



The Youth
Employment
Evidence and
Insights Hub

In partnership with



What works for education and school-to-work transition for young women in Africa?

Youth Employment Evidence and Insights Hub

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About the Youth Employment Evidence and Insights Hub

The Youth Employment and Evidence Insights Hub is a partnership convened by the Pan-African Collective for Evidence (PACE), which brings together key organizations from across Africa and beyond, with expertise and experience in how best to provide evidence and insights to decision-makers. The Youth Employment Evidence and Insights Hub supports the Mastercard Foundation to deliver its Young Africa Works Strategy.

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Consortium partners



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Summary

Across Africa, young women and girls continue to face systemic barriers that limit their access to quality education and their ability to transition into dignified and fulfilling work. These barriers are shaped by poverty, restrictive social norms, limited opportunities for market-relevant skills development, and structural inequalities that affect vulnerable groups, particularly girls with disabilities, refugees, young mothers, those living in rural or informal settlements, and young women not in education, employment or training (NEET).

We synthesized insights from a rapid evidence review focused on programme models, policies, and innovations that support access to quality education and facilitate pathways into work. Drawing on evidence from cash transfers, vocational training, STEM programmes, safe spaces, technology-enabled learning, community engagement, and government partnerships, the analysis highlights what is known to work and where persistent gaps remain.

The evidence shows that young women's progress in education and economic participation improves most consistently when programmes adopt multi-component, gender-responsive, and context-sensitive approaches. Financial support interventions remain essential for improving school retention and reducing the prevalence of early

marriage and adolescent pregnancy. Safe spaces and mentorship have also emerged as powerful enablers of self-esteem, well-being, and educational continuation, particularly for girls confronting social pressure, stigma, or displacement.

Technology-enabled learning, when supported by adequate infrastructure, has expanded access to education, especially for marginalized groups such as refugees and girls in remote areas. However, digital adoption remains uneven, underscoring the importance of pairing digital interventions with investments in connectivity, devices, and digital literacy.

In the domain of work transitions, both vocational training and entrepreneurship have proven to offer viable pathways into employment for young women. Entrepreneurship interventions, in particular, show consistent short-term gains in income and livelihoods, especially when programmes combine business training, mentorship, financing, and network-building. Nonetheless, persistent gender disparities reveal that women benefit less from general youth programmes unless interventions are specifically tailored to their needs and constraints. Together, these insights emphasize the need for holistic, gender-responsive approaches that address not only educational access, but also the social, cultural, and structural conditions shaping transitions into work for young women.

1 | Introduction

Young women in Africa face a unique combination of constraints that affect their educational attainment and limit their access to dignified employment. Despite progress in expanding basic education, gender disparities persist, particularly for girls living in poverty, experiencing displacement, managing disabilities, caring for children, or residing in remote and underserved communities. These challenges widen the mismatch between the skills young people possess and the competencies demanded by labour markets, further compounding the exclusion of young women.

This review set out to understand what works in supporting young women to access quality, relevant education, and what facilitates their transition into work. The analysis draws on available evidence from a supplied programme list, complemented by additional searches where information on priority groups was limited. While the aim was to focus on interventions targeting young women, the scarcity of such programmes required the inclusion of broader youth-focused initiatives where insights could be adapted.

Across the evidence base, the review centred on six highly vulnerable groups: girls living with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced young women, young mothers and pregnant teenagers, young women in rural or impoverished

urban areas, those not in education or employment, and girls facing multiple, overlapping forms of marginalization. The findings presented reflect both what is well-established and where evidence remains emerging or incomplete.

2 | Overview of Insights

The review identifies five broad areas that significantly influence access to education and school-to-work transitions for young women: financial support, community and enabling services, institutional and governmental engagement, technology integration, and pathways into work.

First, financial support mechanisms consistently improve enrolment, retention, and completion for girls from poor households. Scholarships, bursaries, and cash transfers offset direct and indirect schooling costs and reduce pressures that drive early marriage or labour participation. Second, community engagement and enabling services, including childcare, mentorship, psychosocial support, and safe space, are essential for sustained participation, particularly for vulnerable young women who juggle household responsibilities or face restrictive norms.

Third, government engagement and multi-stakeholder partnerships strengthen implementation quality, align interventions with national priorities,

and enable scale. Fourth, technology-based learning offers new opportunities to reach underserved girls, yet remains highly dependent on infrastructure, digital literacy, and gender-responsive pedagogical design. Finally, pathways from education to work are most effective when programmes expand the range of opportunities available to young women, including formal schooling, TVET, entrepreneurship, digital skills programmes, and community-based learning.

Overall, the evidence suggests that interventions succeed when they adopt holistic, context-responsive, and multi-dimensional approaches, combining financial, social, and learning supports with structural reforms.

3 | Findings

3.1 Access to Quality and Relevant Education

Across Africa, programmes designed to improve girls' access to education typically fall into several categories: financial support, vocational and entrepreneurship training, STEM initiatives, safe spaces, accessibility improvements for students with disabilities, and re-entry policies. These interventions acknowledge that poverty, social norms, and household responsibilities disproportionately affect young women and girls, and that targeted support is necessary to overcome these barriers ([Sampa et al. 2021](#)).

Financial support and cash transfer interventions emerge as one of the strongest levers for inclusion.

Scholarships and bursaries have enabled thousands of girls to remain in school, reduce absenteeism, and delay early marriage. Programmes such as CAMFED, [HEAP](#), and Mastercard Foundation Scholars demonstrate clear gains in enrolment and completion among marginalized girls. A study also showed that caregivers often cite affordability as a key barrier, underscoring the role of financial incentives in sustaining participation ([Madden et al., 2023](#)).

Vocational and entrepreneurship training provides an alternative pathway for girls who are unable to continue in formal education. Interventions such as BRAC's [Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents \(ELA\)](#) combine life skills, vocational training, and microfinance, leading to reductions in early pregnancy and increases in economic participation ([Bandiera et al., 2017](#)). Similarly, programmes that blend business training with start-up capital and mentorship improve job readiness and self-employment outcomes.

STEM-focused interventions—including [Techno Girl](#), [Soronko Academy](#), and [African Girls Can Code](#) aim to close gender gaps in STEM fields by introducing girls to digital and technical skills early. While long-term employment data is limited, these initiatives expand exposure to high-growth fields and challenge stereotypes around women in STEM.

Safe spaces play a pivotal role in supporting educational continuity. By creating environments where girls can receive mentorship, build confidence, and discuss sensitive issues, these programmes have demonstrated improvements in self-esteem, school attendance, and overall well-being. ELA's safe spaces in Sierra Leone and AGI Kenya's health and social support interventions illustrate how protective social structures enhance learning outcomes ([Bandiera et al., 2017](#); [Muthengi et al., 2016](#)).

Infrastructure and accessibility improvements remain critical for girls with disabilities. Programmes such as [Sightsavers](#) and [GESS](#) have shown that simple adjustments such as ramps, railings, and accessible toilets can significantly improve school attendance and inclusion ([Anthrologica, 2019](#)).

Finally, re-entry policies for pregnant girls and young mothers are vital but often poorly implemented. Evidence from Kenya indicates that clear guidelines, awareness campaigns, and supportive school environments are necessary for re-entry policies to translate into meaningful retention ([Mutune et al., 2025](#)).

3.2 Support Services for Educational Continuity

Educational success for young women requires more than classroom instruction. Programmes that effectively retain girls combine community-based engagement, social support networks,

and enabling services that reduce attrition and respond to contextual barriers ([Equal Measures 2030, 2021](#)). Community leaders, women mentors, and local organisations frequently act as critical connectors, identifying marginalized girls, shifting attitudes on early marriage, and promoting positive norms around girls' education.

Parental and community engagement play a decisive role. Initiatives such as the Kenya Equity in Education Project ([KEEP II](#)) in Kenya illustrate how partnerships with parents, faith leaders, women mentors, and community champions enhance learning outcomes and reduce dropout ([Rothman and Rioux, 2022](#)). These partnerships help shift norms around girls' education, challenge harmful practices such as early marriage, and build supportive networks for vulnerable girls.

Childcare services are particularly transformative for young mothers or adolescent girls caring for siblings. The Empowering Adolescent Girls Project ([EPAG](#)) programme in Liberia shows that when childcare support is integrated into training programmes, young mothers are more likely to participate consistently, complete training, and pursue employment ([AGI, 2010](#)).

Community-based mentorship also improves programme targeting and inclusion, allowing implementers to reach the most marginalized groups. [CAMFED](#)'s model of employing local women as mentors and community-based advocates demonstrates that

locally grounded solutions enhance trust, improve retention, and strengthen learning outcomes.

These support services are essential because cultural norms often change slowly. Deep-seated beliefs about gender roles, domestic responsibilities, and early marriage require sustained engagement. While some programmes report incremental improvements in attitudes, many note that norm change remains uneven and context-dependent ([Madden et al., 2023](#)).

3.3. Government and Stakeholder Engagement

Government involvement emerges as an indispensable factor in programme success. Stronger outcomes occur where ministries co-lead reforms in teacher training, curriculum development, gender-responsive pedagogy, and TVET alignment education ([Rose et al., 2020](#), [Limboro et al., 2020](#)). Kenya's Ministry of Education, for instance, played an active role in implementing the [Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu \(WWW\) programme](#), driving systemic reforms that supported school retention and transition to training ([Education Development Trust, 2020](#)).

Diplomatic and multilateral partnerships further amplify impact. Initiatives like [Let Girls Learn](#) and [GPE](#) support governments to advance gender-responsive reforms, provide financing, and strengthen institutional capacity. These partnerships reinforce that sustainable impact requires not

only programme-level innovation but broader structural alignment.

The evidence highlights that when governments are actively involved—through sector reforms, curriculum improvements, or teacher capacity development interventions achieve wider scale, stronger alignment, and greater sustainability.

3.4 Technology Integration

Technology-supported education offers immense potential for expanding access and improving quality, especially in remote, fragile, or crisis-affected settings access and during pandemics such as COVID-19. However, its success depends heavily on the surrounding ecosystem. [Thakur and Potter \(2018\)](#) highlight that digital interventions are effective only when paired with reliable infrastructure, internet connectivity, sufficient device access, technical support, and teachers trained in digital pedagogy. Initiatives such as [Giga](#), [Learning Passport](#), [KENET Schools Connectivity Initiative](#), [UCUSAF](#), [Girls' Learning Through Technology – GLTT](#), [Connect To Learn](#), and [Vodafone's Instant Schools](#) illustrate that expanding connectivity and power access is essential for ensuring girls can fully participate in technology-enabled education.

Gender-responsive approaches are crucial. Programmes that consider gender norms, language, online safety, and accessibility help ensure that young women can fully benefit from digital

tools. Teachers play a pivotal role, and evidence suggests that instructors with a growth mindset positively influence students' willingness to engage with technology ([Mesler et al., 2021](#)).

Mobile phones, in particular, are transformative for refugee girls ([Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017](#)). In Kenya's Kakuma and Dadaab camps, mobile access enables young women to engage with support networks, maintain communication with mentors, and access learning opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable.

Despite these gains, digital inequality remains pronounced. Where infrastructure lags, digital interventions often fail to reach the most marginalized girls. Investments in connectivity championed through initiatives such as [Giga](#), [UCUSAF](#), and the [KENET Schools Connectivity Initiative](#) remain essential.

Digital literacy remains essential for both learners and educators. While higher education institutions have made significant strides in adopting digital tools, basic and secondary levels continue to lag due to resource constraints.

3.5. Pathways from Education to Work

Transitioning from school to work requires diverse and flexible pathways. Programmes that recognize the varied realities of young women and offer multiple routes tend to achieve stronger outcomes. Interventions like WWW and [Adolescent Girls Empowerment](#)

[Program \(AGEP\)](#) incorporate alternative pathways such as catch-up classes, TVET routes, apprenticeships, digital learning platforms, and entrepreneurship, and re-entry supports ensure that young women who face disruption are not permanently excluded from learning or work ([Madden et al., 2023](#)).

TVET programmes like [Ninaweza](#) in Kenya demonstrate that targeted skills training improves employability and earnings, especially when linked to labour market needs.

Technology-based informal learning, such as [CodeHive](#) and [Akilah Institute for Women](#), offers promising opportunities for young women to acquire high-demand digital skills with direct pathways into employment or entrepreneurship. Evaluations indicate that graduates often secure employment, internships, or freelance opportunities, with some programmes showing increases in earning potential and leadership roles ([Dickson et al., 2023](#)).

Entrepreneurship provides an important alternative for young women facing constrained labour markets. Successful models combine business training, financial support, mentorship, and peer networks. Programmes such as the [Women's Income-Generating Support \(WINGS\)](#) in Uganda highlight how multi-component approaches strengthen business survival and income generation. However, gender disparities persist, with men generally benefiting

more from mainstream entrepreneurship programmes. This underscores the need for interventions that intentionally address women's constraints, including limited capital, restricted mobility, safety concerns, and time poverty ([ISI, 2023](#)).

4 | Conclusion

This synthesis of evidence reveals that improving education and work outcomes for young women in Africa requires a holistic, multi-level approach. Financial support lays the groundwork for inclusion, but social and structural factors, including community norms, policy environments, infrastructure, digital access, and enabling services, ultimately shape outcomes.

Interventions that combine financial, social, and educational components consistently deliver the strongest results. Technology holds significant potential, similar to entrepreneurship and vocational training, but must be embedded within supportive ecosystems. Government and development partner engagement remain central to scaling and sustaining impact, while community-led initiatives foster trust and address deeply rooted norms.

Despite promising progress, significant gaps remain. Evidence is limited for the most marginalized groups, long-term employment outcomes are rarely measured, and interventions often lack

the gender-responsive design needed to address structural inequalities.

Addressing these gaps will be essential to building pathways that enable young women to access quality education and transition into dignified, fulfilling work across the continent. Strengthening evaluation, scaling proven approaches, and investing in gender-responsive, context-specific solutions will be critical to closing persistent gaps and enabling young women to access dignified, fulfilling work across Africa.

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