lack of mobility to access financial services. However, there has been a shortage of financial products and systems designed to align with these specific financial behaviors and needs despite numerous interventions to increase women's access to such services.

Within rural families in Uganda, women are often required to turn earnings over to the male head of household. Knowledge of family finances is frequently withheld from them. Their own goals and needs are trivialized, ignored, and normally go unmet. Anger usually greets their questions about the finances of the family and violence is often

threatened (or used) to force them to turn over their money.

Since women are more likely to make expenditures that reduce poverty, development goals are less likely to be achieved if this situation prevails.¹ Furthermore, when control over money disappears, women cannot spend their earnings on realizing their own goals nor do they have safety nets to support them should they need to escape abuse.

Providing opportunities for women to increase their financial control supports their empowerment, as well as creates chances to improve development outcomes for their families. Women's increased financial autonomy also reduces the mental and emotional stress that results from unequal financial conditions. The Digital Sub-Wallets project included two main objectives:

- Increase women's *autonomy* through more private control over money; and,
- Improve *cooperation* by enhancing communication and relationships within the household.

The Approach

Digital Sub-wallets

CARE worked with research partners, DoubleXEconomy and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), to identify prioritized savings categories for longer-term savings goals. Program participants were also directly involved in identifying their primary financial issues. Once these categories were distinguished, CARE worked with Uganda's PostBank to develop a user-friendly mobile platform named "Women in Progress" to build financial literacy and increase access for women to financial services without having to leave their homes. This platform allows for users to allocate savings towards specific medium to long-term goals. It was designed to work with Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) that had been operational for two years or more with low numbers of members with existing bank accounts.²

Instead of starting immediately with bank account sign-up, CARE and local partners, Community Volunteer Initiatives for Development (COVOID) and Ankole Private-Sector Promotion Centre Limited (APROCEL), recognized the need to take a graduated approach. When VSLA members joined activities that offered the digital sub-wallet, they started with a training focused on core concepts of financial management including budget management, financial planning, and banking literacy. Following this, members were offered the opportunity to sign up for PostBank accounts and trained by APROCEL on how to access and use Women in Progress.

Household Dialogues

In addition to the digital sub-wallets platform, CARE drew on principles of gender norms transformation and intergenerational conflict resolution to develop a household dialogue curriculum. The curriculum includes a series of modules designed to foster equity among all household members and specifically engages all household members who influence decision-making. CARE and partners trained female and male community-based facilitators to conduct the household dialogue sessions. Community-based facilitators for the household dialogues participated in an intensive week-long training including an in-house simulation prior to starting household dialogue sessions.³

VSLA members were first introduced to the household dialogue intervention through their group. Members who expressed interest in participating in dialogues then had to attain agreement from all other adults influencing decision-making within their respective households to participate. Given that polygamous households and

¹ Scott, L., Custers, A., Wu, M., & Dolan, C. (n.d.). Final Report: Digital Subwallets and Household Dialogues (Rep.). DoublexEconomy LLC.

² Sarah Eckhoff, Grace Majara Kibombo, Melch Muhame Natukunda, Christian Pennotti & Karen Vandergaag (2019) What works to increase financial inclusion and women's financial autonomy? Intentional designs showing promise, *Development in Practice*, 29:8, 974-987

³ Sarah Eckhoff, Grace Majara Kibombo, Melch Muhame Natukunda, Christian Pennotti & Karen Vandergaag (2019) What works to increase financial inclusion and women's financial autonomy? Intentional designs showing promise, *Development in Practice*, 29:8, 974-987

extended family living are common within Uganda, gaining support for the household dialogues from all household members was challenging for some members. Once all household members agreed to participate, the dialogues began. Facilitators focused first on fostering an open and safe space for discussion allowing household members to share their respective financial goals and come to alignment. This process sought to foster balance and equity within the household as well as elevate the status of women's needs and goals and increase their financial autonomy and role in household financial management.

Methodology

Prior to the launch of this intervention, a pilot was conducted to produce an estimate of product uptake rate and get experience delivering treatments. The pilot took place in two districts in Western Uganda with 568 participants and administered both the mobile banking and household dialogues interventions. During the pilot, bank ownership among women significantly increased and uptake of household counseling was very high.⁴

In February 2018, CARE scaled the intervention to reach more than 1,320 women and 90 men in VSLAs from a rural section of southwestern Uganda. The research was a multi-method study, including a randomized control trial (RCT), psychological scales, bank data, two extensive surveys, and a large sample of semi-structured interviews.

In accordance with the Ugandan IRB agreement, the data was shared with the DoubleXEconomy research team only after being anonymized and only at a group level. Informed consent to share customer bank data was obtained from all individuals when they signed up for the Post Bank account. There was concern from both CARE and the IRB that the interventions might lead to domestic violence, so response plans were put in place.

Randomized Control Trial. The selected participants were divided into three groups:

1. **Group 1.** Mobile banking with digital sub-wallets and financial/technical training (DSW)
2. **Group 2.** Household dialogue curriculum followed by DSW offering and training (HHD+DSW)
3. **Group 3.** Control group that was comprised of VSLA members but did not receive any of the interventions

This allowed for the team to evaluate the added benefit of the household dialogues training.

Psychometric Scales. A key innovation in this research discerned a link between women's own experience of empowerment and the RCT outcomes using well established, scientifically validated psychological scales.⁵ The Pearlin Mastery scale measures "mastery," the subject's belief that they can create and guide their own destiny. The Kessler Psychological Distress scale measures the respondent's mental and emotional distress, especially depression and anxiety.⁶

In addition to being scientifically validated, the Kessler and Pearlin scales help avoid socially desirable responses. By measuring both at the baseline and endline, changes in the women's psychological state could be discerned, as well as comparisons made between married women and unmarried women or men and women.

Bank Data. Bank account data for the mobile banking account holders was obtained from the partner bank, Post Bank of Uganda, to have direct evidence of account use.

Baseline and Endline Surveys. As a part of the pretest-posttest research design, initial surveys were administered before the interventions were implemented. In order to determine whether change had occurred and was

⁴ Sarah Eckhoff, Grace Majara Kibombo, Melch Muhame Natukunda, Christian Pennotti & Karen Vandergaag (2019) What works to increase financial inclusion and women's financial autonomy? Intentional designs showing promise, *Development in Practice*, 29:8, 974-987

⁵ The research to evaluate and select relevant measures from among all available, validated scales was done under a grant by the ExxonMobil Foundation to Professor Linda Scott, while at the University of Oxford and, later, to Professor Scott when she was at the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

⁶ For the Pearlin scale, see: Pearlin LI, Schooler C. "The Structure of Coping," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (1978): 2-21j. Also:

[https://www.nlsinfo.org/sites/nlsinfo.org/files/attachments/141120/Pearlin%20Documentatio n%20with%20IRT.pdf](https://www.nlsinfo.org/sites/nlsinfo.org/files/attachments/141120/Pearlin%20Documentatio%20with%20IRT.pdf).

For the Kessler scale, see Ronald C. Kessler, "Stress, Social Status, and Psychological Distress," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 20(3) (Sept. 1979), pp. 259-272.

sustained, the final survey was conducted approximately one year after the interventions were completed.

Semi-structured Interviews. In total, 100 interviews were done. The 40 pilot interviews were used as the baseline interviews. Another twenty interviews were conducted among married women in both intervention groups at the midpoint. The last 40 interviews were after the endline among the women in the HHD+DSW treatment only.

Key Findings

Women receiving both treatments were able to increase their ability to save. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is “Extremely Satisfied,” women in the DSW intervention arm experienced a 0.63 point increase in satisfaction to 2.5 around their ability to save that was statistically more than the control group ($p = 0.003$). The main predictors were women’s ability to make the decision to open the bank account herself and ability to combine spousal incomes in the account. Women in the HHD+DSW intervention experienced a 0.68 point increase to 2.7 in satisfaction around their saving ability that was significantly higher than both the DSW ($p = 0.003$) and control ($p = 0.008$) groups.

Household dialogues had a positive impact on the emotional and mental health of married women. The HHD+DSW intervention did result in significant differences among married women on both the Kessler and Pearlin scales. In nearly all comparisons, the statistical significance was extremely high. The HHD+DSW married women showed a statistically significant *reduction* in psychological distress ($p = 0.0001$) and a statistically significant *increase* in mastery ($p = 0.0001$) while the DSW and control groups did not. Women in both treatment groups who did reach their financial goal experienced reduced stress compared to their score at the baseline ($p = 0.0001$).

The highest uptake of the PostBank account came from married women in the HHD+DSW group. By the end of the project, 97.6% of women in the HHD+DSW treatment said they still used their bank account compared to 91.6% in the DSW treatment ($p = .034$). Interviews indicated that most felt the account was “in use” as long as it wasn’t closed.

Overall, about 54% of women and men signed up for the Post Bank account. As seen in Figure 1, married women in the HHD+DSW treatment (64%) were significantly more likely than married females in the DSW treatment (49%) to sign up ($p = .0001$).⁷

The impact of the Post Bank intervention was sizeable enough to bring women’s bank account ownership equal to men’s. The pie charts in Figure 2 help visualize both the impact of the DSW intervention and the gender inequality that was already present. The data is disaggregated by marriage for women to determine if there were any major differences in access for the groups.⁸ However, for both unmarried and married women, the two largest groups either had (1) no account to start and then signed up for the Post Bank account or (2) had no account at both the end and the beginning. The pie chart for the men, however, is completely flipped, with the two largest groups both having accounts at the baseline.⁹

| Bank Account Ownership | | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------|------|
| Percent by Gender and Marital Status | | | |
| | Married Women | Unmarried Women | Men |
| Had a bank account at baseline | 24.1 | 25.1 | 64.5 |
| Signed up for an individual Post Bank account by the end of the project | 55.5 | 53.8 | 53.7 |
| Post Bank Account Sign-up Percent by Treatment | | | |
| DSW | 49.2 | 50.5 | 55.9 |
| HHD+DSW | 63.9* | 58.5 | 50.0 |

* Married women are significantly different by treatment ($p = 0.01$).

Figure 1.

⁷ Scott, L., Custers, A., Wu, M., & Dolan, C. (n.d.). Final Report: Digital Subwallets and Household Dialogues (Rep.). DoublexEconomy LLC.

⁸ Marriage in Uganda is defined as a legally or formally recognized union of a man and a woman (or women). Unlike many other countries that have 1 type of marriage, Uganda has 5 types of marriages and these are: 1. Customary marriage; 2. Muslim marriage; 3. Church marriage; 4. Civil marriage; 5. Hindu marriage.

⁹ Scott, L., Custers, A., Wu, M., & Dolan, C. (n.d.). Final Report: Digital Subwallets and Household Dialogues (Rep.). DoublexEconomy LLC.

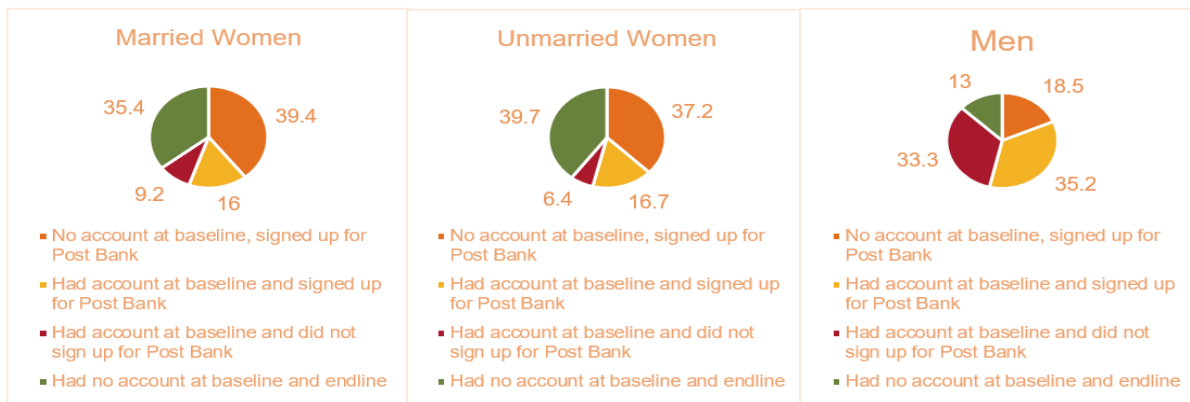


Figure 2.

Nearly three-quarters of women met their financial goals by the end of the project. Though a few changed their goals and some failed, the vast majority of participants achieved the goals they set for themselves in the beginning of the test: 79% of the men and 72% of the women met their financial goals by the end (no statistical difference). Given that men have more money and more control over it in the first place, it’s predictable that more of them would achieve their goals, regardless of the impact from the interventions. Having the women come so close to the men’s record and having nearly three-quarters of them be successful is an important result. When comparing treatments, the difference between the married women in the two intervention groups is not significant, but it is very close ($p = .06$), with the HHD+DSW again showing the better performance.

The HHD+DSW intervention moved family decision-making toward gender-equal practices. Of the married women in the HD+DSW treatment group, 81% said at the endline that they had seen a change in spousal behavior as a result of the sessions and 96% of those testified that the change had been sustained.

Positive Changes Observed by Married Women in HHD+DSW

Percent of Those Observing Changes (n=199)

| | |
|---|----|
| My spouse now understands the household finances. | 62 |
| My spouse now shares household financial decision-making with me. | 61 |
| My spouse now understands that I have needs, too. | 60 |
| My spouse now treats me with more respect with regard to money than before. * | 53 |
| I have learned how to make more money. | 50 |
| My spouse and I have learned how to manage our money better. | 49 |

* Respondents who observed this change showed a significant improvement in psychological wellbeing.

Figure 3.

As can be seen in Figure 3¹⁰, married women identified specific changes in their spouse’s behavior and in the practices of the family. Changes mentioned most frequently relate to sharing of financial information, collaboration on money-related decisions, and being treated with more respect and consideration. Each of these

¹⁰ Scott, L., Custers, A., Wu, M., & Dolan, C. (n.d.). Final Report: Digital Subwallets and Household Dialogues (Rep.). DoublexEconomy LLC.

is a substantial behavior change, given how entrenched the previous practices were.

When asked what they have been able to do differently with money as a result of these sessions, most women listed accomplishments that prioritized their children’s needs and put aside funds for the future as seen in Figure 4.¹¹

What Have You Been Able to Do Differently with Money Since the Household Dialogues?

| <i>Percent of Married Women in HHD+DSW Single mentions only. Total is 100%. (n = 161)</i> | |
|---|------|
| Provide better for the children | 29.8 |
| Put aside money for things that are important to my family | 20.5 |
| Save for the future | 14.3 |
| Other | 35.4 |

Figure 4.

Impact

In each treatment group, about 30% of respondents reported that they were better able to save for the future and to provide for children and family after the intervention. In addition to caring for their families and saving, the women in this intervention were also able to invest and spend money on themselves and their own business goals. Therefore, outcomes benefitted from both interventions.

The evidence from this intervention supports a conclusion that the counseling resulted in better financial management within families and more women’s participation in decision-making, including both more voice and more knowledge.

In the HHD+DSW intervention, there was measurable improvement in the elements of mastery and increased sense of agency that could indicate a woman’s sense and level of empowerment or disempowerment. There were no correlations between these measures and the DSW only intervention; in fact, all but one of the correlations were specifically related to the features of the household counseling sessions.

Recommendation & Next Steps

Upon the successful completion of this invention, the clear benefits of incorporating household dialogues into financial inclusion programming can be seen. The impact on women’s sense of empowerment makes the combined intervention promising for continued efforts around women’s economic empowerment. Women who participated in these dialogues were more active in household financial planning and decision-making than those who only received financial literacy training and access to the digital sub-wallets platform. This indicates that household dialogues address gender norms that include power relations, decision making, and access/control over resources while improving spousal communication. Further rollout of these interventions are recommended based on the research results.

There were also some stark contrasts between the married women and unmarried women across all treatment arms. Moving forward, more information is needed on how household dialogues and the digital sub-wallet platform affect married and unmarried women differently.

¹¹ Scott, L., Custers, A., Wu, M., & Dolan, C. (n.d.). Final Report: Digital Subwallets and Household Dialogues (Rep.). DoublexEconomy LLC.