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EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS PAPER SERIES

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# **YOUNG, FEMALE AND AFRICAN: BARRIERS, INTERVENTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEMALE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN AFRICA**

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Young women are an integral part of Africa's growing youth population. **While Africa as a whole struggles with an employment deficit for both men and women, and in both formal and informal sectors, women are consistently more disadvantaged than men in terms of their economic ability as well as their access to employment in many sectors.** This evidence synthesis paper attempts to extract and document the evidence from the existing literature on **how and why this is so by identifying the key barriers that prevent young women in Africa from joining the workforce; the sort of interventions that currently exist to address these barriers; and what future opportunities are likely to emerge for young women to enable them to become equal and productive members of Africa's workforce.** This paper focuses on young women in Africa, between the ages of 15-29 years, the age group selected to represent youth for the purposes of this study. The methodology adopted was chosen to highlight the evidence and its analysis for the five geographical regions in Africa: West, East, Central, North and Southern, as this allows for a more coherent presentation of results to inform policy and programme decisions.

**Four key barriers were identified** as standing out in the literature. The first is '**social and cultural barriers**', which include early marriage, lack of education, negative attitudes towards women, lack of access to land, and the care economy, which were seen in all five regions in varying forms. The second, '**economic barriers**', consist mainly of lack of access to finance for young women, while the third, '**conflict and fragility**', has resulted in a vulnerable population of young unemployed women. The final barrier, '**skills development**', refers to the lack of resources to train and guide young women in gaining suitable employment.

**The most successful interventions in addressing these four barriers were found to be a combination of those that support wellbeing, capacity building and access to jobs for women, as well as entrepreneurship.** In addition, two emerging areas of opportunity were found to hold great potential for employment: **mobile telecommunications and the digital economy, and the informal economy.** Both require greater attention from policymakers and researchers.

The barriers and interventions identified are based on the available literature and are not necessarily reflective of the entire continent. Evidence on women's employment is available for some regions in Africa, particularly for East and West Africa, on which there is substantial information, but not necessarily other regions, such as Central and Southern Africa, for which information is limited. This, however, does not mean that there are no, or insufficient, interventions in these regions, rather, merely insufficient evidence and documentation. Some key findings have nevertheless emerged:

- **Interventions that focus on providing women with access to, and control over, finance**, such as through financial management training, access to savings accounts and digital funds, ensure greater success for women starting and maintaining businesses.
- Likewise, **a combination of interventions, including access to childcare services, women's wellbeing and economic support**, are best able to ensure that women are able to stay in employment longer.
- In studying the barriers that impact on young women's employment and how these can be overcome, there is a need to focus on regions other than East and West Africa, particularly Central and Southern Africa. While North Africa is also relatively understudied, it nevertheless attracts a higher level of interest from researchers and policymakers.
- **Africa's restrictive regulatory environment clearly favours men over women in business**, e.g. women do not have the same access to loans and are not extended the same services to set up businesses. This automatically creates a bias against women who wish to enter the labour market.
- **Cultural barriers** such as early marriage and an inherent negative attitude towards women, particularly in terms of what their role in society should be, prevents women from playing a key role in the labour market.

- **Female education, or the lack of it, plays an extremely important role** in providing women with economic opportunities, as it sets the stage for young women to enter the formal labour market.
- **The care economy has still not found its way into official employment policy**, despite the impact it has on the ability of women to seek and retain employment. Without adequate support for enhanced social services, women will continue to be restricted to the home, unable to balance care and paid work responsibilities.
- **The rural/urban divide has a major impact on women's employability** - women in rural areas have far fewer opportunities to access formal employment or new innovations in the labour market than women in urban centres.
- **The lack of gender disaggregated data and analysis on labour market** barriers and employment opportunities for women hampers the design and implementation of interventions in both formal and informal labour markets.

## Key recommendations

### *For researchers:*

- **More in-depth regional and gender disaggregated data collection and analysis** on young women in the labour market, across regions and income distribution levels, is necessary to gain a clearer picture of the state and potential of employment opportunities for young women in Africa.
- Conduct **in-depth analysis of whether or not, and how, two emerging sectors, namely, the digital economy and high-skill professions**, can contribute to encouraging young women's employment.
- Study **the impact of urbanization and migration on the employment opportunities** available to young women in both formal and informal sectors.
- Study **different forms of conflict and their impact on young women** and their access to, and use of, the labour market to rehabilitate themselves after conflict.

### *For policymakers:*

- While there is a great need to **develop and enforce legislation in specific areas to aid employment, such as in the informal sector and secondary education**, none of this is possible without **overarching legislation at the country level that specifically targets and addresses discriminatory practices against (young) women**.
- **Recognize that the informal sector provides major labour market opportunities** for young women and explore how to include this in official data.
- **Ensure that financial institutions offer equal access to formal services to both men and women** and that economic programming takes into account women's need to separate funds for household and business use.
- **Encourage better data collection, harmonization and analysis on women's work**, including greater access to gender disaggregated data on labour market variables.
- Focus policies and practice on **improving access to, and retention of, young girls in secondary education** as a stepping stone to future employability.
- Consider **designing employment interventions for young women at a regional level, rather than on a country basis, based on the context of each region**, e.g. some regions are affected by conflict, others have a number of emerging economic opportunities.

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## About INCLUDE

INCLUDE was conceived in 2012 by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote evidence-based policymaking for inclusive development in Africa through research, knowledge sharing and policy dialogue. INCLUDE brings together researchers from African countries and the Netherlands who work with the private sector, non-governmental organizations and governments to exchange knowledge and ideas on how to achieve better research-policy linkages for inclusive development in Africa. Since its establishment, INCLUDE has supported more than 20 international research groups to conduct research on inclusive development and facilitated policy dialogues in Africa and the Netherlands.