

HER Career. THEIR Buy-In: It's a Fine Balance for Rural Young Women

HER Lab is THEIR Lab too. In the hard-to-reach rural community of West Pokot, Kenya, where harmful cultural practices used to keep women and girls in the margins, fathers, influencers and community leaders convene quarterly to provide inputs for continuous improvement of their community's HER Lab – a 12-month skills-building program designed for the unique workforce-readiness needs of rural young women.

Workforce participation for rural young women is a complex decision. Through HER Lab's journalizing data (participant reflections gathered through a series of weekly prompts), in addition to data provided from the quarterly convenings, we have learned that entry into dignified and fulfilling work is shaped by household routines, caregiving obligations, and expectations placed on women inside the home.



HER success is THEIR success too. **Domestic responsibilities** compromise the time required for learning. Family members influence whether a young woman attends a skills-building course, how often she participates, and whether her progress is viewed as legitimate. HER Lab's quarterly convenings demonstrate that when families understand the program's value, **attendance stabilizes and confidence grows**. These findings position family engagement as a necessary part of a successful workforce-readiness training process.

Fetching Wood vs. Learning to Code

HER Lab participant's Journalizing entries and learnings from the HER Lab Pilot point to unpaid household work as the most consistent obstacle to young women attending skills-building classes. Young women describe long days occupied by childcare, cooking, cleaning, water collection, and community obligations. These responsibilities remain largely invisible in public discourse, yet they determine how much time and energy is available for skill building.

Domestic work – a constant barrier:

- **Domestic work** reducing the time available for training and rest
- Missed classes, due to **domestic work**, cannot be rescheduled
- Emotional tension around expectations to prioritize **domestic work**
- **Domestic work** not valued economically



The Ecosystem of Work and Family

Journalizing reflects a clear understanding among participants that **earning, learning, and caregiving** form one interconnected system. Most do not imagine “choosing” between work and family. Instead, they describe a desire for a **balanced life** where professional, educational, and familial life are complementary.



“My parents struggle to provide for us, so I want to study and help them.”

Recurring reflections across journal entries:

- **80%** identify **earning money** as essential to a fulfilling life
- However, most note that **income alone is not sufficient**; true fulfillment comes from **supporting their families, giving back to the community, and earning respect** for both paid and unpaid contributions
- **95%** express a desire to **combine work and family life** rather than choosing between them
- Work viewed as a contribution to **family dignity**, not merely individual advancement

“If I finish my educational journey, my children will also study and I will be proud.”

“I want to be a role model for other children in my village.”

HER Lab & HER Home – it’s a Family Affair

In August 2025, HER Lab West Pokot hosted two community gatherings – one with family and local leaders and another with spouses. The purpose – to address how domestic work and family expectations impact HER Lab attendance. What emerged was a clear pattern: success is a mixture of shared family responsibility and individual economic ambition.

A shift in social attitudes: *At the community convening, the spouse of a plumbing participant was asked to stand. He stood proudly as she was recognized and applauded. His gesture was met with even more applause.*



Community Convening Highlights

“Now I wake up every morning to go to school... no one can even tell I have five children.”
–Day student, fashion design

90 local voices. The community convening brought together local leaders, government officers, youth, and current trainees to outline how the program could expand inclusion and reduce practical barriers. Proposals reflected a shift from awareness to **joint planning**: family meetings three to four times per year, transport and borehole support, an expanded age limit, and men's seminars. Stories from participants revealed **real transformation**: a pilot graduate now supplying produce to the site, another awarded a plumbing scholarship, a group running a tree nursery and rotating cows between households.

Spousal Convening Highlights

Husbands at the table. The spousal convening gathered 60 spouses and guardians to discuss time management and household balance. Many noticed changes in their partners since joining HER Lab: better organization and time management, growing confidence, and new independence. But when the shift to accredited courses demanded five days a week, tensions at home followed. At the convening, spouses proposed adjusted hours and together with their wives and the program, they landed on a three-day schedule that works: Monday, Tuesday, Friday, 8:30–4:00. Families moved from hesitation to collaboration, **aligning home routines with training demands.**

Cooperation and Collaboration Begin with Conversation

The West Pokot convenings demonstrate that engagement within the home and community is as critical as skills training itself. When spouses and leaders understand the program's value, they help secure the time and space young women need to learn. Attendance stabilizes. Confidence grows. Empowerment becomes a communal effort championed by families instead of being carried alone.



The diagram below traces how this shift began. It shows how conversations within homes and communities helped move from household resistance to shared routines that make learning possible.



These changes represent an initial step toward **mutual understanding**. While the convenings did not resolve every challenge, they did create space for families to see training as compatible with daily life, and for communities to recognize young women's capacity for financial contribution. The challenge of how to **balance work, learning, and care** continues, but dialogue is now part of community practice, and shared responsibility is increasingly being seen as **a foundation for shared success**.