

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**UNDERSTANDING YOUNG  
WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO**

**ECONOMIC  
EMPOWERMENT  
& RESILIENCE**

**IN RURAL CONTEXTS**

**AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RURAL  
COMMUNITIES IN ETHIOPIA, MALAWI, AND NEPAL**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Helise milking a cow  
given to her family by Plan  
International in Ethiopia  
©Plan International



**Women's economic empowerment has been increasingly recognised as a critical component of inclusive and sustainable development.** Yet, women continue to face significant barriers to accessing economic opportunities and realising their full potential. This is particularly relevant for women living in rural areas of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where gender norms and roles, limited access to resources, and weak market systems can constrain their ability to engage and access productive and remunerative work opportunities. In addition, many employed young women in rural contexts in LMICs may still live in extreme or moderate poverty signifying a lack of viable employment and development opportunities.

**Since 2020, the situation of young women in rural contexts in LMICs has further exacerbated gender disparities in the labour market and underscored the urgent need for inclusive and resilient economic systems.** Young people have been disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and other shocks including the current Russia-Ukraine war which has affected the global economic situation and thus exacerbated food security challenges, while climate change and other environmental disasters have depleted natural resources. Of those employed, people in the informal sector, which is where the vast majority of women are employed, have been hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, both through loss of

income and the lack of social security and pensions. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus exacerbated an already existing imbalance, sustained by gender discrimination and structural inequality.

**Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that focuses on the advancement of children's rights and equality for girls.** One of Plan International's key priority thematic areas is Skills and Opportunities for Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship (SOYEE). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Plan International commissioned a research study to better understand the needs and barriers of young women's access to economic opportunities in rural contexts by analysing personal, social and economic factors that influence young women's participation in wage or self-employment activities. The overall purpose of this research study was to better understand young women's economic development and resilience in rural contexts by holistically analysing personal, social and economic factors in Ethiopia, Malawi and Nepal.

### **THE RESEARCH STUDY INVESTIGATED THREE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:**

**Specific objective 1.** To determine pathways in which diverse young women (e.g. young women with disabilities, adolescent mothers and single young women heads of households, those with or without/with limited education) in rural contexts access and retain employment in labour markets and self-employment.

**Specific objective 2.** To determine enablers and barriers to diverse young women's (e.g. young women with disabilities) access to and retention in labour markets and self-employment in rural contexts.

**Specific objective 3.** To understand the concept of economic resilience from the perspective of young women in rural contexts.

### **METHODOLOGY**

**Drawing on existing literature and a range of qualitative data sources**, including interviews with young women, parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders, this study explored the personal, social, and economic factors that shape women's economic opportunities and outcomes using an exploratory qualitative descriptive design. The study was informed by a gender transformative perspective and was grounded in the notion that acknowledges gendered contextual influences, addresses gender inequalities, empowers women, and advocates for inclusive and equitable systems/practices that lift the importance and validity of women's lived experiences.

**The literature review was conducted using a scoping review methodology and predetermined criteria were developed to capture academic**

**and grey literature** focusing on gender, youth employment, and entrepreneurship in the three countries. While the qualitative component involved semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in all three targeted countries (Ethiopia, Malawi, and Nepal) and focused on exploring the social and economic drivers that influenced the barriers and facilitators of wage and self-employment of young women in rural settings. Additionally, the qualitative inquiry emphasised the lived experiences of young women using a gender transformative approach to develop an in-depth understanding of young women's path towards economic engagement and resilience in rural contexts. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants, and the team of researchers engaged with Plan International country offices in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Nepal to facilitate the recruitment of study participants. In total, the research team conducted 42 KIIs and 20 FGDs across the three countries.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

**By providing insights into the experiences and perspectives of young women in rural Ethiopia, Malawi, and Nepal, this research report contributes to the evidence base on women's economic empowerment and resilience** and provides insights into future policy and programming aimed at advancing gender equality and economic development for young women in these contexts. The scoping review yielded 66 eligible records from a total of 634 articles/documents screened. Findings from the scoping review identified cultural and social norms; gender roles and gender inequality; education and vocational skills training; lack of job opportunities; lack of financial investments for productive self-employment; and the implementation of policies and legislation as intersecting and cross-cutting personal, social and economic determinants of young women's economic development and resilience across rural contexts of Ethiopia, Malawi, and Nepal. The review also identified gaps in the literature, with limited dedicated research on rural female youth as a specific demographic.

**The qualitative inquiry revealed how women's economic empowerment and resilience are particularly important for achieving gender equality in rural settings.** Findings emerged that explained how financial independence can transform social structures and gender roles and give young women in rural contexts increased power over their own lives as well as in their families and the greater community. Additionally, findings in all three countries show how rural women still face significant barriers to economic empowerment, including limited access to education and training, restricted access to land, and accessible sexual and reproductive health services. Other barriers to economic empowerment identified centred around unpaid care/domestic burdens, gender

roles, and other social norms and cultural beliefs that are restrictive and thus limit access and retention in economic activities. The findings reveal that enablers to young women's economic opportunities in rural contexts are less understood and more difficult to identify than the challenges and barriers. These findings further suggest that single factors have limited potential as enablers for economic resilience without simultaneously addressing related challenges.

**Moreover, there is a gap in existing data and knowledge on the diverse groups of young women in rural contexts.** Intersecting vulnerabilities in these contexts are little understood, including disabilities, experiences with sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) including child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) single-headed households, and more. Therefore, to learn more about intersecting factors and how these affect young women's economic opportunities in rural contexts, more targeted research is needed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**In order to enhance young women's economic empowerment in rural areas, it is recommended to design interventions that provide relevant vocational and business skills training based on local needs and market analyses made with a gender lens.** These interventions should be accompanied by access to financial resources, mentorship, support networks, and partnerships with microfinance institutions.

**Additionally, childcare and unpaid work challenges that young women in rural areas face can be addressed with practical solutions, such as access to childcare and child-friendly workplaces.** This can also be achieved through advocacy for policy and legal reforms. Also, establishing linkages with youth-led early childhood development initiatives can leverage the interest and demand for childcare services under enterprises with social impact.

**Formal education is fundamental to economic empowerment of young women in rural areas,** therefore, to enhance formal education for girls, it is recommended to address financial barriers by assessing and implementing schemes to cover costs such as school fees, books, transportation, and more. Additionally, there should be a focus on improving formal education by strengthening skills development alongside academic subjects. Flexible learning options should be provided to address barriers faced by girls and young women, such as the burden of care work, gender-based violence in schools, and inadequate sanitation facilities, particularly for adolescent girls.

**Furthermore, the promotion of gender equality and women's economic empowerment requires that social and gender norms are identified and transformed.** Therefore, programming should be based on local gender analyses, involving consultation with community members and stakeholders, and addressing potential impacts on gender dynamics. Involving boys and men in activities is vital to this work.

**To address sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as well as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), it is crucial to involve women in the development of programming that specifically targets these issues.** Additionally, raising awareness among parents, men, and local leaders about the potential harms of SGBV and exploitation is essential. Advocacy efforts should focus on policies that improve access to quality SRHR services and ensure effective protection against SGBV.

**Effective policies and regulation are important to promoting gender equality on both the national and local levels.** Furthermore, it is crucial to advocate for effective policies and legal reforms in this regard. This includes promoting access to education, vocational skills training, financial resources, and childcare services. Additionally, efforts should focus on addressing social norms, promoting women's participation in decision-making processes, and ensuring the enforcement of laws that protect women's rights and prohibit gender-based violence.

**Finally, in order to ensure comprehensive understanding and inclusivity, it is necessary to conduct targeted research on intersecting vulnerabilities, such as disabilities.** Noting that thorough assessments and consultations should precede the implementation of new programmes to account for local variations. Additionally, exploring the role of innovation, including digital access, digital literacy, mobile banking, and innovative agricultural technologies, can contribute to the economic empowerment of young women in rural contexts.



Sita, 21, and her two sons in front of their fish pond in Nepal ©Plan International



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was conducted by KPMG AS (International Development Advisory Services). We would like to acknowledge the contributions and support of the core team Eva Langaas, Anise Gold-Watts, PhD, and Reza Lahidji, PhD and Selam Ayalew, Chimwemwe Chilenga, Dilli Joshi, who supported primary data collection activities in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Nepal.

The research was managed on behalf of Plan International by Paul Fean, PhD, Tendai Manyozo, Lucia Rost, PhD, and Isobel Fergus. Plan International's country offices in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Nepal liaised with local communities, supported in ethical approval processes and reviewed the research findings and analysis. The research team is especially grateful to Mudasser Siddiqui and Solomon Debebe (Plan International Ethiopia), Phoebe Kasoga, Faith Makwera and Wanda Wanangwa (Plan International Malawi), and Ram Kishan, Julie Gurung, Pratima Kunwar and Shubheksha Rana (Plan International Nepal).

Technical support to the research was provided by Ingrid Finess Evensmo, Alexandra Letelier and Johanne Walle (Plan International Norway), Jan Soehlemann (Plan International Germany), Tanushree Soni (Plan International Australia) and Abdi Yusuf

(Plan International UK), The research also benefited from regional technical insights from Samuel Musyoki (Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa Region) and Pragma Gurung and Alexandra Pura (Asia Pacific Region).

We would like to also express our gratitude to all the participants in this study for their important contribution.

This study was conducted thanks to funding from Norad and Plan International Australia, Germany, Norway, and United Kingdom, as well as the Plan International Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Hub, the Asia Pacific Regional Hub, and the Global Hub.

This document was designed by Alan Bingle at Forty6 Design ([www.forty6design.com](http://www.forty6design.com))





## ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity.

We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For 85 years, we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 80 countries.

## CONTACT US

Plan International  
Global Hub  
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,  
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155 / Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505

- [plan-international.org](https://www.plan-international.org)
- [facebook.com/planinternational](https://www.facebook.com/planinternational)
- [twitter.com/planglobal](https://twitter.com/planglobal)
- [instagram.com/planinternational](https://www.instagram.com/planinternational)
- [linkedin.com/company/plan-international](https://www.linkedin.com/company/plan-international)
- [youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv](https://www.youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv)

