



Gender

A Thematic Brief



The Youth
Employment
Evidence and
Insights Hub

In partnership with



Supporting young women's participation in workforce development and entrepreneurship

Youth Employment Evidence and Insights Hub

This thematic brief presents evidence related to the economic participation of young women and girls in Africa, with a focus on entrepreneurial development and avenues to sustainable employment. It highlights the potential of women-led entrepreneurship and workforce development as pathways to inclusive and sustainable growth. Importantly, it incorporates the lived experiences of different women and intersecting factors which complicate barriers to participation. At the centre of actionable strategies in diverse societies are multifaceted drivers of exclusion such as social norms, rurality and remoteness, refugee status and disability, which can exacerbate inequalities further making vulnerable groups inaccessible. Moreover, the roles of communities, men and other champions in advancing the economic empowerment of women cannot be understated in the context of entrenched social norms and attitudes.

Despite growing efforts to integrate women into mainstream economic activities in Africa, persistent barriers continue to limit their participation. Beyond identifying 'what works,' incorporating women's perspectives adds

critical value to programme design and helps refine targeting strategies.

Intersecting factors and workforce and entrepreneurship development

Young women's economic participation is often constrained by restrictive social norms, limited access to finance, and gaps in education and skills, which reduce their opportunities in both employment and entrepreneurship.

Intersecting factors such as disability, refugee status, and rural location can deepen existing barriers, making some groups of women even harder to reach and support.

Disability

- Career growth is constrained by discrimination in its visible and hidden forms, perpetuating exclusion ([Omolawal and Obiesan, 2022](#); [Basson 2023](#)). In this way, gender and disability combine to create compounded discrimination for women with disabilities.
- In Nigeria, young women with disabilities emphasized that family support – through information sharing and emotional encouragement – was critical to their career aspirations. When combined with access to education, such support strengthened their confidence and mental wellbeing, fostering greater ambition ([Eleweke and Ebenso, 2016](#)); [Omolawal and Obiesan, 2022](#)).



- Career aspirations for women with disabilities are also shaped by mental health support, and social systems ([Chan and Hutchings, 2024](#); [Omolawal and Obiesan, 2022](#)).
- A limited understanding of disabilities, particularly invisible ones, and human resources (HR) promotion practices contribute to career stagnation ([Coetzee et al., 2017](#)). People with disabilities also identified inadequate training, stigma, and poor infrastructure as key barriers to career advancement.
- Evidence on entrepreneurship by women with disabilities is mostly from high-income countries, where some pursue business ventures to bypass exclusionary hiring practices ([Merluzzi et al., 2020](#)).
- In Ghana, self-belief and self-esteem are key to entrepreneurial survival. ([Bukari et al., 2023](#)). Young women with disabilities who participated in the YCI HerStart program in Ghana gained confidence and motivation in addition to technical skills. The women reported increased self-worth due to being treated like equals by the facilitators ([Youth Challenge International, 2023](#)).

Refugee status and displacement

- Undocumented female migrants are typically excluded from formal economic activities in countries like South Africa ([Khutso et al., 2022](#); [Smit and Rugunanan, 2014](#)).
- To survive, female refugees turn to entrepreneurship in informal trades

such as hairdressing and street vending ([Al-Hamad et al., 2024](#)). In Ghana, refugee women entrepreneurs drew on resilience and self-belief to build customer trust and sustain their businesses ([Owusu and Gil, 2025](#)).

- The experiences of internally displaced women in Ethiopia show that self-belief plays a pivotal role in enabling entrepreneurial success, particularly in informal businesses ([Beta, 2025](#)).

Rural location

- Rural locations limit workplace access, particularly for women with disabilities ([Akyeampong, 2023](#)).
- In Tanzania and South Africa, rural contexts present unique challenges for women entrepreneurs, including limited access to inputs, business networks, finance, and time ([Semkunde et al., 2022](#); [Aliamutu and Mkhize, 2024](#)).

Social norms

- Gendered perceptions influence women's involvement in income-generating activities, particularly regarding childcare and domestic roles.
- In Egypt and Ghana, attitudes about women as primary caregivers shape their decisions to work or start businesses ([Zeitoun et al., 2024](#); [Boateng, 2021](#)). In northern Ghana, young women with disabilities noted that caregiving duties drained their time and energy, limiting both entrepreneurial ambitions and wider career goals in rural settings ([Naami, 2015](#)).



- In contexts such as DRC, Ethiopia, and northern Uganda, internally displaced women without support systems devote most of their time to household and childcare, leaving little opportunity to explore entrepreneurship aspirations ([Amodu et al., 2020](#)).
- Sudanese refugee women in Egypt, especially single mothers, lack support and affordable childcare, forcing them to focus on childcare rather than entrepreneurship training ([UNICEF, 2024](#)).
- Female entrepreneurs in Sudan expressed frustration at restrictive social norms, particularly upheld by men, that confine women to household roles or office jobs as the only 'suitable work' ([Said and Enslin, 2020](#)).
- A synthesis on gender norms in agrifood systems reinforced the trend that men are positioned as empowered breadwinners, while women remain concentrated in subsistence activities and childcare ([Rietveld et al., 2023](#)).

Shifting societal mindsets helps shape attitudes and create an environment where marginalized groups can engage fully in social and economic life.

Shifting societal mindsets

- Fostering meaningful inclusion for women requires shifting social norms and attitudes to ensure their increased economic participation.
- In Uganda, the SASA! program used community dialogues and prevention

strategies to challenge stigmatizing attitudes toward gender inequality ([Abramsky et al., 2014](#); [Kyegombe et al., 2014](#)).

- To facilitate social change and community-led development, the Tostan program in Senegal used a similar approach in a community-driven effort, which led to greater acceptance of women in leadership and public roles ([Diop et al., 2008](#)). Participants also praised the program as a useful and inclusive tool to improved social and interpersonal relations within their villages.
- In Ghana, participatory community engagement by grassroots NGOs promoted linguistic inclusion and gained broader communal support ([Clarke, 2019](#)).

With their historical influence and power in society, men as allies can help shift norms, share power, and foster environments that accelerate women's inclusion.

Engaging men and allies

- Existing evaluation evidence from past and current programs shows that interventions which include men as allies have become increasingly common.
- In Rwanda, gender-transformative programmes such as Bandedehero and Indashyikirwa engaged men through group education, couple workshops, and community activism – aiming to challenge harmful norms, reduce violence, and foster more equitable relationships ([Doyle et al., 2018](#); [Dunkle et al., 2020](#)). Qualitative insights from



participants in these two programs highlighted more equitable decision-making and increased appreciation of others' perspectives ([Doyle et al., 2014](#); [What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls, 2019](#)).

- Review evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia strongly supports self-help groups and village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) in enhancing women's and girls' participation within households and communities ([Lwamba et al., 2021](#)). In Uganda, impact evidence highlighted empowerment gains for persons with disabilities participating in savings groups ([Bjortvatn and Tungodden, 2022](#)). Similarly, the combination of livelihood training and VSLAs contributed to improved livelihoods for refugees in South Sudan ([Vallet et al., 2021](#)).
- Community-based development projects were found to improve women's overall participation but showed limited evidence of lasting changes in community relationships in contexts such as the DRC and Afghanistan ([Mvukiyehe and van der Windt, 2020](#); [Beathe et al., 2013](#)).

Key programmatic insights

1. **Considering an intersectional lens:** There appears to be value in recognising how overlapping factors, such as disability, displacement, rurality, and social norms, shape young women's economic experiences and may influence the effectiveness of different types of support.
2. **Promoting disability-inclusive economic spaces:** Evidence suggests that more inclusive and accessible workplaces, alongside efforts to address discrimination and support self-employment, could help expand opportunities for women with disabilities.
3. **Recognizing informal entrepreneurship pathways:** In contexts where formal employment is limited, particularly for refugee and migrant women, informal entrepreneurship may serve as a common strategy for economic inclusion, and could benefit from more targeted support.
4. **Acknowledging rural constraints:** Women in rural areas seem to face unique barriers linked to mobility, time, and access to inputs and networks – factors that might require more context-sensitive approaches.
5. **Understanding the role of gender norms:** Shifting gendered expectations around work, care, and income generation may require more sustained engagement at household and community levels, particularly with men and boys as allies.
6. **Engaging men and communities is important for transformation:** Men's engagement helps accelerate women's inclusion by shifting power dynamics and challenging social expectations, while community participation is equally vital for



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strengthening collective agency and involvement. Participatory approaches and awareness-building efforts that involve families, boys, and broader communities may help foster more enabling environments for women's economic participation.

7. Reinforcing collective support

mechanisms: While self-help groups and VSLAs are widely used, their impact may be more significant when combined with broader structural changes that address underlying power dynamics and access issues.

