

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TAILORING PROGRAM ON INCOME GENERATION AMONG SINGLE MOTHERS IN KHONGO VILLAGE, LILONGWE

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Abstract

Single mothers in rural Malawi face significant economic challenges, including limited income-generating opportunities and lack of marketable skills. This study assessed the effectiveness of a tailoring program in promoting income generation among single mothers in Khongo Village, Lilongwe District. The objectives were to evaluate participants' income levels before and after the program, examine the skills acquired and their contribution to income generation, and identify

challenges faced in utilizing tailoring skills for economic empowerment. A case study design using a qualitative approach was adopted, and data were collected from 30 single mothers through questionnaires and interviews. The findings revealed that the tailoring program significantly improved participants' income levels, with most reporting increased monthly earnings from tailoring-related activities. Key skills acquired included pattern making, cutting, sewing, and finishing techniques, which contributed directly to income generation through self-employment and freelance work. However, participants faced challenges including lack of capital, limited market access, competition, inadequate equipment, and time constraints that hindered optimal income generation.

The study concludes that vocational skills training programs, such as tailoring, play a vital role in economic empowerment of single mothers by equipping them with marketable skills and enhancing their financial stability. However, program effectiveness is constrained by resource limitations and lack of complementary business support. The study recommends enhanced resource mobilization, provision of start-up capital, integration of business management training, market linkage facilitation, and flexible program design to improve sustainability and impact. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of comprehensive support systems that address both technical skills development and the broader socio-economic challenges faced by vulnerable women in rural communities.

Keywords: tailoring program, income generation, single mothers, women empowerment, vocational training, economic empowerment

Introduction

Women's economic empowerment is widely recognized as a critical component of sustainable development, particularly in low-income countries where women face significant socio-economic challenges (United Nations, 2020). In Malawi, women constitute approximately 51% of the population yet experience disproportionate poverty, with over 70% engaged in informal or vulnerable work (NSO, 2018). Single mothers, in particular, face heightened economic vulnerability due to their dual responsibility of childcare and income generation, often with limited access to formal employment and financial resources (Baxley & West, 2021). In rural areas such as Khongo Village in Lilongwe District, limited access to education, vocational training, and

entrepreneurial opportunities further restricts women's advancement, reinforcing cycles of poverty and social exclusion (World Bank, 2020).

Vocational skills training programs have increasingly been recognized as effective interventions for promoting women's economic empowerment by providing practical skills that enhance employability and entrepreneurship (Morrison & Sabarwal, 2018). Tailoring, in particular, has emerged as a popular income-generating activity for women in developing countries due to its relatively low entry barriers, flexibility, and alignment with cultural norms (Chaudhary et al., 2020). Studies indicate that skills development programs in Malawi have yielded positive outcomes such as improved income generation and enhanced community participation (Manda, 2019); however, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of tailoring programs specifically targeting single mothers remains limited. Therefore, this study seeks to critically evaluate the effectiveness of a tailoring program in promoting income generation among single mothers in Khongo Village, Lilongwe, by examining income changes, skills acquired, and challenges encountered, thereby contributing valuable insights to the understanding and improvement of women's economic empowerment strategies

Background of the Study

Women's economic empowerment is recognized globally as a critical factor in achieving sustainable development goals. International organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank emphasize women's empowerment through various programs focused on education, skills training, and entrepreneurship. These programs aim to provide women with the skills and opportunities necessary to contribute to their communities and economies (UN, 2020). Additionally, international policies advocate for the inclusion of women in decision-making processes to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed (World Bank, 2020).

In Africa, women's economic empowerment is especially important because women face numerous challenges including unemployment, poverty, and limited access to education and financial services. The African Union (AU) has developed frameworks and strategies to promote women's development, focusing on areas such as skills development, entrepreneurship, and participation in governance (African Union, 2021). Various African governments and NGOs have implemented programs aimed at empowering women through vocational training, access to

finance, and mentorship opportunities. These programs recognize the potential of women to drive economic growth and social progress across the continent.

In Malawi, like many other African countries, there are significant challenges in helping women, particularly single mothers, to grow and succeed economically. The National Youth and Women Policy in Malawi outlines the government's commitment to empowering women through education, skills training, and access to resources (Government of Malawi, 2013). However, implementation of these policies is often hindered by limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers. Several NGOs and community-based organizations in Malawi are working to address these challenges by providing women with opportunities for vocational training, entrepreneurship, and leadership development (Chirwa & Mkandaw, 2019).

Khongo Village is located in Lilongwe District of Malawi, a peri-urban area with many single mothers facing significant socio-economic problems. Limited access to formal employment, high rates of poverty, and inadequate support services are major issues affecting women in this region. Local organizations and community initiatives play an important role in implementing women empowerment programs. These programs often focus on providing vocational skills training, promoting entrepreneurship, and addressing economic-related issues. The effectiveness of these programs is crucial for improving the livelihoods and overall well-being of single mothers in Khongo Village.

Problem Statement

Single mothers in Malawi constitute a significant proportion of vulnerable populations, facing multiple economic and social challenges that limit their ability to provide for their families (NSO, 2018). In Khongo Village, Lilongwe District, single mothers experience high levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to income-generating opportunities. Many lack formal education and marketable skills, making it difficult to secure stable employment or establish sustainable businesses (Banda, 2020). The absence of adequate childcare support and social safety nets further constrains their economic participation, often forcing them to rely on informal, low-paying activities that perpetuate poverty cycles.

Vocational skills training programs, particularly in tailoring, have been implemented in various parts of Malawi to address women's economic challenges. While anecdotal evidence suggests that

such programs can improve participants' livelihoods, empirical evidence on their effectiveness in promoting sustainable income generation among single mothers remains limited (Manda, 2019). Studies indicate that skills development programs often fail to translate into long-term economic empowerment due to challenges such as lack of capital, limited market access, and absence of business management skills (Phiri, 2019; Tembo, 2021). Moreover, there is insufficient understanding of the specific challenges single mothers face in utilizing acquired skills for income generation.

Therefore, this study seeks to assess the effectiveness of a tailoring program in promoting income generation among single mothers in Khongo Village, Lilongwe, by examining changes in income levels before and after participation, identifying skills acquired and their contribution to economic empowerment, and exploring challenges encountered in utilizing tailoring skills for sustainable livelihoods. The findings will contribute to the evidence base on women's economic empowerment and inform policy and program interventions aimed at supporting vulnerable women in rural and peri-urban communities.

Research Objectives

Main Objective

To assess the effectiveness of a tailoring program in promoting income generation among single mothers in Khongo Village, Lilongwe.

Specific Objectives

- To evaluate the level of income by single mothers before and after participating in the tailoring program.
- To examine the skills acquired by single mothers through the tailoring program and how they have contributed to income generation.
- To identify the challenges faced by single mothers in utilizing tailoring skills for income generation.

Research Questions

- What is the level of income by single mothers before and after participating in the tailoring program?
- What skills have single mothers acquired through the tailoring program and how have they contributed to income generation?
- What are the challenges faced by single mothers in utilizing tailoring skills for income generation?

Literature Review

Definition of Terms

Single Mother

A single mother is defined as a woman who is raising one or more children alone, without the presence or support of a spouse or partner. This includes women who are unmarried, divorced, separated, or widowed (Baxley & West, 2021).

Income Generation

Income generation refers to activities or processes through which individuals or households earn money to support their livelihoods. It encompasses formal employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal economic activities (World Bank, 2020).

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is broadly understood as a multifaceted process through which women gain the necessary skills, knowledge, confidence, and agency to make informed decisions, control resources, and participate meaningfully in economic, social, and political life. It encompasses economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions (Zimmerman, 2000).

Vocational Training

Vocational training refers to education and skills development programs that prepare individuals for specific trades, crafts, or occupations. It focuses on practical, hands-on learning that equips participants with marketable skills for employment or self-employment (Morrison & Sabarwal, 2018).

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is the extent to which a program, intervention, or policy achieves its intended outcomes or objectives. It is measured by assessing the degree to which desired results are produced in relation to stated goals (Becker, 1964).

Women's Economic Empowerment Through Vocational Training

Women's economic empowerment is broadly understood as a multifaceted process through which women gain the necessary skills, resources, and opportunities to participate fully in economic activities and control economic decisions. Vocational training plays a critical role in this process by equipping women with practical, marketable skills that enhance their employability and entrepreneurial capacity. According to Becker's Human Capital Theory (1964), investment in skills development increases individuals' productivity and earning potential, thereby improving their economic outcomes. For women in rural and peri-urban communities, vocational training provides a pathway to escape poverty, reduce dependency, and achieve financial independence.

Tailoring as an Income-Generating Activity for Women

Tailoring has emerged as a popular and viable income-generating activity for women in developing countries due to its relatively low entry barriers, flexibility, and cultural acceptability. Studies from various African and Asian contexts demonstrate that tailoring programs can significantly improve women's income levels and economic status. For example, research in Bangladesh found that women who participated in tailoring training programs reported substantial increases in monthly income and greater financial autonomy (Chaudhary et al., 2020). Similarly, studies in Kenya and Ghana indicate that tailoring skills enable women to start small businesses, secure freelance work, and contribute meaningfully to household income (Kilonzo & Maghanga, 2020; Osei & Dzamboe, 2016).

In Malawi, evidence suggests that vocational training programs focusing on tailoring have positively impacted women's livelihoods by providing them with skills that are in demand within local markets (Manda, 2019; Banda, 2020). However, the effectiveness of such programs in promoting sustained income generation depends on several factors, including the quality of training, availability of equipment and materials, access to capital, and market opportunities (Tembo, 2021).

Challenges in Utilizing Vocational Skills for Income Generation

Despite the potential benefits of vocational training, women often face multiple challenges in translating acquired skills into sustainable income generation. Empirical studies identify several common barriers including lack of start-up capital, limited access to markets, inadequate equipment, intense competition, and time constraints related to domestic responsibilities (Abebe & Admassie, 2017; Ndungu, 2021). For single mothers, these challenges are often more pronounced due to their dual burden of childcare and income generation, limited social support networks, and restricted mobility (Chitereka, 2014).

Research in Malawi highlights that women tailoring entrepreneurs frequently struggle with insufficient capital to purchase materials, lack of modern equipment, and limited business management skills that hinder business growth and profitability (Phiri, 2019; Nkhoma & Gondwe, 2022). Furthermore, absence of post-training support, such as mentorship, access to microfinance, and market linkages, reduces the long-term impact of vocational training programs (Mshote et al., 2018). These findings underscore the need for comprehensive support systems that address both technical skills development and the broader socio-economic challenges faced by women entrepreneurs.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000). Human Capital Theory posits that investment in education and skills training enhances individuals' productivity and earning potential, thereby improving their economic outcomes and quality of life. Applied to this study, the theory suggests that participation in vocational training programs, such as tailoring, increases single mothers' human capital by equipping them with marketable skills that enable income generation and economic self-sufficiency.

Empowerment Theory complements this perspective by conceptualizing empowerment as a multilevel process through which individuals gain control over their lives, develop critical awareness, and participate in collective action to address social and economic challenges. According to Zimmerman (2000), empowerment operates at psychological, organizational, and community levels. At the psychological level, empowerment involves increased self-efficacy,

confidence, and sense of control; at the organizational level, it involves participation in decision-making and access to resources; and at the community level, it involves collective action and social change. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how vocational training programs can promote women's economic empowerment by enhancing their skills, confidence, and agency to generate income and improve their livelihoods.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to support an in-depth exploration of the tailoring program's effectiveness in promoting income generation among single mothers in Khongo Village, Lilongwe. A cross-sectional approach was employed in which qualitative data were collected at a single point in time from program participants. The study population consisted of single mothers who had completed the tailoring program in Khongo Village. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 participants who met the inclusion criteria of being single mothers, having completed the tailoring training, and being willing to participate in the study.

Data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The questionnaires captured quantitative information on income levels before and after the program, while interviews explored participants' experiences, skills acquired, and challenges faced in utilizing tailoring skills for income generation. Data analysis involved thematic analysis, whereby interview transcripts were coded and organized into themes corresponding to the research objectives. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and conducting the study in accordance with ethical research standards.

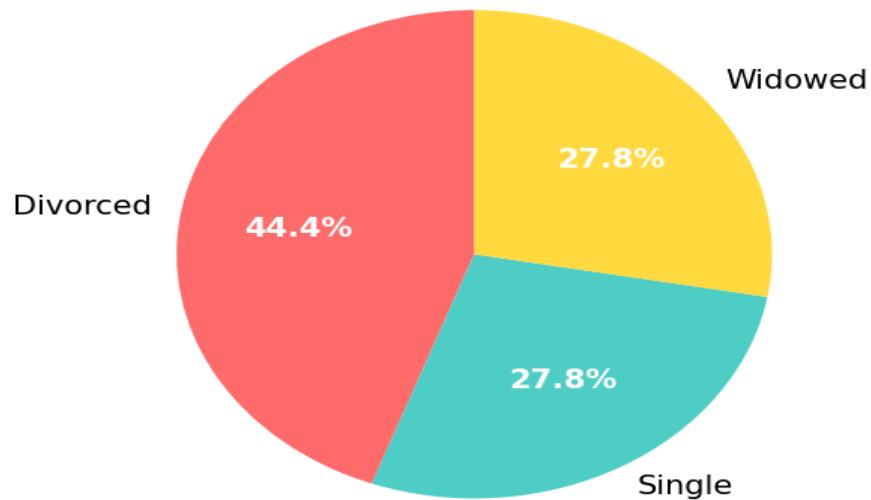
Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The diagram below presents the marital status of the respondents. Out of the sample respondents, 44.4% were divorced, representing the largest proportion of the sample. Single respondents accounted for 27.8%, while widowed respondents also constituted 27.8% of the total respondents. The cumulative percentages indicate that by the time divorced respondents are included, 72.2% of the respondents were either single or divorced. The distribution suggests that a significant

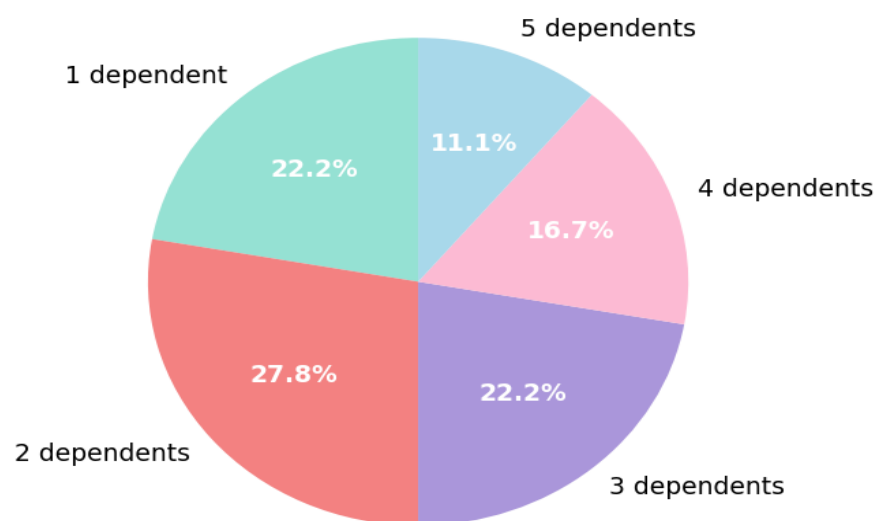
proportion of participants were not currently married, which may have implications for household responsibilities and economic vulnerability.

Figure 1: Marital Status of Respondents



The figure below shows the distribution of respondents by number of dependents. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents had two dependents, accounting for 27.8%. Respondents with one dependent and those with three dependents each accounted for 22.2%. Additionally, 16.7% reported having four dependents, while 11.1% had five dependents. The cumulative percentages show that 50.0% of respondents had two or fewer dependents, while 72.2% had three or fewer dependents. Overall, the results indicate that most respondents supported multiple dependents, which may place additional financial pressure on their income and influence their ability to save, invest, or expand their tailoring businesses.

Figure 2: Number of Dependents



The age distribution of respondents showed that the majority (46.7%) were between 30 and 39 years old, followed by those aged 20-29 years (33.3%), and 40-49 years (20.0%). This indicates that the program attracted women in their economically productive years who are actively seeking income-generating opportunities.

Figure 3: Age Distribution of Respondents

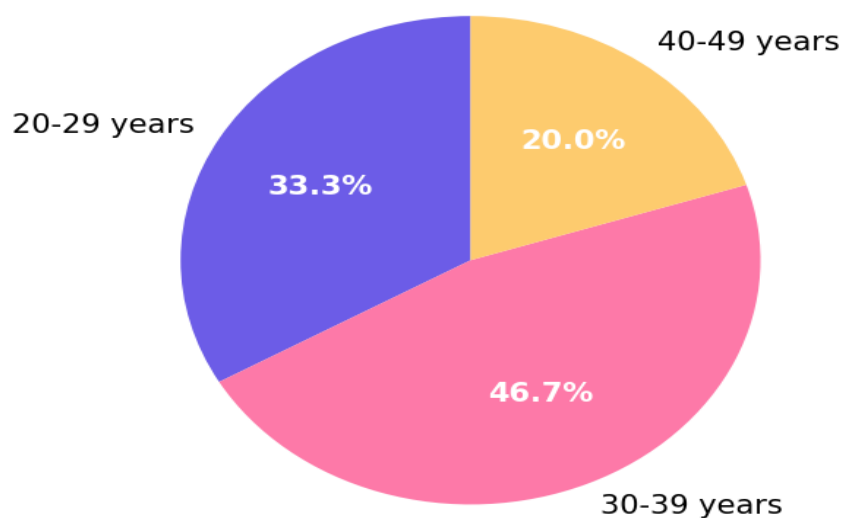


Table 1: Educational Level of Respondents

Education Level	Percentage (%)
Primary	40.0
Secondary	53.3
None	6.7
Total	100.0

Most participants (53.3%) had completed secondary education, while 40.0% had primary education only, and 6.7% had no formal education. This indicates that the program was accessible to women with varying educational backgrounds, though most had at least basic literacy skills.

Income Levels Before and After the Tailoring Program

Table 2: Comparison of Monthly Income Before and After Program

Income Level (MWK)	Before (%)	After (%)
0 - 10,000	60.0	6.7
10,001 - 30,000	26.7	33.3
30,001 - 50,000	13.3	40.0
Above 50,000	0.0	20.0
Total	100.0	100.0

The findings revealed a significant improvement in participants' monthly income after completing the tailoring program. Before the program, 60% of respondents earned between 0-10,000 MWK per month, indicating severe economic vulnerability. After the program, only 6.7% remained in this income bracket. The majority (40%) moved to the 30,001-50,000 MWK bracket, and 20% earned above 50,000 MWK per month. This demonstrates that the tailoring program had a positive impact on income generation, enabling participants to significantly improve their earnings and economic status.

Skills Acquired and Their Contribution to Income Generation

The study identified several key tailoring skills that participants acquired through the program, which contributed directly to their ability to generate income. These skills included:

- **Pattern making and cutting:** Participants learned how to design patterns and cut fabric accurately, which is essential for producing quality garments.
- **Sewing and stitching:** The core skill of operating sewing machines and performing various stitching techniques enabled participants to produce finished products.
- **Finishing techniques:** Skills in hemming, adding buttons, zippers, and other finishing touches allowed participants to produce professional-quality garments.
- **Garment repair and alteration:** Many participants engaged in repair and alteration services, which provided a steady source of income.

These skills contributed to income generation through various pathways. Many participants started their own small tailoring businesses, operating from home or renting small shops. Others worked as freelance tailors, taking orders from individual customers and institutions. Some secured employment in existing tailoring shops. The flexibility of tailoring work allowed participants to balance income-generating activities with childcare and domestic responsibilities, which was particularly important for single mothers. Additionally, participants reported increased self-confidence and social status as a result of acquiring marketable skills and contributing to household income.

Challenges Faced in Utilizing Tailoring Skills for Income Generation

Despite the positive impact of the tailoring program on income generation, participants identified several challenges that hindered optimal economic outcomes. The major challenges included:

- **Lack of capital:** The most frequently mentioned challenge was insufficient capital to purchase materials, equipment, and tools needed to start or expand tailoring businesses. Many participants could not afford to buy fabric in bulk or invest in modern sewing machines.
- **Limited market access:** Participants struggled to find consistent customers and market their services effectively. Many relied on word-of-mouth and lacked formal marketing strategies or connections to institutional buyers.

- **Competition:** The tailoring market in Khongo Village and surrounding areas was saturated, leading to intense competition and pressure to reduce prices, which negatively affected profitability.
- **Inadequate equipment:** Many participants lacked access to modern, efficient sewing machines and tools, which limited their productivity and ability to produce high-quality garments quickly.
- **Time constraints:** As single mothers, participants faced significant time constraints due to childcare and household responsibilities, which limited the amount of time they could dedicate to tailoring work.
- **Lack of business management skills:** Participants reported difficulties in managing finances, keeping records, pricing products appropriately, and planning for business growth.

These findings are consistent with existing literature on small-scale women entrepreneurs in low-resource settings, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems that address not only technical skills training but also financial access, market facilitation, and business management capacity building.

Summary of Research Findings

The demographic characteristics of respondents provided important contextual insights into the study findings. The age distribution showed that the majority of participants were in their economically productive years (30-39 years), reflecting active engagement in seeking income-generating opportunities. In terms of marital status, most were divorced (44.4%), followed by single and widowed (27.8% each). Most participants had completed at least primary or secondary education, indicating basic literacy levels that facilitated learning. All respondents were single mothers supporting multiple dependents, highlighting the program's focus on a vulnerable population facing significant economic challenges.

The findings revealed that the tailoring program significantly improved participants' income levels. Before the program, the majority earned very low incomes, with 60% earning less than 10,000 MWK per month. After completing the program, there was a substantial shift in income distribution, with most participants moving to higher income brackets. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the program in enhancing economic outcomes for single mothers through skills development.

The study also established that participants acquired practical tailoring skills that directly contributed to income generation. Key skills included pattern making, cutting, sewing, and finishing techniques. These skills enabled participants to start small businesses, work as freelancers, or secure employment. The flexibility of tailoring work was particularly beneficial for single mothers. Additionally, participants reported increased self-confidence, improved social status, and greater financial independence as a result of their participation in the program.

Despite the positive contributions of the tailoring program, participants faced multiple challenges that hindered optimal income generation. The most significant challenges included lack of capital, limited market access, intense competition, inadequate equipment, time constraints, and lack of business management skills. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive support systems that address both technical skills development and the broader socio-economic and business-related challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in rural and peri-urban communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the tailoring program positively impacted single mothers' income generation in Khongo Village, Lilongwe. The program equipped participants with practical, marketable skills that enabled them to engage in income-generating activities, resulting in significant improvements in their monthly earnings and economic status. Technical skills such as pattern making, cutting, sewing, and finishing techniques contributed directly to participants' ability to start businesses, secure freelance work, or gain employment.

However, the effectiveness of the program in promoting sustained income generation and economic empowerment was constrained by multiple challenges, including lack of capital, limited market access, inadequate equipment, competition, time constraints, and absence of business management training. These challenges limited participants' ability to optimize their income and achieve long-term business sustainability. The study concludes that vocational skills training programs must be complemented by financial support, market facilitation, equipment provision, and business management capacity building to maximize their impact on women's economic empowerment.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of tailoring programs as flexible income-generating activities that can be integrated with childcare and domestic responsibilities, making them particularly suitable for single mothers. The psychological and social benefits of the program, including increased self-confidence and improved social status, are equally important outcomes that contribute to participants' overall empowerment and well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the study recommends the following:

For Program Implementers

- Provide start-up capital or facilitate access to microfinance loans to enable participants to purchase materials and equipment.
- Supply or facilitate access to modern tailoring equipment to improve productivity and quality of products.
- Integrate business management and marketing training into the curriculum to enhance participants' ability to manage finances, price products appropriately, and market their services effectively.
- Implement flexible training schedules and provide childcare support to accommodate participants' family responsibilities.
- Establish post-training mentorship and support systems to guide participants in starting and growing their businesses.

For Policymakers and Funding Organizations

- Support and strengthen microfinance initiatives targeting small-scale women entrepreneurs in tailoring and other vocational sectors.
- Promote market linkages by connecting women tailors to institutions, cooperatives, and bulk buyers to ensure consistent demand for their products.
- Encourage partnerships between vocational training centers, NGOs, and private sector actors to enhance the scope, quality, and sustainability of skills development programs.
- Develop policies that support women entrepreneurs, including tax incentives, business registration facilitation, and access to government contracts.

For Future Research

- Investigate the long-term impact of tailoring programs on income generation, business sustainability, and overall economic empowerment of single mothers.
- Explore the effectiveness of integrating business management, marketing, and financial literacy training into vocational programs.
- Conduct comparative studies to assess the impact of program variations, such as inclusion of capital support versus technical skills training only.
- Examine the role of social support networks and community-based organizations in enhancing the effectiveness of women's empowerment programs.

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