

# Uplifting Women's Futures:

## Proven Investments in Women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo



In some of the toughest places in the world, Women for Women International invests in women survivors of war and conflict, connecting them with new knowledge, skills, and resources – and each other – to realize their own power through our **Signature Program**. Together, they learn to save, build businesses, understand their rights, improve their health, and influence household decisions and societal rules. They pass on this knowledge to their families and communities, creating a world that's more equal, peaceful, and prosperous.

Rigorous research plays an important role in learning what really works in supporting the most marginalized women to make long-term sustainable change in their lives, families and communities. Our team builds on an existing foundation of strong evidence, and our research contributes to that growing body so more people can work towards a more equitable reality.

### Women's Lives in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Trapped in a complex web of ongoing conflict, instability, poverty, disease, and extreme gender discrimination, women who are already struggling end up staying at the bottom. Conflict has destabilized the communities women call home, hindering development, disrupting markets, limiting governance, and destroying assets while threatening women's safety through sexual violence. Gender norms limit women's income, access to education, ownership of assets, safety, agency, and power. At the time of enrollment into the program and study:

- Only 14% of women participants attained education higher than primary school.
- Women's average earnings were \$1.57 per week, well below the global poverty line of \$1.90 per day.
- 27% of respondents reported experiencing an incident of violence within her household or community in the past year.



### Rigorous Global Research

In collaboration with researchers at the University of Washington, University of Texas at Austin, Marakuja Kivu Research, and the Innovative Hub for Research in Africa (IHfRA), Women for Women International conducted a 24-month randomized control trial (RCT) in four communities in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo. The study measured the impacts of the Signature Program on women's livelihoods, savings and assets, social empowerment, well-being, and social assets a year after program completion.

Researchers also examined the impact on women participants of having a male household member join Women for Women International's Men's Engagement Program (MEP). The MEP engages men to become advocates and allies for gender equality through training of community leaders, followed by discussion groups led by these local leaders with male family and community members.

## Summary of Findings

The research demonstrates that an integrated social and economic empowerment program can improve the lives of marginalized women in conflict-affected eastern DRC. One year after program completion, compared to women in the control group, graduates of the program had:



#### Increased their savings,

including a three-fold increase in their average personal savings, a doubling in the proportion of households with savings, and a doubling in average household savings. The gains in the household were driven by women's own higher savings.



#### Increased their earnings,

including 1.6 times higher weekly gross earnings and a shift from wage labor to entrepreneurship.



#### Increased their access and usage of credit,

including improving their financial inclusion via participation in Village Savings and Loan Associations, where they had a source to access, use, and benefit from credit.



#### Increased their assets,

including gains in the value of household assets and in the percentage of women with legal control over land.

Compared to women in the control group a year after graduating, graduates of the program had also:



#### Increased their health and well-being,

including improved household diet diversity and decreased rates of anxiety.



#### Increased agency and decision making,

including feelings of more control over their own lives and increased participation in making decisions in their households.



#### Increased social inclusion and networking,

including increased participation in community groups and access to social support and an increase in women's belief that women can lead in their communities.

## Programmatic Achievements

We believe the positive impacts of Women for Women International's Signature Program on women's social and economic well-being can be attributed to:

- **Equipping women with basic foundational skills**  
in numeracy, finance, business, and market-based vocations.
- **Using a bundled, gender-transformative approach**  
that integrates social power with economic skill building.
- **Tailoring the program**  
to meet the needs women express and respecting their strength, resilience, and leadership.
- **Connecting women with one another**  
to form financial and emotional support groups, and building their power to take on leadership roles in advocacy and collective action.

## More Time and Tailored Approaches to Shift Gender Norms, Reduce Violence, and Engage Men to Empower Women

Along with the positive and significant impacts on women's social and economic well-being, the research highlighted areas for improvement: Women's overall attitudes about gender norms and women's reported experiences of intimate partner violence did not change during this study period. Having a spouse or male household member in MEP also did not lead to additional gains for women in key outcome areas. Women for Women International understands that attitudes and behaviors around gender norms take time and targeted efforts to change. The results demonstrate a need for larger and longer investments, especially at the community level, to cultivate an environment where all women use their power and reach their full potential.

## Women's Futures in the DRC

Even when faced with frequent shocks and crises that can disrupt lives and communities, women made significant and sustainable gains in social and economic outcomes from participation in the Signature Program. This study proves a bundled approach can help women improve their lives despite conflict, poverty, and gender discrimination. With a stronger foundation for confidence, self-sufficiency, and financial stability, women made changes based on their vision for their own power, their families, and their communities. An equitable future for the DRC calls for intentional and widespread investment in women.

Women for Women International has begun the process of incorporating lessons from this research into the Signature Program.

As we move forward, we are eager to partner with governments, NGOs, and other organizations to continue the work of both supporting women survivors of war and improving that support to achieve a world where every woman can use her power.

### Our roadmap for improving our programming includes investments in:



#### Individualized support

for women's specific needs and causes of marginalization.



#### Fostering a more supportive environment

for women's power by engaging household and community members with more intentional and longer-term approaches.



#### Integrating lessons

from other proven models to reduce intimate partner violence.

Learn more at [womenforwomen.org](https://www.womenforwomen.org)

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