The Youth Employment Evidence and Insights Hub

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What works in entrepreneurship for young women in Africa?

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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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Summary

- Africa has the most rapidly growing youth population compared to the rest of the world. Therefore more and more young people in Africa are embracing entrepreneurship as a route to dignified work. This is more so with the persistent challenge of limited formal employment. This rapid evidence review synthesizes insights from 57 studies across Africa, alongside lessons from Latin America and South Asia, to identify what works in supporting youth entrepreneurship and inclusive job creation.

- The review finds that entrepreneurship programmes generally improve access to work and income in the short term, particularly when they combine multiple components such as training, finance, mentorship, and market linkages. Isolated interventions, especially those offering only cash or grants, tend to have limited or short-lived impact.

- Successful initiatives, such as YouWiN! in Nigeria and WINGS in Uganda, demonstrate that multi-layered and context-sensitive support helps to both start and grow enterprises. Yet, gender disparities persist where young men continue to benefit more than young women, reflecting enduring social, cultural, and economic barriers.

- Beyond individual interventions, the report underscores the need for robust entrepreneurship ecosystems encompassing policy, finance, skills, markets, and culture. Drawing on ILO's framework, it calls for gender-responsive, ecosystem-based approaches that integrate training, finance, and institutional reforms to make entrepreneurship a more transformative and equitable pathway to work for Africa's youth.

1 | Introduction

Africa faces a pressing challenge: the continent's youth population is growing rapidly, yet formal employment opportunities remain limited. For many young people, especially young women, are embracing entrepreneurship as an alternative route to secure dignified and fulfilling work.

This rapid evidence review was developed to provide practical insights for policy-makers, program designers, and implementing organizations. It specifically explores entrepreneurship as a strategy to improve employment outcomes for young women in Africa. The review draws on evidence from 57 studies from across Africa that assess interventions designed to stimulate youth entrepreneurship, as well as additional evidence from Latin America and South Asia. It investigates the effectiveness of different approaches and contextual conditions that influence success. The review is structured around four critical questions:

1. Does entrepreneurship create access to dignified and fulfilling work?
2. What effective interventions have supported the development or scale-up of businesses?
3. What approaches for ecosystem-building to promote access to work through entrepreneurship in Africa are effective?
4. What can be learned from select interventions beyond Africa?

2 | Overview of Insights

The evidence indicates that entrepreneurship interventions generally lead to short-term improvements in access to work both self-employment and wage employment (Abebe, 2015; Mussa et al., 2018). Gains are observed among young men and women, as well as internally displaced and conflict-affected populations (IOM, 2019). However, young men tend to benefit more than young women, reflecting deep-seated gender-based barriers that influence program design, access, and outcomes (Honorati, 2015).

Multi-component interventions combining training, skills development, access to finance, mentorship, and network-building are more effective than single-component approaches. Business development and performance improve most consistently when training is tailored and complemented by real opportunities to access finance and markets. While cash transfers and business grants can support entrepreneurship, their impact depends heavily on how they are structured and supported.

The review also highlights the value of ecosystem thinking. Entrepreneurship does not exist in a vacuum — it thrives where there is enabling policy, inclusive financing, access to human capital, supportive culture, and functioning markets. The International Labour Organization's framework and three-step method for assessing and strengthening entrepreneurship ecosystems offers a practical route for localized, targeted action, especially for youth and women.

Case studies from India, Latin America, and Indonesia reinforce key lessons: context matters, segmentation is critical, and supportive structures make all the difference. In particular, models that focus on peer learning, digital tools, formalization, and access to diverse financing can significantly strengthen women's participation in entrepreneurship.

Despite clear progress, gaps remain. Evidence on digital entrepreneurship in Africa is limited, and understanding how networks function to support young women entrepreneurs calls for more work. Lastly, a stronger gender lens must be integrated across all interventions — from design to delivery and evaluation — to ensure that entrepreneurship truly serves as a transformative vehicle for young women.

3 | Findings

3.1 Entrepreneurship as a pathway to work for young women

The evidence is largely conclusive that entrepreneurship interventions create short-term access to employment for young people, including young women. Across 40 of the 57 studies reviewed, programs increased self-employment, improved job readiness, and in some cases led to wage employment. However, the magnitude of these benefits varies significantly across gender, geography, and program design.

Most successful interventions share common features: they target vulnerable groups, combine multiple support mechanisms, and are contextually grounded. For instance, the Micro and Small Enterprises Development (MSE) Program in Ethiopia linked small business grants with microfinance training and resource management education, leading to increased self-employment (Abebe, 2015). Similarly, in Nigeria, the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWiN!) business plan competition boosted self-employment and firm survival, while the Youth-in-Agribusiness (YIA) program facilitated land access and technical training for youth, resulting in higher employment levels(McKenzie, 2017, Bello et al., 2021).

These gains are not limited to self-employment. Some programs facilitated entry into formal wage labour, particularly for young men. The Kenya Youth Empowerment Project (KYEP), which paired classroom training with internships, improved formal job placement (Honorati, 2015). The Youth Employment and Empowerment Program (YEEP) in Sierra Leone helped graduates to secure roles in political and industry organizations (Adablah and Bockarie, 2018).

Nevertheless, interventions are not universally successful. A grant program in South Sudan and a micro-franchising scheme in Kenya failed to significantly improve employment outcomes, suggesting that cash alone is insufficient without supportive infrastructure or accountability mechanisms (Müller et al., 2019, Brudevold-Newman et al., 2017).

Crucially, gender disparities persist. Men consistently reap greater benefits, partly due to structural factors such as time poverty, mobility restrictions, and unequal asset ownership. While some women-focused initiatives, such as Uganda's Women's Income Generating Support (WINGS) program and Benin's Benin Youth Employment Project (BYEP), show promising results,) many mainstream interventions fall short of addressing the specific constraints faced by women (Blattman et al., 2013; World Bank, 2019). Programs with multiple components tend to produce positive outcomes. Of the 40 studies with access-to-work outcomes, 39 include training, education, and skills development. These are mostly combined with business mentoring, cash grants, networks, or behavioural support. Interventions that included structured networking opportunities or community-building, though fewer, also showed improved self-employment outcomes for women.

Table 1: Examples of Entrepreneurship Interventions that Increased Access to Work

Country	Intervention Name	Start-End	Components	Outcome
Ethiopia	MSE Program	2004-present	Grants, training, microfinance	Increased self-employment
Nigeria	YouWiN!	2011-2014 ~3 years	Business plan competition, training	Firm survival, self-employment
Uganda	WINGS	2009-2012 ~3 years	Business grants, skills training	Higher income, more time in self-employment
Sudan	YVRDP	2015-2017 ~2 years	Value chain support, training, networks	500 new youth jobs, including women
Sierra Leone	YEEP	2011-2013 ~2 years	Labour placement, training	Formal jobs in industry and politics
South Sudan	Business Start-Up Grant	2014-2016 ~2 years	Unconditional cash transfer	Minimal impact on employment

3.2 Growing and scaling businesses: What works?

Beyond initial access to work, sustainable entrepreneurship depends on whether young people can successfully start, grow, and maintain their enterprises. The review examined both start-up activity and business performance. It found that certain interventions can significantly improve outcomes related to profitability, business survival, and scale, particularly when support extends beyond the launch phase.

Training once again emerges as important. Programs that embedded business or vocational training especially when paired with mentoring, microcredit, or networking led to start-up success and ongoing performance. However, the content, duration, and delivery of training varied widely. Some interventions offered intensive multi-week programs, while others delivered training in as little as a day. Despite this variation, consistent gains were found across formats, provided the training was tailored and practically applied.

For example, in Uganda, the Skills for Effective Entrepreneurship Development

(SEED) program provided both soft and hard business skills training to secondary school learners, resulting in higher profitability for businesses started by graduates (Choida et al., 2021). Similarly in the YouWin! Competition in Nigeria, where participants were trained and mentored, winners were more likely to operate innovative businesses with better sales and survival rates (Mckenzie, 2017). In Lesotho, graduates of the YEP program were able to hire more employees and increase sales after training (Morejele, 2008).

Performance was also strengthened when business support extended into operational or market-facing aspects. Programs like the Youth Volunteers Rebuilding Darfur Project (YVRDP) in Sudan, which included value chain integration, showed improved profits among rural micro- and small enterprises (Abduljabar, 2015). In Sierra Leone's Youth Employment Support Project (YESP), training reduced volatility in monthly profits, and recordkeeping improved (Rosas et al., 2017).

Microfinance and access to credit played an enabling role in some cases. Cash grants, particularly when conditional or coupled with capacity-building initiatives, contributed to improved business survival and revenue growth. However, studies that relied solely on finance without training or mentoring reported mixed or negligible impact.

Networks featured in several interventions as a mechanism for both start-up success and business performance. Evidence suggests that peer learning and professional mentorship improve not just technical skills, but also entrepreneurial confidence and market reach especially for young women.

Table 2: Examples of Interventions that Supported Business Development and Performance

Country	Intervention Name	Active	Support Provided	Outcome
Uganda	SEED	2012-2013 ~1 year	Soft/hard skills training	Higher profitability, increased business survival
Nigeria	YouWiN!	2011-2014 ~3 years	Training, mentorship, grants	Innovation, growth, employment creation
Lesotho	YEP	2010-2012 2 years	Training, mentoring, business networks	Increased hiring and improved sales
Sudan	YVRDP	2015-2017 2 years	Value chain training, networks	10% increase in profits for rural MSEs
Sierra Leone	YESP	2010-2015 5 years	Training, microfinance, business coaching	Reduced profit volatility, better bookkeeping
Tunisia	Mashrou3i	2012-2022 ~10 years	Support to expand businesses	Start-up and expansion of existing businesses

3.3 Building entrepreneurial ecosystems for youth and women

Entrepreneurship cannot thrive in isolation. It requires an enabling environment that supports individuals at multiple levels. The concept of an entrepreneurship ecosystem (EE) is gaining traction across Africa. However, most of the available evidence is conceptual or descriptive. The practical implementation of EE frameworks remains limited, though emerging examples show how ecosystems can be built and assessed to drive inclusive entrepreneurial growth.

Drawing on the International Labour Organization's (ILO) framework, the review identifies six core pillars of entrepreneurship ecosystems: policy, finance, human capital, support services, markets, and culture (ILO, 2024). In Africa, interventions rarely engage with all these pillars simultaneously. Instead, most programs focus on individual elements especially training and finance without addressing the structural barriers that prevent marginalised groups, including young women, from participating fully.

This three-step method presented by ILO offers a promising roadmap for ecosystem development:

3.3.1 Define the target group, location, and entrepreneurship objective

This ensures interventions are tailored and context-sensitive. For instance, programs in rural areas must consider remoteness, limited infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms that restrict women's mobility.

3.3.2 Assess the local entrepreneurship ecosystem

This entails going beyond mapping services to understand who has access, what the key constraints are, and why exclusion persists. In Egypt and Tanzania, national assessments have used this method to identify systemic gaps in education, finance, and cultural support.

Prioritise ecosystem pillars for action

By evaluating each pillar through a scoring system based on constraints, capacity, and potential for change stakeholders can focus resources where they will have the greatest impact. This approach also highlights the importance of collaboration, particularly between governments, financial institutions, private sector actors, and community organizations.

Gender-responsive ecosystem building is essential. Evidence shows that young women face compounded disadvantages across almost every pillar (Nhleko et al., 2023; ILO, 2024). Cultural norms, limited asset ownership, and gender bias in financing all reduce their chances of success. Therefore, EE development must incorporate inclusive design principles and ensure that women's access, safety, and participation are considered from the outset.

Special attention must also be paid to rural entrepreneurship ecosystems, where challenges include poverty, poor infrastructure, limited market access, and traditional gender roles. However, rural areas may also offer untapped opportunities, such as resource-based enterprises and strong local networks

Table 3: Examples of Ecosystem Assessment and Development

Country	Focus Area	Key Insight	Application in Ecosystem Building
Egypt	National ecosystem assessment	Gaps in finance and training identified	Used to target support services and policy reforms
Tanzania	Policy and institutional review	Fragmented support system highlighted	Coordinated stakeholder strategy proposed
Algeria	Academic institutions	Role of universities as ecosystem hubs	Recommended integrating entrepreneurship education
Rural Africa	Community context	Cultural and spatial barriers for women entrepreneurs	Calls for rural-specific ecosystem design
Multi-country	ILO 3-step ecosystem approach	Framework used for prioritising EE pillars	Focused on skills, finance, and market access

3.4 Global lessons: What Africa can learn from others

While Africa's entrepreneurship landscape has unique characteristics, lessons from other regions, particularly South Asia and Latin America, offer transferable insights into effective practices for empowering young entrepreneurs, especially women. The review analysed 14 studies from India, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Indonesia, focusing on both barriers and solutions that can inform African programming.

3.4.1 India: Mass entrepreneurship through segmentation and digital support

In India, a nuanced typology of entrepreneurs, solopreneurs and nanopreneurs has helped shape more targeted interventions. Solopreneurs are typically self-employed individuals operating home-based or informal businesses, while nanopreneurs manage small enterprises that employ others and seek growth.

Interventions that supported growth aspirations varied by type. Solopreneurs often lacked digital and financial literacy, struggled with compliance processes, and relied on informal networks. Nanopreneurs needed help with marketing, scaling, and business strategy. Across both groups, access to credit and digital tools was a consistent barrier (Mohan et al., 2020).

Key strategies included:

- Peer learning and exposure to role models
- Business incubators and cohort-based training
- Digital identity and e-commerce enablement

- Access to collateral-free working capital loans

These interventions revealed that gender-responsive programming is critical. Women entrepreneurs faced compounded barriers due to time poverty, limited mobility, and a lack of formal documentation. Programs that included mentoring, financial literacy, and digital on boarding were particularly effective in bridging these gaps.

3.4.2 Latin America: Digital entrepreneurship and women's enterprise

In Latin America, two focus areas emerged: digital entrepreneurship and women's enterprise development in low-income settings.

Digital entrepreneurship studies showed that firms using digital tools like websites and mobile payments were more resilient to institutional turbulence. However, many women lacked the confidence, knowledge, or resources to use digital platforms (Elias et al, 2022). Barriers also included high tax burdens and informal competition (Urbano et al., 2024). Strategies to promote digital enterprise included training in digital financial tools; support to build online presence (e.g. Instagram storefronts); and fiscal policy reforms to reduce operational burdens.

Women's entrepreneurship in Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and Guatemala faced systemic challenges, such as limited access to finance, marketing channels, and skilled human resources. Women reported high stress due to overlapping personal and professional demands, often running businesses to secure flexible schedules. Ways of addressing these challenges included returning to school or upskilling; participation in business fairs; and resilience-building through psychological support and mentorship. A study from Colombia found that women who received entrepreneurship training earned 19.6% more and were more likely to be employed in the formal sector (Attanasio et al., 2011).

3.4.3 Indonesia: Balancing family and enterprise

Indonesian women entrepreneurs faced barriers similar to their African counterparts' limited capital or access to credit, and cultural constraints. "Mumpreneurs" particularly struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic, juggling childcare with running businesses (Tan and Yew, 2023). Supportive measures included routine entrepreneurship and product quality training; technical assistance delivered onsite; and clear communication about available government programs.

Role models and exposure to entrepreneurial success stories also emerged as important motivators, especially for younger women, who demonstrated higher entrepreneurial self-efficacy than their male peers.

Table 4: Global Lessons with Relevance to African Contexts

Region	Focus Area	Key Barrier	Effective Strategy
India	Mass entrepreneurship	Low digital literacy and compliance	Digital onboarding, mentoring, peer learning
Latin America	Digital entrepreneurship	Institutional burdens and informality	Tech training, tax reforms, access to digital platforms
Latin America	Women's enterprise	Marketing, finance, HR challenges	Business fairs, training, resilience-building
Indonesia	Women-led microenterprise	Childcare duties, cultural norms	Spousal support, training, field-based technical support

4 | Conclusions

Entrepreneurship holds significant promise as a solution to Africa's youth employment challenge. For young women in particular who often face disproportionate barriers to entering formal employment entrepreneurship can offer flexibility, agency, and access to income. However, unlocking this potential requires deliberate, inclusive, and systemic approaches. This review synthesizes key findings to guide practitioners and policymakers in designing programs that are effective, scalable, and equitable.

The evidence demonstrates that entrepreneurship interventions can and do increase access to work. Most programs led to greater self-employment and, in some cases, wage employment, even in conflict-affected or fragile settings. However, the impact varied significantly across programs and participant groups. Men were more likely to benefit than women, pointing to persistent gendered constraints that limit women's ability to participate equally in economic life.

Training is the most consistent and impactful element across successful programs. Yet it is clear that training alone is not enough. Programs that combined training with business grants, access to credit, mentoring, and support networks contributed to greater business success. The strongest results came from interventions that aligned with local needs, offered follow-up support, and created clear pathways for both entry into and growth within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

In terms of business development, supporting young people to start businesses is only the first step. Helping them to grow and sustain these businesses is equally critical. This review found that performance improved when programs provided tailored skills development, market linkages, value chain support, and ongoing mentorship. Initiatives that incorporated performance coaching or helped participants navigate bureaucratic and financial systems achieved better results.

Equity must remain a central consideration. Women entrepreneurs often face barriers that are not just financial or educational but structural and cultural. Programs that failed to address these barriers for instance, by assuming equal access to time, mobility, or capital often registered limited results for women. Gender-responsive designing should therefore not be optional.

Additionally, entrepreneurship cannot be addressed solely at the individual level. Sustainable change requires strengthening the entire ecosystem policy, finance, skills, markets, and culture. Tools like the ILO's three-step method help identify the most critical elements to target, depending on the context.

While comprehensive ecosystem interventions are still emerging in Africa, early efforts suggest they can create a more enabling environment for young entrepreneurs. Prioritising the inclusion of marginalised groups' especially young women, rural youth, and displaced populations will ensure ecosystem investments do not reinforce existing inequalities.

Finally, experiences from India, Latin America, and Indonesia validate the importance of context-sensitive, multi-layered approaches. Whether addressing digital access, fiscal burden, or social norms, interventions are most effective when they blend technical, financial, and behavioural support. These lessons provide practical models but must be adapted to Africa's distinct cultural, economic, and political landscapes.

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