



## Learning Brief | Beyond Delivery

### Participation and Engagement of Women and Girls in the Biqu Wetat Programme: Insights from the Afar Region

#### Overview

The Biqu Wetat Programme in Afar Region aims to improve youth livelihoods by enhancing psychological wellbeing through Social and Behavioral communication (SBC) and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) initiatives, providing training, and supporting transitions to work, with a focus on young women's participation.



880 women trained  
out of 1,029 youth



1,130 women-in-work  
out of 1,278 youth-in-work



165 women-led enterprises established  
out of 228 enterprises

*Key results in numbers in Afar region, June 2026*

The program operates in eight woredas of Afar region among pastoralist communities where gender norms and clan structures limit girls' mobility and opportunities. In this context, girls and young women often face barriers related to mobility restrictions, domestic responsibilities, limited decision-making power, and concerns around safety and social reputation, all of which affect their participation in education, training, and work opportunities. This learning brief presents key findings from a qualitative study in Chifra and Gulina/Kawan drawing on six key informant interviews and two focus groups with 14 participants (10F/4M) examining challenges in engaging 80% female participation, highlighting persistent barriers and recommended solutions.

## Learnings on Selection, Participation, and Engagement of Young Women

While the Biqu Wetat program successfully achieved the target of 80% female participation and engagement, the learning exercise showed that the main challenge was sustaining girls' and young women's participation and transition into work.

### 1. Household Decision-Making and Gender Norms

Domestic responsibilities, including childcare, household chores, and supporting family livelihoods hinder consistent participation.

Community engagement structures such as community conversations and guidance platforms which are facilitated by program were attended mainly by female caregivers, with limited involvement of fathers and male figures. Since men remain key decision-makers within households, their limited engagement weakens support for women's participation and mobility.



If my husband agrees, everything is possible. If he refuses, both he and the community will be against me.

Zehara Ali, 20  
-Biqu Wetat participant



Thanks to the facilitators for coming up with the idea to accompany us with trusted community members. Otherwise, we would have been forced to drop out.

Seida Mohammed, 18  
-Biqu Wetat participant

### 2. Mobility Restrictions and Safety Concerns

Girls' and young women's movement outside the home is tightly controlled, particularly when travel involves long distances or late hours. Families expressed concerns related to safety, harassment, and social stigma, especially fear of pregnancy outside socially accepted norms.

However, facilitators helped address these concerns by arranging trusted community members, including clan leaders and male youth, to accompany participants to training sites.

### 3. Confidence, Voice, and Financial Agency

Many girls and young women felt uncomfortable speaking openly, particularly in group settings. Additionally, young women lack control over financial resources. Several participants reported handing over their training allowances to their husbands or male household members. In some cases, sharing the training allowance was expected in exchange for being allowed to participate in the programme.

The key learning is that engaging women in such programmes alone is not sufficient; it is equally important to involve male household members and community leaders to address intra-household dynamics and gender norms that influence women's agency. In addition, soft skills training, particularly in financial literacy and negotiation, should be strengthened alongside technical training components.

## 4. Transition from Training to Work

Delays in the transition from training to work access support negatively affected motivation and engagement, particularly for young women. In contexts where women's economic participation is closely scrutinized, such delays triggered community concerns due to the lack of immediate, visible benefits from the training.

Ayisa, a 22-year-old young woman from Chifra, joined the program after failing her Grade 12 exams 3 years ago. Like many others, she saw the training as a second chance. She learned tailoring skills for the first time and began to imagine a different future for herself.



I used to think clothes were only made in factories. I never imagined they could be made by hand let alone by a woman like me. Now I feel like a superwoman. Support with access to workspace and equipment are critical to actually engage in the business. Without it, me and my friends would have been struggling.

Ayisa Abdela, 22  
Biqu Wetat Participant

For Ayisa, the transition to employment following the completion of the training has taken longer than anticipated, largely due to limited access to appropriate workspace and equipment. A key learning is that completing training does not automatically translate into viable livelihoods without timely access to adequate resources and support. Limited access to equipment and workspace arrangements can affect girls' ability to fully move toward income generation. In addition, social perceptions around certain sectors such as farming or water maintenance can shape participation even when opportunities are available, underscoring the value of engaging communities to support positive shifts in attitudes. Addressing these practical gaps can help sustain motivation and strengthen confidence among participants, while also reinforcing community trust in the programme's potential to deliver economic opportunities.

## 5. System-Level Challenges and Emerging Good Practices

System-level barriers also hinder the participation and engagement of girls and women, particularly when there is intense pressure to achieve participation targets within tight timelines. In some cases, this resulted in rushed recruitment and insufficient preparation for sustained engagement. Government stakeholders also noted that while supportive policies exist, weak enforcement and outdated legal protections continue to reinforce family concerns around girls' safety and reputation.

Despite these challenges, several approaches showed positive results in improving girls' participation and retention. Community dialogue sessions, supported by program facilitators with clan leaders, religious leaders, and social workers, helped increase family and community acceptance of young women's participation. Discussions focused on young women's economic participation, safety concerns, and the benefits of supporting young women's livelihoods. As 22 year old participant, Amina Hamed shared, "When the clan leaders spoke with our families, our parents started to understand and support us more."

Bringing training closer to communities reduced mobility barriers and eased safety concerns, while peer support among women enabled shared childcare and mutual encouragement. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services also helped rebuild hope among young women affected by conflict and personal hardship. Hasna Amin, a 19 year old participant explained, "I was overwhelmed by stress from the conflict and being unemployed for a long time. I was thinking of even quitting the training, but the sessions gave me hope and encouraged me to continue."

## Conclusion and Recommendation

The programme met its 80% target for engaging women, but sustaining their continued engagement, and addressing interconnected barriers to selection, retention, and economic empowerment remains an important consideration.

The program has also created valuable opportunities for young women by strengthening skills, confidence, and community acceptance of girls' economic roles. Effective approaches such as community dialogue, engagement with local and religious leaders, accessible training, peer support, and psychosocial support have shown positive results and should be expanded.

To improve participation, retention, and transition to work, the program should:

- ◆ Strengthen engagement with fathers, husbands, clan leaders, and other male community actors to improve girls' mobility, decision-making power, and control over income.
- ◆ Expand flexible and locally accessible training options that respond to girls' realities and mobility constraints.
- ◆ Prioritize timely access to tools, materials, workspace, and market linkages immediately after training.
- ◆ Integrate childcare support to help young mothers and married women sustain participation.
- ◆ Integrate confidence-building and communication activities within existing programme structures to help girls and young women participate more actively and express their needs and aspirations.
- ◆ Strengthen coordination, accountability, and follow-up mechanisms among implementing partners and government actors to sustain trust, participation, and long-term impact.

UNICEF in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation through Biqu Wetat programme aims to extend its impact by equipping 120,000 disadvantaged youth (80 percent women and 10 percent persons with disability) with mental health support and practical skills by 2027, helping them learn, earn and build stronger futures.

