

Impact Brief Series, Issue 10

Empowering Young Women through Business and Vocational Training

Evidence from Rural Upper Egypt

This brief summarizes the findings of an impact evaluation¹ of a large-scale training and empowerment intervention in rural Upper Egypt, a region with some of the lowest rates of female labour force participation and highest gender disparities in the Arab World. The intervention offered business, vocational and life skills training combined with business development services and civic education to 4,500 young women in 30 villages in rural Upper Egypt. The evaluation of the intervention used difference-in-difference and propensity score matching and included 5,704 survey respondents in the follow-up data collection round. Results of the study concentrate on outcomes related to labour market status and career aspirations, intra-household decision-making and attitudes to gender roles.

KEY MESSAGES

- The intervention resulted in a strong and highly significant impact on labour market outcomes, economic aspirations and business knowledge of young women in treated villages compared to control villages.
- Economic empowerment of young women can be increased by combining hard and soft skills, in the form of business, vocational and life skills training, combined with civic education and guidance on how to start a business or become employed.
- Interventions that specifically target young women must employ a gender-sensitive design, which would include gender-sensitive outreach, creating female-friendly spaces during training, minimizing the distance to training facilities, flexible timing of classes and close mentoring by local women to serve as role models.
- Promoting safe, flexible, female-friendly employment and workplaces for women including maternity protection and more harmonized work-life balance will help in increasing female labour market participation in Egypt.
- A combination of creative gender dynamics curricula and innovative programme design is needed if the social and economic empowerment of young women in rural societies is to be increased.

¹ Based on the paper, A. Elsayed and R. Roushdy: Empowering young women through business and vocational training: Evidence from a field intervention in rural Egypt (Geneva, ILO, Impact Report Series, Issue 8, 2017).

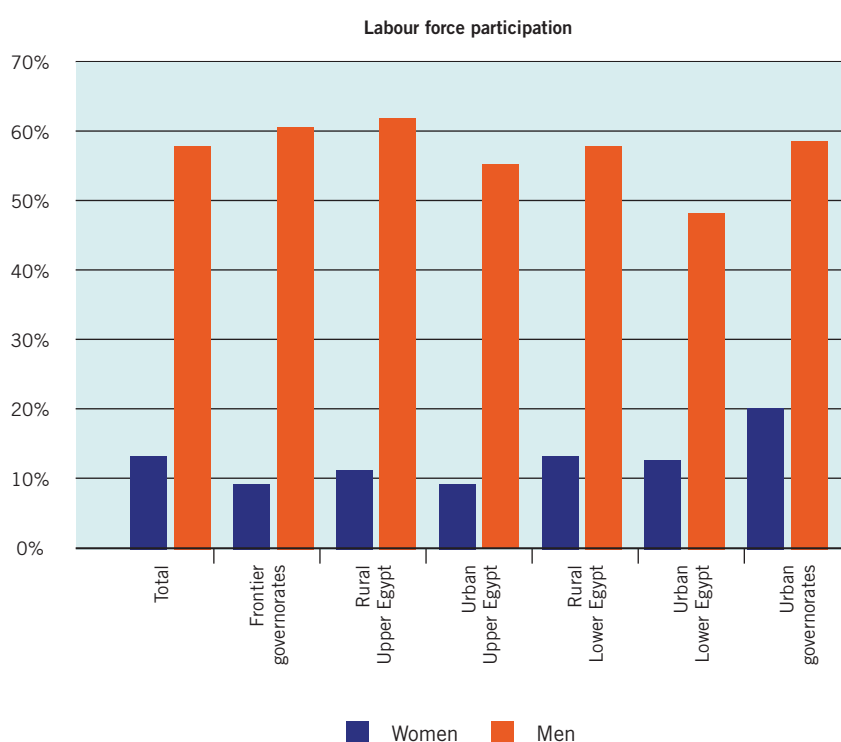
Background

As in many countries, women in rural Egypt face several forms of gender discrimination. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2016* ranked Egypt 132nd out of 144 countries in terms of the relative disparities between women and men in four areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political empowerment and health survival.

Unfortunately, despite improvements in literacy and school enrolment rates in rural areas in Egypt over recent decades, gender disparity in economic opportunity among young people has narrowed only slightly. In the Egyptian labour market, young women are particularly disadvantaged, with a labour force participation rate of only 13 per cent, compared with 58 per cent for their male counterparts (age cohort 15–29) in 2014 (Figure 1). Young women who seek work face an unemployment rate of over 32 per cent, more than triple that faced by young males (around 9 per cent).

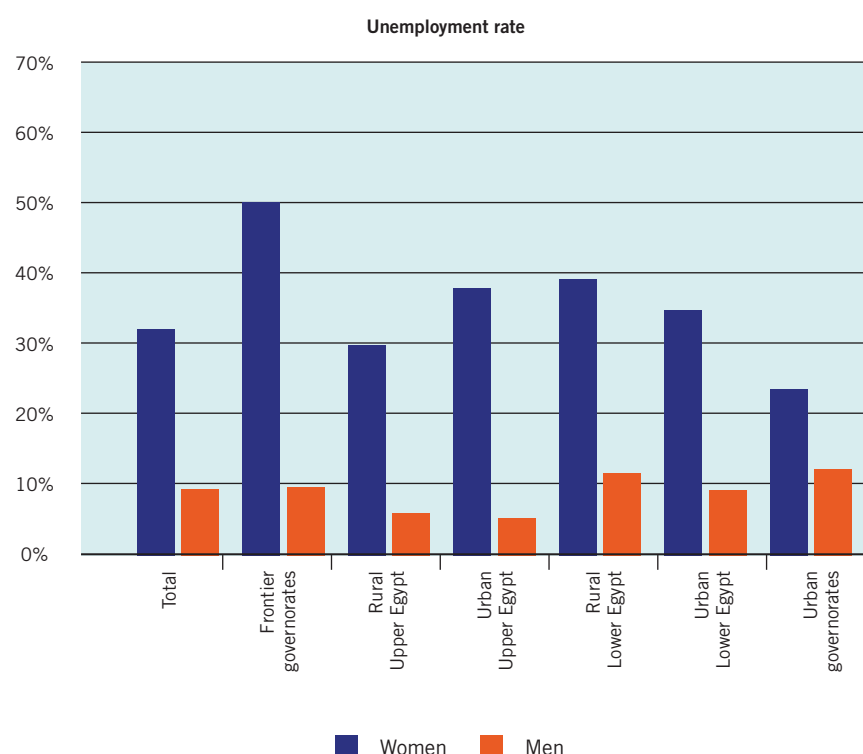
Young Egyptian women continue to favour flexible working conditions, but jobs that offer flexible working – typically found in the public sector – are becoming increasingly rare. Furthermore, the private sector has failed to offer conditions which are sufficiently attractive to encourage sustainable increases in labour force participation among female youth. Entrepreneurship rates among young people are still very low, particularly for women. Only 6 per cent of employed female youth reported having established their own business in 2014, compared with 13 per cent of their employed male peers.

FIGURE 1. Labour force participation and unemployment rates by region, young people (aged 15–29), 2014



Source: *Survey of Young People in Egypt 2014*; authors' own calculations.

FIGURE 1. (continued)



The situation worsens for young women in the rural setting of Upper Egypt, which is the most culturally conservative and traditional region of the country. Cultural restrictions in the region greatly restrict the mobility of young women, as well as their educational attainment, economic opportunities, and participation in the public sphere.¹ Young women in rural Upper Egypt also stand out as the largest group left behind in education. Moreover, employment in the non-agricultural private sector is very limited and there are few other non-agricultural job opportunities in the villages. Thus, small enterprise development and the expansion of female-friendly employment in existing enterprises are essential for creating jobs for young women.

Recognizing the severity of the situation for young women in rural Upper Egypt, the Population Council, in collaboration with three governorate-level non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 30 village-level community development associations (CDAs), implemented the *Neqdar Nesharek* (meaning “We can Participate”) programme. This initiative adopted an integrated approach to female economic and social empowerment to improve transitions to work for young marginalized women in the rural communities of Upper Egypt.

¹ W. Baldwin: *Creating “safe spaces” for adolescent girls: promoting healthy, safe, and productive transitions to adulthood* (New York, Population Council, Brief No. 39, 2011); M. Sieverding and A. Elbadawy: “Empowering adolescent girls in socially conservative settings”, in *Studies in Family Planning* (2016, Vol. 47, No. 2), pp. 129–144.

The *Neqdar Nesharek* programme

The *Neqdar Nesharek* programme targeted 4,500 young women aged 16–29, adopting the “safe spaces” livelihood approach by addressing community-specific needs of vulnerable women. The programme, which operated in 30 villages in the three governorates of Fayoum, Qena, and Suhag in Upper Egypt, provided young women with a forum within which they could continue their social and economic development. Launched with funds from USAID-Egypt, training activities started in January 2013 and continued until mid-2014.

The intervention aimed to empower young rural Upper Egyptian women by providing them with business and vocational skills training and supporting them in starting a business or seeking employment.² It also aimed to increase social empowerment for young women, while emphasizing the importance of involving women’s “gatekeepers” (husbands and fathers) and community leaders. Unlike many interventions targeting women’s economic empowerment, the *Neqdar Nesharek* programme did not focus on microfinance. Furthermore, to mentor, teach, coach and guide programme participants during the training period, eight young, educated women were recruited in each village to act as promoters (240 promoters in total). Importantly, these promoters, all of whom had completed at least secondary education, came from within the local communities, so they could provide moral support for the participants not only as their mentors, but also as their peers.

The training programme consisted of three main components: (i) business skills training, (ii) vocational training, and (iii) life skills, legal rights and civic education. The business skills curriculum was delivered over 12 weeks, at three sessions of two hours each week (a total of 72 hours). Vocational training started after the business skills training was completed. With the help of local training institutes and



Photo credit: Nada Ramadan, 2014

² For a detailed description of the programme design, see N. Ramadan, N. Abdel-Tawab, K. El Sayed and R. Roushdy: *Enhancing livelihood opportunities for young women in rural Upper Egypt: The Neqdar Nesharek program* (Cairo, Population Council, 2014).



businesses, participants could choose from a variety of vocations such as accessory making, sewing, hairdressing, livestock raising, dairy-product making, perfume making, cleaning supplies production, mobile phone repair, computer hardware and software training, first aid/paramedic skills and dessert/food catering services. All participants who were seeking employment during the period of training also received help to obtain employment from local business, such as factories, shops, schools and pharmacies.

During the vocational training and the subsequent business start-up or employment phase, beneficiaries also attended life-skills training courses (comprising eight two-hour sessions), health-awareness classes (four two-hour sessions) and classes on legal rights and civic engagement (two two-hour sessions). In parallel with the training provision, NGO and CDA staff made sure that all beneficiaries had proper documentation, such as identity cards, which would be vital for being able to apply for loans, formalize businesses and vote. CDA staff also helped participants to open their own saving accounts at local post offices and banks.

Impact evaluation design

The study to evaluate the impact of *Neqdar Nesharek* on young women's labour market outcomes and social empowerment measures used a quasi-experimental design. In addition to assessing whether the programme enabled women to engage in income-generating activities, the evaluation also considered

BOX 1. Indicators of women's economic and social empowerment used in the Neqdar Nesharek impact evaluation

Economic empowerment indicators

- **Income-generating activity:** whether a woman was involved in any economic activity with the goal of generating income during the three months prior to the survey interview.
- **Wage employment:** whether a woman was working for a wage during the week preceding the survey interview.
- **Self-employment:** whether the woman was self-employed during the week preceding the survey interview.
- **Business knowledge index:** the percentage of correct answers to six questions about business practices.
- **Economic aspiration:** whether the woman plans to (a) set up or continue a business project; (b) obtain wage employment.

Social empowerment indicators

- **Gender equality index (GEI):** calculated from responses to eight statements that test agreement or disagreement with pro-gender-equality attitudes, such as "A women can have her own business project" and "Girls in the family should have the same level of education as boys".
- **Decision-making index (DMI):** calculated from responses to seven questions asking women whether they make certain decisions on household-related matters, such as "You getting employed or starting business project", "Buying clothes for yourself", "Spending money you saved".

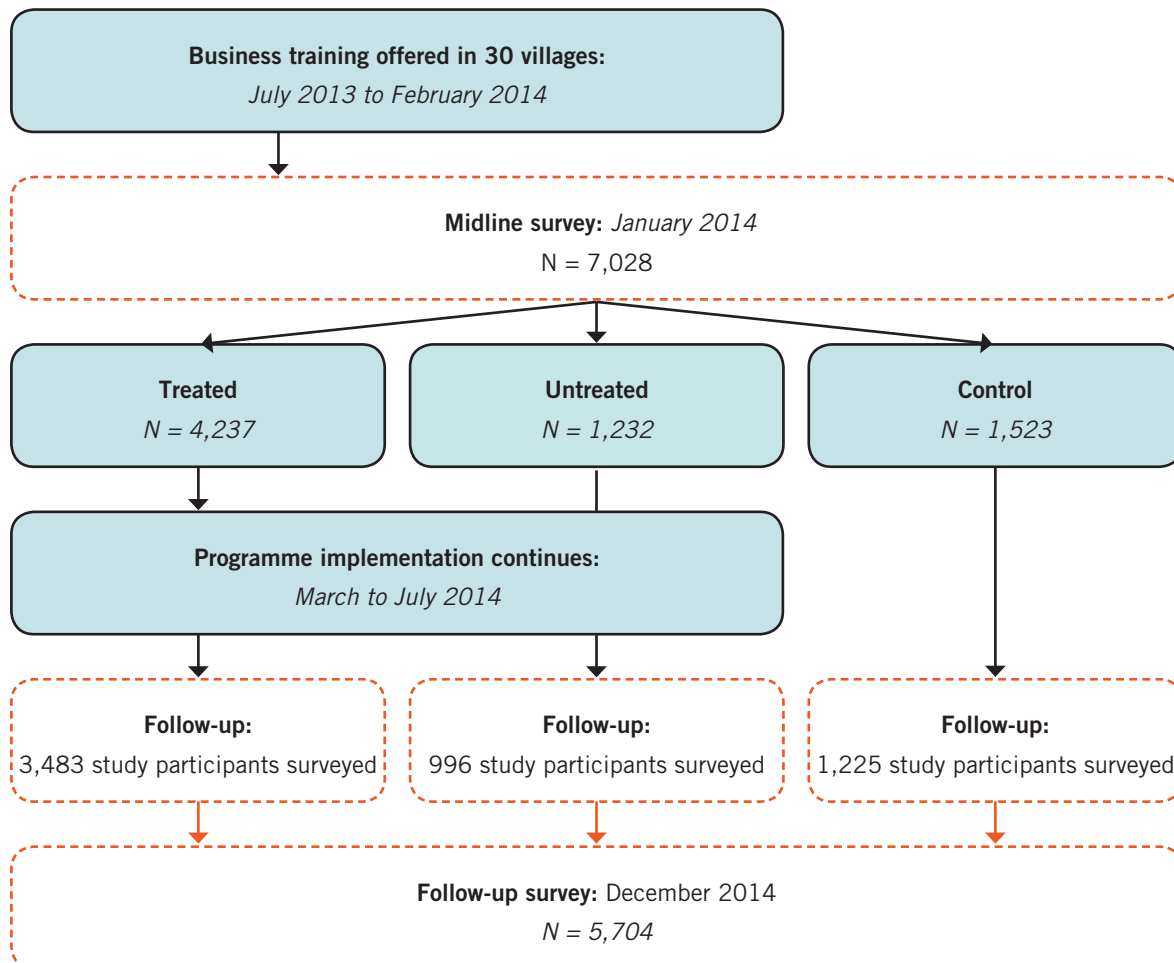
Note: More details on the indexes, including full lists of the questions, are given in Elsayed and Roushdy (2017), see footnote 1.

business knowledge and aspirations, intra-household decision-making and gender roles attitudes. Box 1 provides an overview of economic and social empowerment indicators.

The impact of the programme was assessed using a strategy that combined a difference-in-differences design with propensity score matching and made use of data from a midline survey and a follow-up survey. Impacts were calculated by comparing the differences between the two survey rounds for women who participated in the programme with equivalent data for women in control villages. In addition, to assess the spillover effects of the intervention, the evaluation study also collected data for women living in *Neqdar Nesharek* villages who did not participate in the training. The midline survey was completed in January 2014 and the follow-up survey in December 2014. When the midline survey took place, almost all business skills classes had been completed and the vocational training was just about to start (see Figure 2). Life skills, legal rights and civic engagement training and community awareness events were all implemented after the midline survey.

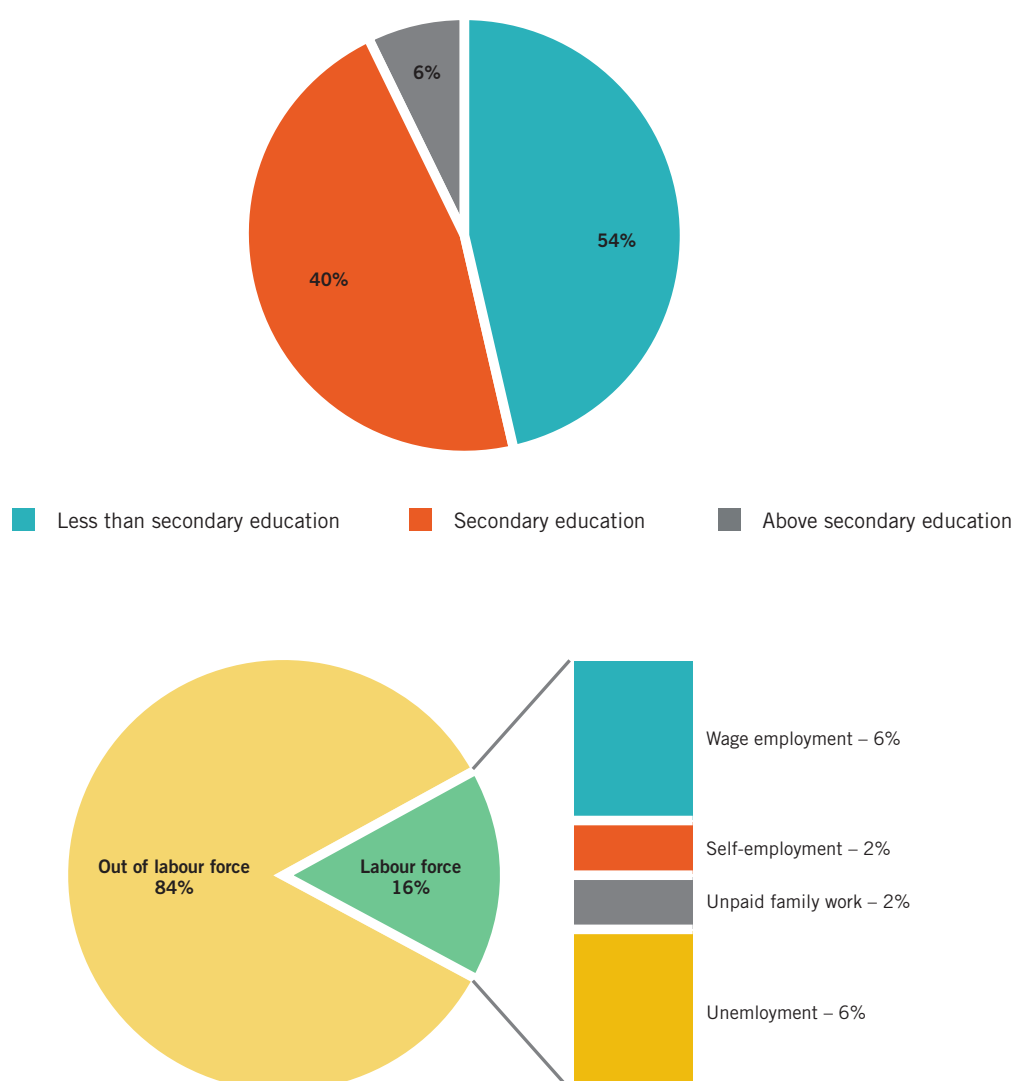
The study included 7,028 young women in the midline survey, of whom 5,704 could be tracked down for the follow-up data collection round. Of these, 3,483 participated in the *Neqdar Nesharek* programme, 996 lived in *Neqdar* villages but did not receive any training and 1,225 resided in control villages.

FIGURE 2. Impact evaluation design



Looking at the socio-economic characteristics of the 5,704 young women at the time of the midline survey helps to put the intervention and evaluation design into context. The average age of the interviewees was 22 years, and 43 per cent were married. The average household size was around five persons, indicating that many young women lived with their families. Roughly half of the women had attained less than secondary education and 40 per cent had completed only secondary education (figure 3). In comparison, only 19 per cent of the women's fathers had attained at least secondary education. This shows that while there seems to have been intergenerational progress in terms of education, it has not translated into adequate representation of young women in the labour force. In fact, a clear majority of the interviewees – 84 per cent – reported that they did not participate in the labour market (Figure 3). However, while this is certainly high, it is below the average for rural Upper Egypt, which stood at 89 per cent in 2014 (see Figure 1). By contrast, only 8 per cent of the sample worked in paid (wage or self) employment.

FIGURE 3. Educational attainment and employment outcomes of study sample: 5,704 young women, age 16–29, at the midline (January 2014)



Impacts on young women's economic and social empowerment

Neqdar Nesharek had a significant impact on the economic empowerment of programme participants, as measured by their engagement in income-generating activities, work aspirations and business knowledge. The follow-up survey found that *Neqdar Nesharek* participants were 4.5 percentage points more likely to be engaged in an income-generating activity than women in the control group (Figure 4). This was an increase of 33 per cent for the treated group, up from an average of 13.4 per cent in the control group. Most of the positive impact was driven by an increase in participants' engagement in self-employment activities. In contrast, participation in wage work did not significantly change for women in the treated group.

However, the positive impact on economic empowerment strongly depends on the background characteristics of participants. A subgroup analysis revealed that impacts were strongest for women who were married or had obtained at least secondary education. As Figure 5 shows, the programme seemed to have been especially successful at increasing the economic empowerment of older participants (aged 22 or above).

“ I like the idea of having my own business. The best thing about this is that I can run it from my house, and that there aren't specific hours. I can work anytime.”

(19-year-old women from Fayoum who opened a kiosk)

“Neqdar helped me think of how to expand my small women's garment store. Initially, I did not know how to conduct a market study, make a financial plan, or apply for a loan and formalize my business.”

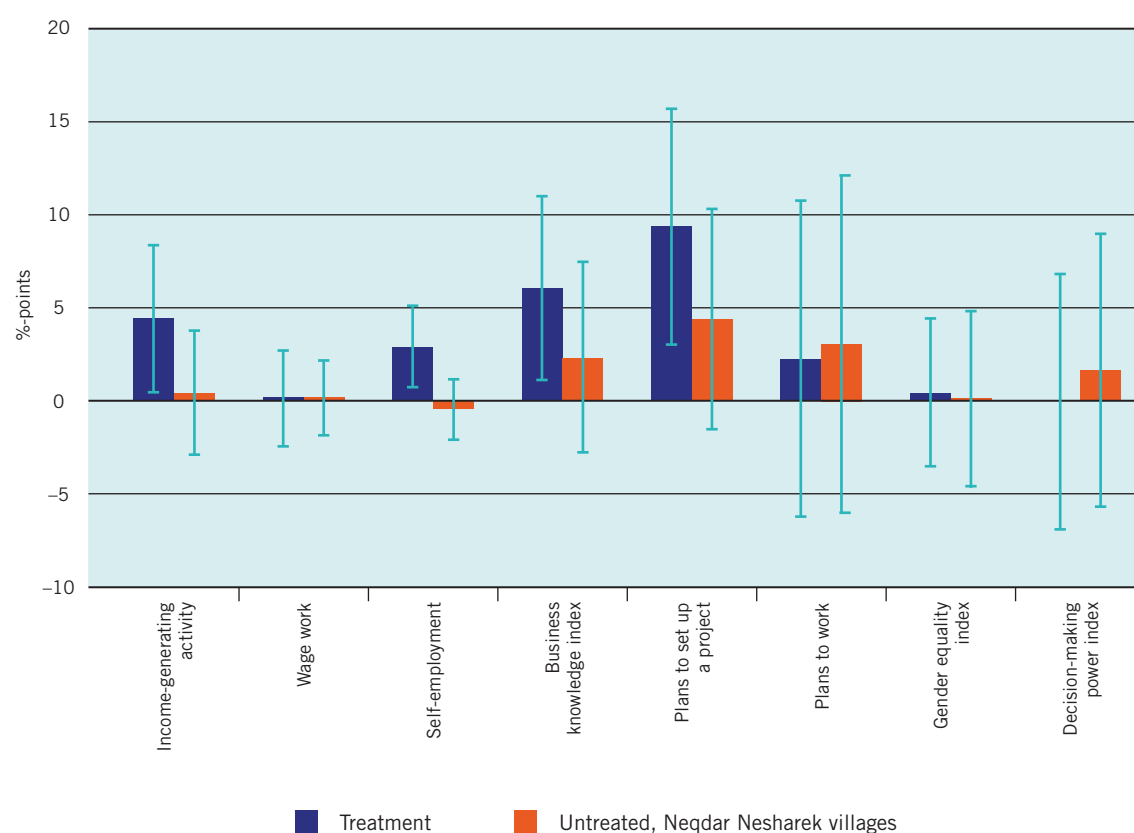
(25-year-old businesswoman from Suhag)

Source: Ramadan et al. 2014, see footnote 3.

Moreover, the evaluation revealed no spillover effects on labour market outcomes. While *Neqdar Nesharek* positively affected outcomes for the programme’s participants, it had no impact on the labour market outcomes for other women living in the programme villages. This result provides evidence that the benefits of such livelihood interventions do not readily spread the learnings beyond the group of direct beneficiaries.

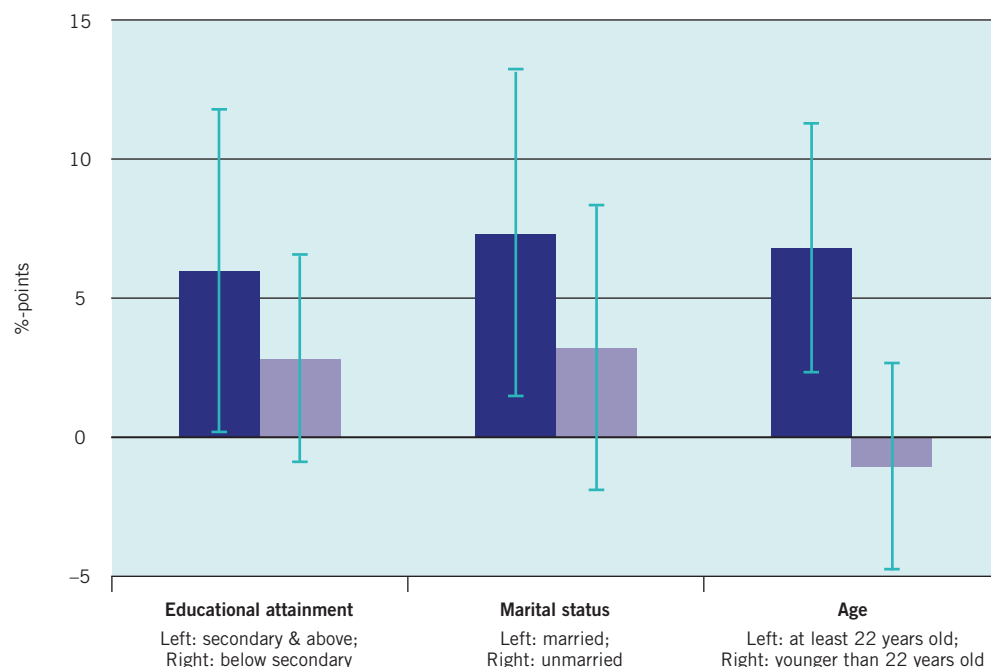
The intervention had a significant positive impact on young women’s economic aspirations and business knowledge. *Neqdar Nesharek* participants were more likely to have plans to initiate their own projects and scored significantly higher on a business knowledge index than women in the control group. To a lesser extent, the evaluation also detected positive spillover effects among women living in programme villages but who did not participate. Indeed, it seems plausible that some of the learnings from the business skills training – and some resulting change in attitudes – are shared with other members, given that these communities are particularly tightly knit. However, these effects were not sufficient to affect the labour market outcomes of these indirect beneficiaries.

FIGURE 4. Impact estimates for young women’s economic and social outcomes (relative to the control group)



Note: Impact estimates are based on a combination of Propensity Score Matching and a Difference-in-Differences approach and include a set of control variables. The figure displays point estimates (bars) as well as 95 per cent confidence intervals. For more information on the methodology see Elsayed and Roushdy (2017), see footnote 1.

FIGURE 5: Impacts on income-generating activities by subgroups (programme participants relative to the control group)



Note: Impact estimates are based on a combination of Propensity Score Matching and a Difference-in-Differences approach and include a set of control variables. The figure displays point estimates (bars) as well as 95 per cent confidence intervals. For more information on the methodology see Elsayed and Roushdy (2017), see footnote 1.

However, the evaluation found that the intervention had no impact on social empowerment.

The decision-making powers of the participants, and their attitudes towards gender roles, as measured by two separate indexes, remained almost constant between the midline and follow-up surveys for both the treatment and control groups. Subgroup analyses, which involved dividing the sample by age, marital status and level of education, found the same results. Therefore, while the economic situation of young women improved following participation in the *Neqdar Nesharek* programme, this had not translated into a better social status for these young women.



Photo credit: Nada Ramadan, 2014



Key considerations for policy and practice

Improving women's human capital in a conservative setting, such as rural Upper Egypt, is a vital step towards their economic empowerment. The findings of this evaluation provide evidence that increasing women's human capital significantly can jump-start their economic empowerment. Through the provision of hard and soft skills – in the form of vocational, business and life skills training – combined with guidance for business start-ups, *Neqdar Nesharek* has improved women's business knowledge and engagement in entrepreneurial activities.³

Ensuring that classes and vocational training are accessible by women is crucial to the success of women's economic empowerment programmes in conservative rural settings. Making the timing and location of classes and training convenient for all women can help to ensure good take-up and a high level of satisfaction for overall training experiences. A gender-sensitive intervention design may include gender-sensitive outreach, creating female-friendly spaces during training, minimizing the distance to training facilities, flexible timing of classes and close mentoring by local women, who serve as role models.

Promoting safe, flexible, female-friendly employment and workplaces for women: maternity protection, paternity leave and other measures that enable a more harmonized work–family balance. National laws and policies in Egypt need to be designed to minimize the financial cost to employers, and their coverage needs to be expanded to protect those categories of workers who are frequently excluded, such as non-standard workers, domestic workers and homeworkers.

³ Ramadan et al. (2014), see footnote 3.

Engaging local communities is indispensable for creating enabling environments for women's empowerment. Involving community members and gaining community support are critical for the effective implementation and sustainability of women's livelihood programmes in rural villages. Throughout the programme, community mobilization events took place; for example, promoters made home visits to parents and husbands when beneficiaries failed to attend or when they faced familial constraints. Encouraging women to start businesses with other family members creates an environment that enables women to be active economically.

There is an urgent need for intensive training on gender dynamics and social norms, combined with innovative programme design, to be able to enhance the social and economic empowerment of young women in rural settings. A continuous programme for designing and testing new intervention approaches and gender dynamics curricula is needed to provide evidence on what will be effective for different target groups and in different community settings, both in Egypt and worldwide.

Long-term impact estimates are needed to properly assess the effect of livelihood intervention programmes on the social empowerment of young women in conservative rural settings. The endline survey of the *Neqdar Nesharek* evaluation was conducted around six months after the programme ended, thus the impact of the programme was evaluated after a relatively short period of time. Some participants may have had enough time to set up their own businesses. However, social empowerment might also in part be driven by economic empowerment, such as establishing a profitable business and accumulating savings. Thus, effects on gender roles and intra-household decision-making power might take longer to materialize. Long-term impact evaluation is needed if the full potential of training interventions to boost social and economic empowerment of young women in rural settings is to be properly understood.

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