



How gender equality and financial inclusion shape the impacts of cash transfers

When companies pay cash transfers to farmers in their supply chain, should they target women? Should they add interventions to promote gender equality and to allow families to save and borrow?

October 2025



International
COCOA
Initiative

Protecting children and their families in cocoa growing communities

The International Cocoa Initiative is a non-profit partnership organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children and adults in cocoa growing communities. We are experts on child labour and forced labour in cocoa, advising governments and corporations to inform their practices and influence decisions-making, and working with NGOs in the field. We are committed to achieving sustainable cocoa production that protects the rights of children and adults worldwide.

This study was commissioned by the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI), in partnership with Nestlé. Data was collected by the Bureau for Integrated Rural Development (BIRD) at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, Ghana, under ICI's supervision.

The photographs used in this report are for illustrative purposes only. The individuals shown do not necessarily correspond to the quotes or testimonies included in the text.

www.cocoainitiative.org | info@cocoainitiative.org

ICI Secretariat in Switzerland
Chemin de Balexert 9,
1219 Châtelaine | Switzerland
+41 22 341 47 25

ICI National Office in Côte d'Ivoire
Riviera 3, Quartier Les Oscars, ILOT 109 - LOTS
1139 & 1141 | Abidjan-Cocody | Côte d'Ivoire
+225 27 22 52 70 97

ICI National Office in Ghana
No. 16, Djanie Ashie Street,
East-Legon | Accra | Ghana
+233 302 998 870

Contents

Executive summary	4
About the study	5
Context and objectives	5
The experiment at a glance	6
Study methodology	7
Results	9
Impact on household finances	9
Effects on gender equality	14
Effects on children's basic needs and child labour	16
Impact on the wider community	19
Perceptions on programme design and relevance	19
Key takeaways	23
Recommendations	24
References	26

Executive summary

Cash transfers are a widely used poverty reduction intervention. They are also one of the most promising ways to address child labour globally, according to the International Labour Organisation.¹ In recent years, they have gained attention in agricultural supply chains, including cocoa, with an increasing number of private companies implementing these programmes.

Research has shown that providing financial support to cocoa-growing households can help reduce child labour, improve child protection and make households more resilient.² However, it also revealed that **when cash transfers are paid to farmers registered as cooperative members, control of the cash often remains in the hands of men, limiting the potential benefits for women and children** in the household.

To better understand the effects of different design features, ICI, in partnership with Nestlé, piloted a cash transfer programme across 79 cocoa-growing communities in Ghana in 2023 to explore whether cash transfers have different impacts when paid directly to women, and how the impact changes when cash is combined with complementary services: training on gender equality (delivered through the Gender Action Learning System – GALS) and groups to promote financial inclusion (Village Savings and Loan Associations – VSLA).

Results showed that the cash transfer enabled households to diversify their livelihoods, start new income-generating activities, and acquire assets such as livestock, equipment, and farmland. The combination of cash with GALS and VSLA further amplified these effects by improving savings habits, financial planning, and goal setting.

Results show that **cash significantly reduced hazardous child labour, with generally stronger effects when complemented with GALS or VSLA participation**. The effects were independent of whether the money was given to women or to men. **However, not all children benefited to the same extent**. The positive impact was primarily driven by secondary school-aged children and by boys. Girls' participation in labour even *increased* slightly. In addition, some households that invested the transfer into farming or business activities experienced an increase in child labour, demonstrating that productive use of cash may increase labour demand, which can fall on children if not properly managed.

Cash transfers also helped reduce school absence, especially among boys and primary-school age children. Transfers modestly increased children's likelihood of eating three or more meals a day and improved access to school items.

When women received the cash, participated in VSLA, and received GALS training, they gained greater decision-making power, financial independence, and social status within their households and communities. GALS further supported joint decision-making within households, increased women's control over household finances, and promoted financial planning and goal setting.

Overall, the findings show that **cash transfers, especially when combined with empowerment and savings interventions, can strengthen livelihoods, reduce child labour, and promote gender equality**. However, **they must be carefully designed to prevent unintended consequences**, particularly the potential increase in labour demands in households investing the cash in new economic activities. Integrating financial support with child protection messaging is essential to ensure that the benefits of cash transfers reach everyone.

¹ Meta-analysis of the effects of interventions on child labour, International Labour Organisation, 2023

² Cash transfers, resilience and child labour in Ghana, International Cocoa Initiative, 2022

About the study

Context and objectives

Cash transfers are a widely used poverty reduction intervention all over the world and have been shown to improve a broad range of social outcomes for recipient families, including education, health and nutrition. According to the International Labour Organisation, they are also one of the most promising ways to address child labour.³ In recent years, they have gained attention as a tool to address human rights concerns within agricultural supply chains, including cocoa, with an increasing number of private companies beginning to adopt them.

In 2020, ICI conducted a randomized experiment in Ghana to assess whether cash transfers could effectively reduce child labour in cocoa supply chains. The findings demonstrated that providing unconditional cash transfers to cocoa-growing households over a period of 6 months reduced child labour by 16%, improved child protection and made households more resilient.⁴

Since then, ICI has implemented several cash transfer programmes within supply chain contexts in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, which have shown promising results.⁵ These programmes also highlighted that when cash transfers are paid to farmers registered as cooperative members, control of the cash often remains in the hands of men. Previous evidence has shown that in some contexts, targeting cash transfers directly to women can maximise the benefits for the entire family and for children.⁶

Building on these findings and on ICI's previous experience, this study focused on two main research questions:

- Do unconditional cash transfers in the context of a cocoa supply chain have different impacts when paid directly to women?
- How does the impact change when cash is combined with interventions to promote gender equality (Gender Action Learning System – GALS) and financial inclusion (Village Savings and Loan Associations – VSLA)?

[Gender Action Learning System](#) is a community-led empowerment methodology designed to promote gender equality and economic empowerment. GALS training uses visioning and planning methods to give women and men more control over their lives. Participants are encouraged to set personal and household goals and plan concrete actions to achieve them. Topics covered during the training include parenting skills, communication skills and conflict-resolution within couples, and equitable household roles and decision-making.

[Village Savings and Loan Associations](#) are savings groups, often targeted at women, that promote saving and borrowing in communities where access to formal financial services is limited. Members make regular contributions to a collective pool from which they can take out small loans and repay the money on time with a flat rate of interest. At the end of the year's cycle, the group's collective profits are then distributed to its members on a scale dependent on their contribution.

³ Meta-analysis of the effects of interventions on child labour, International Labour Organisation, 2023

⁴ Cash transfers, resilience and child labour in Ghana, International Cocoa Initiative, 2022

⁵ Innovative strategies to stimulate adult labour and tackle child labour, International Cocoa Initiative, 2024

⁶ Dispelling myths on gender and cash transfers in Africa: Evidence Summary. UNICEF and Policy Research Solutions, 2025, and Addressing the income – child labour – gender nexus, KIT, 2025.

The experiment at a glance

To test these research questions, ICI, in partnership with Nestlé, implemented a cash transfer experiment in 2023-2024 across 79 cocoa-growing communities in five districts of Ghana: Suhum A and B, Akim Oda, Asamankese (Eastern Region), and Breman Asikuma (Central Region). Cash transfers were paid to all households covered by the Nestlé Cocoa Plan in the targeted communities.

Transfers were paid via mobile money over nine months, starting in September 2023, to targeted farming households with children. Each household received a base payment of GHS 170 per month (approximately 14 USD), with child-specific top-ups of GHS 30 for each primary school child and GHS 50 for each secondary school child. Payments were capped at GHS 350 per household per month (approximately 28 USD).

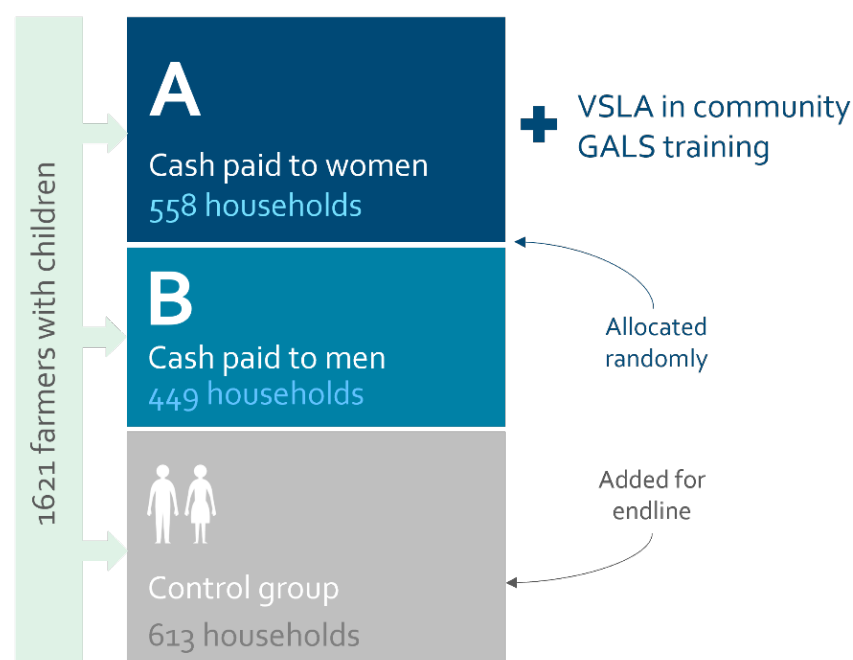
To test our research questions, communities were randomly assigned to three groups (Figure 1):

Group A – Cash was paid directly to a woman, preferably the mother of the children living in the household. In parallel, cash recipients were encouraged to join community saving groups (VSLA), which had been set up in these communities, and were invited to participate in gender equality training (GALS) with their husbands or partners.⁷

Group B – Cash paid to a man in the household. No VSLAs were set up, and no GALS training was offered in these communities.

Control group – Households covered by the Nestlé Cocoa Plan in neighbouring cocoa districts.

Figure 1: Control and treatment groups

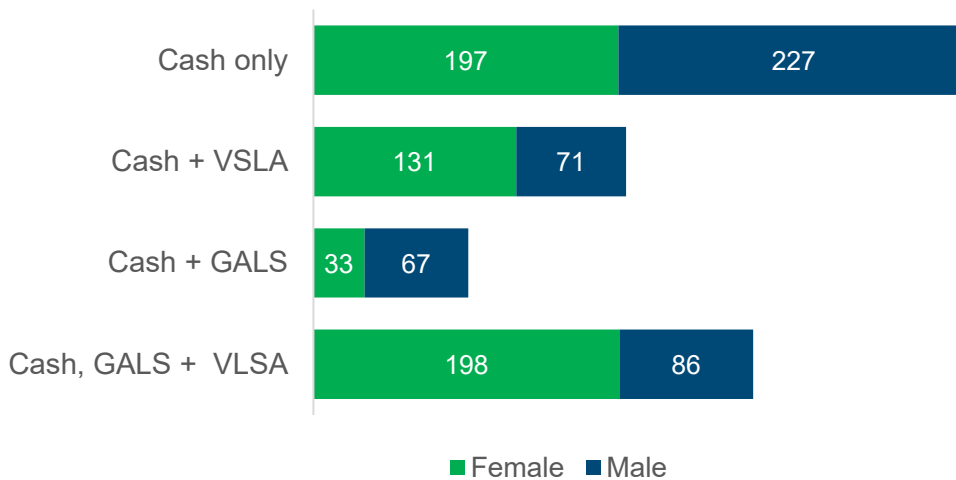


⁷ The VSLA and GALS component of the intervention was implemented by [Participatory Development Associates \(PDA\) Ghana](#).

The intended random assignment of the treatment did not work out perfectly in practice, as not all households complied with the experimental cash modalities. In some households in Group A, transfers were channelled to men rather than to women, and vice versa.

As a result, the final sample included households across all possible combinations of cash recipient gender and GALS and VSLA participation, albeit with varying numbers of households in each group (see Figure 2). This meant that, on the one hand, we needed to address a self-selection bias in the analysis, and on the other hand, it created an opportunity to explore a wider set of household experiences.

Figure 2: Number of households in each group, by treatment arm (left) and by gender of the cash recipient (right)



In our final sample, we observe a higher share of female-headed households among female recipients than among male recipients, reflecting persistent barriers to transferring cash directly to women in male-headed households.

Study methodology

Quantitative methods

An endline household survey was conducted after the last cash payment to provide a quantitative basis for assessing the impact of the pilot. The survey collected information on household finances, investment in productive assets, new business activities, gender equality, children's material needs, children's involvement in child labour, and schooling.

The data was used to estimate the effects of the different treatment combinations on each outcome, using 4 different regression models:

1. Comparing cash recipients against non-cash recipients
2. Comparing female cash recipients against male cash recipients, against non-cash recipients
3. Comparing cash recipients participating in VSLA, against cash recipients not participating in VSLA, against non-cash recipients
4. Comparing cash recipients participating in GALS training, against cash recipients not participating in GALS, against non-cash recipients

As mentioned earlier, because the random assignment of treatment groups did not work perfectly in practice, there was potential for selection bias in the sample. To mitigate this, the analysis employed inverse probability

weighting regression adjustment, a statistical technique which enhances comparability between treatment and control groups by accounting for confounders. Confounders are household characteristics which affect the likelihood of a household falling into one of the treatment groups, and at the same time affect outcomes. The following household characteristics were accounted for as confounders in the analysis: whether the household head is female, whether the household head is a single woman (i.e. that is, being unmarried, divorced, or widowed), the level of education of the household head, and the number of children in the household.⁸

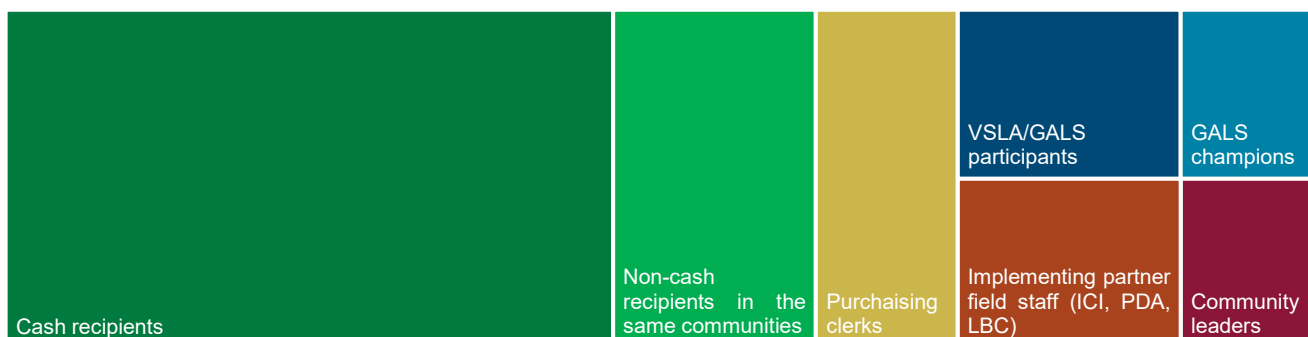
Qualitative methods

To complement our quantitative findings, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews with key informants and beneficiaries, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) to understand key factors around programme design and perceptions, including:

- What are the perceptions and experiences of cash beneficiaries and others in the community regarding the intervention, including the cash payment modalities, economic, social and psychological impacts, community dynamics, etc.?
- What difference did it make whether the cash was given to men or women?
- How did membership in a VSLA affect the impact of the cash transfer?
- What impact has the GALS training had on gender relations within families?
- What are the key challenges associated with the supply-chain-based cash transfer?

Respondents for the qualitative component were purposively selected to capture a diversity of perspectives, see Figure 3.

Figure 3: Composition of respondents in the qualitative data collection



Note: GALS Champions are individuals who took on leadership roles in promoting gender equality through the GALS approach. Purchasing Clerks are intermediaries between farmers and cocoa buying companies, who facilitated communication and supported monitoring of the intervention at the community level.

⁸ For outcomes at child level, the following controls were added to the regression model: child's age, child's sex, and whether the child is living with biological parents. Further details about the estimation method are provided in the full analysis report, which is available upon request from ICI.

Results

Impact on household finances

Cash strengthened livelihoods and income diversification

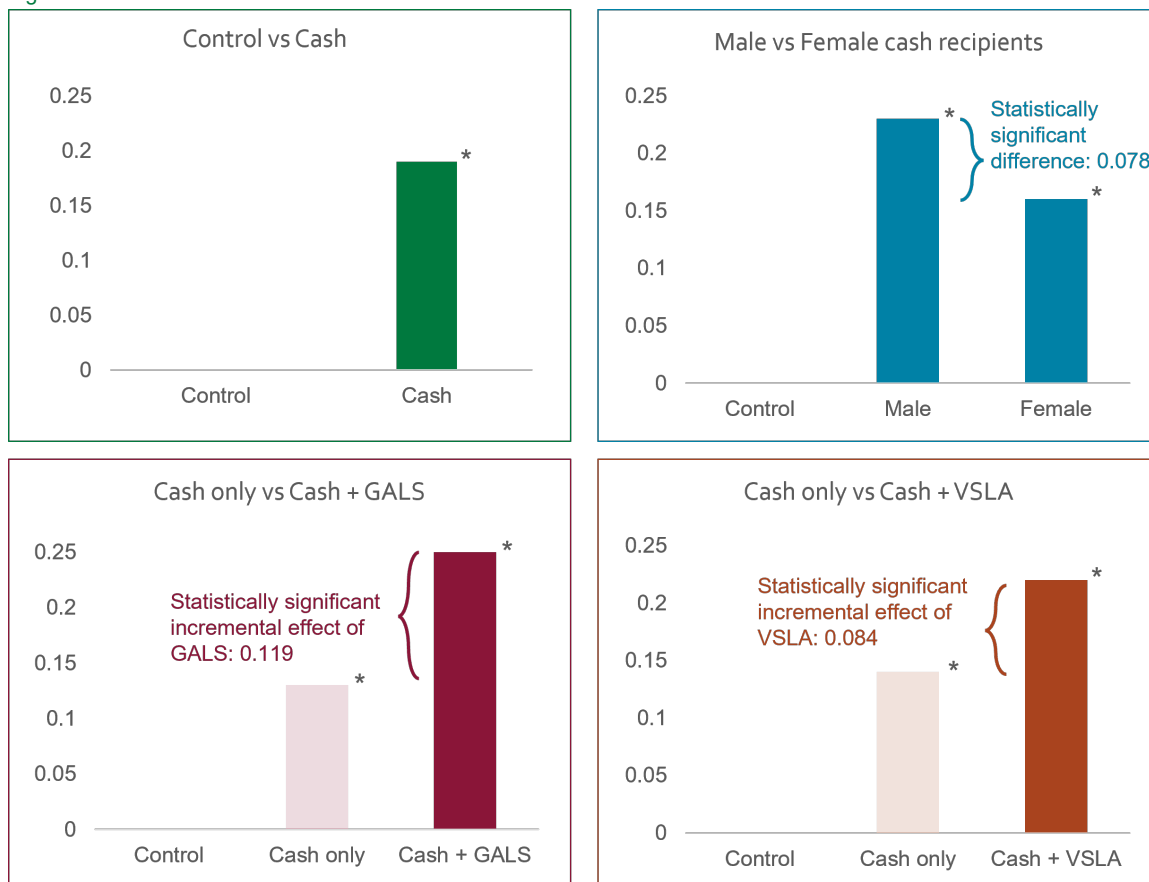
Cash transfers enabled households to start new income-generating activities and acquire additional assets and agricultural land.

New income sources

Cash recipients were significantly more likely to start new income-generating activities compared to control households (Figure 4). Men reported more new ventures than women – this difference between male and female recipients was statistically significant.

Participation in GALS and VSLA further amplified these impacts, enabling households to diversify more and build resilience. This is not surprising, as the GALS training actively encouraged participants to initiate new business ventures as part of achieving their household financial objectives.

Figure 4: Number of new income sources



Note: Bars indicate increases in new income-generating activities which households started over the treatment period, comparing treatment groups against the control group mean. (*) indicate statistical significance.

Qualitative findings echoed these results: respondents explained that cash enabled them to revive struggling businesses or invest in new entrepreneurial activities, boosting household incomes. In many communities, this led to a rise in small businesses, such as food vending, market trading, and even small-scale water production in sachets. Respondents highlighted that this was particularly the case among women, which is not what we observe in the quantitative data.

Finally, respondents emphasised that the cash transfer addressed a lack of capital and provided a more reliable alternative to informal borrowing and rotating savings schemes. It gave individuals, especially women, the opportunity to invest in business ventures they had long considered but never had the means to start.



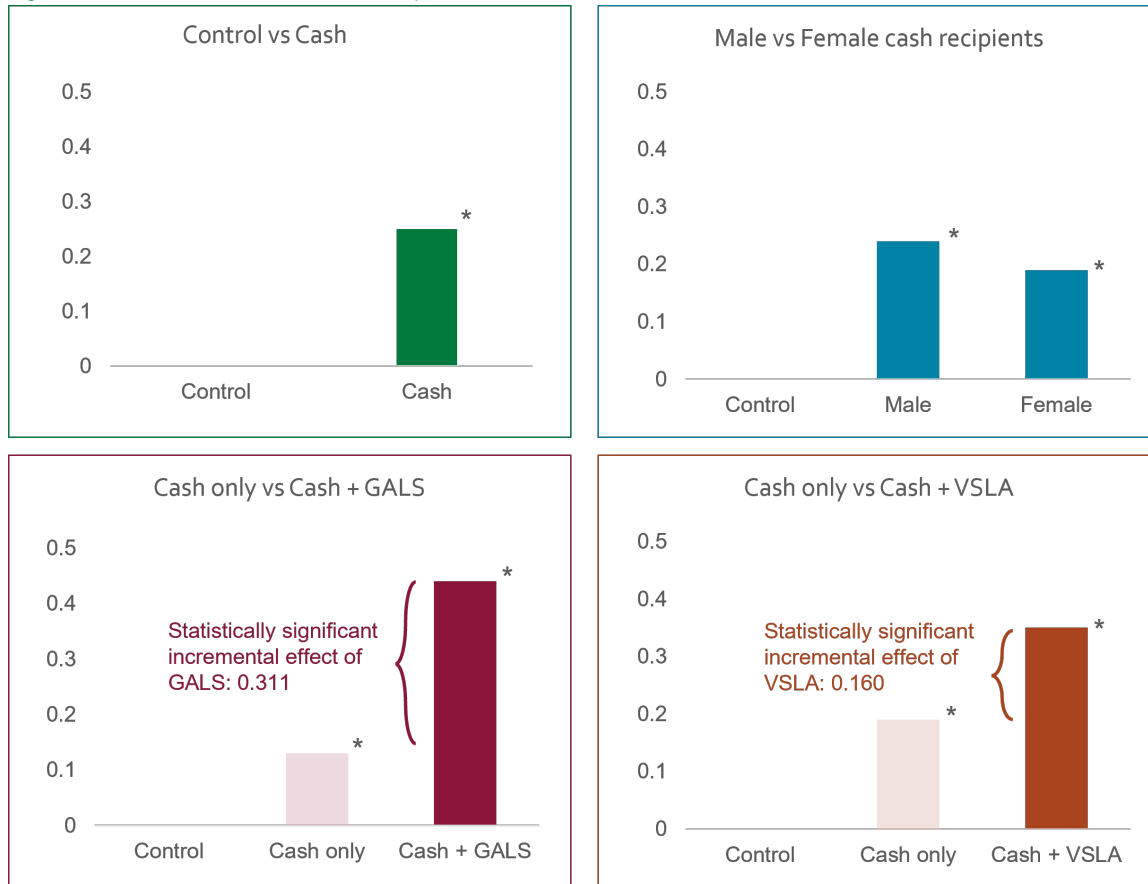
I never thought of starting something on my own. But after GALS, I realised I could. I started selling gari and fish, and now I'm able to contribute more to the household.

Female cash recipient who participated in GALS and VSLA

New wealth assets

Households also used the transfers to acquire new assets, such as livestock, motorcycles or refrigerators. This effect was slightly higher when women received the cash; however, the difference between male and female recipients was not statistically significant. When cash was combined with either GALS or VSLA, households acquired significantly more items (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Number of new wealth assets acquired



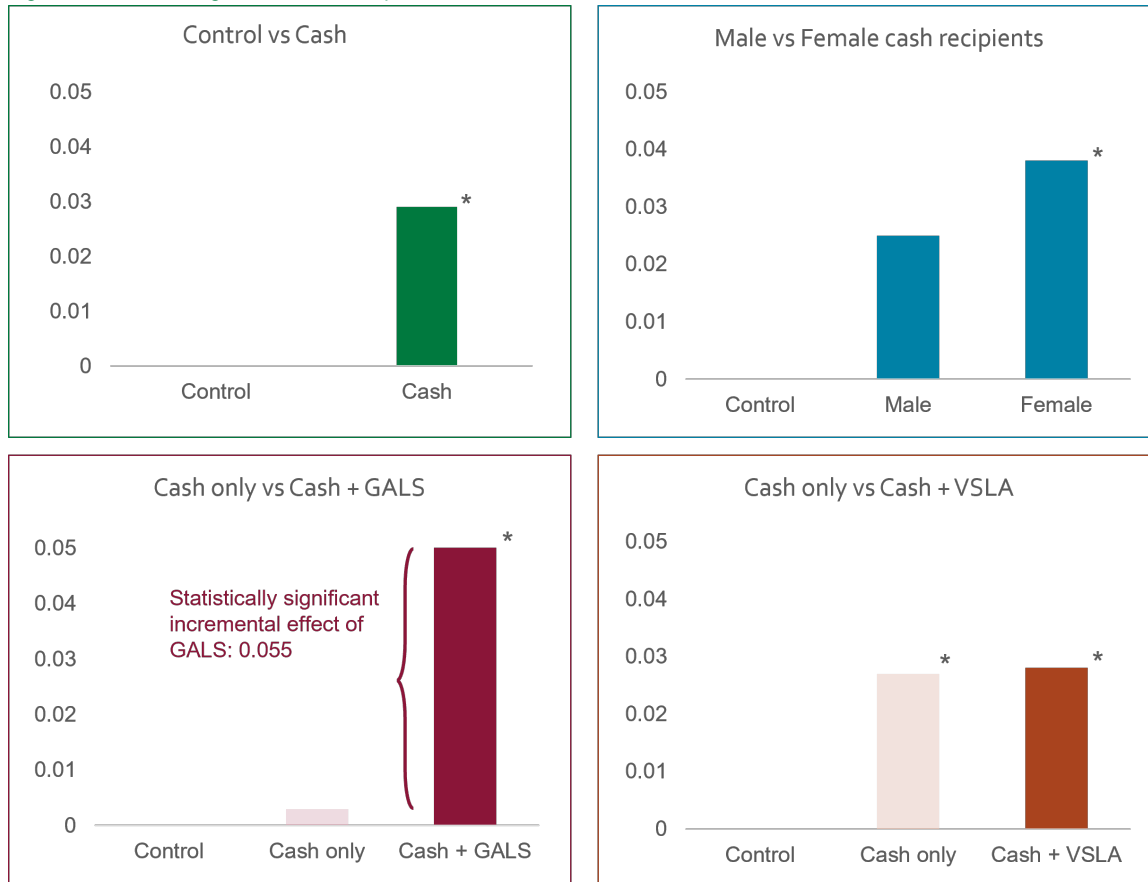
Note: Bars indicate increases in new assets acquired over the treatment period, comparing treatment groups against the control group mean. (*) indicate statistical significance at the 5%-level or higher.

Additional agricultural land

Cash recipients were a bit more likely to acquire additional agricultural land, with slightly higher effects observed for women recipients (although the difference by recipient gender was not statistically significant (Figure 6). In the qualitative data collection, respondents confirmed that it was common for women recipients to invest in additional land, which is often seen as a sign of women's empowerment.

When cash was combined with GALS training, the likelihood of land acquisition rose significantly. Participation in VSLA, by contrast, did not enhance the effect on land acquisition.

Figure 6: Additional agricultural land acquisition



Note: Bars indicate an increase in the likelihood that households acquired additional agricultural land, comparing the treatment groups against the control group mean. (*) indicate statistical significance at the 5%-level or higher.

Spending on hired labour didn't change

Households receiving cash transfers spent GHC 128 less on hired agricultural labour than control households, but this reduction was not statistically significant.

Cash recipients who also participated in GALS and VSLA programmes showed modest increases in labour spending (GALS participants increased their spending by GHC 66, while VSLA participants increased theirs by GHC 64), but again these were not statistically significant.

These results suggest that alternative complementary interventions may be needed to encourage households to spend more on hiring labour. An earlier ICI innovation pilot found a combination of cash with an incentive to hire Community Service Groups for agricultural labour tasks to be highly effective in this context.⁹

Increased household resilience

Qualitative findings highlight that the cash transfer significantly improved the financial resilience of recipient households.

Recipients reported that the cash transfer **reduced their reliance on short-term loans** and advances from Purchasing Clerks or informal lenders, many of which came with unfavourable repayment conditions. With a predictable and regular flow of funds, households were able to **plan ahead, build small savings**, often through

⁹ See ICI report "[Innovative strategies to stimulate adult labour and tackle child labour | ICI Cocoa Initiative](#)".

VSLA groups or *susu* collectors (a traditional form of financial intermediaries), and **respond to shocks** more effectively.

Gender dynamics shaped how resilience was built. Women tended to strengthen resilience through small businesses and participation in VSLAs, while men leaned more towards long-term strategies, such as expanding their farm or purchasing agricultural equipment. This reflects the gendered perception of financial resilience, where men focus on asset accumulation and productivity, while women prioritize financial security and stability through savings and flexible income sources.

Participation in **VSLA and GALS** was also highlighted as an important driver of resilience, helping households to improve their savings habits and diversify income sources. Participants appreciated VSLA as a safe way to save and borrow. The GALS training encouraged households to create financial roadmaps by setting financial goals, assessing risks, and making more informed investment decisions, thereby working toward household-level economic stability.



“

I save a part of the money every month in our VSLA. It has helped me to feel secure because I know I can use my savings if there is an emergency.

Female cash recipient who participated in VSLA



“

Before this, we lived day-to-day. GALS showed us how to dream and plan. Now we have goals - one is to buy more land - and we are saving towards it.

Couple who received cash and participated in GALS and VSLA

These results demonstrate that cash transfers can play an important role in strengthening household livelihoods by enabling investment in new income-generating activities, productive assets, and land. GALS and VSLA amplified these effects by improving financial planning, savings habits, and goal setting, highlighting their role in encouraging productive investments within households.

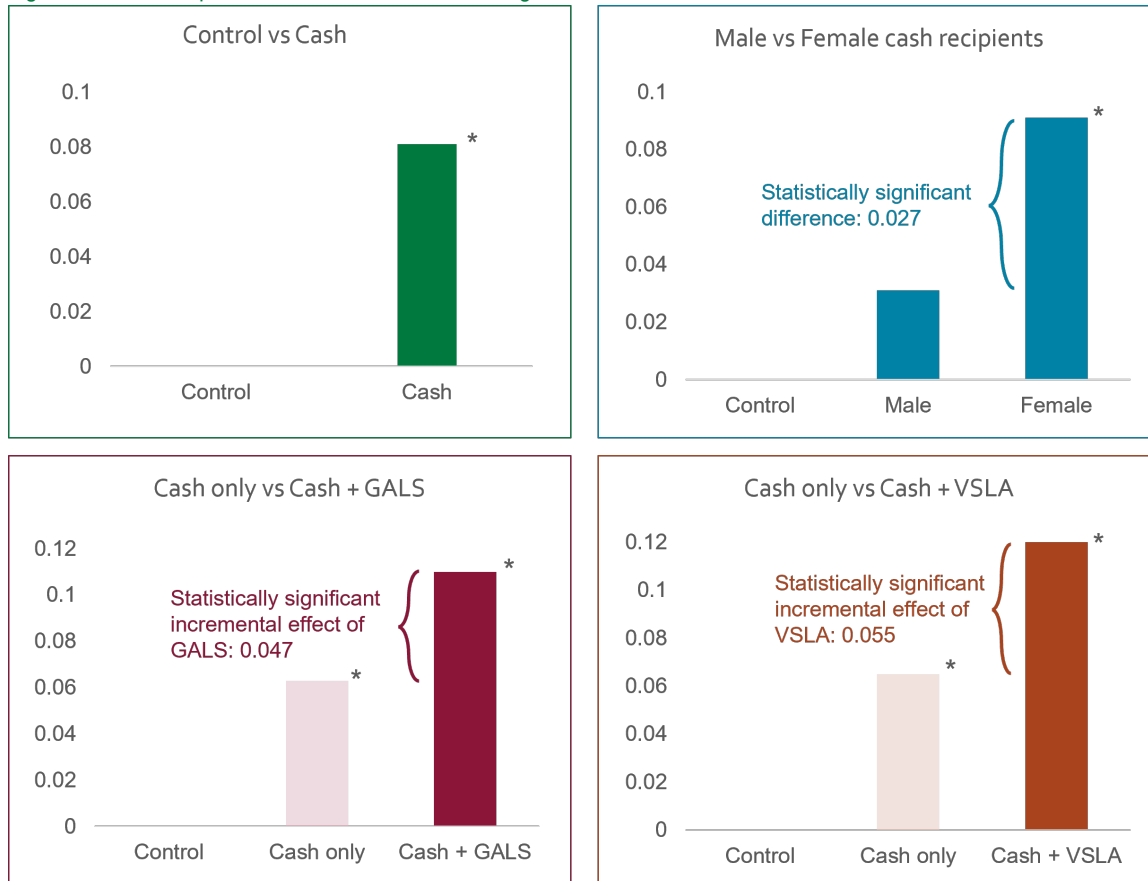
Effects on gender equality

Quantitative results show that the cash transfer significantly improved gender equality in decision-making within recipient households.

Household power dynamics were assessed using an index which reflects joint or consultative decision-making on major purchases, daily needs, and children's education. Households that received cash scored higher on this index than those in the control group, and the improvement was stronger when the cash transfer was directed to women compared to men, a statistically significant difference (Figure 7). This underscores the importance of providing financial support directly to women to promote more equitable decision-making and household relations.

Combining cash with GALS and VSLA had an even more pronounced effect on equitable decision-making within households compared to cash-only households (statistically significant). **These findings provide compelling evidence that integrating economic support with empowerment and savings initiatives can lead to transformative gender outcomes.**

Figure 7: Index of equitable household decision-making



Note: Bars indicate an increase in the value of the index of equitable decision-making (ranging from 0 = no gender equality to 1 = full gender equality in household decision-making), comparing the treatment groups against the control group mean. (*) indicate statistical significance at the 5%-level or higher.

Qualitative findings echoed the quantitative results. Respondents highlighted that the cash transfers gave women greater **financial independence**, enabling them to contribute directly to household expenses rather than relying solely on their spouses. Women who received cash transfers experienced a shift in household power dynamics as they became more actively involved in financial **decision-making**. This was the case **especially in households that had also received GALS training**, which encourages joint planning and open communication.

Furthermore, GALS participants highlighted that the training helped reduce household conflicts, especially those related to financial stress and unilateral decision-making. Women reported feeling more respected and included in discussions around money, children's welfare, and farm investments. This was attributed directly to the tools and exercises from GALS, which encouraged couples to visualize family goals together and identify their individual roles in achieving them. Women reported feeling more confident to participate in budgeting and farm planning, while some men acknowledged a growing appreciation for their wives' contributions to the household's economic welfare.



I'm able to contribute more to the things in our household than before. In fact, I can do the things the man can do because I received the money. This has reduced my financial dependence on him, and my respect in the household has improved. I'm now able to pay school fees, go for loans, and save without much difficulty.

Female cash recipient

According to the qualitative data, these shifts extended into a more equitable **division of household labour**. Women in GALS and VSLA groups reported greater support from men with chores and childcare, which they linked to GALS sessions on shared responsibilities and family visioning. Men likewise noted a better appreciation of their wives' workload after participating in these exercises.

As women became more financially independent and involved in decision-making, their **status within the household and community** improved. They were viewed as contributors to the household's economic well-being and gained greater respect from both their spouses and peers. This was enhanced when cash was combined with VSLA and GALS. Female beneficiaries frequently reported increased respect, visibility, and influence, both within their households and in the broader community. Participation in the program elevated how others perceived them, with many now seen as contributors, reliable decision-makers, and informal leaders. Importantly, many women began mentoring peers and assuming leadership positions in community associations or women's groups.

In contrast, in some male-recipient households, especially those that did not participate in GALS training, decision-making remained largely centralized. In these households, the cash was often seen as merely

supplementing what the men already controlled, leaving women with limited influence. However, some of the men who continued to make final decisions on household spending also noted that shared financial responsibility had contributed to greater household stability.

Effects on children's basic needs and child labour

Mixed effects on spending on children's basic needs and material well-being

Quantitative findings show no statistically significant change in overall household spending on children's needs or in children's overall material well-being, although cash transfers did increase children's ownership of school items and the likelihood of having three meals per day.

Cash recipients reported **spending** less than non-cash recipients on children's needs, although this difference was not significant. They did spend somewhat more on education and on clothes and shoes compared to the control group, but these increases were also not statistically significant.

In addition to asking parents about amounts spent on children's material needs, children were asked directly what items they own. According to these data, the cash transfers overall did not lead to a measurable improvement in children's overall **material well-being**, as measured through an index reflecting children's access to basics, including clothing, footwear and bedding. However, outcomes improved when cash was combined with GALS (statistically significant) and VSLA (not statistically significant).

Children's ownership of **school supplies** improved with cash alone, showing a small but statistically significant gain, and was reduced when combined with VSLA and GALS (not statistically significant). Children in households that only received cash were also more likely to **eat three meals per day** compared to non-recipient households, a statistically significant effect. However, this positive effect was no longer present when cash was combined with GALS or VSLA. A possible interpretation could be that these activities may have encouraged households to invest or save for other purposes, deprioritizing children's material needs.

By contrast, qualitative findings reflected strong perceptions among recipients that the cash transfer improved children's well-being and educational outcomes. Recipients reported that the cash transfer allowed increased spending on education and health and described using the funds to purchase school supplies, uniforms, and pay tuition fees.

Qualitative interviews also highlighted differences in spending priorities between women and men. Women tended to prioritise immediate children's needs – food, schooling, and healthcare – while men more often directed funds toward agricultural inputs such as fertilisers, pesticides, and labour.

Mixed results on school attendance

Quantitative data show that the intervention has the potential to decrease school absenteeism. However, the effects are not statistically significant and differ by children's age and gender.

The proportion of children from households receiving cash who missed classes during the 2023/2024 school year was 1.5 percentage points lower than that of children in households not receiving cash, but this difference was not statistically significant. The effect was not different when cash was paid to women rather than to men. However, when the cash transfer was combined with GALS and VSLA, any positive effect of the cash transfer disappeared completely.

When disaggregated by children's school year, results show that cash **lowers school absenteeism among primary school students** but increases it among secondary school students (not statistically significant). These effects are amplified when the cash recipient is female and when cash is combined with GALS and VSLA.

Analysis by child gender shows that cash **reduced absenteeism among boys** but slightly increased it among girls (not statistically significant). Participation in GALS reinforced these patterns, further reducing absenteeism for boys and slightly increasing it for girls, though again without statistical significance. Finally, the gender of the cash recipient made no difference for boys, but when women received the cash, girls were more likely to miss school than when men received the cash.

Reduced hazardous child labour

Cash transfers and empowerment interventions significantly decreased the likelihood of children engaging in hazardous activities.

Children in households receiving cash were 5.9 percentage points less likely to participate in hazardous work (last 7 days), which is a statistically significant effect (Figure 8). In relative terms, this represents a 13% decrease in hazardous child labour in cash recipient households. The reduction was even greater for households that combined cash with GALS (8.6 percentage points) and VLSA (7.1 percentage points); both effects were statistically significant.

When breaking the results down by the gender of the cash recipient, the reduction was slightly stronger when cash was received by men compared to when it was received by women. However, the difference between male and female recipients was not statistically significant.

Figure 8: Reduction in hazardous child labour (last 7 days)



Note: Bars indicate a decrease in the percentage points of children engaging in hazardous work activities in the 7 days preceding the endline survey, comparing the treatment groups against the control group mean. (*) indicate statistical significance at the 5%-level or higher.

When the recall period was extended to 12 months preceding the survey, similar but slightly smaller effects were observed.

Qualitative findings help explain these quantitative results. Many respondents explained that before the intervention, they were forced to make their children participate in labour-intensive activities. Parents reported that the cash transfers allowed them to seek alternative sources of labour, such as hiring workers or engaging in *nnoba* (a traditional labour exchange arrangement). However, this perception was not supported by the quantitative data, which did not show increased spending on hired labour.

Respondents also emphasised the role of GALS and VSLA in reinforcing the reduction of child labour. GALS discussions prompted parents to reflect on the consequences of child labour and to jointly commit to investing in children's schooling and healthcare. At the same time, participation in VSLA groups gave caregivers greater financial flexibility to cover school fees or medical costs without resorting to child labour. Participants often linked their ability to keep children in school or seek timely healthcare to the financial cushion and peer encouragement provided by these groups, which reinforced positive behaviours.

Stronger effects in secondary school-age children

The effects on hazardous child labour are driven by secondary school children. In fact, effects are statistically significant *only* for the subgroup of secondary school-age children. For secondary school-age children in female cash recipient households, the probability of engaging in hazardous child labour was lower by 14.7 percentage points; and in male cash recipient households it was lower by 12.2 percentage points, as compared to secondary school-age children in non-cash recipient households. The GALS and VSLA interventions do not appear to reinforce the effect of the cash transfer on child labour within the sub-sample of secondary school-age children. In contrast, primary school-age children benefit more in households participating in GALS trainings, although this was not statistically significant.

Stronger effects in boys

We find that the effects of the cash transfer on reducing child labour are entirely driven by boys, with boys in recipient households being 10.8 percentage points less likely to engage in hazardous work compared to boys in non-recipient households. For boys, the effect of cash transfer is reinforced if the household participated in GALS training. In contrast, we see no statistically significant effect of the cash transfer on girls' involvement in hazardous child labour; there is even a tendency for child labour in girls to increase (not statistically significant).

Acquiring new business and farmland diminishes positive effects

As mentioned earlier, the cash transfer allowed some households to acquire additional farmland or start new businesses. The results indicate that children in households that received cash and either started a new business activity or acquired new agricultural land were more likely to engage in hazardous work compared to those who only received cash. While this increase in child labour is not statistically significant, it raises important concerns as it suggests that productive investments made with the cash transfer may inadvertently increase the demand for child labour.

Shifts in children's workload, from farm work to household chores

The cash transfer led to a statistically significant *increase* in the time children spent on household chores, across all treatment groups.

Quantitative findings show that cash transfers **reduced the amount of time children spent on farm work**. This reduction is even greater when the cash is received by women, although the difference between male and female recipients is not statistically significant. Combining cash transfers with GALS further reduced children's farm work intensity (statistically significant). This suggests that while the intervention may have reduced children's engagement in farm work, it may have inadvertently increased children's participation in household chores.

The increase in household chores is consistent with the broader finding of a rise in child labour among girls, suggesting that girls may have absorbed a larger share of domestic responsibilities as households'

labour needs changed. This shift may also reflect changes in women's economic participation: as female cash recipients engaged more actively in income-generating activities or small businesses, daughters may have taken on a greater share of household and caregiving tasks to compensate for their mothers' absence from home.

Improved response to child work injuries

Quantitative findings show that cash transfers increased the likelihood that children received treatment after experiencing a work-related injury. This suggests that the intervention improved households' capacity to respond when incidents occurred. The effect was slightly stronger among households where men received the cash transfer, and was slightly reinforced when combined with GALS, although neither was statistically significant.

These results confirm that cash transfers can make a significant contribution to reducing child labour, especially when households also participate in VSLA and GALS training. However, when households invest the cash in new income-generating activities, this may create new labour demands, which can lead to increased workloads for children. **Cash transfer programmes must therefore be carefully designed, combining financial support with mitigating strategies, to ensure that the benefits of cash do not come at the expense of increased labour for certain groups, particularly girls.**

Impact on the wider community

Strengthened family support systems

During qualitative interviews, recipients reported that cash transfers strengthened family support systems within their households and communities. By allowing cash recipients to share resources and provide financial assistance to relatives in need, cash transfers helped to reduce economic strain within the broader family network and created a sense of social cohesion. However, while this spillover effect is positive for community solidarity, it also risks diverting part of the financial support away from the intended beneficiaries, including children in targeted households.

Increased sense of community and solidarity

Participants in VSLA and GALS training described the groups not only as financial platforms but also as communities of mutual support, learning, and empowerment. They provided safe spaces where members could share personal challenges, discuss family matters, exchange business strategies, and support one another's goals. Participants highlighted that the combination of VSLA and GALS fostered vibrant, inclusive group dynamics, with leadership structures that promoted gender balance and encouraged active participation from all members.

Perceptions on programme design and relevance

- | | |
|---|---|
| 😊 Monthly payment | 😞 Non-beneficiaries suspected favoritism |
| 😊 Cover urgent needs (cocoa off-season) | 😊 Cash to women |
| 😊 Reduced borrowing and social tensions | 😞 Traditional roles and deep-rooted norms |
| 😊 Mobile money | 😞 Household tensions |
| 😞 Low digital literacy among older recipients | |

Relevance

The cash recipients consistently described the project as highly relevant, timely, and life-changing. Many shared that the intervention alleviated their financial stress, particularly around educational and household needs and enabled them to meet pressing obligations like school expenses. Community leaders emphasised the relief the program brought to their communities, particularly during the cocoa off-season. They noted reduced community tensions, reduced borrowing from informal sources, and fewer complaints of unmet financial needs.

Programme understanding

Respondents reported that there was a widespread misunderstanding of the nature of the cash transfers. In several communities, recipients initially assumed the money was a repayable loan, which triggered reluctance and anxiety. This confusion was associated with a lack of communication ahead of payment and was exacerbated by mistrust linked to past experiences with financial schemes.



At first, some of us thought it was a loan. We were scared. You know how these things go—someone comes to give you money, and later they say pay back with interest. I didn't want to take it and be embarrassed later if I couldn't pay. Even in my house, my husband said don't touch it until we are sure. It was only after the officers came again and explained that we felt safe to use it.

Female cash recipient

Selection criteria

Beneficiaries generally expressed high levels of awareness, understanding, and satisfaction with the design of the pilot. Nevertheless, there were some misunderstandings regarding the eligibility criteria. Respondents had differing perceptions of the eligibility criteria, associating it with factors such as vulnerability, household size, and farming activity, or other factors, whereas in reality, eligibility was determined by whether households supplied cocoa to Nestlé.

Some respondents expressed concerns about the fairness of beneficiary selection, and non-recipients in particular suspected favouritism. Respondents perceived that personal relationships between field staff and selected households had influenced decisions, noting that some recipients were no longer active cocoa suppliers, while more loyal and financially vulnerable producers had been excluded. These perceptions created mistrust and frustration within communities. Looking forward, **greater community engagement will be important to reduce such misperceptions and strengthen trust in the selection process.**

Payment modalities

Respondents agreed that mobile money was the preferred channel to receive the cash, due to the speed of transfer, convenience, and safety. They appreciated being able to access funds instantly without the burden of travelling long distances or waiting in queues at financial institutions.

However, several challenges were reported. Ghana's national SIM–Ghana Card registration policy, which was rolled out during the programme period, caused disruptions as some beneficiaries' SIM cards were deactivated for non-compliance. This issue was especially common among women using shared or less frequently used phones.

Recipients, particularly older and less literate women, also faced difficulties using mobile money due to limited digital and financial literacy. Many relied on others to check balances, interpret messages, or withdraw funds, raising safety and privacy concerns. Technical limitations in verifying transactions further complicated matters, as some recipients claimed not to have received payments even when records showed otherwise. In some

cases, shared phones or children withdrawing money without informing their parents caused confusion and mistrust.



A few people insisted they hadn't gotten the money, but when we checked the records, the transaction had gone through. It became hard to manage those cases. Some accused us of withholding their money or giving it to someone else. We later found out that in a few cases, they had shared phones or their children had withdrawn it without telling them. These incidents really showed us the need for a better verification and complaints system.

ICI Field staff

Timing

Most beneficiaries supported monthly disbursements because of their predictability and alignment with household budgeting needs. However, some participants advocated for bi-monthly or quarterly disbursements, arguing that larger lump sums could support more substantial investments.

Recipient gender

Most female recipients strongly supported the decision to direct cash to women, emphasising that women are more likely to prioritise household and child welfare.



Women take care of the children and the home, so if the money had gone to the men, we might not get enough to cater for the children. They might not even tell us they received it, and we would struggle to care for the children.

Female cash recipient

Male respondents expressed mixed views. While many supported directing transfers to women because of their daily role in managing children's needs, others were uncomfortable with losing control over household finances. Some men initially saw their wives' participation in GALS and the direct cash transfers as a threat to traditional authority and decision-making structures, leading to resistance and household tension. In fact, GALS champions noted that husbands often resisted their wives' attendance at meetings, driven by fears of shifting gender roles and loss of power. In some cases, men discouraged or prevented their wives' participation, revealing deeper cultural and relational barriers to gender-transformative programs. Over time, however, this tension was resolved through sustained dialogue, men's participation in GALS partner sessions, and clear explanations of the program's benefits, such as improved cooperation and financial management.

Resource control

Some households experienced tension when only one spouse received the cash and failed to communicate or involve the other in how it was used. This reflected enduring norms around financial secrecy and gendered control over resources.



There were cases where the wife or husband received the money and didn't tell the other. It caused confusion and arguments in some homes. One man even came to the VSLA meeting angry, saying his wife took the money and went to buy a sewing machine without telling him. Even though GALS was supposed to help them plan together, not everyone had reached that level of understanding. It takes time to break those old habits about who controls money.

GALS Champion

Participation

Some recipients struggled to participate consistently in GALS and VSLA meetings due to competing livelihood demands and limited ability to contribute savings. GALS champions explained that farming responsibilities, particularly during planting or harvest seasons, often conflicted with meeting times, while others felt embarrassed attending without savings to contribute.

Key takeaways

Cash, GALS and VSLA encouraged income diversification

Cash transfers enabled households to diversify their livelihoods, start new income-generating activities, and acquire assets such as livestock, equipment, and farmland. The combination of cash with GALS and VSLA further amplified these effects, helping households invest more, strengthen savings habits, plan ahead, and manage shocks more effectively. This is consistent with the GALS approach, which actively encourages participants to initiate new ventures as part of achieving their household financial goals.

Cash, GALS and VSLA reduced child labour, especially for boys

Cash significantly reduced hazardous child labour prevalence and severity, with stronger effects when complemented with GALS or VSLA participation. The effects were of similar size when the money was given to women as to men. However, not all children benefited: the positive effects were primarily driven by secondary school-aged boys, whereas no reduction in child labour was observed for primary-age children and girls. In some cases, girls' participation in labour slightly increased. Furthermore, some households that invested the transfer in farming or business activities experienced an increase in child labour, suggesting that productive use of cash may increase labour demand, which can fall on children. **These findings emphasise the need to accompany cash transfers with measures to mitigate the risk of creating additional workload for children.** Possible measures may include awareness-raising on child protection, the importance of education and the risks of child labour; and training to help households manage businesses and realistic planning of labour supply throughout the annual cycle.

Cash had positive effects on education, especially for boys

Cash transfers **modestly increased household spending on children's school materials and may help reduce school absenteeism, particularly among boys and primary school-aged children.** These outcomes did not differ significantly depending on whether women or men received the cash.

Cash didn't impact child material well-being

Cash transfers modestly increased children's likelihood of eating three or more meals a day and improved access to school items, though overall material well-being gains were limited. The combination of cash with GALS or VSLA enhanced financial planning, but did not consistently translate into higher spending on children's needs

Paying cash directly to women, GALS, and VSLAs strengthened gender equality

When women received cash, participated in VSLA, and received GALS training, they gained greater decision-making power, financial independence, and social status both within their households and communities. GALS further supported joint decision-making within households, increased women's control over household finances, and promoted financial planning and goal setting.

Recommendations

This pilot confirmed and deepened insights from previous cash transfer projects implemented by ICI and its partners in supply chain contexts. The following recommendations emerge:

Eligibility

- **Use a comprehensive and up-to-date database** to select recipients, based on clear eligibility criteria.
- **Clearly communicate the eligibility criteria** to beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries to minimize perceptions of favoritism or exclusion.

Communication

- **Strengthen communication before and during rollout** to explain eligibility criteria, payment schedules and modalities, and the purpose of the cash. Cash recipients should understand the purpose and the modalities of the cash transfer, and that it is not a loan.
- **Conduct community-wide sensitization** to ensure all members of the community, not just cash recipients, understand the objectives, selection criteria, and intended outcomes of the intervention. This contributes to reducing mistrust and resentment.
- **Involve community leaders and all programme partners in communication** efforts from the outset to enhance credibility and ensure messages are consistent.

Support

- **Provide digital literacy support**, including hands-on guidance for recipients with limited phone or financial literacy. Field agents must be available to follow up on mobile money payments and provide support to recipients with low digital literacy – plan time and budget for this.
- **Establish support and complaint channels**. To reduce disputes around delay and non-payment, establish robust systems for verifying transactions and resolving complaints. For instance, organise follow-up visits or calls within two weeks of each transfer so that recipients can confirm receipt and flag any issues.
- **Ensure timely and reliable payments** by implementing clear timelines for disbursements.

Partnerships

- **Clarify the roles of partners**. Cash transfer programmes in supply chains are often part of complex programmes implemented by a consortium of partner organisations, where each partner implements a component corresponding to their area of expertise (e.g. money transfer, verifying households' compliance with any conditions, conducting complementary training programmes, etc.). Within consortia, the roles and performance of members needs to be periodically reassessed.
- **Align on communication messages**. When cash transfers are part of wider programmes with a consortium of implementing partners, make sure that all partners communicate consistent messages on objectives, eligibility criteria, and conditionality.
- **Strengthen government collaboration**. Share evidence of impact to align with national social protection priorities and help build institutional support.

Sustainability and gender equality

- **Promote early involvement of both men and women** to reduce resistance and household tensions. The GALS methodology has proven highly effective to this end.
- **Organise follow-up GALS refresher trainings and ongoing mentorship** to reinforce key messages and support long-term behaviour change.

- **Embed GALS training methodology into existing community structures**, such as development committees or local governance bodies, to strengthen sustainability.
- **Encourage GALS participants to share their knowledge** with others in the community. This can help spread GALS practices more widely and extend the programme's long-term impact.

Child protection

- **Address and mitigate potential unintended consequences**, such as an increased workload for children resulting from new business initiatives. This could involve integrating a child protection component into the GALS or VLSA programmes, conducting parallel awareness-raising activities on child labour, or coaching households to better manage labour needs when investing in new income-generating activities.

References

- Meta-analysis of the effects of interventions on child labour, International Labour Organisation, 2023
- Cash transfers, resilience and child labour in Ghana, International Cocoa Initiative, 2022
- Dispelling myths on gender and cash transfers in Africa: Evidence Summary. UNICEF and Policy Research Solutions, 2025
- Addressing the income – child labour – gender nexus, KIT, 2025