

From School to Employment: Effective Strategies to Support Women and Girls through the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond



Lessons from Rigorous Evidence from Low- and Middle-Income Countries



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The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected employment and schooling for young people around the world, exacerbating existing gender inequalities and the particular risks faced by girls and women. Before the pandemic, young women were already less likely than their male peers to be employed or in school and more likely to be working in informal or precarious forms of employment.¹ Estimates show that an additional 11 million girls may not return to school in 2021 due to the COVID-19 crisis. Evidence from previous crises suggests that many will never return to school.²

Gender gaps also appear in skilling activities, especially vocational education training programs and information, communications, and technology (ICT) education.³ Girls have less access to mobile internet than their male peers.⁴ These gaps have widened during the pandemic, as women and girls are more likely to be pulled out of school or leave the workforce to compensate for increased care and domestic work.⁵ Girls not returning to school may also lead to an increase in child marriages as a way to relieve families from economic stress. Lockdowns may also increase rates of pregnancy among girls due to disrupted access to reproductive health centers and social services.⁶ Further, evidence suggests that young people graduating in times of crisis find it more difficult to find jobs and income, delaying their path to financial independence and potentially causing them to fall into poverty as they have less savings.⁷

In this brief, Innovations for Poverty Action has compiled evidence-based insights from multiple meta-analyses and three-dozen randomized evaluations (both IPA and non-IPA studies) on how to support young women's skill-building and their transition into the labor force in low- and middle-income countries, with a focus on the COVID-19 crisis.⁸

Key Lessons on Supporting Young Women's Transition into the Labor Force*



Vocational training programs can increase young women's employment and earnings, particularly when combined with job matching assistance or internships.



Apprenticeship programs may help participants gain relevant skills and make the transition from wage work to self-employment. More research is needed on the long-term effects of apprenticeship programs on income and how they compare to vocational training programs for young women.



One-time cash grants designed to start businesses coupled with training may be effective in the short run but could have limited long-term impacts on the earnings capacity of young women.



Programs training women on job application best practices or providing financial incentives to apply for jobs may increase young women's ability to get job interviews and employment opportunities.



Providing information and connecting young women to economic opportunities may help change their cultural attitudes around occupational choices.



There is emerging evidence on the positive impacts of soft skills training programs on labor force outcomes. More evidence is needed on whether these programs are beneficial for young women in the long run and whether there are benefits from combining them with other interventions.



Multidimensional women's empowerment programs that holistically address barriers to young women's participation in the economy can improve employment and income, but the quality of implementation matters.

*** Important note:** While all interventions mentioned here have been or are currently being rigorously tested, solutions that work in one context may not work as well in another. In addition, while many of these interventions improve women's labor force participation in trial settings, delivery at scale might be more challenging. Careful monitoring and evaluation as these programs are adapted will help stakeholders understand whether programs may produce the intended results.



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In Mongolia, researchers randomly assigned, by school and trade, admission to vocational school to applicants who had completed either nine or eleven years of schooling. Female students who were admitted to vocational schools had higher employment rates and increased income, which can be attributed to gaining skills in specific trades and increased employment opportunities in high-paying sectors.⁹

In Egypt, researchers evaluated the impact of a training and employment support program for people aged 18-29 who were unemployed and out of school. The program included either training and capital support for participants to start their own business or training and job matching assistance to find a job opportunity. A randomly chosen subset of individuals were also provided with individualized counseling support. The researchers found that the program was successful in improving labor market outcomes for participants, with much stronger results for younger women.

The program increased women's decision-making power over how they spend the income they generate, suggesting that improvement in labor market outcomes for women corresponds with empowering them financially. The findings also suggest that counseling did not add much to the success of the regular training interventions.¹⁰

Researchers evaluated the long-term impact of a vocational training program in Colombia called *Jóvenes en Acción* for unemployed youth aged 18-25. The program combined classroom training with an internship and a small stipend. This mechanism provided clear incentives, as payments were linked to the completion of both the classroom and the internship components. Researchers found that the program benefited mainly women, increasing their employment, participation in the formal sector, and earnings.¹¹

In India, researchers found that a subsidized vocational training program for women aged 18-39 with at least five completed grades of schooling residing in low-income households increased their employment, hours spent working per week, and earnings. A cost-benefit analysis of the program indicated that the program costs could be recovered with less than four years of employment.¹²



Researchers evaluated the impact of *Ninaweza*, a 24-month training youth employability program for young women living in informal settlements in Nairobi. Applicants were eligible for the program if they had completed high school and had been out of school for at least one year. The program provided training in information and communications technology (ICT) and life skills, internships, and job placement support. The program increased participants' knowledge in ICT and life skills, the likelihood of finding a job, and weekly income. It was also successful in bolstering the confidence of women who were initially not confident in their skill sets.¹³

Another study in Kenya evaluated the impact of a training program, Artificial Intelligence 101, which taught young workers aged 18-35 with a high school certificate the skills needed for digital work. Applicants were either provided training or training and a referral for a job. Workers who participated in the digital skills training and job referral program had positive impacts on income and employment relative to those who did not participate. Effects were especially strong for women, and earnings benefits were particularly significant during the COVID-19 pandemic when jobs were remote. Workers who only received the training component struggled to find digital work in the first couple of years after training, with slightly negative impacts on earnings.¹⁴

In Argentina, a program for youth aged 18-30 that included life skills and vocational training, as well as internships with private sector employers, had substantial positive impacts on employment in the short term. However, these impacts dissipated in the medium to long term. The program had substantially larger impacts on young men, possibly due to women candidates being older, more likely to have children, and having lower levels of educational attainment and previous employment experience relative to men at the time of entering the program.¹⁵

Also in Kenya, a program called the Kenya Youth Empowerment Project had significant positive effects on the earnings of women trainees aged 17-29. The program included classroom-based training on life skills, general

business skills, and sector-specific skills, and a 12-week internship in six high-growth sectors. The program also had impacts on the financial behavior of participants, especially the savings rates of young women, possibly due to the life skills training component. These results should be interpreted with caution given the high number of female participants who did not continue in the follow-up survey.¹⁶



Apprenticeship programs may help participants gain relevant skills and make the transition from wage work to self-employment. More research is needed on the long-term effects of apprenticeship programs on income and how they compare to vocational training programs for young women.

In Ghana, researchers evaluated the impact of a government-sponsored apprenticeship training program for youth aged 15-30 designed to address high levels of youth unemployment. Participants were more likely to shift out of wage work and into self-employment, but the program did not lead to changes in income in the short run. Female participants working in cosmetology or garment making were more likely to complete the program and had longer apprenticeships, but this did not result in a significant increase in earnings or employment.¹⁷

Researchers compared the effects of offering workers in Uganda aged 18-25 and with seven to eleven years of education either vocational training or firm-provided on-the-job training for six months. After three years, they found that workers in both groups gained sector-specific skills, improved employment rates, and experienced improvements on an index of labor outcomes. However, they found that gains from firm-provided training materialized quickly but faded over time, while gains from vocational training emerged slowly but were long-lasting, possibly because vocational training provided certifiable skills.¹⁸



A study in Malawi evaluated the impact of an entrepreneurship and vocational training program for youth aged 15-24 and why many potential trainees do not attend or complete such programs. Participants in the program received on-the-job training through placement as apprentices to master craftspeople in their area of interest. The study found that there were differences in the reasons young women and men stopped attending the program. For example, women were more likely to drop out due to distance, illness, or injury, whereas men were more likely to drop out to take advantage of migration work opportunities. The location of the apprenticeship training, family support, and convenience were important determinants of whether a young woman attended the apprenticeship program.¹⁹



One-time cash grants designed to start businesses coupled with training may be effective in the short run but could have limited long-term impacts on the earnings capacity of young women.

In Kenya, researchers evaluated a microfranchising program for young women aged 18-19 in three of Nairobi's poorest neighborhoods. The program provided "franchises" of either salons or food carts, so that participants did not have to come up with their own business models. It also included vocational and life skills training together with start-up capital and ongoing business mentoring. The evaluation found that the program had an impact on income seven to ten months after the intervention, but these impacts were not sustained two years after the cash grant.²⁰ The authors suggest that participants may have invested their grants in

businesses even if they did not have a particular interest in business management in part because there were few other good options for them to save their money instead.

Researchers in Uganda found that in the short run, one-time cash grants of US\$400 to support members of self-help groups aged 16-35 to start individual skilled trades increased average earnings. The program was targeted to poor, unemployed young people with at least some education and prospects for starting a skilled trade. The cash grants included funding for groups to hire their own vocational trainers, buy start-up tools and materials, and set themselves up as individual tradespersons. The results after four years suggested that program impacts on women were proportionally greater. However, in the long run, the income effects were minimal, and the only sustained effect was the increased likelihood of engaging in a skilled trade.²¹

Also in Uganda, researchers evaluated the impact of a program providing extremely poor women and girls aged 14-30 in war-affected villages with grants of about US\$150. They also received five days of business skills training and planning and ongoing supervision to help with the implementation of their business plans. A random subset of participants was encouraged to form self-help groups and offered training on working together. Sixteen months after the grants, participants doubled their microenterprise ownership and incomes, mainly from petty trading, with little evidence of changes in financial autonomy, mental health, or domestic violence.²² Participants who were encouraged to form groups increased the frequency of group interactions and engagement in cooperative activities like labor sharing and informal finance. This suggests that social interactions can deliver economic returns.



Programs training women on job application best practices or providing financial incentives to apply for jobs may increase young women's ability to get job interviews and employment opportunities.

In South Africa, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to study the impact of including standardized reference letters with the job applications of women aged 18-34. They found that these women were more successful at getting both job interviews and offers. Letters were effective because they provided accurate information about workers' skills that firms used to select applicants of higher ability.²³

Also in South Africa, researchers found that a program for youth aged 18-29 assessing work seekers' skills, giving them their assessment results, and helping them to credibly share the results with firms, increased their employment and earnings. The program targeted unemployed job seekers who had some form of previous work experience and had not completed university-level tertiary education. Giving assessment results only to work seekers had similar effects

on beliefs and search, but smaller effects on employment and earnings.²⁴

In Ethiopia, researchers evaluated the impact of a program for youth aged 18-29 offering either a transport subsidy or a two-day job application workshop that included an orientation on curricula vitae, cover letters, and interviews. The program targeted youth who had completed high school and who did not have a permanent job. They also certified their general skills using a mix of standardized personnel selection tests. Both the transport subsidy and job application workshop increased the probability of finding stable and formal jobs and increased earnings and employment rates among the most disadvantaged job seekers, including women.²⁵

In another study in Ethiopia, researchers evaluated a program where employers offered a small monetary payment to all job applicants calibrated to reimburse them for transport costs and the opportunity cost of their time. They found that the incentive improved the quality of the applicant pool, whose average age was 26. This improvement was driven by women and by job seekers who were unemployed and less experienced, and thus stood to benefit the most from the job.²⁶



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In India, researchers evaluated the impact of recruiting services to help young women aged 15-21 with 10-12 years of schooling in rural Indian villages get jobs in the business process outsourcing industry. They found that young women were significantly less likely to get married or have children during this period, choosing instead to enter the labor market or obtain more schooling or post-school training. Women also reported wanting to have fewer children and to work more steadily throughout their lifetime, consistent with increased aspirations for a career.²⁷

Researchers in Egypt evaluated the impact of an “edutainment” program broadcast on a popular Egyptian television channel designed to promote entrepreneurship among young adult viewers aged 18-25. They found that it was successful at changing viewers’ attitudes and perceptions regarding entrepreneurship and gender-related beliefs, especially among men and low-educated respondents. In particular, women role models that were portrayed on the show had an impact on gender-related norms and opinions associated with self-employment.²⁸

In Kenya, as part of a vocational training voucher program for youth aged 18-30, researchers used persuasive messaging to encourage female participation in traditionally male-dominated and increasingly profitable fields. They found that the provision of better information did not

have a significant impact on enrollment decisions but did encourage women to take up male-dominated trades.²⁹



There is emerging evidence on the positive impacts of soft skills training programs on labor force outcomes. More evidence is needed on whether these programs are beneficial for young women in the long run and whether there are benefits from combining them with other interventions.

In the Dominican Republic, researchers studied the impact of a training program for youth aged 16-29 who were unemployed or underemployed and had not completed secondary school. The program, *Juventud y Empleo*, offered a range of vocational training options combined with basic skills training on self-esteem and work habits, followed by an internship in a private sector firm. Researchers found that 18-24 months after graduating from the program, there were no significant impacts on overall employment. But there was a positive impact of the program on perceptions of and expectations for the future, in particular for young women, who also saw a reduction in pregnancy rates. There were additional positive impacts on leadership skills and persistence of effort, which might matter for longer-term labor market outcomes.³⁰ Six years after the program, the researchers documented increased earnings for women in urban areas, suggesting that there are growing long-term effects of participation and that local labor market context and demand for the acquired skills may be important conditions for the success of such training programs.³¹

More recently, researchers studied a newer iteration of *Juventud y Empleo* which in 2009 expanded the personal skills component and opened several soft-skills-only courses. The 2009 iteration of the program provided either vocational and soft skills training plus an internship or only soft skills training plus an internship. In both programs, female participants experienced improved labor market outcomes in the short run and exhibited substantially higher levels of personal skills in the long run. Overall, these women experienced an improved sense of optimism, higher self-esteem, and lower fertility rates.³²

In Uganda, secondary school students who participated in the Educate! leadership and entrepreneurship training program, which teaches youth soft and hard skills through practically trained youth mentors, had positive impacts on educational outcomes, especially for female participants. The program generated positive social spillovers such as delayed family formation and changes in social norms.³³



Multidimensional women's empowerment programs that holistically address barriers to young women's participation in the economy can improve employment and income, but the quality of implementation matters.

In Sierra Leone, researchers evaluated an empowerment program where women aged 12-25 received support, information on health and reproductive issues, and vocational training during the Ebola crisis. Researchers found that women increased contraceptive use and were more likely to re-enroll in school post-crisis as a result of the program.³⁴

Researchers in Liberia evaluated the impact of the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women project for young women and girls aged 16-27 who were not enrolled in school. The program resulted in increased income and participation in the labor force. Researchers also found positive effects on a variety of empowerment measures including access to money, self-confidence, reduction in anxiety about circumstances and the future, and shifting attitudes toward gender norms at the household level.³⁵

In Uganda, researchers studied the effects of adolescent development clubs that combined vocational training to enable adolescent girls aged 14-20 to start small-scale income-generating activities with life skills training focused on sex, reproduction, and marriage. This community-based program increased the likelihood of girls engaging in income-generating activities and reduced teen pregnancy and early marriage.³⁶

In Tanzania, researchers replicated the Uganda study and introduced a second treatment arm that combined vocational and life skills training with microcredit. The study did not find any robust effects of the vocational and life skills training on young women's social and economic outcomes. The difference in effectiveness between

the Ugandan and Tanzanian programs may be due to differences in the quality of implementation and contextual factors. Results also demonstrated that layering the microfinance program onto the standard vocational and life skills training led to greater take-up of the program and an increase in savings.³⁷

Researchers in Bolivia evaluated the impact of a youth empowerment program that offered training in soft skills and technical skills, sex education, mentoring, and job-finding assistance for youth aged 15-18. The program increased girls' earnings and decreased violence targeting women. The findings suggest that empowerment programs can reduce the level of violence experienced by young women during times of crisis.³⁸

Researchers also evaluated the impact of a sports and life skills development program in Liberia for out-of-school youth aged 15-25 with little or no prior formal work experience. Results suggested that young adults who participated in the program were more likely to increase their participation in the labor force. These effects were particularly pronounced for disadvantaged groups that include women and those without vocational training experience.³⁹

Conclusion

The evidence-based approaches outlined in this document suggest some ways in which programming can be strengthened to support young women's participation in the labor force. It also includes suggestions for new evidence-backed programming that policymakers could consider to address other key barriers that women face in entering the labor force. The pandemic has generated considerable attention to the inequalities and vulnerabilities that can constrain women's work. Applying a gender lens to recovery activities and using data and evidence to guide those efforts is an opportunity to create sustainable systems that facilitate women's participation in the labor force.

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