

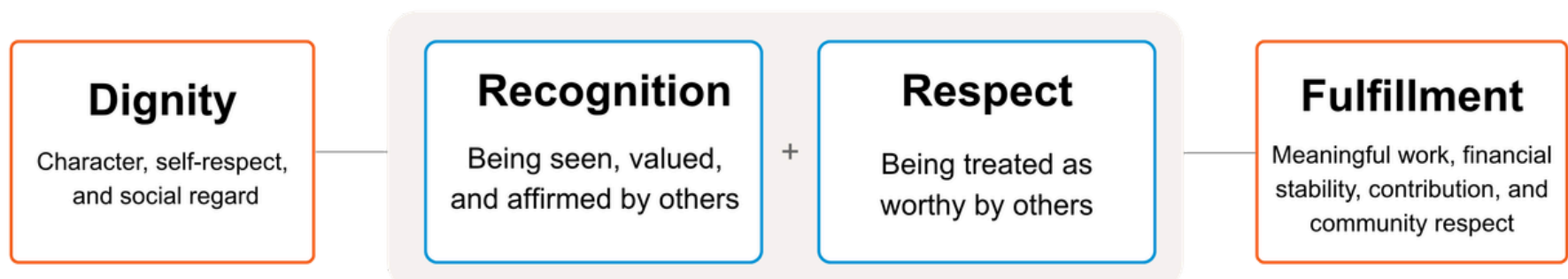
How do marginalized, young women in rural Kenya define dignity, fulfillment, and respect, and how do these definitions manifest in their professional and personal goals?

Dignity, Fulfillment, and Respect: *What Young Women in West Pokot Say They Need from Work and Life*

Global Give Back Circle partnered with Mastercard Foundation on a pilot program to inform the scale-up of HER Lab in rural Kenya. Participants were young women from West Pokot, most between ages 15 and 35, who face barriers in education and work. Through open-ended surveys and guided journalizing—a facilitated, guided writing practice where participants reflect on their experiences, set goals, and work through challenges—participants were asked to define dignity and fulfillment in their own words, describe what they are still missing, and explain what they need from work in order to feel valued.



Across responses, one word appears again and again: **respect**. It surfaces in how participants define dignity, in what they say fulfillment requires, and in what they want most from work. More than salary, security, or advancement, participants return to being valued by others. Respect emerges as the thread connecting dignity and fulfillment.



Respect is one social expression of recognition.

Dignity is rooted in character, self-respect, and social regard. Fulfillment is tied to meaningful work, financial stability, and the ability to support others. Respect is the social recognition that makes both legible to the world.

Dignity in HER Words

Participants define dignity as both internal and relational; it is lived from the inside and confirmed by the social world they inhabit. Honesty, trustworthiness, and a strong moral compass—themes that repeatedly came up in responses—are expressions of the internal dimension, the self that behaves with integrity when no one is watching.

"Dignity to me means things that I do in my life that make me worthy of other people's respect and honor. It also means my character how I carry myself when I am alone when no one is looking. Doing the right thing without being supervised or even losing things because of doing the right thing in my life."

Being Seen, Heard, and Recognized

In the data, dignity and respect are closely intertwined. Respect is expressed through repeated interactions that make a person's worth visible: being treated kindly, having one's views taken seriously, and being recognized for effort, character, or contribution. When participants were asked to recall a moment when they felt respected in school or work, **40%** described some form of **appreciation or recognition**. Across responses, **voice** is also important. Being heard, taken seriously, and not dismissed appears as a core part of both dignity and respect.

How Respect Is Felt & Experienced

Being Heard

"When I speak before my colleagues, they listen to me, and here I know I am respected and I respect them too."

"I speak up when I feel that I am being discriminated due to my gender and people actually listen when I call them out."

Being Acknowledged

"My daughter, you are a good girl; continue with the same spirit."

"Friend, you are so important to your family, and also to the people around you."



Communication skills, especially listening, careful observation, and speaking clearly, were the most frequently named everyday work skills, mentioned by **25%** of participants.

Dignity Across Gender: Shared Values, Different Standards

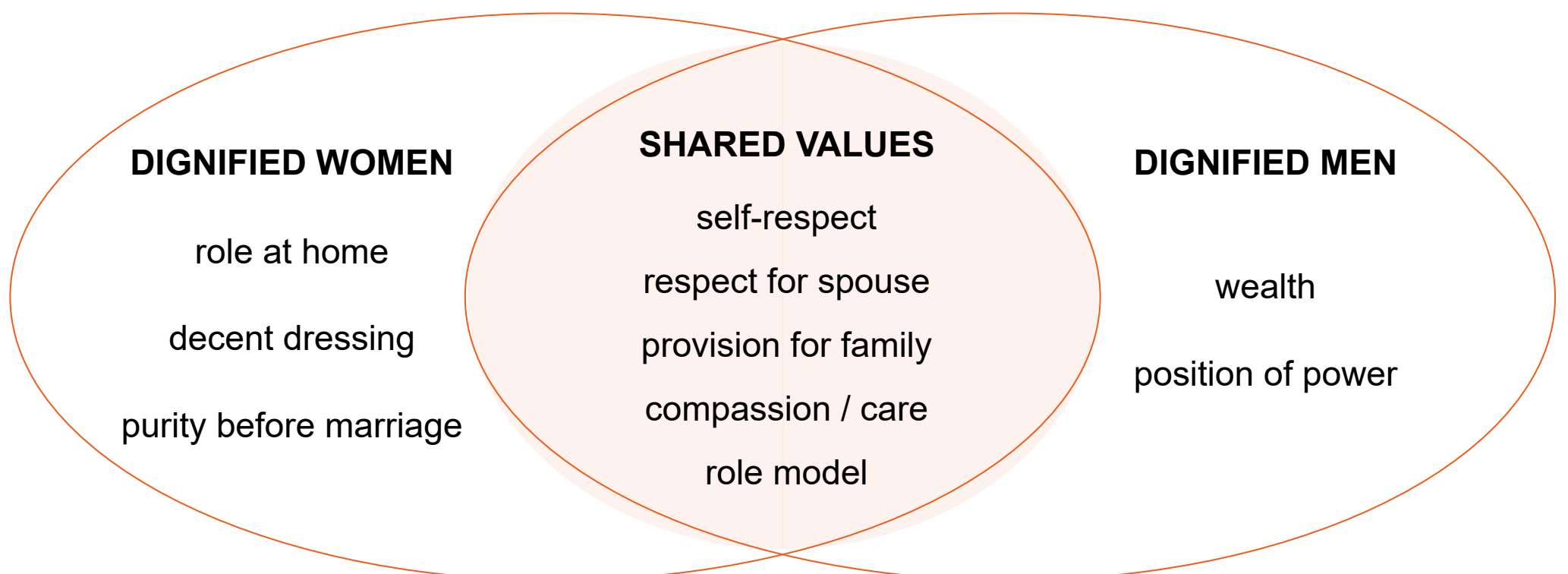
We asked participants to describe dignity across the people in their lives: mothers and fathers, neighbors and community members, religious leaders, and government officials. Their responses suggest that dignity is understood as universal in principle, but applied differently in practice. 46% of participants described a woman, 43% described a man, and 11% described someone without specifying gender.

65% believe that dignity should mean the same thing for men and women.

However, the way that social norms dictate gendered behaviors and expectations appears to also shape what dignity looks like for a woman versus a man. The values they name do overlap, but there are asymmetries in how similar values are applied to each gender, as illustrated by the table below.

How Participants Describe Dignity by Gender

The values overlap, but the standards do not.



Appearance, conduct, and domestic role.

"In a woman, dignity is mainly measured by how the person dresses, how she presents herself, and also who stays pure till marriage."

Status, provision, and treatment of women.

"I would define dignity in a man in terms of respecting his wife and women in his life... a man who is not violent, chauvinist, or narcissistic."

For women, dignity is more often described as a threshold that must be continuously upheld. For men, it is more often treated as a baseline that remains intact unless seriously violated.

Two Portraits of Dignified Womanhood: Rooted in Belonging

Zeroing in on the question of what dignified womanhood looks like, two distinct portraits emerge from the data, each organized around a different understanding of how a woman's worth is confirmed. The first locates dignity in fulfilling what the community expects. The second locates it in exceeding those expectations, claiming standing the community has withheld. While on the surface they appear to conflict, upon a closer look, both expressions of dignity draw from the same root: belonging, and what a woman gives to the people around her.

Dignity as Upholding Tradition.

Social standing through fulfilling cultural expectations.

In this understanding, a dignified woman earns her standing by honoring what the community expects of her—in her appearance, her conduct within marriage, her relationship to male authority, her sexual propriety. Her worth is confirmed through conformity to norms that define what a respected woman should be. Her value is confirmed relationally: she belongs because she has fulfilled the terms the community uses to measure worth.

"A dignified woman would probably be adored if she has a perfect family (isn't divorced), dresses decently as per community expectations, doesn't involve herself in leadership that is expected to be men's, and is submissive."

Dignity as Subverting Tradition.

Worth claimed beyond the boundaries of convention.

According to this conception, a dignified woman claims value beyond the boundaries tradition has set for her. She enters leadership, work, and public roles from which women have often been excluded, and she refuses practices that diminish her. Her dignity remains relational, but it is expressed through courage, solidarity, and expansion of what her community can recognize as worthy.

"A woman who is valued, respected, honored and has gone against community beliefs that a woman is supposed to be at home. She has taken up leadership positions, jobs that previously belonged to men."

Dignity as Transcending and Belonging.

Value through authenticity and community connection.

Read together, these two portraits reveal a shared logic. In both, a woman's dignity is shaped through relationships, through what she contributes to others, and through the recognition she receives in return. The difference lies in what the portraits ask of her, but the root they share is the same.

This shared relational core matters for program design. If dignity depends in part on community recognition, then women's pathways into dignified work cannot be treated as individual goals. Families, spouses, leaders, and peers all shape what kinds of aspiration are welcomed, resisted, or affirmed. Community dialogue is therefore part of the pathway, because it helps expand what is recognized as a worthy pursuit for women. By learning new skills, advancing their education, entering leadership positions, and contributing financially, women are demonstrating value in areas long reserved for men, prompting those around them to expand their sense of what a woman's role can be.

This renegotiation of dignified womanhood helps resolve the tension between the two conceptions above. A woman can show up authentically, without curtailing her ambition, and still belong to a community that recognizes and embraces her aspirations and accomplishments.

A woman's dignity is defined not by the roles she upholds or refuses, but by the quality of her character, the consistency and warmth of her presence, and what she gives to the people around her.

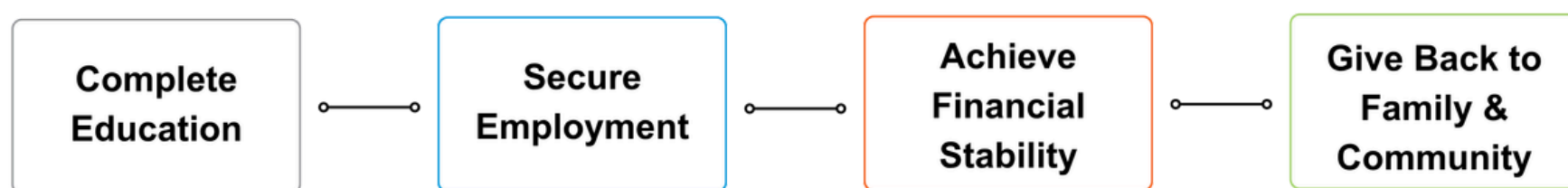
Fulfillment: Having Enough and Giving Back

Over 80% of participants identify having a job or earning money as a key component of overall life fulfillment, and over **99%** report a desire to participate in paid work.

Paid work sits at the center of how participants understand a fulfilling life overall. Work and life fulfillment are intertwined: work is the primary medium through which a fulfilling life becomes possible because it enables women to financially support themselves and their families, and it also provides purpose.

HER Vision of Fulfillment

The Pathway to Fulfillment



Asked specifically what about a job contributes to their feeling of dignity, participants identified three mechanisms.

- 1 Professional respect:** being valued by colleagues, clients, and the community, and belonging to a profession others regard as worthy.
- 2 Diligence and productivity:** putting in hard effort, achieving goals, and seeing visible output from the work. Participants feel dignified when they are recognized, but also when they have produced something; the output is itself a confirmation of worth.
- 3 Recognition and standing:** being regarded as a role model, earning a salary that signals their value, and building a reputation that spreads through positive word-of-mouth.

"I will feel dignity because my customers will appreciate my work and also respect my work, and also encourage me to keep up with the job that I conduct, and they also support me."

.....

"My hard work and cooperation... which will make me to be respected by others."

.....

"This job will contribute to my dignity because even my neighbors will see me as dignified person, I would now have money, and my family will be proud of me."

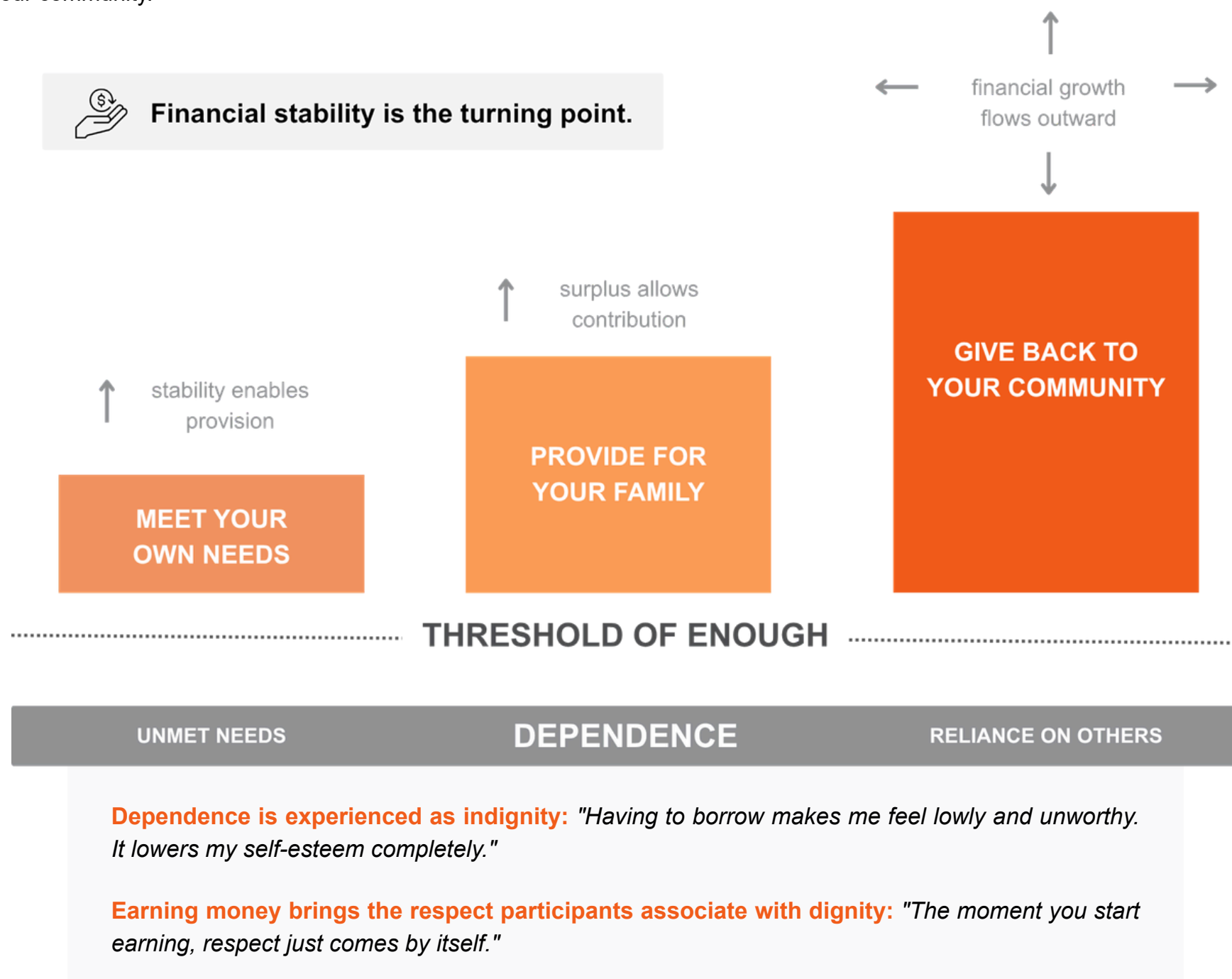


When asked how they would know they had arrived at fulfillment, participants named three markers: **visible and tangible progress** in one's work (business expansion, loyal customers, production that does not run short); **financial independence**, meaning earning enough to make free choices, sustain oneself and one's family, and release the dependence that participants describe as a specific form of indignity; and **emotional satisfaction**, the experience of being happy in the work, at peace with colleagues, and operating in an environment that supports rather than diminishes.

The Threshold of Enough

For about 75% of participants, fulfillment remains something they are still working toward. Many have not been able to complete education, which limits access to stable work. They describe dependence on family, irregular or insufficient income, and difficulty meeting basic needs as central features of their current situation.

Participants return to one idea again and again: **having enough**. This threshold breaks down into three stages: enough to meet your own needs without relying on others, enough to provide for your family, and finally a surplus you can give back to your community.



This is why financial stability is not only a practical goal but a social one as well. It recalibrates how a woman is seen and valued by her community.

Work That Matters

Beyond the material dimensions, **purpose and passion** also matter. For many participants, how much the work means to them is as significant as what it pays.

"Purpose for me is key, no matter the amount of money I get in my place of work if it's not making me happy or I am not feeling any fulfillment then it's not worth my presence."

When asked to choose between a higher-paying job with low satisfaction and a lower-paying job with higher satisfaction, most participants chose enjoyment, as long as pay remained sufficient to meet their needs. Asked what they expect from a workplace, participants ranked **respect and being valued** first, well ahead of every other response. Salary came next, followed by supportive colleagues, opportunities for growth, and job security. Respect comes before salary.

Engaging in paid work is a vehicle for social recognition and dignity, as much as for income.

Implications: From Data to Design

Global Give Back Circle's HER Lab programming has been shaped by the understanding that skilling alone is not sufficient: financial and infrastructural barriers remain after skilling, and social barriers can remain even after those are addressed.

	What the Data Shows	How HER Lab Responds
From Capable to Credentialed	Participants want more than skills. They want qualifications and work that others recognize as credible, respectable, and worth pursuing.	HER Lab offers nationally recognized vocational certificates at multiple levels, helping participants turn capability into trusted opportunity and continue training over time.
Shifting Community Norms	Respect and recognition are social experiences. Women's pathways into work are shaped partly by what families and communities value and affirm.	HER Lab uses community convenings, Give Back Commitments, and storytelling to create public space for women's voices, contributions, and ambitions to be heard and taken seriously by the people in their lives.
Enabling Work and Family Together	Participants do not describe work and family as competing futures. Fulfillment means being able to sustain both.	HER Lab has adapted its model to better support this balance, including an on-site creche and a day-student option for women in nearby communities.
Engaging Earlier Through Second Chance Education	Education appears as the first step in the pathway to fulfillment. When it is interrupted, entry into dignified work becomes much harder.	HER Lab's Second Chance Education program aims to reconnect girls and young women to that pathway through financial, academic, psychosocial, and family-level support.

What's Next from the Learning Series

This report is the first in a series of five learning questions unfolding throughout this year. The questions that follow will build from this foundation—from how work and education shape identity and independence, to how women navigate the tension between personal aspiration and family obligation, to what their communities and local economies make possible or foreclose. By the end of the series, these questions will have constructed a layered, participant-centered account of what it means to be a young woman pursuing dignified work in rural Kenya.