

## NO QUICK FIX:

### *Evaluation of the World Bank's Female Youth Employment Initiative in Afghanistan*



The World Bank's 2012 World Development Report states that investing in women's and girls' empowerment and economic potential is "smart economics". Researchers speak of the "Girl Effect" and find strong linkages between investing in girls and increases in national income all over the developing world. For Afghanistan in the early 2000s, fostering economic development is a high priority.

While the country still suffers from a severe lack of educational opportunities for girls and young women, significant progress has been made since the fall of the Taliban regime. The problem today, often underestimated by development actors, is that *educating* girls and young women is not enough to achieve the full benefits of the "girls effect".

As long as young women who have acquired marketable skills cannot access viable income earning-opportunities, their education may benefit themselves and their communities, but not their societies at large.

#### What prevents Afghan young women from accessing the labour market?

- **The labour market is rigid and saturated**, characterized by severe un- and underemployment.
- **Traditional norms** discourage their pursuit of viable income-earning activities for women.
- Afghanistan's economy is still extremely dependent on foreign aid but **aid is dwindling**. The services sector has been hit particularly hard by this development.

- A worsening **security** context restricts the movement of women and girls.

This document provides highlights from research conducted by Samuel Hall Consulting for the World Bank Group in 2015.

#### Bridging the gap between education and the job market

The ambitious goal of the FYEI was to provide an eight-month job skills training to 1300 young women aged 18-30, followed by a three-month internship, in order to improve their access to income-earning opportunities.

The pilot programme took place in Balkh province in Northern Afghanistan. In order to tackle the mismatch between labour market supply and demand for young women, the programme was designed to supply *targeted* job trainings. Labour market growth sectors were identified via a social-marketing survey.

*Importantly, however, such a survey needs to take into account not only what kind of work the labour market needs but also what kind of work young women are willing to perform.*

#### What kinds of activities are acceptable to young educated women in Northern Afghanistan in 2015?

Commonly, both young women and their communities consider that the only acceptable types of work for them are in the education and health sectors, as well as with international organizations (where all-female work environments are usually strongly preferred).

## Can all young Afghan women work in these sectors?

No. The Afghan labour market cannot absorb millions of female teachers and midwives, and the NGO sector is shrinking.

## Is it useful to have a programme which provides young women with skills and an internship opportunity even if hardly any tangible labour market outcomes result?

Yes. Samuel Hall's interviews with 600 graduates of the FYEI initiative show that the great majority of beneficiaries appreciated the classes received (English, computer skills, life skills and job skills).

Non-labour market dividends include increased knowledge and experience, as well as empowerment. The FYEI programme encouraged trainees to become more involved in society, while showing their families that they can play a more significant socio-economic role and creating new social ties with other trainees.

## Lessons learned

For future programming of this kind, the selection of topics should take into account not only what skills are in demand in a small segment of the labour market but also what young female high school graduates wish for and can realistically aspire to.

Vocational training (e.g. tailoring) might have the benefit of enabling women to work in sectors with a higher demand for their labour market contribution. Furthermore, such training would permit women to perform tasks acceptable in their communities while cultural attitudes evolve over time.

## Challenges ahead

Economically, Afghanistan is still too brittle to absorb the employment needs of its people. The reduction of foreign aid has begun to cause serious shortfalls as businesses are still largely dependent on sales coming from foreign aid. Afghanistan is expected to have little economic growth potential in 2015, which will render employment programmes of all kinds a challenging undertaking. Furthermore, the political and economic instability of the coming years is likely to add planning uncertainty to all initiatives carried out in Afghanistan.

### Priority gaps:

**Strengthen the basis of the economy:** In the Afghan context, the majority of women will not find work while most men remain unemployed or underemployed.

**Raise community awareness:** The FYEI programme was successful in using community mobilization to raise awareness of the importance of keeping girls in school and providing them with practical skills to allow them access to sustainable employment. Future initiatives should build on this experience and take it further.



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