



GENDER AND ECONOMIC AGENCY INITIATIVE (GEA): An overview of research opportunities

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I. Introduction

Women around the world are less likely than men to participate in the labor force, with 47 percent of women in the global labor force compared to 74 percent of men as of 2019 (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2019). Among women in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) who have entered the labor force, they are more likely to earn less than men and be unemployed (ILO 2018a). They are also overrepresented in informal employment, which often comes with greater risks and more limited opportunities due to limited legal protections (ILO 2018a). The gender gap in female labor force participation is particularly large in South Asia, where the average female labor force participation rate is 41 percent (ILO 2019). Regional statistics mask great variation: in India and Pakistan, fewer than a quarter of women (23 and 24 percent, respectively) work. Conversely, in East Africa, around two-thirds of women (67 percent) participate in the labor force. Among all East African countries, Rwanda leads with the highest rate of female labor force participation at 84 percent, and many other nations have participation rates over 50 percent. Despite progress in female labor force participation rates across sub-Saharan Africa, large gender gaps in earnings and productivity still persist (Calderon et al. 2019).

Female labor force participation is often considered a core aspect of gender equality and women's empowerment. Increasing women's labor force participation is key to achieving the agenda outlined by the United Nations (UN) for its Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 8 on decent work. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights codifies the right to work under just and favorable conditions for all people, including women. In addition to being a right in itself, women's labor force participation is considered to have positive downstream effects for women themselves, their families, and society. Promoting gender equality can advance economic growth (de Haan 2017): estimates suggest that advancing women's equal participation in the labor force can potentially add US\$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025 (McKinsey Global Institute 2015). Participating in the labor force can also allow women to have more control over their lives (Goldin 1995; McKelway 2019). This may have effects on her family, such as generating positive impacts for her children through

increased investments in school or health (Armand et al. 2020; Bobonis 2009; Duflo 2012; Lundberg, Pollak, and Wales 1997; Qian 2008).

Persistent challenges remain to women's labor market engagement. For example, women may lack the necessary skills employers are seeking (ILO 2014), while employers may have bias against female candidates when hiring for many positions (ILO 2017). Women disproportionately face harassment in public, hindering how they may get to work and shaping the likelihood of violence they may face at work (ILO 2019a). As women perform the lion's share of unpaid work and domestic care, the lack of affordable care options for children and other family members also impedes their work opportunities (Addati et al. 2018). Finally, gender norms underpin these and other barriers to women's employment (Jayachandran 2019).

It is important to note, however, that female labor force participation is not sufficient to fully capture women's economic agency—defined as women's ability to define meaningful economic choices and act on them.¹ directly. Many women who work may not have had a choice and face unsafe working conditions or significant constraints in choosing their occupation. They may face barriers in earning equal pay or progressing into higher-paying management positions, or they may select into lower-return sectors. The following specific examples illustrate that increases in labor force participation do not always reflect enhanced economic agency; providing recruitment services to young women in rural India and offering jobs to female applicants in Ethiopia increased women's employment but did not change their decision-making power (Jensen 2012; Kotsadam and Villanger 2019). Moreover, there may be a cyclical relationship between economic agency and work: women's limited agency may lead them not to work, while limited employment opportunities also hinder their agency (McKelway 2020). Because of the

¹ This definition of economic agency is a slight modification of Naila Kabeer's conceptualization of agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, Naila. 1999. "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change* 30(3): 435- 464.)

complex relationship between women's economic agency and employment, research to better understand women's economic employment should consider the many ways women express agency, as well as the underpinning barriers women may face to empowerment.

A key challenge policymakers and the private sector face is a lack of evidence about which approaches to increasing women's economic agency are effective and scalable, in what contexts they are successful, and why certain approaches work. This type of information can help policymakers work to ensure women's work and economic agency are at the forefront of economic development efforts. To address this challenge, the Gender and Economic Agency (GEA) Initiative at the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) aims to build a strong body of evidence on policies and programs to promote women's work and enhance women's economic agency in East Africa and South Asia. Stemming from this research, GEA will work to develop policy-relevant insights to drive programming, strategies, and policymaking on women's work in both formal and informal employment. Furthermore, as there is a growing need to identify and test key indicators for women's empowerment and agency, GEA will help to enhance the availability and scale of improved metrics for these outcomes.

This framing paper highlights potential research topics of interest to GEA and references key lessons from the existing global evidence base. These topics are categorized into three themes: 1) workplace arrangements and labor policies to promote formal and informal employment for women, 2) enhancing women's labor potential and work readiness (including self-employment), and 3) addressing restrictive gender norms and attitudes related to women's work. Additionally, in the appendix, we reference policies and programs relevant for each theme across GEA's five priority countries (Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) that were identified through our scoping process. The aim is to note potential opportunities for evaluation as J-PAL affiliated researchers develop research projects related to enhancing women's work in these priority countries.

II. Potential research topics under the Gender and Economic Agency Initiative (GEA)

Under each theme described above, we outline policies and programs that fall under the overarching topic and highlight potential avenues for further research. When relevant, we summarize key takeaways from existing syntheses of the global evidence base, including our own literature review on women’s agency (Chang et al. 2020), and feature compelling examples of rigorous research conducted on this topic. We conclude by listing potential research questions of interest to GEA. These following topics are not intended to be an exhaustive summary but rather to give a sense of the kinds of research that will be eligible for funding under GEA.

A. Workplace arrangements and labor policies to promote formal and informal employment for women

GEA is interested in better understanding how to create work opportunities that are attractive to and supportive of women. These can include government policies and firm-led programs to promote women’s work in both formal and informal employment. The following section outlines potential areas of research on workplace arrangements and labor policies to promote formal and informal employment for women, including (but not limited to): generating work opportunities targeted to women, ensuring equal access to jobs through gender-equitable hiring practices, improving workplaces to better support women (e.g., accommodating domestic responsibilities or addressing violence/harassment, etc.), and leveraging technology to improve the “future of work” for women.

Policies that generate work opportunities for women can improve female labor force participation. As outlined in Chang et al. (2020), several studies found that increasing women’s access to job opportunities through randomly assigned job offers or recruitment services increased women’s employment and earnings in the short run, though long-run evidence is lacking (Kotsadam and Villanger 2019; Jensen 2012; Groh et al. 2016; McKelway 2019). Governments can employ many strategies to create job

opportunities for women, for example, by integrating women into public works programs. One study in India examined policies to improve women's control over their earnings from a government workfare program, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). They found that linking earnings from the program to women's bank accounts and training women to use the accounts led to increased employment both within the program and in the private sector (Field et al. 2019). Future research can identify barriers women face to participate in public works programs, along with effective modifications to address them. Such research can guide policymakers as they design public works and other social protection programs that are targeted to or tailored for women. Another strategy may entail investing in firms to support their expansion, specifically in sectors dominated by women. Some promising solutions to firm growth include targeting cash grants to high-potential entrepreneurs, increasing small business's access to export markets, and informing firms about local labor regulations (McKenzie 2017; Atkin, Khandelwal, and Osman 2017; Bertrand and Crépon 2019). There is limited evidence on this topic, particularly related to women's employment, and more research is needed to understand what works to help firms grow and hire more workers.

In contexts where employees or customers prefer gender-segregated workplaces, like South Asia, a critical mass of women in the workforce may be necessary to demonstrate to firms the value of taking on the costs of gender integration. It is an open research question whether a "big push" campaign to bring more women into the workforce would be an effective policy strategy in these settings (Jayachandran 2019).

Creating work opportunities for women should be coupled with ensuring decent working conditions, with higher pay, safer conditions, and more legal and social protections. Transitioning women from the informal sector into the formal economy is often a key strategy to promoting decent work (ILO 2018b). However, formal employment may not necessarily guarantee decent work. In Ethiopia, women offered industrial jobs earned less, had lower wages, and worked longer hours than women who found informal

employment (Blattman and Dercon 2018). Most of those offered formal employment ultimately quit their industrial jobs and chose to leave the sector entirely. These industrial jobs also came with health risks: one year after being offered formal employment, workers reported exposures to hazards such as chemical fumes and repetitive stress injuries. Another study of industrial jobs in Ethiopia also found negative impacts on women's health, though women did earn more in this case (Abebe, Buehren, and Goldstein 2020). Future research should not only assess job access for women but also consider job quality.

Ensuring women have equal access to job opportunities through gender equitable hiring practices is another key area for research. Similar to how quotas increased women's political representation in India (J-PAL 2018a), gender quotas and affirmative action policies can create work opportunities for women. Employment quotas targeted to disadvantaged minorities in India, rather than women specifically, increased the likelihood of obtaining a salaried job and choosing a high-skill occupation for members of Scheduled Castes (Prakash 2018; Howard and Prakash 2012). More research is needed to understand the full effects of hiring quotas, such as whether women are supported in these positions, whether there is backlash from other employees, and whether these policies can encourage other women to join the workforce. In addition, increasing women's representation not only in the workplace but also in hiring committees may benefit women. However, one evaluation from Spain found that when the hiring committee was composed of more women, female candidates were *less* likely to be hired for positions in the Spanish Judiciary (Bagues and Esteve-Volart 2010). These results highlight the need to further evaluate hiring practices, as well-intentioned policies may backfire. Information interventions targeting employers can also improve women's labor outcomes, as there is evidence that employers evaluate male and female candidates differently (Gallego, Larroulet, and Repetto 2018; López Bóo, Rossi, and Urzúa 2013). For example, informing employers of their implicit bias towards women may counteract biased behavior towards female candidates when hiring. This was the case with teachers in Italy; revealing anti-immigrant stereotypes among teachers improved their grading of immigrant students (Alesina et al.

2018). What types of information can successfully reduce and address hiring bias—and how to deliver it to employers—remains an open research question.

Policies that make workplaces more supportive of women might also increase women's labor force participation. Women often bear the majority of household and childcare responsibilities, which can hinder their employment opportunities and productivity. In 2018, 606 million women of working age were outside of the labor force due to family responsibilities, whereas only 41 million men were inactive for the same reason (Addati et al. 2018). Three randomized evaluations of free or subsidized childcare in Brazil, Kenya, and Chile identified that the interventions increased women's labor force participation, and one found that it increased women's income (de Barros et al. 2011; Clark et al. 2019; Martínez and Peticar 2017). The positive effects on employment were concentrated among women who were not working before, suggesting that lack of childcare prevented women from pursuing labor force opportunities. These findings complement existing work in high-income countries on the role of childcare subsidies in increasing women's labor force participation (Blau and Currie 2006). Future evaluations to understand the impacts of childcare on women's long-term career trajectories, firm productivity, and worker satisfaction can help inform the design of effective childcare policies, including demonstrating the potential benefits of employer-offered childcare. As referenced in a later section, gender norms also play an important role in reinforcing women's childcare responsibilities, such that shifting these norms may reduce women's care burden.

Flexible work arrangements, like working from home or choosing work hours, can be another way workplaces can accommodate women's domestic responsibilities. These types of policies can potentially attract and retain more women, as well as increase women's productivity and wages. Yet, these policies may also isolate women from their colleagues and reinforce stereotypical gender roles if only women take advantage of these policies. Analysis within the United States demonstrates issues women face with working hours. Lower-income workers face a large hourly wage penalty for working fewer than 40 hours

per week. Because women on average work fewer hours per week than men, they are affected the most by this wage penalty (Goldin 2015). This is a topic that would benefit from more research, as there is little to no experimental evidence on this topic in low- to middle-income countries.

The UN's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women recognizes sexual harassment and intimidation at work as a violation of women's fundamental rights. Yet, violence and harassment in the workplace remain a pervasive issue that disproportionately affects women from entering, remaining, and advancing in the labor market. Research that explores and attempts to quantify how violence and harassment in the workplace influence women's labor decisions can help inform policy debates. Moreover, understanding effective policies to address violence and harassment in the workplace, including reducing incidents of violence and ensuring just reporting and redressal mechanisms, is also key to ensuring women's safety at work—an area where rigorous evidence is lacking. As discussed in a later section, more research is also needed on issues of public safety that influence violence and harassment women may face traveling to and from work.

Finally, as technology shifts the nature of work, can e-commerce platforms and gig economy roles be leveraged to include more women in the workforce or will technology exacerbate existing gender gaps? Technological change can in some cases allow for more flexible work arrangements, as it may be easier to substitute employees, which may help close the gender wage gap (Goldin 2015). On this topic, ongoing research is exploring how best to engage women as mobile money agents in Bangladesh (Gine, Goldberg, and Vandewalle ongoing). In other cases, women may be at a greater risk of losing their job due to technological advances because they often occupy jobs that are at risk of automation and lack skills relevant to the digital era (Brussevich et al. 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic may accelerate this technological transition as automation can allow employers to resume some work amid lockdowns and social distancing policies. Evaluations exploring the role of technology in creating employment

opportunities for women would help policymakers plan for a more equal distribution of employment gains stemming from technological innovation.

Potential research questions:

- How can social protection workfare programs better accommodate gender-specific barriers?
- What are effective strategies to help firms grow and hire more women? Do these strategies create higher quality work for women, and if so, how?
- What kinds of gender-equitable hiring practices, such as quotas, hiring committees, or information interventions for employers, can effectively increase women's labor force participation and access to quality work? What are subsequent impacts on firm performance?
- How to design and provide cost-effective childcare and flexible work arrangements, and how does access to these options impact women's career trajectories and firm performance?
- What are the impacts of workplace violence and harassment on women's labor decisions, and what kinds of interventions will best address violence and harassment in the workplace?
- How will technological changes influence women's labor force participation?

B. Enhancing women's labor potential and work readiness (including self-employment)

GEA is interested in ways to prepare women with the necessary skills to secure work and advance in their careers, including in self-employment. The following section outlines potential areas of research on enhancing women's labor potential and work readiness, including (but not limited to): skills development (including hard and soft skills), promotion and management training, interventions to support female jobseekers, leveraging social networks, and collective enterprise.

Many existing approaches to enhance women's labor force participation are centered on providing women with access to various skills training programs, but evidence on their efficacy yields mixed results

(Chang et al. 2020; J-PAL 2019). Standard training curricula often focus on developing technical skills but may also include a soft skills component. As discussed in Chang et al. (2020), soft skills acquisition appears to be an important mechanism for increasing young women’s self-employment into adulthood among adolescent girls’ programs employing “safe space” models (Bandiera et al. 2020; Buehren, Goldstein, et al. 2017; Bandiera et al. 2019; Buehren, Chakravarty, et al. 2017; Buchmann et al. 2018; Amin et al. 2016). Examples of soft skills in these programs include negotiation, goal setting, and reproductive health. Future research should explore the impacts of soft skills training for women beyond adolescence, including disentangling the impacts of bundled program’s various components. Ultimately, there is a need to better understand which kinds of skills—either technical, soft, or a combination of both—can help women enter and succeed in employment. For example, this could entail involving the private sector to develop curriculum tailored to the skills required for particular positions and providing on-the-job training opportunities for women.

Exploring effective programming that complements skills training by supporting women in overcoming gender-specific constraints they face in employment (both formal and informal) is an interesting area for future research. Chang et al. (2020) identified that business trainings that address gender-specific constraints by including modules on self-confidence, self-efficacy, or women’s entrepreneurship tend to be effective in improving women’s business outcomes in the majority of evaluations (Bulte, Lensink, and Vu 2017; Valdivia 2015; McKenzie and Puerto forthcoming; Alibhai et al. 2019). Add-on programming that offers mentorship, provides exposure to role models, or strengthens social ties have also shown promising results to improve women’s microenterprises (Brooks, Donovan, and Johnson 2018; Lafortune, Riutort, and Tessada 2018; Field et al. 2016). Better understanding psychological aspects of success is another fruitful area for further research, as raising women entrepreneurs’ aspirations may have been a key mechanism to the success of these additional training components. For example, a nine session group-based psychosocial training in India led to large gains in women’s employment; the training helped women identify their strengths, goals, and paths to achieve them (McKelway 2020). Additionally,

exploring how gender norms affect female microentrepreneurs' ambitions and whether in return shapes growth for women's businesses, including business formalization, offers another avenue for potential research (Jayachandran 2020). A key research question that remains is how to design effective training programs that take into account women's skill gaps, gender-based needs, and employment goals, including securing higher-quality work. Understanding which components of a training program are most effective could be particularly insightful to help design more cost-effective programs.

In addition to helping women secure jobs, trainings may also help women advance in their careers.

Women are markedly missing from management positions: according to an ILO global survey of almost 13,000 enterprises in 70 countries, nearly half of enterprises reported that women hold fewer than 30 percent of entry-level management positions (ILO 2019b). More research is needed to understand the barriers women face for promotion and how to advance women into management positions. An ongoing study in Bangladesh, for example, is evaluating the relative importance of hard versus soft skills training to advance women in the garment sector (Uckat and Woodruff, ongoing).

In addition to skills deficits, jobseekers also face search frictions that make it challenging to identify quality employment, and women may be affected disproportionately in some settings. Jobseekers may not know where or how to search for jobs efficiently; searching requires a lot of effort, and jobseekers often do not understand their own skills well in relation to what skills employers want. These barriers are often magnified for youth, who lack both experience searching for jobs and the work experience that could help employers gauge their abilities, and may also be heightened for women. A review of nineteen randomized evaluations of interventions aimed at reducing search barriers shows that job search assistance helped jobseekers look for jobs in better places and increased their search efforts (J-PAL 2018b). Examples of job search interventions include vouchers to job fairs, assistance to create job search plans, and CV and interview workshops (Beam 2016; Abel et al. 2019; Abebe et al. 2020). Helping jobseekers communicate their abilities often benefited both jobseekers and firms who hired them. While many studies show

positive impacts on outcomes such as interview offers, job offers, employment, and quality employment, not all of the studies measure or show sustained benefits to earnings, total employment, or well-being. Additionally, in the few cases where it was measured (e.g., Crépon et al. 2013), some of the gains from job search assistance programs came at the expense of jobseekers who did not receive the programs, implying that job search assistance may have merely reshuffled who received the limited number of available jobs rather than increasing overall employment. It would be beneficial for future research to rigorously measure displacement effects of job search programs and explore ways to mitigate these effects.

As most of these job search interventions did not target women specifically, exploring if it is necessary, and how, to design and target these interventions to women may be a useful area for future research. For example, encouraging young jobseekers in South Africa to include a reference letter with their job applications and providing them with a simple template letter increased employer callbacks (Abel, Burger, and Piraino 2020). This was particularly impactful for women, who doubled their employment rates when they used reference letters. These types of interventions may improve equity in hiring in settings where employers have limited information about applicants. They may also provide less well-connected groups (often women and minority groups) a channel to connect to job opportunities in settings where employers hire through informal referral systems. Turning to formal job search platforms, providing educated female jobseekers in Pakistan with information on the gender of the supervisor increased the likelihood of applying (Subramanian 2020). Whether similar information interventions are effective among women of lower socioeconomic status could be an area for future research, given that web-based and phone-based job search platforms are increasingly common in low- and middle-income countries.

Other topics for potential research relevant to GEA include understanding the role of social networks and collective enterprises in promoting women's employment. Social norms restricting women's mobility

may limit women's professional networks, which may hinder women's employment opportunities. Though there is limited empirical evidence, extensive literature in sociology suggests that social networks, particularly workforce networks, tend to form among people who share the same gender (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). In contexts where hiring is conducted through informal referral networks, limited social connections disadvantage women, as documented in a study in Malawi (Beaman, Keleher, and Magruder 2018). There is also little rigorous evidence to date on the link between collective enterprises like unions or cooperatives and women's employment. An interesting area for future research may be, for example, understanding potential gender differences in collective bargaining and how this affects negotiations. Additionally, research on what types of wraparound services, like negotiation training, may be beneficial to women's cooperatives can help inform program design.

Potential research questions:

- What type of skills (i.e., hard, soft, or some combination of both) are most effective in improving labor outcomes and securing decent work for women? How can skills trainings be designed to address the gender-specific barriers women face in different contexts? What components of these trainings are most effective?
- How to build women's skills for promotion and management, especially in settings where women are underrepresented in management positions?
- What kinds of interventions are most effective to help women in the job search process? What innovations help link female jobseekers and employers? Do these interventions increase net employment for women? How to tailor existing jobseeker interventions for women, and does this generate greater benefits for women than non-gendered approaches?
- How do women's social networks effect employment outcomes?
- What is the role of collective enterprises in promoting women's employment?

C. Addressing restrictive gender norms and attitudes related to women's work

A cross cutting topic, gender norms—the informal rules that impose expectations about behavior that are dependent on gender (Marcus et al. 2015)—are another constraint to women’s work. As discussed in Jayachandran (2019), gender norms are important in determining women’s labor market outcomes, but it is possible to counter these restrictive norms, which can also change over time. Many of the aforementioned interventions focused on working around existing gender norms, for example, by providing childcare or flexible work arrangements. Another promising approach is to try to directly shift underlying gender norms. The following section outlines potential areas of research on addressing restrictive gender norms and attitudes related to women’s work, including (but not limited to): women’s work and roles, unpaid care work, public safety, violence and harassment, and occupational sex segregation.

Directly challenging and changing attitudes about women working is an understudied area. Since attitudes about female labor force participation can inhibit women’s work, more evidence is needed on whether sharing information with women and their family members about the safety and benefits of work can increase women’s labor force participation in settings where they face restrictions. Two studies in India have tested these kinds of interventions. In Uttar Pradesh, promoting carpet manufacturing job opportunities to women’s families increased women’s employment and earnings in the short run; yet in Karnataka, providing employer-led, family-orientation videos and discussions about women’s employment found no effects (McKelway 2019; Dean and Jayachandran 2019). In Saudi Arabia, social norms require women to receive approval from a male “guardian” (typically husband or father) prior to working. Offering men in Saudi Arabia simple information on other men’s perceptions of female labor force participation increased the likelihood that their wives applied and interviewed for a job outside of the home (Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott 2018). More research could help to better understand the levers for how attitudes about gender equality in the workforce can translate to behavior change, and whether insights can be scaled to different delivery platforms (e.g., would this kind of

information intervention work as an ad campaign). Efforts to challenge restrictive gender norms may also create backlash for women, which could be a consideration for future research. For example, working more may put women at greater risk of intimate partner violence, as men may feel threatened by changing household dynamics (Guarnieri and Rainer 2018; Krishnan et al. 2010).

Worldwide, women perform over three-quarters of total unpaid care work (Addati et al. 2018). More research is needed on how to reduce the burden of unpaid care and domestic work and more evenly distribute it across household members. For example, the human rights organization Breakthrough's program in India, which consisted of a series of interactive classroom discussions about gender equality over two and a half years, increased students' support for gender equality and led students to enact more gender-equitable behavior (Dhar, Jain, and Jayachandran 2018). In particular, boys reported doing more household chores, though girls did not reduce their number of chores. Evaluations of interventions such as family counseling or gender dialogue groups targeted to adults and geared towards questioning and changing patterns of domestic work are of interest to GEA. In addition, understanding how family obligations and finances shape women's labor decisions is an important research priority, particularly to understand and address the gender gap in microenterprise performance (Jayachandran 2020). For example, in Uganda, women who faced the most pressure to share money with others in their household experienced the greatest benefits to their businesses when loans were disbursed through mobile money rather than in cash (Riley 2020). Given competing demands for women entrepreneurs' time with care and household responsibilities, the ability to hire and delegate responsibilities to employees may be especially valuable to women (Jayachandran 2020).

In many countries, women face social constraints that limit their mobility and interpersonal interactions, which may be in part due to real safety concerns but also perceptions around preserving women's "purity." Another avenue for potential research is how best to address norms and attitudes related to mobility, public safety, transportation, violence, and harassment. Two ongoing studies are exploring the

impacts of alleviating some barriers women may face to using public transportation by offering subsidies in India and reserving a section of buses as women-only in Pakistan (Borker, Kreindler and Patel, ongoing; Field et al. ongoing). More research is needed to identify the major constraints (e.g., financial, safety, or gender norms) to women's use of public transit in different contexts, in addition to understanding how public transit interventions align with increasing women's employment opportunities.

Identifying and addressing the drivers of occupational sex segregation is another research priority, as this is key to closing gender gaps in job quality, wage, and employment trajectories (Das and Kotikula 2019). Several studies suggest that occupational sex segregation may explain why women have lower returns to capital than men. Reanalysis of evaluations providing business grants in Sri Lanka and Ghana and microcredit in India identified key differences in how women's and men's businesses were able to benefit from positive capital shocks, as evidence suggests that women often diverted resources to their spouses' businesses (Bernhardt et al. 2019). The researchers noted that these results may be in part due to gender norms that led women to sort into less profitable entrepreneurial activities. Additional studies have also suggested that women experience lower returns because they operate businesses in lower-return industries (de Mel, McKenzie, and Woodruff 2009; Klapper and Parker 2011). An area for further work is to better understand why women work in industries with lower growth potential or, as suggested by Hardy and Kagy (2020), more competition. This may be due to constraints with respect to workplace practices, women's labor market potential, and/or restrictive gender norms (aligning with the aforementioned research themes), but the lack of rigorous evidence makes it difficult to design effective policies (Das and Kotikula 2019). Efforts to shift norms around female employment in particular industries, rather than by a single firm, may be promising, such as momentum in the United States to promote women in STEM.

Potential research questions:

- How to directly challenge and change gender norms related to women’s work, including by engaging men, other household members, and local community and religious leaders? Do these approaches create backlash that harm women? How to scale effective interventions?
- How to more equitably share domestic responsibilities among household members, and how does this impact women’s job opportunities?
- How to ensure women’s safety and mobility in public spaces, and what are the resulting impacts on labor force participation?
- What are effective policies and programs to address occupational sex segregation?

III. Conclusion

With an increasing number of policymakers and donors interested in applying a gender lens to the policymaking process, there is heightened demand for rigorous research related to women’s work and economic agency. Women experience unique barriers to exercising agency in economic decisions such as labor force participation. A key challenge policymakers and the private sector face is a lack of evidence about which approaches to increasing women’s work and economic agency are effective and scalable.

To address this research gap, GEA will spur new rigorous research on strategies to promote women’s work and economic agency and remove constraints to work. This paper outlines the research agenda for GEA to further understanding of what works for promoting gender equality and women’s economic empowerment. In particular, GEA seeks to develop and contribute to a body of evidence to better understand what works to address barriers to women’s formal and informal employment, enhance women’s labor force potential, and challenge restrictive gender norms and attitudes related to women’s work.

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Appendix I: Summary of policy landscape in priority countries

With a regional focus on East Africa and South Asia, GEA emphasizes research in five priority countries: Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. To better understand the policy landscape within each country and identify opportunities for policy-relevant research, we undertook a scoping exercise from January to May 2020 that consisted of desk research and stakeholder interviews. In addition to desk research, we leveraged existing evidence from landscaping work conducted by the Global Center for Gender Equality at Stanford University. Additionally, we conducted interviews with key stakeholders and policy partners, including Innovations for Poverty Action, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy, Kore Global Consulting, World Bank and its Africa Gender Innovation Lab, and Ethiopia's Job Creation Commission.

The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the world in unprecedented ways, and the policy landscape is rapidly changing as a result. In particular, policy efforts to support women's labor force participation may be threatened by unemployment or job instability triggered by the pandemic. Likewise, the pandemic is exacerbating and creating new challenges to women's work. This document largely reflects the policy landscape before the pandemic outbreak and will continue to be updated in the future as COVID-19 response and recovery measures crystallize.

Below we highlight interesting trends, policy developments, and research opportunities in the five priority countries across GEA's three research themes. This scoping summary helps to guide GEA's strategy for relationship-building with policy partners in the region. In addition, it identifies policy priorities in the regions that can inform GEA's funding decisions.

A. Overview

Female labor force participation rates are much higher among the countries in East Africa than in India (Table 1). Over two-thirds of women are participating in the labor force across Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Tanzania leads among the four priority countries in East Africa, with 79 percent of women participating in the labor force. Gender gaps are much starker in India; female labor force participation has actually decreased over the past two decades. Restrictive gender norms on women's mobility, in addition to real concerns for women's safety, may explain the low rate of female labor force participation in India (Jayachandran, 2015). Rates of formal employment (i.e., wage and salaried workers) for women are low in all five countries, ranging from 10 percent in Tanzania to 40 percent in Kenya.

Many countries recognize supporting women as a priority for their development strategy, but it is unclear if and how these priorities actualize into concrete policies. National development agendas in the five countries (i.e., Vision 2025 in Ethiopia, Vision 2030 in Kenya, Vision 2025 in Tanzania, and Vision 2040 in Uganda) all include some mention of enhancing women's empowerment and ensuring gender equality across many domains, including economic empowerment (Table 2). Gender mainstreaming is often a core component of these approaches, and some plans detail specific focus areas like entrepreneurship or gender-based violence. Of particular note, Uganda has issued the National Gender Policy, first published in 1997 and revised in 2007, which provides a framework for addressing gender inequality and guides development practitioners to incorporate gender into programming. Likewise, India's Gender Budgeting Initiative, established in the early 2000s, works to ensure gender commitments are reflected in budgets. Overall, these plans rarely mention specific policies and programs, and it was difficult to find more information on implementation.

B. Workplace arrangements and labor policies to promote formal and informal employment for women

Overall, there is a strong policy appetite for social protection programs, with all countries implementing some form of social protection targeting workers and/or women. Ethiopia and Kenya mandate that employers provide some employment-related protections like sick leave and maternity benefits. As referenced in a previous section, the MGNREGA program in India guarantees 100 days of unskilled employment per year. Likewise, Tanzania Public Works Program guarantees households targeted by the Productive Social Safety Net program fifteen days of paid work per month for four months. The Northern Uganda Social Action Fund provides income support for poor and vulnerable households, including through a public works component. Most of these countries have already rapidly introduced or adapted social protection programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gentilini et al. 2020).

Job creation is often recognized as key for growth in East Africa, though these strategies are not always gendered. In the last decade, Ethiopia has invested heavily in the development of industrial parks and export-oriented manufacturing. Industrial parks present an opportunity for women to migrate from rural areas to urban ones, and stakeholder interviews suggest that a large majority of industrial park workers are women. However, women may face challenges working in industrial parks, including safety concerns, both in public and at work, and face issues with poor water, sanitation, and public service provision. Tanzania's National Five Year Development Plan (2016/17–2020/21) identifies job creation as a key objective, especially for youth and disadvantaged groups. Spurring growth in the labor market is part of Kenya's Vision 2030 agenda to enhance manufacturing, though youth employment is the focus demographic, not women. Uganda also emphasizes job creation in creative industries especially for young people, in addition to calling for a national program for women's economic empowerment. In addition, Uganda recently began implementing the Green Jobs Fair Market Programme that aims to create sustainable and decent employment and to enhance labor productivity. Targeting both educated and uneducated women and youth, the program has several components, including establishing industrial business centers in urban areas of Uganda and improving apprenticeship and volunteer programs.

The Indian government's efforts have largely focused on women's collectives and emphasized entrepreneurship. Launched in 2011, the National Rural Livelihoods Mission aims to provide rural households sustainable income through income-generating assets and economic activities to help lift these households out of poverty. Most state governments in India also have initiatives that adopt group-based approaches to livelihoods development and social protection, such as the *Jeevika* program in Bihar and the *Kudumbashree* program in Kerala. To support female entrepreneurs, the government also established an online platform for these women to display their goods through the *Mahila e-Haat* initiative.

Though laws exist to forbid gender discrimination in all five priority countries, there seems to be a gap in policies and implementation to ensure gender-equitable hiring practices. Similarly, several countries have adopted gender quotas for public procurement to create market opportunities for women, but these policies may not be fully realized. For example, Kenya aims for at least 30 percent of all procurements to be provided by women, but this policy has faced wide criticism for over-politicization, corruption, and mismanagement. Gender-equitable hiring practices remain an area lacking policy intervention.

Out of the five priority countries, Kenya and India have considerable traction around workplace policies to better accommodate women, such as childcare, maternity leave, and flexible work arrangements. In 2017, Kenya issued the Health Act that requires employers to provide lactation stations at workplaces and allow women up to one hour of paid time off for breastfeeding for every eight hours of work. The National Social Protection Policy (2011) proposed that maternity benefits be provided through a restructured National Social Security Fund, however, this has not yet been realized. In Kenya, there is significant private sector energy to align workplace practices with government policy, which has been perceived to be poorly implemented, for example, in relation to maternity leave, flexible work, crèches, breastfeeding rooms, and increasing female leadership. Safaricom, the largest telecommunications company in Kenya, has successfully implemented progressive maternity and adoption leave policies. India also has several policies to support working mothers. Through the National Crèche Scheme

managed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, working mothers in India have access to nurseries for their children during the working day. Additionally, the Working Women Hostel scheme, under the Mission for Empowerment and Protection for Women, offers safe and conveniently located accommodations for working women in India, including daycare facilities wherever possible, including in urban, semi-urban, and even rural areas where employment opportunities for women exist. Within the private sector, Zomato, one of India's largest food delivery companies, recently issued up to ten days of "period leave" for women and transgender employees.

Childcare is emerging as a policy concern in Ethiopia, but this concern has not actualized into policies. Ethiopia's Plan of Action for Job Creation (2020–2025) recognizes the potential of industrial parks in creating and fostering jobs. The plan also emphasizes the need to improve working conditions in these industrial parks by encouraging and incentivizing industrial parks to provide integrated services, including housing, childcare, catering, etc. This remains an area where more policies are needed.

In all five countries, laws exist on sexual harassment but implementation is not clear. For instance, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act in India legally protects women from sexual harassment at their place of work. Additionally, the Ministry of Women & Child Development has published the Handbook on the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (The Vishaka Guidelines), which details instances of unwelcome behavior that constitutes sexual harassment in the workplace. It is important to acknowledge that the private sector and employers play a key role in implementing these laws. The Private Sector Foundation of Uganda, for example, is working together with United Nations Development Programme's Seal Certification Programme for Public and Private Enterprises to address sexual harassment in the workplace and mainstream gender equality issues into business policies and strategies.

It is important to note the potential growth of the gig economy and technology in these priority countries. For instance, Lynk, a technology platform for informal sector workers in Kenya, has grown to be one of the largest gig-work platforms on the continent. Yet, women face societal and occupational barriers and, thus, have been considerably limited in engaging in gig work in East Africa. For all five priority countries, there is a serious lack of policies ensuring women are included in the “future of work.”

Examples of topics with existing policy momentum:

- Gender-sensitive social protection workfare programs, particularly in India, Tanzania, and Uganda
- Women’s collectives, particularly in India
- Workplace policies to better accommodate women (e.g., childcare, maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, etc.), particularly in Ethiopia, India, and Kenya
- Legal protections for workplace sexual harassment in all five priority countries

C. Enhancing women’s labor potential and work readiness (including self-employment)

Skills development consistently appears as a top development priority across the five countries, but they vary in whether they take gender into account. India and Uganda have elevated gender as a core focus of their skills development programs. The National Skills Development Corporation of India has a framework for gender mainstreaming but does not detail implementation. One particular program for women is the Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP) Scheme that aims to provide women skills for employment and entrepreneurship. Uganda’s national planning documents recognize the unique barriers women face to Business, Technical, Vocational, and Educational Training (BTJET), namely the lack of housing and accommodations, inadequacy of sanitation facilities, and prevalence of sexual harassment. The 2011–2020 BTJET Strategic Plan for Skilling Uganda includes mention of developing and implementing a gender strategy to: address the need for a national gender

awareness program, improve hostel facilities for girls, provide special assistance in job placements, and enact strict policies on sexual harassment and abuse. The plan also discusses potential incentives or quotas for women in funding BTVET programs, as well as preferential access for female BTVET graduates to receive training to become BTVET instructors. Developing assessment and training programs in occupations attractive to women is also a priority for Uganda. Implementation of this strategic plan remains to be seen, as well as the future direction of the strategy since the plan ends in 2020.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is also key to Ethiopia's strategy, but it is unclear whether efforts to improve technical and vocational skills take gender into account. While women enroll in trainings at nearly the same rate as men, they tend to enroll in those that teach skills for less lucrative, more traditional female positions, like commerce, textiles, and hospitality (World Bank 2019). Ethiopia plans to establish Sector Skills Committees (SSCs) in all sectors to ensure that skills built through technical and vocational training match industry needs. A key industry that is supported by the committee is the textile and garment industry, which largely employs women, and therefore these trainings may be specifically designed for women's needs. Similarly, in India, skills development programs exist but may not prioritize women in practice.

The four East Africa countries, like many countries in sub-Saharan Africa with large youth populations, have much policy traction around training programs for youth, rather than for women specifically. To strengthen occupational prospects for African youth, the African Union Commission recently launched the Skills Initiative for Africa in eight pilot countries, including Ethiopia and Kenya. The Kenya Youth Employment and Skills Program helps youth develop technical and vocational skills in order to secure employment in high-demand industries such as plumbing, masonry, poultry farming, and retail. However, the program does not appear to have a gender-specific component or an explicit focus on women.

Officially launched in 2019, the Uganda Graduate Volunteer Scheme aims to help Ugandan graduates

transition from school to work by developing skills on the job through volunteerism. The two-year pilot plans to target 500 graduates annually with equal gender representation. Another program for youth, Tanzania's Productive Social Safety Net program recently piloted *Ujana Salama*, a "Cash Plus" model to help youth transition into healthy and productive adulthood. This program does have a gender component. Leveraging the existing cash transfer program, the Cash Plus model included three interventions specifically for adolescents: livelihood enhancement that includes skills training and start-up grants, education on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and gender equity, and strengthening linkages to youth friendly SRH services. Midline results from evaluating this model are promising; participants increased SRH knowledge, gender-equitable attitudes, and aspirations to run a business (The Transfer Project 2019).

It is important to acknowledge that all five countries have strong policy interest in women's entrepreneurship funds, though programs that only relieve capital constraints are beyond the research scope of GEA. Entrepreneurship funds ease credit constraints faced by women entrepreneurs. For example, in 2019, the Kenyan government consolidated three funds (The Women Enterprise Fund, Uwezo Fund, and Youth Enterprise Development Fund) into the *Biashara* Kenya Fund that gives marginalized groups (i.e., women, youth, and disabled people) preference when evaluating loan applications. Some issues have been raised about the effectiveness of this merger in solving the issues faced by the individual funds. In India, government schemes leverage self-help groups to provide loans to women for entrepreneurship, such as the *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* scheme.

In some cases, these funds may involve skilling components, as with the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Fund, and, thus would be within GEA's research scope. The main aim of the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Fund is to address credit barriers, while the extent of the skill training components is unclear. Similarly, Uganda's Youth Livelihoods Program provides loans to low-income unemployed youth aged 18–30. These loans can be used for both livelihood support and skills

development. In 2018, the fund had supported over 4,000 youth, of which 46 percent were female, and the vast majority of projects were for livelihood support rather than skills development (“Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development, Uganda” n.d.). An evaluation of the program found that it had little to no effect on socio-economic outcomes, like income (Bukonya et al. 2019). Researchers note that the limited effects may be due to most youth investing in livelihood projects that do not require technical skills but faced great competition. This result suggests that there is a need for greater investment in skills development and skills-based projects.

Unions focused on women exist in all five priority countries. For example, the Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Association Limited has spearheaded changes in perceptions and policies for women entrepreneurs for over thirty years. Likewise, the Self Employed Women’s Association organizes low-income, self-employed women in India. In 2019, the ILO launched the Advancing Decent Work and Inclusive Industrialization Programme in Ethiopia in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, Ethiopian Employers’ Confederation, and Ethiopian Industry Employers Confederation. With the initial focus on the textile and garment industry, this program is likely to affect women workers more as women make up 80 to 90 percent of the workers in this sector (Ethiopia Jobs Creation Commission 2019). An interesting program related to promoting women in management, the Female Future Tanzania program hosted by the Association for Tanzania Employees focuses on getting more women into management positions, the decision-making process, and corporate boards through capacity building and networking.

Examples of topics with existing policy momentum:

- Skills training programs for women in all five priority countries
- Gender-sensitive skills training programs for youth in East Africa
- Entrepreneurship funds with skills components for women and youth, particularly in Uganda
- Unions for women in all five priority countries

D. Addressing restrictive gender norms and attitudes related to women's work

The Ethiopian and Indian governments emerge as having recognized restrictive social norms as a key barrier to women's economic empowerment. Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plan II (2014/15 to 2019/20) highlights the role of youth and women's organizations in eliminating gender-based violence and raising awareness of harmful social norms. However, across these countries, there are few policies that explicitly address attitudes related to gender norms around women's work directly. In India, some social awareness schemes exist to address gender norms that largely target attitudes towards son-preference and girls' education. The *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* program is a social campaign aimed at eradication of female feticide and raising awareness of welfare services intended for young Indian girls. Likewise, the *Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra* scheme involves student volunteers working to raise awareness and build capacity among women in rural areas.

Civil society, rather than government, has been instrumental in advocating for norms change in all five priority countries. For example, through continued grassroots efforts, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association along with other human rights organizations pushed forward nationwide legal reform to ensure women's equal rights in marriage and divorce, property and asset ownership, and the workplace. There are many organizations working on social norms across the five countries. For instance, based in Kenya, the African Women's Development and Communication Network has played a leading role in building the women's movement across Africa since 1988. Similarly, the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme works across several thematic areas to ensure equitable resource allocation and sustainable livelihoods for women. An advocacy organization, the Uganda Women's Network, works to coordinate collective action among women's rights and gender-equality stakeholders to promote gender equality in Uganda. Finally, Breakthrough, a human rights organization based in India that works to promote social

change, created a curriculum to promote gender equality through classroom discussion; several NGOs have developed other programs to encourage norm change.

Safety and mobility for women emerge as key policy issues in India and Kenya. For example, the One Stop Centre Scheme, known popularly as *Sakhi*, has been established at various locations in India to provide shelter, police desk, and legal, medical, and counselling services to victims of violence under one roof integrated with a 24-hour Helpline. Kenya has similar programs to address gender-based violence. However, this level of policy traction is not seen in the other East African priority countries.

Examples of topics with existing policy momentum:

- Social awareness programs to address restrictive gender norms, particularly in India
- Civil society organizations working on norms change in all five priority countries
- Safety and mobility for women, particularly in India and Kenya

Table 1: Summary statistics on women’s work in GEA’s priority countries

	Country				
	Ethiopia	India	Kenya	Tanzania	Uganda
Female labor force participation rate (2019)¹	74%	23%	64%	79%	67%
Female unemployment rate (2019)²	2.8%	5.2%	2.8%	2.5%	2.3%
Female informal employment rate³		76% (2018)		76% (2014)	87% (2017)
Female formal sector (i.e., wage and salary work) employment rate (2019)⁴	11%	23%	40%	10%	15%
Gender wage gap	36% (2016) ⁵			35% (2018) ⁶	
Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic care work per day⁷	19% (2013)			16% (2014)	

Blank cells indicate data is not available

¹ International Labour Organization. “Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) — ILO modelled estimates.” ILOSTAT.

² International Labour Organization. “Unemployment, female (% of female labor force) — ILO modelled estimates.” ILOSTAT.

³ International Labour Organization. “Informal employment, female (% of total non-agricultural employment).” ILOSTAT.

⁴ International Labour Organization. “Wage and salaried workers, female (% of female employment) — ILO modelled estimates.” ILOSTAT.

⁵ World Bank. 2019. Ethiopia Gender Diagnostic Report. Country Gender Assessment. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/31420>.

⁶ “Global Wage Report 2018/19: What Lies behind Gender Pay Gaps.” 2018. http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_650553/lang--en/index.htm.

⁷ International Labour Organization. “Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, female (% of 24 hour day)” United Nations Statistics Division.

Table 2: Overview of relevant government ministries and policy priorities in GEA’s priority countries

Country	Relevant Government Ministries	Relevant Policy Priorities (source)
Ethiopia	Ministry of Public Service, Youth, and Gender; Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender equality (Growth and Transformation Plan II) • Social protection • Job creation (National Plan of Action for Job Creation [2020–2025]) • Workplace policies for women (National Plan of Action for Job Creation [2020–2025]) • Skills development (Federal Technical and Vocational Training Agency) • Entrepreneurship (National Plan of Action for Job Creation [2020–2025]) • Challenging restrictive gender norms (Growth and Transformation Plan II)
India	Ministry of Women and Child Development; Ministry of Labour and Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social protection (Rashtriya Mahila Kosh) • Workplace policies for women (National Mission for Empowerment of Women [2011-12], The Ministry of Women & Child Development’s Handbook on the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act) • Skills development (National Skills Development Corporation) • Challenging restrictive gender norms
Kenya	Ministry of Public Service, Youth, and Gender; Ministry of Labour and Social Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender equality (Vision 2030, Third Medium Term Plan) • Social protection (National Social Protection Policy [2011]) • Job creation (Vision 2030) • Workplace policies for women (Health Act [2017], National Social Protection Policy [2011], State Department of Labour’s Strategic Plan [2018]) • Skills development (the TVET Act [2013]) • Entrepreneurship (Vision 2030)
Tanzania	Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children; Ministry of Labour and Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender equality (Vision 2025) • Job creation, entrepreneurship, skills development (National Five Year Development Plan II [2016/17–2020/21])
Uganda	Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender equality (National Gender Policy [2007]); Second National Development Plan) • Job creation, skills development, entrepreneurship, social protection (Second National Development Plan)