

Next Generation

Economic empowerment of women and girls

What we know brief

7 March 2024



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Executive summary

This briefing paper seeks to understand the enablers of and barriers to the economic empowerment of women and girls in seven Next Generation countries. These are spread across South and East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe, and include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland.

The paper applies a socio-ecological lens to draw insights on enablers and barriers at various levels: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, societal, and policy and legal. It also incorporates the principles of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) to research design and delivery across the various country contexts. It reanalyses seven Next Generation datasets to the extent possible based on age (15–24 and 25–35), sex (young women and men), and location (rural and urban). Insights are also drawn from qualitative interview data collected in 2023.

Overall, there is a greater volume of evidence on barriers than enablers, pointing to the urgent need for galvanising action on amplifying enablers and mitigating the stated barriers.

Enablers of economic empowerment

Progress in legislative frameworks, access to education, and the digital economy are facilitating the economic empowerment of women and girls. Furthermore, many young people want to pursue their careers as entrepreneurs. Key enablers emerging from the evidence include:

- **Individual:** Young people, especially women in urban areas, have increasing access to education and are inclined towards entrepreneurship as a viable avenue for economic empowerment.
- **Interpersonal:** Supportive families are crucial in enabling young women to pursue their career aspirations, especially male family members, such as husbands and fathers.
- **Organisational:** Promoting inter-organisational collaboration and establishing entrepreneurship hubs and organisations that specifically address women's economic needs are successfully fostering economic empowerment among young people.

- **Community:** Women who have actively taken measures to enhance their own empowerment serve as role models, providing inspiration and creating employment opportunities for other women within their communities.
- **Policy and legal:** Governments are developing laws and policies that favour the creation of new jobs and businesses, increasing employment opportunities for young people.
- **Cross-cutting enablers:** The digital economy, for example, is contributing to young people's economic empowerment.

Barriers to economic empowerment

Corruption, nepotism, and discrimination in the workforce are found to be widespread and compromise merit-based and fair recruitment, selection, and retention practices. Women and girls also face gender-specific challenges, such as discrimination and societal expectations based on traditional gender norms, hindering their access to opportunities for economic empowerment. Some of the barriers emerging from the evidence include:

- **Interpersonal:** Family influence on career choices and the expectation to financially sustain the family add pressure on young people, who feel constrained in their career options and responsible for their wellbeing and financial stability.
- **Organisational:** Workplaces fail to efficiently support working mothers, jeopardising their continued access to the labour market.
- **Societal:** Harmful gender norms and discrimination undermine young women's economic potential.
- **Policy and legal:** Although young people express a strong interest in initiating their businesses, uneven infrastructure provision poses significant challenges, hindering their ability to pursue entrepreneurial endeavours effectively.

Way forward

The findings of this paper reveal how different stakeholders can work to support the economic empowerment of women and girls:

1. Families and communities are central to the education and economic empowerment of young people, especially women, debunking gender norms and encouraging women and girls in their economic pursuits. Specific efforts would include:
 - Valuing and respecting girls and boys to ensure equal opportunities and sharing household responsibilities.
2. Educational and training institutions have the most power to shape young people's aspirations and potential to explore economic opportunities with confidence. Some areas for investment would include:
 - Shifting gender and social norms by engaging both men and boys and women and girls to facilitate an inclusive educational environment where all genders can pursue their goals.
 - Updating learning and training environments and teaching methods to cater for various industries across the STEM sector.
 - Expanding extra-curricular activities in different fields to inculcate critical thinking, soft skills-building, and digital skills at an early age.
 - Introducing progressive career counselling services that challenge gendered ideas of careers in schools and universities to meet the needs of young people seeking professional advice.
 - Collaborating with public and private employers to provide apprenticeships and internships.
 - Showcasing success stories of women who work in unconventional roles to inspire other young women and girls and, in the process, debunking gender stereotypes.
3. Addressing sexual and gender-based violence in educational settings.
3. Workplaces play an important role in the economic empowerment of young people. The organisational culture, policies (including anti-sexual harassment and anti-bullying), and recruitment processes may encourage young women to seek or resume employment and to derive job satisfaction. Workplaces can be more inclusive of young people in several ways, including:
 - Ensuring fairer recruitment and career progression processes for all individuals, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, personal connections, disability status or ethnicity, and addressing nepotism.
 - Leveraging the pandemic-induced changes in working habits (i.e. increased flexibility and remote working) to hire a more diverse workforce (e.g. young people who live outside of urban hubs and young people with disabilities) and be more family-friendly.
 - Promoting gender equality, creating safe, accessible, and non-discriminatory work environments for women.
 - Providing mental health support to young entrepreneurs, especially young women.
4. Civil society actors and service providers (public and private) can develop programmes and initiatives to economically empower young people, especially women and girls. Investments would include:
 - Increasing opportunities for young people to pursue entrepreneurial goals, such as training, networking, mentoring, and access to financial support.
 - Participating in extensive awareness campaigns, advocating for supportive working environments, and contributing to coaching initiatives to improve young people's economic opportunities.

- Increasing advocacy to highlight root causes of women's economic disempowerment.
 - Advocating for gender transformative results in policy formulation and programme implementation.
5. Policymakers and legislators play a critical role in enacting laws and policies that have a direct impact on young people's ability to economically empower themselves. Areas to focus on would cover:
- Bridging the gap between existing policies that promote gender equality in the workplace and their implementation, including workplace diversity, and encouraging greater transparency in organisations to publish diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) statistics.
 - Ensuring that new policies and laws are intersectional by engaging diverse social groups in discussions about employment and economic empowerment.
 - Revising (or introducing) maternity leave policies to make it easier for women to rejoin the workforce and implement legislation for mandatory paternity leave, where this is absent, so husbands can support their wives' transition to motherhood and rejoining of the workforce by sharing childcare equally.
 - Introducing merit-based financial support for young people with entrepreneurial goals and raising awareness of how to access funds.
 - Improving administrative and taxation guidelines for small businesses and social enterprises and removing barriers to youth employment.
 - Supporting and expanding initiatives that promote female leadership and training for women in professional settings.
- Making education compulsory to ensure girls have the same opportunities as boys.
 - Enhancing investment in digital infrastructure and connectivity to capitalise on online learning, digital skills, and employment.
 - Introducing social protection for women and girls in the informal sector and formal sector.
 - Addressing challenges arising from the intersection between barriers to education and skills, economic disempowerment, violence against women, and childcare policies.



1 Introduction

Today, more than ever, global progress on sustainable development and people's wellbeing rests on the economic empowerment of women and girls. It is defined as the ability to participate equally in existing markets, access productive resources and decent work, and engage meaningfully in economic decision making at all levels, including and beyond the household (UN Women, 2020). While appreciating its relevance and critical need, most nations have left women and girls behind in economic change processes.

This briefing paper, a part of the British Council's thematic study, Next Generation: What we know on women and girls, delves into the enablers of

and barriers to economic empowerment in seven countries: Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland. The overarching research question is:

'What do we know about the economic empowerment of women and girls?'

The paper is organised as follows: Chapter 2 presents the research methodology; Chapter 3 introduces country contexts; Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the key enablers and barriers; and Chapter 6 concludes with recommendations.

What is the Next Generation programme?

The Next Generation is a global research programme that explores the needs, potential, and aspirations of young people across the world. The research seeks to analyse the conditions that support young people and allow them to reach their potential as fulfilled, productive and active citizens. This will include those from underprivileged or geographically isolated backgrounds, as well as those from more established communities and will represent the aspirations of young women and girls, as well as young men and boys. Research is initiated in countries that are experiencing a period of notable change, with the purpose of ensuring that young people's voices are heard, no matter their background or gender, and their interests properly represented in decisions that will have lasting implications for their lives. The research is always completed with a series of recommendations based on supporting policy change.

The overall aim of Next Generation is defined through three strands:

- **Research:** Understanding youth attitudes and aspirations, including those from underprivileged backgrounds and differences by gender.

- **Youth voice and capacity building:** Amplifying youth voices from a range of backgrounds, including supporting their active participation, inclusion within the research process and opportunities for skills development.
- **Policy impact:** Supporting better youth policymaking, including perspectives of underprivileged youth and support that increases the inclusion of women and girls.

Next Generation has been conducted in the following countries: Indonesia, Poland, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, Italy, Viet Nam, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Germany, Sri Lanka, Ireland/Northern Ireland, Kenya, Turkey, the UK, Tanzania, South Africa, Pakistan, Colombia, Albania, and Sudan. Follow-up reports have taken place in Myanmar and Lebanon, and an overview report has been conducted on Next Generation countries in Africa. Work is currently underway in Iraq and Bangladesh, and new research will shortly be launched in Brazil, and Kazakhstan.

2 Research methodology

The paper uses a mixed-methods approach. It triangulates insights from the seven Next Generation country-level reports and datasets from 2018 to 2023 and new qualitative interview data from 2023.¹ Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model from the 1970s, which posits that people exist and interact within a complex ecological system of interrelated levels, provides a compelling framework to analyse the data. The five levels include:

- 1. Individual:** The physical and cognitive characteristics of youth, such as age, education, income, experience, interests, attitudes, and beliefs.
- 2. Interpersonal:** The immediate social circle of youth, such as peers, partners, family, teachers, and community leaders, who influence their perceptions and behaviours.
- 3. Organisational/community:** The structured communities and settings in which social relationships occur, including schools, workplaces, training academies, and neighbourhoods. The characteristics and interactions in each space can either facilitate or hinder young people's access to education and their political, social, and economic empowerment.
- 4. Societal:** The broad societal factors that shape youth participation in education, political, social, and economic change processes, including social and cultural norms that help to maintain inequalities between groups in society.
- 5. Policy and legal:** Public policies, laws, and regulations at various levels – including local and national policy frameworks – and programme interventions around education, skills, and broader policies on empowerment.

Since the Next Generation reports were published at various points in time over the five-year period, the team reviewed policy and grey literature published between 2018 and 2023. This helped to better understand the contexts of each country. The research team also clustered key findings from the seven reports into themes, enablers, and barriers using the different socio-ecological levels. Fifty-eight semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted across the seven countries in native languages and English. Stakeholders for the KIIs included government officials, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, implementing partner agencies, and civil society (academics, thought leaders, activists, influencers, and rights-based organisations). Data from the interviews was anonymised and coded in a qualitative analysis grid using the socio-ecological levels. Enablers and barriers common to at least two or more countries are presented in the paper.

Cross-country insights derived from global datasets have focused on questions that allowed comparisons across at least four of the seven countries. These are related to the latest labour force participation rate (LFPR) for women and men, and the economic participation and opportunity sub-index scores and country rankings, estimated by the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Index.



¹ Reports (most recent first): Pakistan (June 2023), Indonesia (October 2022), Poland (May 2021), Nigeria (November 2020), Viet Nam (August 2020), Ethiopia (October 2019), and Sri Lanka (March 2019)

3 Country contexts

The seven countries in this paper have diverse political, social, and economic conditions. Three (Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nigeria) are the world's fourth, fifth, and sixth most populated countries with sizeable youth demographics. Youth aged 15–35 constitute a significant share in each

country (25 per cent in Poland and between 30 per cent and 38 per cent in the other six countries). In most, women and girls make up equal shares of the population.

Table 1. Key data on each country

Key indicators	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Indonesia	Viet Nam	Nigeria	Ethiopia	Poland
Income classification*	LMIC	LMIC	UMIC	LMIC	LMIC	LIC	HIC
Total population (in millions)	234	22	277.5	99	219	123	38.4
Share of girls and women in total population	50%	52%	50%	51%	49%	50%	52%
Share of youth aged 15–35 in total population	37%	30%	33%	32%	34%	38%	25%
Women's labour force participation rate aged 15–64	25%	33%	53%	69%	52%	77%	66%
Year CESC ^R ratified	2008	1980	2006	1982	1993	1993	1997

Sources: UNDESA (2022), World Bank (2024a), OHCHR (n.d.).

*LIC: low-income country, LMIC: lower-middle-income country, UMIC: upper-middle-income country, HIC: high-income country.

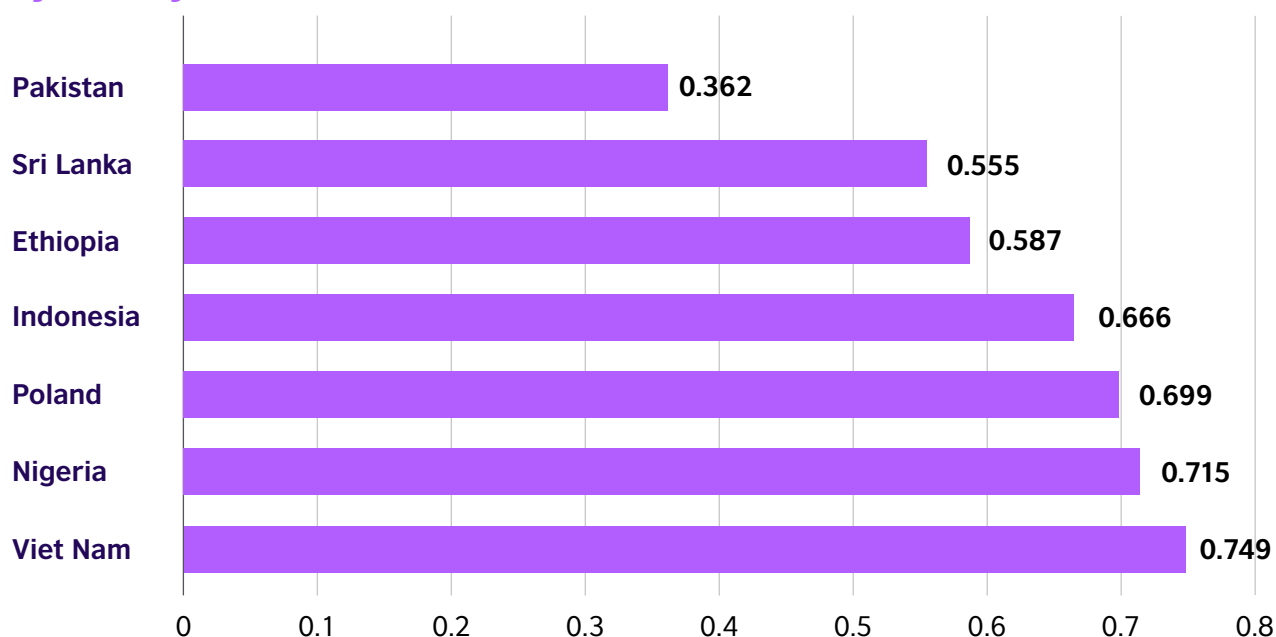
The seven countries have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) (see Table 1) where Articles 6 and 7 outline the obligations of the state parties to accept the right of all to work, to ensure necessary provisions for training, to provide safe working conditions as well as equal pay (OHCHR, n.d.).

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) economic participation and opportunity sub-index is a useful measure to understand the different countries' performance on closing the gap between men and women with respect to participation (difference between women and men in LFPR), remuneration (ratio of estimated female-to-male earned income and wage equality for similar work),

and advancement (ratio of women to men among senior officials and managers, and the ratio of women to men among technical and professional workers).

Of the seven countries, Viet Nam leads with the highest score, 0.749, and ranks 31 out of 146 countries in terms of closing the gender gap in economic participation between men and women. Pakistan has the lowest score, 0.362, and ranks 143 (WEF, 2023) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Economic participation and opportunity sub-index score (0–1) by country



Source: WEF (2023).

Progress on economic participation is also evident in the case of Nigeria, with a score of 0.715 and rank, 54, despite its lower-middle income status. On the other hand, both Poland and Indonesia reflect relatively higher gender gaps in economic participation, scoring 0.699 (rank: 64) and 0.666 (rank: 87) despite their respective high-income and upper-middle income statuses.

Pakistan: The LFPR for women is only 25 per cent, in comparison to men at 81 per cent (World Bank, 2024b, c). Women tend to be overrepresented in informal agricultural work and informal service sectors, which are largely unregulated and undocumented (World Bank, 2023).

Sri Lanka: Despite high educational attainment levels among women, the female LFPR has remained low for the past two decades (ILO, 2016; UNDP, 2021). At 33 per cent, it is substantially lower than men's, at 71 per cent (World Bank, 2024b, c). Female employment in agriculture has decreased consistently over the past decade and a half (World Bank, 2024d). During the same period, the proportion of women working in the service sector increased steadily (World Bank, 2024e).

Indonesia: Despite a stable economy, Indonesia's female LFPR is 53 per cent (World Bank, 2024b). This has remained unchanged since the 1990s and is considerably lower than the regional average at 67 per cent (World Bank, 2024i). On the other hand, men's LFPR stands at 81 per cent (World Bank, 2024c). Women are largely represented in informal and low-paying jobs.

Viet Nam: Both women and men have high LFPRs (69 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively) (World Bank, 2024b, c). Despite commendable achievements in recent decades, gender equality remains a key challenge where women are disproportionately represented in low-quality and vulnerable jobs, including housework, and underrepresented in decision-making positions and higher paid jobs compared to men (ILO, 2021).

Nigeria: Women's LFPR is 52 per cent, and it is 65 per cent for men (World Bank, 2024b, c). Since the 1990s, female employment in the agricultural sector has declined steadily while it continued to rise in the service sector (World Bank, 2024f, g).

Ethiopia: Women's LFPR is 77 per cent while it is 87 per cent for men (World Bank, 2024b, c). Since 2005, the proportion of females employed in agriculture has been declining while it has doubled in the services sector where women tend to be overrepresented in sales, administration, or as support staff (World Bank, 2024h, i; UN Women, 2019).

Poland: Women's LFPR is 66 per cent and for men, it is 80 per cent (World Bank, 2024b, c). Since the early 1990s, female employment in agriculture has declined steadily (World Bank, 2024j). While employment in the services sector continued to rise for both men and women, the proportion of women employed is much higher, 76 per cent in comparison to men, at 48 per cent (World Bank, 2024k, l).

4 Enablers of economic empowerment

This section explores the enablers of economic empowerment of young people, with a focus on women and girls. See Table 2 for a summary of key enablers.

4.1 Individual enablers

Young women's growing interest in entrepreneurship

Inclination of young women towards self-employment and business creation is a significant enabler for economic empowerment. In Pakistan, 92 per cent of young women aged 15–24 in urban areas feel very or somewhat prepared to become entrepreneurs, compared to 73 per cent of women of the same age in rural areas (Next Generation data). This is also the case for the older age group, where 91 per cent of women aged 25–35 feel very or somewhat prepared to start their businesses in urban areas relative to 70 per cent of women of the same age in rural areas (ibid.). Key informants also noted an upward movement in women's mindsets towards entrepreneurship driven by a *'shift in the general economy because it is more flexible for them to work in'* (interviews, 2023), even though they face significant labour market discrimination.

In Indonesia, 57 per cent of young women aged 15–24 in both rural and urban areas want to set up their own businesses (Next Generation data). This rate is higher among young women aged 25–35 (67 per cent in rural areas and 66 per cent in urban areas (ibid.). For many, this is a 'means to an end' in a challenging job market where there are limited opportunities and intense competition (Allison et al., 2022).

In Viet Nam, 81 per cent of young women aged 15–24 in urban areas feel very or somewhat prepared to become entrepreneurs, in comparison to 68 per cent of women of the same age in rural areas (Next Generation data). This is reversed for the older age group, where 79 per cent of women aged 25–35 feel very or somewhat prepared to start their businesses in rural areas relative to 75 per cent of women of the same age in urban areas (ibid.). A desire for authority and freedom drives this inclination, and many young people are saving capital to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

4.2 Interpersonal enablers

Supportive families

Families, especially husbands, play a key role in women's economic empowerment journeys. Key informants underscore the critical contribution that supportive families make in creating conditions for women and girls to pursue their ambitions. The roles of fathers and husbands are particularly emphasised in encouraging them to complete higher studies, get jobs, and manage careers alongside other responsibilities. This support is driven, in key informant views in both Indonesia and Viet Nam, by husbands who are fair and understand their partners well and are willing to share some of the responsibilities of household and child/elderly care, although this an exception, not the norm (interviews, 2023).

Interviewees also stated that being part of supportive families from a young age helps women to explore employment options across more sectors (interviews, 2023). This diversity of choice allows them to make more informed decisions about their career, marriage and having children (ibid.).

4.3 Organisational enablers

Access to higher education

Higher education helps young people secure jobs that are more aligned with their fields of study and personal interests. Educational achievement is pivotal in bridging the divide between youth aspirations and subsequent job placements. In Viet Nam, higher education significantly influences this dynamic, as 59 per cent of young women aged 15–24 with higher education reported that their first job was related to their chosen field of study, in comparison to 13



per cent who completed secondary education. This was also the case for the older cohort of 25–35-year-olds (Next Generation data).

In Poland, educational attainment shapes attitudes towards work and life. Those with higher educational qualifications often see work as an essential source of personal fulfilment (Raven et al., 2021). Key informants from Pakistan, Indonesia, Viet Nam, and Ethiopia also note a positive shift among women with higher education as it helps them to pursue better jobs and, equally critically, to make better life choices, and advocate and stand up for themselves (interviews, 2023).

Tech and innovation hubs foster entrepreneurship

Supportive hubs for entrepreneurs enable economic empowerment and social change.

In Pakistan and Nigeria, tech incubators and innovation hubs are addressing crucial gaps that have traditionally hindered entrepreneurship. In Pakistan, tech incubators are central to creating centres for learning and facilitation, and in fostering mutual engagement and acceptance among young entrepreneurs, irrespective of their background (Babar et al., 2023). These also enable women and girls, who may face restrictions to work outside the home, to participate in e-commerce (ibid.).

Nigeria is witnessing significant growth in its tech and innovation hub ecosystem, with at least 85 active hubs, the largest number in Africa (Briter Bridges, 2019; Curran et al., 2020). These hubs provide services like skills training, mentorship, incubation programmes, and access to workspaces. They also act as forums for communication and networking, fostering strong social and professional networks. They have become platforms for collective action, as seen in initiatives like the women-led Market March Movement, which raises awareness and organises protests on social issues like sexual harassment (ibid.). Key informants also gave examples of other hubs which aim to stimulate innovation and technology application to catalyse the African creative economy's growth (interviews, 2023). For instance, the Co-Creation Hub's Women in Business programme helps women entrepreneurs from across Nigeria become more investment ready (ibid.).

Organisations addressing women's economic needs

Creating organisations tailored to address women's economic needs empowers them.

In Sri Lanka, interviewees welcomed the establishment of business consortia that are led by women (interviews, 2023). In these organisations, decisions on how to act as a business community of women are collaboratively made. Issues around business regulations and operations, access to finance, how to influence organisations, and end corruption are extensively discussed. Women have found convening around common goals and collectively bargaining for their rights under these mechanisms to be powerful (ibid.).

Key informants from Ethiopia gave the example of member-owned Saving and Credit Cooperatives, operational across many cities and rural areas. These cater to young people aged 15–29 and aim to ensure equal membership of women (interviews, 2023). They receive incentives such as lower interest rates, specialised coaching, and mentoring support (ibid.).

Poland's experience with Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers has also enabled the creation of new civil society organisations that are focused on preventing the loss of professional credentials among Ukrainian women, who had decent educational qualifications and good quality jobs prior to being displaced. Two years into living in Poland, many require support on economic integration (interviews, 2023).



Growing inter-organisational collaborations

Inter-organisational collaborations, including between government and civil society, international agencies, the private sector, and civil society, are on the rise in many countries. Key informants from Pakistan, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, and Ethiopia gave several examples of promising collaborations. In Pakistan, since 2023, a partnership focused on women's social innovation between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Jazz (the largest digital operator) has resulted in the creation of the Women Initiative in Social Entrepreneurship (WISE) (interviews, 2023; UNDP, 2023). The WISE bootcamps aim to empower 400 women social entrepreneurs across 12 cities with business knowledge and skills to manage sustainable enterprises.

In Nigeria, interviewees gave examples of the work between civil society and government agencies, including the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs (interviews, 2023). In Ethiopia, informants cited work on disability inclusion involving different types of civil society organisations (disability advocates, human rights organisations, and women's rights organisations) who are working with the Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA), to help persons with disabilities gain greater self-esteem and self-confidence in accessing education and skills training and gainful employment (interviews, 2023).

4.4 Community enablers

Women as community role models

Empowered women who lead by example inspire and provide economic opportunities

to others in their community. In Pakistan, key informants gave examples of role models who rose against gender discrimination and cultural barriers to create organisations such as Kashf Foundation and the Women's Digital League (WDL), which is one of the first digital platforms for women that provides training and jobs (interviews, 2023). Other examples include the founder of a youth- and women-led organisation called Baithak – Challenging Taboos, who is recognised for her work on advocating for women's rights, especially in rural areas, and in educating them (ibid.).

In Indonesia, key informants mentioned many examples of role models who have become ministers, celebrities, and well-known academics

and entrepreneurs (interviews, 2023). They also gave examples of ordinary women with extraordinary stories of empowerment. Many of the ordinary stories come from rural areas and informal settlements. For instance, Resa Boenard from Bantar Gebang Integrated Waste Disposal area, who was born and raised around there, 'provides education and scholarships to children of scavengers in the area. She established a non-profit organisation named the Kingdom of BGBJ and a start-up of products from waste disposal' (ibid.). In all the countries, key informants explained that the personal stories of role models inspire other women and support them through their empowerment journeys (ibid.).

4.5 Policy and legal enablers

Government support for entrepreneurship

Governmental support for entrepreneurship is a crucial enabler for nurturing the entrepreneurial ambitions of young women and men. Governments in all seven countries have implemented various policies and reforms aimed at simplifying business processes, providing financial support, and integrating entrepreneurial skills into education. These have had varying degrees of success.

Interviewees from Indonesia mentioned the government's approach toward building an entrepreneurial ecosystem to address key areas, including culture, skills, and funding to enable more women to start their businesses. Several ministries, including the Ministry of National Development Planning (BAPPENAS), Ministry of Youth and Sports (MENPORA), Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture (MENKO PMK), and Ministry of Home Affairs (KEMENDAGRI) have collaborated to build this ecosystem, together with partners like the United Nations Development Programme (interviews, 2023).

Nigeria has demonstrated progress, evidenced by its 15-place rise in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business ranking (Curran et al., 2020), primarily due to reforms such as the Companies and Allied Matters Act 2020 (ibid.) These target the challenges faced specifically by small and medium enterprises. Ethiopia has channelled efforts into nurturing young entrepreneurs through initiatives like the Micro and Small Enterprises Development Policy and the Youth Revolving Fund (De Schryver et al., 2019).

4.6 Cross-cutting enablers

The digital economy

The digital economy is a vital catalyst for youth employment and entrepreneurship. In all seven countries, the digital sphere provides alternative platforms that circumvent traditional obstacles, enabling youth to harness internet-based opportunities in freelancing, e-commerce, and digital entrepreneurship. It also nurtures creativity, self-sufficiency, and youth resilience.

In Pakistan, 70 per cent of young women and men believe that the internet will emerge as a major source of employment in the future, with 59 per cent considering online freelancing a viable career choice (Babar et al., 2023). The burgeoning tech start-up ecosystem and the growth of the gig economy play pivotal roles in driving this emerging trend (ibid.). The online space also offers women a path towards economic empowerment and enhanced financial independence; 68 per cent of Pakistani youth believe that women can harness the internet to access new economic opportunities, while 62 per cent agree that women will predominantly benefit from e-commerce (Next Generation data). Interestingly, both men and women endorse this perspective (ibid.). Yet, it is important to acknowledge the presence of expected resistance to this notion, particularly among youth educated in religious institutions, where support stands at 39 per cent, in contrast to the national average of 68 per cent (ibid.). Interviewees mentioned an increasing use of social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram among women entrepreneurs to promote their products, sell them online, and connect with their customers in innovative ways (interviews, 2023).

Indonesian youth increasingly rely on social media as a means of income generation, particularly in urban areas, where they use these platforms for live streaming, product sales, and promoting small businesses, circumventing the competitive traditional job market (Allison et al., 2022). The influence of accomplished young entrepreneurs in the online domain as role models and reservoirs of valuable insights for youth is also evident, as indicated by 50 per cent of young women and men concurring that there are many thriving young entrepreneurs to emulate and acquire knowledge from (ibid.).

In Viet Nam, there is an upbeat sentiment among young entrepreneurs about the future of digital start-ups, particularly in innovative digital solutions and remote work. E-commerce and online service platforms are popular, offering both consumer and seller benefits (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). Moreover, the digital space serves as a trusted resource for job hunting and education, with 57 per cent of young women and men placing their trust on the internet and 51 per cent on social media for such opportunities (Next Generation data).

Nigeria has witnessed a significant shift towards online business ventures in response to the pandemic, with young Nigerians actively exploring e-commerce and digital services as essential for sustaining their livelihoods (Curran et al., 2020). Interviewees noted that even though many women are digitally excluded, the ones who have access to technology in the cities are smartly adopting it to run online businesses and market their products (interviews, 2023). Many organisations are also embedding digital literacy into their skills training portfolios to support women in their work (ibid.).

Table 2. Summary of enablers of economic empowerment

Level	Enablers of economic empowerment
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people's growing interest in entrepreneurship
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive families
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to higher education • Tech and innovations hubs foster entrepreneurship • Organisations addressing women's economic needs • Growing inter-organisational collaborations
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women as community role models
Policy and legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government support for entrepreneurship
Cross-cutting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The digital economy

Source: Authors' analysis.

5 Barriers to economic empowerment

This section explores the barriers to the economic empowerment of young people, with a focus on women and girls. See Table 3 for a summary of key barriers.

5.1 Interpersonal barriers

Family influence on career choices

Young individuals often face challenges in achieving economic empowerment due to a lack of support from their families. This is a common challenge in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Viet Nam. In Pakistan, young individuals, especially women, encounter obstacles in finding jobs, mainly due to family limitations and expectations. Women particularly struggle to achieve career success due to a lack of family support, leading to dissatisfaction and unequal career opportunities compared to men (Babar et al., 2023). Key informants from Pakistan said that women often lean towards a career in academia, which is seen as a safer option due to societal constraints related to household responsibilities and early marriages (interviews, 2023).

In Indonesia, young individuals navigate conflicting motivations between securing traditional, family-approved formal sector jobs and aspiring for unconventional careers. A generational gap is evident, with younger individuals favouring creative, better paid, tech-oriented sectors that offer freedom from nepotism and hierarchies (Allison et al., 2022). Yet, key informants explained that family approval remains a major hurdle for young people, especially women, impacting their access to funding and participation in economic programmes (interviews, 2023).

In Viet Nam, key informants underscored that family plays a central role in a woman's life, affecting her career path. The degree of family support she receives significantly impacts a woman's ability to return to work after giving birth. The division of household workload and the sacrifice of career paths are topics of serious discussion even before marriage (interviews, 2023). Because of this, young people often feel compelled to pursue family-preferred fields (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

Expectations to financially sustain the family early in their careers

Young women's economic empowerment is impeded by financial constraints, exacerbated by the responsibility to provide financial support to their families. In Pakistan, 63 per cent of young women aged 15–24 and 61 per cent of young women aged 25–35 stress the substantial influence of their family's financial situation on their career choices (Next Generation data). In Indonesia, young people are expected to financially support their parents and siblings (Jakarta Post, 2021; Allison et al., 2022). This added responsibility compels many young Indonesian women to take on multiple jobs: 23 per cent of women aged 15–24 and 26 per cent of women aged 25–35 report needing to do more than one job (Next Generation data).

5.3 Organisational barriers

Workplaces fail to support working mothers

Women's economic empowerment is held back by inadequate support for working mothers. Insufficient childcare assistance, inflexible working hours, and restricted maternity leave contribute to the challenges faced by working mothers in Pakistan, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Ethiopia, and Poland. In Pakistan, key informants said that the absence of day-care facilities and limited maternity leave options in urban areas force many women to leave the workforce prematurely, hampering their professional growth (interviews, 2023).

In Indonesia, Viet Nam and Poland, key informants report that organisations are hesitant to hire women with young children (interviews, 2023). Furthermore, childcare is often expensive or inaccessible, especially in rural areas, and balancing work and childcare is challenging for working women. This prompts many of them to stay home and raise their children instead (ibid).

Nepotism, corruption, and favouritism in the labour market

Nepotism and favouritism in the labour market pose a significant barrier to the economic empowerment of young women. This issue is prevalent across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, where young women struggle to find merit-based opportunities.

In Nigeria, favouritism and the lack of personal connections pose significant challenges for young women: 18 per cent of women aged 25–35 in urban areas and 13 per cent in rural areas cited not having connections in the relevant company as a reason for not getting a job, while 15 per cent of women aged 25–35 in urban areas and 12 per cent in rural areas cited favouritism (Next Generation data).

In Sri Lanka, young women are deterred from seeking state sector employment due to perceived discrimination and corruption in recruitment processes, leading them to prefer private sector jobs (Perera et al., 2019). In Indonesia, young women face challenges related to nepotism, prompting them towards more entrepreneurial endeavours and alternative means of income generation out of necessity rather than choice (Allison et al., 2022).

Limited synergies between education and the labour market

The lack of alignment between education and job market requirements contributes to youth unemployment and dissatisfaction. This results in a surplus of highly educated youth vying for a constrained number of formal job opportunities in all seven countries. In Indonesia, there is a disparity between education-acquired skills and market demands, affecting young women (12 per cent of whom are in part-time work and 13 per cent of whom are unemployed) (Allison et al., 2022). A significant proportion of educated young individuals are forced into roles for which they are overqualified, with 19 per cent of young women and men attributing their part-time employment or unemployment to a scarcity of job opportunities in their field (ibid.). Additionally, 15 per cent of those with higher education qualifications are currently involved in informal employment (ibid.).

In Viet Nam, especially in urban areas, young people face intense competition in the labour market. The competition is exacerbated by the country's high education levels, fostering a perception among many young Vietnamese that there is now an oversupply of graduates compared to the demand for labour. However, the data indicates a positive link between education levels and employment rates among young individuals. Specifically, 31 per cent of women aged 15–24 and 78 per cent aged 25–35, who have completed tertiary education are engaged in full-time employment (Next Generation data). Similar trends are observed among young men, where 20 per cent of those aged 15–24 and 86 per cent aged 25–35 with tertiary education are employed full-time (ibid.).

5.4 Societal barriers

Harmful gender norms

Harmful gender norms pose a significant barrier to young women's socio-economic empowerment. Societal expectations deeply rooted in traditional gender roles and biases contribute to the limited job opportunities for women across countries.

In Pakistan, 91 per cent of women aged 25–35 were out of the labour force and identified as mothers/homemakers, whereas no men of the same age identified as homemakers (Next Generation data). In Indonesia, 68 per cent of unemployed women aged 25–35 reported having to look after their children as a reason for unemployment, relative to only 6 per cent of men of the same age bracket (ibid.). Key informant views were consistent with these findings.

Discrimination based on age, ethnicity, religion, and ability

Discrimination in the labour market and in the workplace hinder young people's economic empowerment and their career opportunities. Diverse forms of discrimination are widespread across the Next Generation countries, including discrimination based on age, ethnicity, religion and ability. Age discrimination makes it harder for young people to assert themselves and advance in their careers (De Schryver et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2019).

Ableism further exacerbates young people's struggle to access employment opportunities and achieve career success. In Indonesia, youth with disabilities face substantial challenges in various aspects of life, with employment being particularly daunting (Allison et al., 2022). In Indonesia, a higher share of young women with disabilities are unemployed relative to men with disabilities (34 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively) (Next Generation data).

Ethnic and religious discrimination poses a significant barrier to the economic empowerment of young people. In Pakistan, religious and ethnic minorities encounter socio-economic barriers, with Christians, constituting less than 2 per cent of the population, disproportionately occupying jobs related to cleaning and sanitation (Babar et al., 2023). In Sri Lanka, minority communities have limited upward social mobility, perceiving better job opportunities with decent pay to be primarily available to the majority Sinhalese population (Perera et al., 2019). In Nigeria, members of minority groups are approximately twice as likely to report ethnic and religious discrimination as

factors hindering their selection for employment, alongside higher instances of tribalism, favouritism, nepotism, and mistreatment in the workforce (Curran et al., 2020).

5.5 Policy and legal barriers

Infrastructure deficits in rural areas

Limited employment opportunities for rural youth create pronounced economic disparities.

Rural youth face significant challenges in securing viable employment and adequate wages, compounded by infrastructural inadequacies. In Indonesia, rural youth grapple with higher rates of unemployment, with nearly 25 per cent jobless, while urban areas have a lower unemployment rate of 10 per cent (Allison et al., 2022). This divide stems from a lack of job prospects in rural communities, where approximately 23 per cent of rural youth perceive inadequate employment opportunities (ibid.). A high share of rural youth is informally employed, with 40 per cent engaged in casual or irregular work without regular wages

or benefits (ibid.). The disparity in educational infrastructure between urban and rural regions further exacerbates their challenges, limiting their job opportunities and compelling them to turn to informal employment as their primary means of earning a living (ibid.). Additionally, rural women have a gender-specific challenge, with traditional social norms retaining them in the household and disincentivising them from pursuing economic goals (interviews, 2023).

In Poland, the challenges confronted by rural youth include low wages and restricted access to economic opportunities. The pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges, leaving rural youth feeling isolated and financially strained. Their limited access to public transportation has hindered their ability to reach nearby economic hubs, increasing their reliance on digital opportunities and underscoring the need for enhanced infrastructure and connectivity (Raven et al., 2021).

Table 3. Summary of key barriers to economic empowerment

Level	Barriers to economic empowerment
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family influence on career choices Expectations to financially sustain the family early in their careers
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workplaces fail to support working mothers Nepotism, corruption, and favouritism in the labour market Limited synergies between education and the labour market
Societal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harmful gender norms Discrimination based on age, ethnicity, religion, and ability
Policy and legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Infrastructure deficits in rural areas

Source: Authors' analysis.



6 Conclusion and recommendations

This paper examines the enablers of and barriers to the economic empowerment of women and girls, across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland. Broadly, the Next Generation reports and the interview data draw attention to the following.

Progress in legislative frameworks, access to education, and the growing digital economy are facilitating the economic empowerment of women and girls. Furthermore, many young women want to become entrepreneurs. However, nepotism and discrimination in the workforce are widespread. Women and girls also face gender-based discrimination and societal barriers based on traditional gender norms, hindering their access to opportunities for economic empowerment.

Recommendations

The findings of this paper reveal how different stakeholders can work to support the economic empowerment of women and girls:

1. Families and communities are central to the education and economic empowerment of young people, especially women, debunking gender norms and encouraging women and girls in their economic pursuits. Specific efforts would include:
 - Valuing and respecting girls and boys to ensure equal opportunities and sharing household responsibilities.
2. Educational and training institutions have the most power to shape young people's aspirations and potential to explore economic opportunities with confidence. Some areas for investment would include:
 - Shifting gender and social norms by engaging both men and boys and women and girls to facilitate an inclusive educational environment where all genders can pursue their goals.
 - Updating learning and training environments and teaching methods to cater for various industries across the STEM sector.
 - Expanding extra-curricular activities in different fields to inculcate critical thinking, soft skills-building, and digital skills at an early age.
 - Introducing progressive career counselling services that challenge gendered ideas
- of careers in schools and universities to meet the needs of young people seeking professional advice.
- Collaborating with public and private employers to provide apprenticeships and internships.
- Showcasing success stories of women who work in unconventional roles to inspire other young women and girls and, in the process, debunking gender stereotypes.
- Addressing sexual and gender-based violence in educational settings.
3. Workplaces play an important role in the economic empowerment of young people. The organisational culture, policies (including anti-sexual harassment and anti-bullying), and recruitment processes may encourage young women to seek or resume employment and to derive job satisfaction. Workplaces can be more inclusive of young people in several ways, including:
 - Ensuring fairer recruitment and career progression processes for all individuals, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, personal connections, disability status, and ethnicity, and addressing nepotism.
 - Leveraging the pandemic-induced changes in working habits (i.e. increased flexibility and remote working) to hire a more diverse workforce (e.g. young people who live outside of urban hubs and young people with disabilities) and be more family-friendly.
 - Promoting gender equality, creating safe, accessible, and non-discriminatory work environments for women.
 - Providing mental health support to young entrepreneurs, especially young women.
4. Civil society actors and service providers (public and private) can develop programmes and initiatives to economically empower young people, especially women and girls. Investments would include:
 - Increasing opportunities for young people to pursue entrepreneurial goals, such as training, networking, mentoring, and access to financial support.
 - Participating in extensive awareness campaigns, advocating for supportive

working environments, and contributing to coaching initiatives to improve young people's economic opportunities.

- Increasing advocacy to highlight root causes of women's economic disempowerment.
 - Advocating for gender transformative results in policy formulation and programme implementation.
5. Policymakers and legislators play a critical role in enacting laws and policies that have a direct impact on young people's ability to economically empower themselves. Areas to focus on would cover:
- Bridging the gap between existing policies that promote gender equality in the workplace and their implementation, including workplace diversity, and encouraging greater transparency in organisations to publish diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) statistics.
 - Ensuring that new policies and laws are intersectional by engaging diverse social groups in discussions about employment and economic empowerment.
 - Revising (or introducing) maternity leave policies to make it easier for women to rejoin the workforce and implement legislation for mandatory paternity leave, where this is absent, so husbands can support their wives' transition to motherhood and rejoining of the workforce by sharing childcare equally.
- Introducing merit-based financial support for young people with entrepreneurial goals and raising awareness of how to access funds.
 - Improving administrative and taxation guidelines for small businesses and social enterprises and removing barriers to youth employment.
 - Supporting and expanding initiatives that promote female leadership and training for women in professional settings.
 - Making education compulsory to ensure girls have the same opportunities as boys.
 - Enhancing investment in digital infrastructure and connectivity to capitalise on online learning, digital skills, and employment.
 - Introducing social protection for women and girls in the informal sector and formal sector.
 - Addressing challenges arising from the intersection between barriers to education and skills, economic disempowerment, violence against women, and childcare policies.



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57884/9fr8-5t03>