



Rewriting the story: Young women's economic potential

Evidence from Ethiopia

Introduction

Over the past year, our team carried out comprehensive GESI responsive Rapid Market Assessments (RMAs) across nine clusters in Ethiopia; **Oromia, South West Ethiopia, Central Ethiopia, Sidama, Southern Ethiopia, Tigray, Eastern Amhara, and West Amhara**. This was supported by our 'Realising Aspiration Youth in Ethiopia through Employment (RAYEE 2)' project, funded by the Mastercard Foundation. **We spent time in communities, listened to young women and youth with disabilities, met with families and cooperatives, and spoke with technical and vocational education providers, financing institutions, private sector actors, and local authorities to understand how systems support—or restrict—young women's work** in the agri-food sector. What we learnt speaks to broader myths about young women's participation in economic activity and refocuses us on whose reality matters in these discussions.

- **Young women are not "unemployed" or "inactive"—they are working every day, often in invisible, informal, or undervalued ways.**
- **Their challenges are structural, not individual.**

The insights from Ethiopia reflect global patterns and help move the conversation beyond stereotypes. They reinforce that young women are motivated, capable, and ambitious—but they are operating within systems shaped by restrictive norms, safety concerns, time poverty, financial exclusion, and limited access to formal training and opportunity. Understanding these myths—and the realities—helps lay the foundation for more inclusive, practical, and effective programming.

Myths and realities about young women's work

Myth 1: "Young women are not interested in work or entrepreneurship."

Reality: Young women consistently show high ambition and motivation to work (in the agri-food sector). What looks like "lack of interest" is almost always the result of unsafe mobility, inaccessible training, limited capital, weak market links, or restrictive norms.

Myth 2: "Women's work is only supplemental to the household."

Reality: Women's income is central to household wellbeing. It pays for food, healthcare, schooling, clothing, shelter, and emergencies. In many contexts, women's earnings are more stable and diversified than men's.

Myth 3: "Young women lack the technical skills for productive work."

Reality: When training is practical, safe, and inclusive, young women acquire new skills quickly. Skills gaps reflect exclusion from training—not lack of ability.

Myth 4: "Young women prefer informal or low growth activities."

Reality: Women enter informal work because formal systems often exclude them. When women gain better access to finance, technology, markets, and fair recruitment, they succeed across high growth sectors including agro processing, services, manufacturing, digital work, and entrepreneurship.

Myth 5: “Women are too burdened by domestic work to engage in employment.”

Reality: Time poverty is real and results from unequal care responsibilities, lack of timesaving technology and poor infrastructure. Flexible schedules, improved sharing of household duties, investment in time saving technologies and schemes which reduce things like travel time, result in increased women’s participation and completion rates for training that often exceed men’s.

Myth 6: “Young women with disabilities cannot participate meaningfully in work.”

Reality: Many roles—from processing, packaging, horticulture, poultry, and retail to record keeping and digital work—are fully accessible with minor adaptations. Barriers come from the environment and stigma, not from women’s ability.

Myth 7: “Markets and public spaces are too unsafe for women.”

Reality: Safety challenges reflect poor design, not inherent risk and are already part of their day to day lives. Group marketing, women-friendly transport, lighting, and safeguarding systems significantly expand women’s safe mobility and market access.

Myth 8: “Young women’s economic challenges are the same everywhere.”

Reality: Barriers differ by region and context:

- **Urban:** unemployment, discrimination, financial exclusion
- **Rural:** land access, mobility restrictions, strong social norms
- **Pastoral:** early marriage, limited education, remoteness
- **Conflict-affected:** displacement, asset loss, heightened protection risks

Different locations require tailored approaches.

Young women face a heavier workload than men, managing both household and business duties. Despite this, they aspire to become investors in the future.



Myth 9: “There are limited opportunities for young women’s businesses to succeed.”

Reality: The RMAs show the opposite. Young women have strong opportunities to thrive in high return, low barrier sectors—especially poultry, vegetables, dairy, honey, and small ruminants. Group enterprises, tailored finance, practical nearhome training, and rising market demand for valueadded products all expand the space for women-led businesses. When women can access finance, skills, safe mobility, supportive families, and market linkages, their enterprises grow rapidly. The issue is not a lack of opportunity—it is ensuring women can access these opportunities equitably.

Myth 10: “Formal employment is too complex or demanding for young women.”

Reality: When workplaces offer transparent recruitment, mentoring, safety, and flexibility, young women perform strongly across all sectors.

Myth 11: “When women work, children receive less care.”

Reality: Children’s wellbeing improves when women earn. Enhanced income leads to better nutrition, schooling, and healthcare. Shared household duties, a supportive family environment and diversified incomes improve outcomes for the whole family in financially disadvantaged households.

Myth 12: “Women without paid work have no work experience”

Reality: Most women are not unemployed—they are engaged in unpaid care work, family farming, informal trading, or unpaid work. Their work is simply invisible or unremunerated. Transitioning into paid, recognised work strengthens household wellbeing. Any tension is rooted in norms (how work is valued, remunerated and formalised)—not in women’s economic participation.



About SNV: SNV is a global development partner, rooted in the African and Asian countries where we operate. With 60 years of experience and a team of approximately 1,600 people, it is our mission to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform the agri-food, energy, and water systems to enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all.

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“We want to see our lives change and become businesswomen. We now know our income, such as how many eggs we get in a day, week, month, so we can calculate our income and plan for the future.”

Respondent, GESI responsive RMAs, Ethiopia

Myth 13: “Families are unsupportive of young women working.”

Reality: Families are not inherently barriers. Many want young women to succeed but express concerns about safety, mobility, reputational risk, and care responsibilities. These worries reflect norms and structural constraints—not opposition to women earning income. When families understand the benefits, see safe work options, or are included in dialogue, support grows significantly. With the right reassurance and information, families become strong allies in women’s economic participation.

Conclusion

Across all regions, young women—including those with disabilities—are already working in ways that are essential but often overlooked or undervalued. Their economic potential is constrained by structural barriers: restrictive norms, safety concerns, time poverty, financial exclusion, unequal care burdens, and limited access to training and markets.

In their own voice, young women tell us that when these barriers are addressed, young women thrive—driving stronger households, more resilient markets, and more inclusive local economies.