

In Rural Kenya, Young Women Hold the Cards: Becoming a Decision-Maker through Poker Power

A Wild Card

In the remote country of West Pokot, Kenya, a group of young women are learning to bluff. It's not about deception; it's actually about decision-making. Reading a room. Weighing incomplete information. Acting when the outcome is uncertain. The game is poker. The lesson is power. Poker Power is a curriculum that uses the mechanics of poker to teach strategic thinking, emotional regulation, risk assessment, and communication. It has reached secondary school students in Nairobi, university women, and now, rural participants in HER Lab, a workforce development program for young women in Kenya's hardest-to-reach communities.

Poker may be an unlikely empowerment tool as it carries associations with casinos, with risk, with masculinity. But that is precisely the point. Women are often socialized away from risk. Taught to defer, to hedge, to wait for permission. Poker flips the script. It rewards reading the room, managing emotion, and making decisions with imperfect information. These are skills women use constantly and rarely name. Poker Power makes them both visible and teachable.



How Gameplay Translates to Real Life

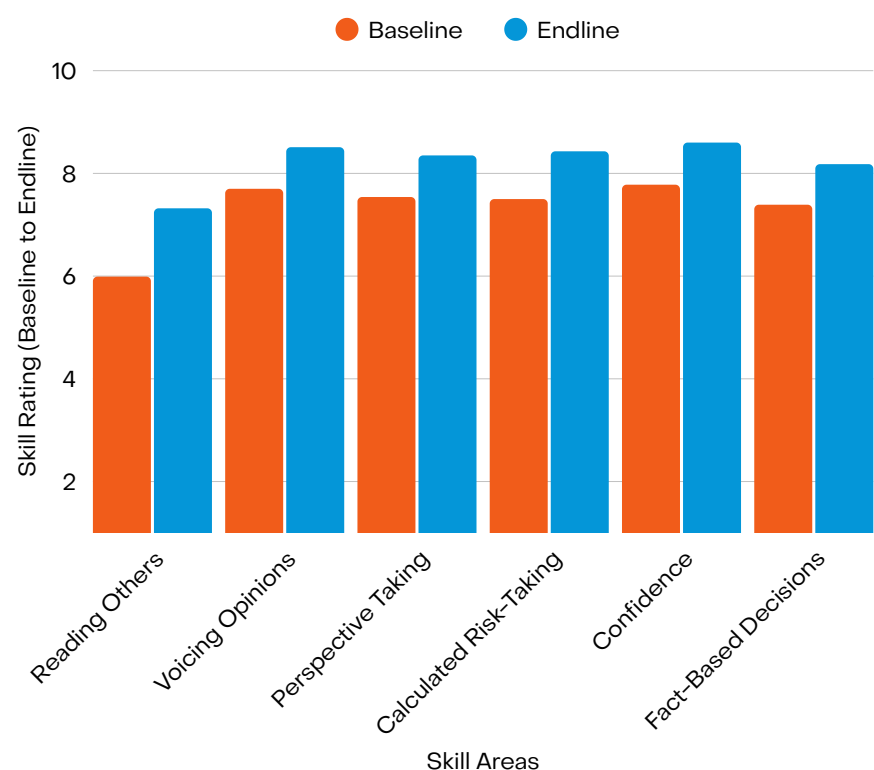
Across every site, participants report changes in how they read situations, how they speak up, and how they weigh risk.

The Clearest Gains:

- Reading how others feel or think ($p < .01$)
- Making one's opinion known ($p < .05$)
- Seeing situations through another's perspective ($p < .05$)
- Taking calculated risks ($p < .10$)
- Carrying oneself with confidence ($p < .10$)
- Gathering information before deciding ($p < .10$)

The data confirms what participants describe in their own words: they are pausing before reacting, noticing more, and trusting their own judgment.

Measured Improvements in Core Skill Areas



A Culturally-Responsive, Scalable Model for Empowerment

From high school girls in the Kibera slum to college students and young women in empowerment incubators like HER Lab, the program successfully adapted poker training to diverse contexts in Kenya. Cohort design and participant feedback demonstrate that the program is culturally adaptable, scalable, and suitable for continued expansion across other marginalized groups.

For HER Lab participants, the curriculum resonated most when examples matched their daily lives: budgeting for a household, navigating pressure from family, knowing when to push and when to fold. Lessons on **financial planning, group collaboration, emotional awareness, and peer influence** translated immediately. Participants connected poker mechanics to decisions they already face, from managing savings to responding to a spouse's doubts about their training.



“I liked the content of poker power as it relates to our real life experiences and the lessons we draw from learning and playing the game are applicable in my day to day activities.”

“It paves ways for me to be more aggressive with whatever I do in life. It helps me to be a risk taker and always hope for the best.”

The localized examples offer insight into how Poker Power’s principles operate in real life. Several themes appear repeatedly:

Boldness & Betting for Value	Perception & Behavior	Discipline
Participants linked bold decision-making to how they manage money.	Women reflect on recognizing emotional triggers and choosing measured responses.	Discipline appears as a central theme in both poker and life.
Saving for education, travel, or a business as a form of “betting for value”	Identifying what causes anger or stress and responding with intention	Avoiding situations that undermine one’s goals
Recognizing that impulsive spending reduces long-term opportunities	Requesting additional guidance rather than withdrawing when material feels difficult	Resisting peer pressure that conflicts with program expectations
Understanding the relationship between strategic choices and future outcomes	Understanding how perception influences group work, leadership, and trust	Choosing long-term improvement over short-term gratification

Raising the Stakes in Rural Kenya

At endline, every participant said they would recommend Poker Power to a peer. None disliked the experience, and the vast majority said they really enjoyed it. Young women in one of Kenya's most underserved regions are learning to see decision-making as something they can control. They are practicing authority in a space designed for play. Most importantly, they are carrying that practice into the rest of their lives. For young women navigating complex environments with limited resources and high stakes, Poker Power offers something rare: a safe place to take risks, and a framework for thinking strategically about the ones that count.

