

# Enhancing Women's Economic Empowerment in Rural Nigeria Through Advocacy Trainings

Katrina Kosec, Jordan Kyle, and Cecilia H. Mo

## Executive Summary

This note shares quantitative results from a project examining the effectiveness of advocacy and leadership training for women, along with allyship training for men (their husbands), in improving women's economic outcomes. We share insights from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted across three states of southwestern Nigeria (Oyo, Ogun, and Osun) involving over 5,800 women participants from 450 communities. We causally test whether training women alone, as well as whether training them in tandem (though in separate sessions) with their husbands, can increase women's access to and investments in livelihood opportunities as well as their participation in a community grants program soliciting applications from the local community. While the trainings were designed to train women in the skills needed for engaging in the local policy process in rural communities in Nigeria and to train their husbands on the benefits of women's participation in community affairs as well as in how to practically support their wives' participation, we posit that increased efficacy combined with advocacy skills and husbands' support could additionally have profound economic spillovers. Indeed, we show causal improvements in many of these investment and livelihood outcomes when women are trained—though no added benefits of additionally training husbands (and possibly some drawbacks in terms of women's self-efficacy and participation in the grants program). We distill from this a set of emerging policy lessons.

## 1. Introduction and Motivation

The economic benefits of empowering women to have greater decision-making authority within the household are well recognized. In farming households, for example, women's empowerment in the household predicts greater technical efficiency on plots managed by women and by men (Seymour 2017); more efficient use of land fallowing, which boosts crop yields (Goldstein and Udry 2008); and increased investments in land quality, such as use of fertilizer and intensive tillage (Dillon and Voena 2018). However, women's livelihoods and income generation might also rely on their voice and agency beyond the household. Success in businesses and other economic activities can depend on women's

capacity to engage with formal and informal local leaders and to self-advocate with elites, lenders, business associates, and customers. Additionally, policies can support or hinder women's livelihoods, underscoring—the value of women's political participation to shape these decisions (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006). Finally, access to rural public goods and services, such as roads and electricity, is crucial to enhancing women's business and economic opportunities. Advocating for these resources often requires women to develop and leverage their political advocacy skills.

This note shares the causal impacts of a women's advocacy training program, as well as the effects of additionally offering male allyship training to women's husbands, on women's engagement in livelihood opportunities. In examining whether an intervention aiming to enhance women's advocacy skills could impact their livelihoods, we are examining a novel pathway to enhance women's economic empowerment and the potential for empowerment in one domain (political) to have positive spillovers into another domain (economic). This picks up important literature within women's empowerment that finds that when women act within groups, such as women's self-help groups, they can improve their access to information, decision-making autonomy, and access to social protection programs (e.g. Raghunathan et al. 2023). Yet, less is known about how to form these groups in the first place and how to transmit the skills that women may need to enhance their effectiveness. The findings presented in this brief thus contribute new insights into how to empower women in their communities, particularly with respect to their economic livelihoods.

## 2. Context

In Nigeria, women's economic empowerment faces significant challenges due to systemic barriers that limit women's participation in decision-making processes within their communities as well as those within their households. Indeed, in 2024, Nigeria ranked 125th out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2024). In Nigeria, the total estimated loss in earnings due to gender disparities in agricultural productivity, business profits, and wages is approximately US \$9.3 billion, representing 2.3 percent of the total gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank 2022). Identifying effective interventions and policies to close these gender gaps would therefore substantially benefit the country.

There are several reasons women are economically and socially disempowered in Nigeria. First, cultural norms and traditional practices often relegate women to subordinate roles in governance and community development initiatives which offer them minimal influence. This marginalization further hampers women's ability to engage key business leaders and other individuals who might help them access resources, information, and finance necessary for achieving economic objectives. Consequently, women's voices remain underrepresented in critical discussions that shape community investments, economic opportunities, and well-being. Other factors serve as further obstacles to Nigerian women pursuing livelihood opportunities beyond subsistence farming. For example, limited access to education and training can constrain their ability to invest in small businesses, adopt innovative agricultural practices, or diversify income sources. Additionally, a lack of self-efficacy and confidence needed to engage with influential community and business figures further diminishes their economic prospects.

Without targeted interventions to address harmful gender norms and enhance women's confidence, skills, and access to resources, their economic opportunities are likely to remain constrained—perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence. The implications of inaction are profound. Women's economic disempowerment inhibits the creation of inclusive, equitable growth and stalls progress toward national development goals. Programming that promises to promote gender equality could unlock women's po-

tential as economic actors and leaders, transforming communities and contributing to sustainable development. This underscores the urgency of creating pathways for women to meaningfully engage in civic and political life and by doing so, improve not only their livelihoods but also the well-being of their families and the broader society.

### 3. Methodology

#### *Sampling and Randomization*<sup>1</sup>

The study engaged approximately 5,800 women across 450 rural communities in the Nigerian states of Ogun, Osun, and Oyo (Figure 1). The sample was selected from the universe of all rural wards in these three states (wards are the smallest formal administrative unit in Nigeria), randomly selecting 150 rural wards in each, and then randomly selecting one community in each rural ward in which to implement the study. Communities were randomly assigned to one of three groups, with equal probability:

- ▶ **Placebo Group:** Women received basic civic education on political rights and opportunities
- ▶ **Treatment Group 1 (T1):** Women received the basic civic education on political rights and opportunities as in the placebo group, plus intensive training in leadership, organizing, and advocacy skills, aimed at bolstering women's collective efficacy over the course of 5-6 months
- ▶ **Treatment Group 2 (T2):** Women received the basic civic education on political rights and opportunities as in the placebo group as well as the same intensive training as T1, plus a parallel (but separate from the women's training) training for trained women's husbands focused on fostering male allyship to support women's empowerment in civic spaces (explaining the value of empowering their wives for families and communities, as well as how to do so) over the course of 5-6 months

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<sup>1</sup> As this study was guided by a pre-analysis plan (PAP) (Adida et al. 2023), elements of the study design repeat text in the PAP to ensure clarity and continuity from the PAP to the report of study results.

**Figure 1: Study locations**



Notes: Boundaries in this map represent states in Nigeria. This map is for illustrative purposes and does not imply endorsement of any political or territorial claims.

### ***Intervention Overview***

We developed and implemented the intervention in partnership with ActionAid Nigeria (AAN), a well-established local NGO with deep experience in women’s empowerment initiatives across Nigeria. This collaboration ensured that the intervention was culturally relevant, accessible, and locally grounded. Each community’s traditional leader (known as the Baale, and always male) participated in a preliminary meeting with AAN and generated a list of 13 women and their 13 husbands for participation in the training. Requirements were that women must: (1) be married; (2) be between the ages of 21 and 50; (3) have done something to earn money outside of their household in the last month (i.e., economically active); (4) be interested in participating in training at least once per month over the following 5 months; and (5) have a husband they believe is available and willing to participate in men’s training at least once per month over the next 5 months. In choosing these criteria, we prioritized the likelihood of participation and retention over a six-month training period, as well as women who had some mobility within the community due to their preexisting economic activities (even if these were minimal). Within these criteria, we asked Baales to prioritize women who were not leaders within the community and who were not already politically active.

In a linked policy note where we report the positive effects of the interventions on women’s political participation and on leaders’ responsiveness to women’s concerns (Adida et al. 2024), we fully introduce and describe the training curricula co-designed with ActionAid Nigeria for this project: *The Women’s Political Participation Training for Southwest Nigeria* (2023) and the *Men’s Political Participation Training for Southwest Nigeria* (2023). Here, we describe the intervention more briefly, primarily emphasizing how concepts and skills addressed within the training could boost women’s economic empowerment.

### ***Preliminary Meeting for All Communities***

In order to ensure that women in the placebo and treatment groups were comparable, we conducted a preliminary meeting in all 450 communities before randomization. During this meeting, the 13 women in

each of the communities recruited by the Baales gathered for a one-way training session on basic civic education. This session covered topics like the Nigerian constitution, local governance structures, and the roles and responsibilities of different types of leaders and public officials. By ensuring that all participants had this baseline level of information, we ensure that women in placebo and treatment conditions are comparable (because they are recruited under identical conditions) and that any effects we see are due to the trainings rather than from becoming more informed about how local governance works. About a week after the conclusion of the preliminary meetings, we randomized communities into placebo, T1, and T2, with equal probabilities.

### ***Women's Training (T1 and T2)***

Women in the treatment communities (T1 and T2) participated in five structured, group-based training sessions, developed collaboratively with AAN to foster women's advocacy skills. These sessions aimed to activate three critical components of the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA), as being able to act collectively is a critical part of advocacy: (1) recognizing shared injustices, (2) fostering a collective gender identity, and (3) building a capacity for collective action. Training modules, tailored to local needs, included participatory activities, discussions, and take-home exercises. Key components included:

- ▶ **Group-Based Injustice:** In their first training after the preliminary meeting, women discussed gender-based inequities in local services, public participation, and economic opportunities. Activities included mapping community resources and identifying who controls them, helping women articulate shared grievances and understand their rights (Van Zomeren et al., 2008).
- ▶ **Collective Identity as Women:** Additional sessions encouraged women to define their shared identity and values, using exercises to identify collective goals and formulate community needs. These discussions not only increased women's sense of solidarity, but also empowered them to advocate for gender-specific concerns within their communities. Many of the examples and discussions encouraged women to think about community development goals that would improve their own well-being, as well as the well-being of their families and to discuss concretely how they might achieve those goals.
- ▶ **Perceived Collective Efficacy:** Later sessions emphasized practical skills for coordinated advocacy, including how to identify and approach decision-makers, understand local governance, and leverage shared grievances to gain influence. Interactive exercises, such as "Collective Dream Mapping" and "Stakeholder Analysis," provided women with hands-on experience in planning civic interventions and communicating with officials (Bandura, 1997).

While engaging in the participatory exercises embedded in the training sessions, women were practicing skills critical to boosting their livelihoods, including envisioning public goods and community assets that could promote community development and where they should ideally be located within the village; articulating their preferences and ideas; forming social bonds with other training participants; and learning how to work as a group to achieve a common goal.

### ***Men's Training (T2)***

For communities in the T2 condition, husbands of trained women participated in five parallel training sessions (held separately from the women's trainings), focusing on the importance of supporting women's political engagement. This aspect of the intervention recognized the role men often play as

“gatekeepers” in patriarchal settings and aimed to boost men’s normative and practical support for women’s empowerment. The male training curriculum highlighted:

- ▶ **Understanding Gender Equality:** Sessions introduced men to basic gender concepts, reinforcing how women’s empowerment benefits families and the broader community. Discussions covered men’s potential roles in reducing gender inequities and supporting women’s leadership within the village.
- ▶ **Supporting Women’s Civic Engagement:** Using community case studies, men explored ways to actively encourage women’s participation. These discussions included tangible actions, from encouraging women to attend local meetings to publicly supporting women’s initiatives, to ensuring that women have safe transportation if needed to community meetings and taking over caregiving responsibilities so that she can attend meetings.
- ▶ **Effective Allyship:** Sessions concluded with strategies for advocating alongside women on community issues, encouraging men to view women’s success as a shared community benefit. Homework assignments before this session encouraged men to talk to their wives about their needs and preferences and to share ideas as a couple about how those could be achieved.

### *Implementation and Localization*

AAN engaged local facilitators, including teachers, social workers, and health workers familiar with the dialects and cultural norms of each community. This staffing strategy built trust and ensured the training materials were both linguistically and culturally relevant. The training sessions were adapted based on pilot feedback, and activities were designed to accommodate participants’ schedules and learning preferences. Additionally, AAN conducted extensive consultations with local leaders to secure community buy-in, which was essential for overcoming initial skepticism about the program.

### *Data Collection*

We conducted a baseline survey in May – June 2023, immediately after the preliminary meetings held in all communities. This note presents results from our endline survey, which was conducted between January and February 2024, about one month after the conclusion of the training sessions in treatment communities. In addition to women’s political participation, the endline survey collected information on women’s aspirations, livelihoods, and economic outcomes, as well as on their sense of individual and collective efficacy.

Additionally, we formed a partnership with a Nigerian private equity firm to run an independent community grants program in all 450 communities (including placebo communities). This community grants program was advertised via radio jingles and posters hung up in public areas of communities. Anyone from the 450 communities could apply for the community grant; it was not restricted to training participants. Data from this independent community grants program enabled us to collect a behavioral measure on whether trained women were taking real world actions to improve their communities and their well-being.

## **4. Findings: Impacts on Women’s Voice and Agency Outcomes**

In this section, we describe causal impacts of our interventions on women’s economic activities and livelihood strategies. While the interventions did not directly train women on business skills, we posit

that advocacy and communication skills as well as enhanced individual and collective efficacy play important roles in successful livelihood strategies. In what follows, we show that women's advocacy trainings indeed lead to many significant increases in their economic empowerment, though we do not find evidence that additionally training their husbands led to any further gains compared to training women alone. Instead, we see evidence that for some outcomes, additionally training husbands lowered gains for women compared to training women alone.

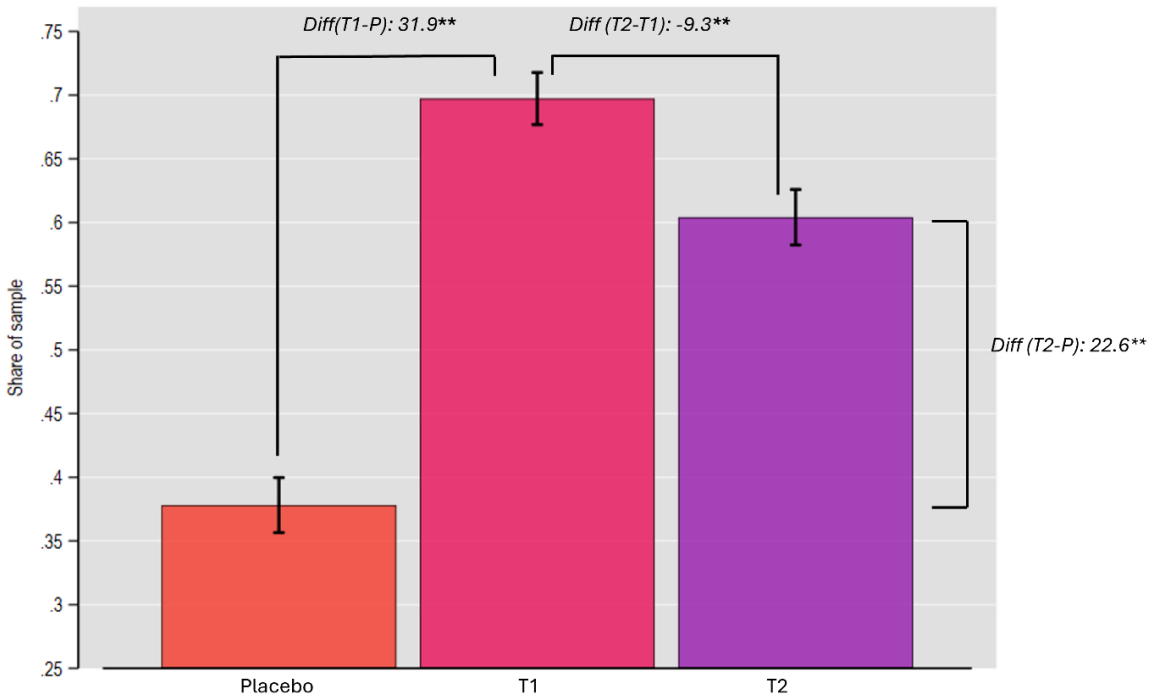
We present results based on analysis of our endline survey data, as randomization ensures that any differences between the placebo group, T1, and T2 are due to effects of the trainings alone. For women in the placebo group, T1, and T2, respectively, the bar graphs below (Figures 2-8) display the mean of each outcome variable from the endline survey.

Overall, the training interventions had various positive economic spillover effects, yielding notable improvements in terms of women's engagement in the independent community grants program as well as in their economic activities. Treated women from T1 were 31.9 percentage points more likely to report that they applied for community grants compared to the control group (Figure 2), highlighting an increased sense of agency and initiative in seeking economic resources. To apply for this community grant, individuals had to form a team of five community members, develop a project idea, describe how the project would benefit their community, and develop a budget for the project. Thus, the application process required working as a group and articulating development goals. Applicants were informed that their Baales and elected leaders would play a role in scoring applications to select winners, so individuals knew that contacting local leaders to gain support for their ideas could be helpful.

Interestingly, this effect was moderated when women's husbands were also trained—with a statistically significant 9.3 percentage point lower increase observed in T2 compared to T1. It is possible that men who attended trainings were more motivated compared to untrained men to participate in the community grants program themselves (as signatories or leads), and that households put a maximum of one name on any application. This is something we plan to analyze further in future analysis using survey data from the husbands as well as administrative data from the community grants program.

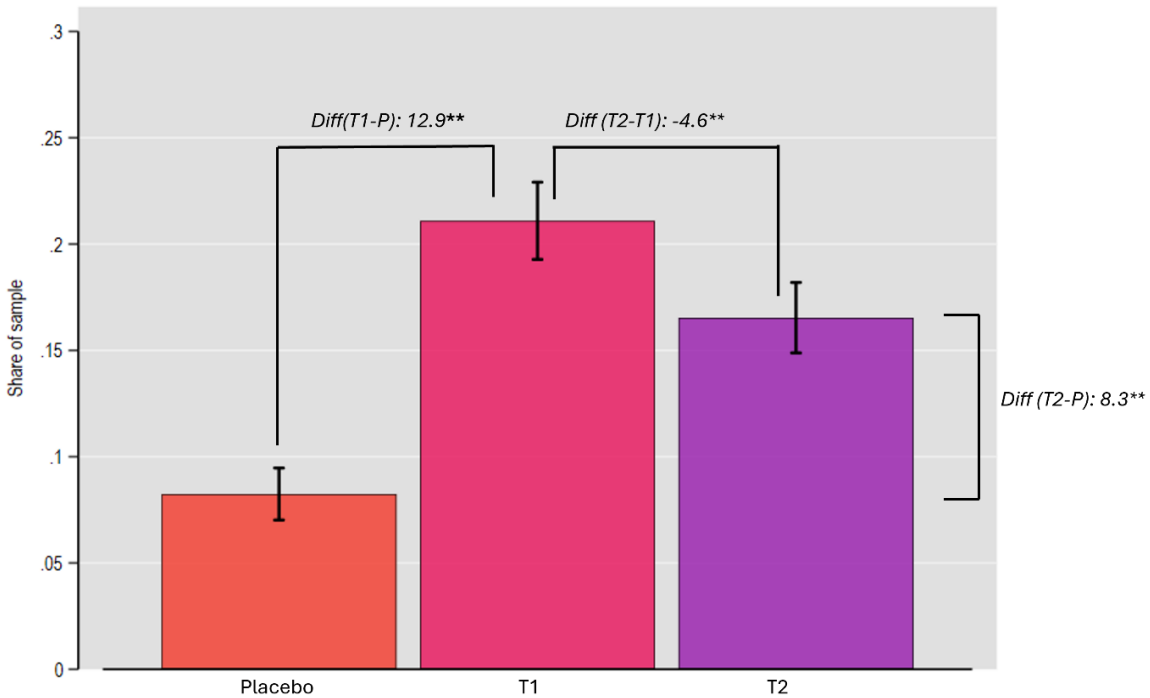
As we see in Figure 3, both T1 and T2 also significantly increased the likelihood that women were the lead applicant for a grant—by about 12.9 percentage points for T1 and 8.3 percentage points for T2. However, once again, we observe that T1 benefits women significantly more than does T2 (4.6 percentage points more).

**Figure 2: Application for a grant from community grants program**



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. \*\* indicates a  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ; \* indicates a  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ , and + indicates a  $p$ -value of  $< 0.10$ .

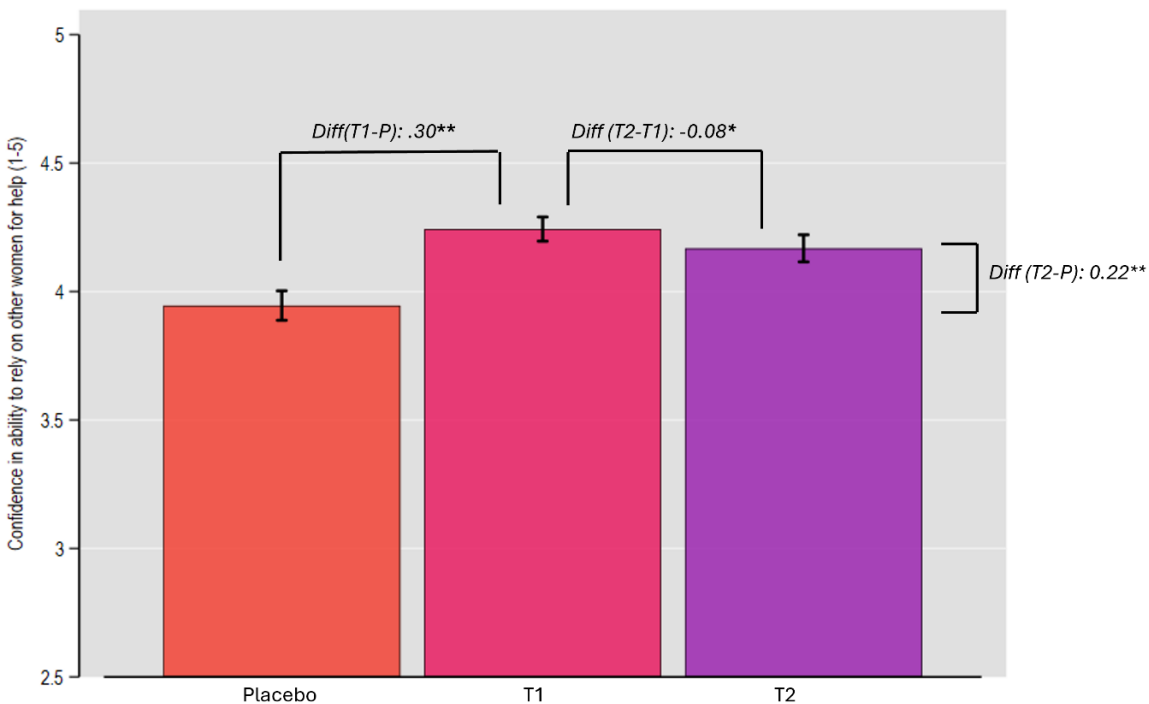
**Figure 3: Application for a grant from community grants program as a lead applicant**



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. \*\* indicates a  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ; \* indicates a  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ , and + indicates a  $p$ -value of  $< 0.10$ .

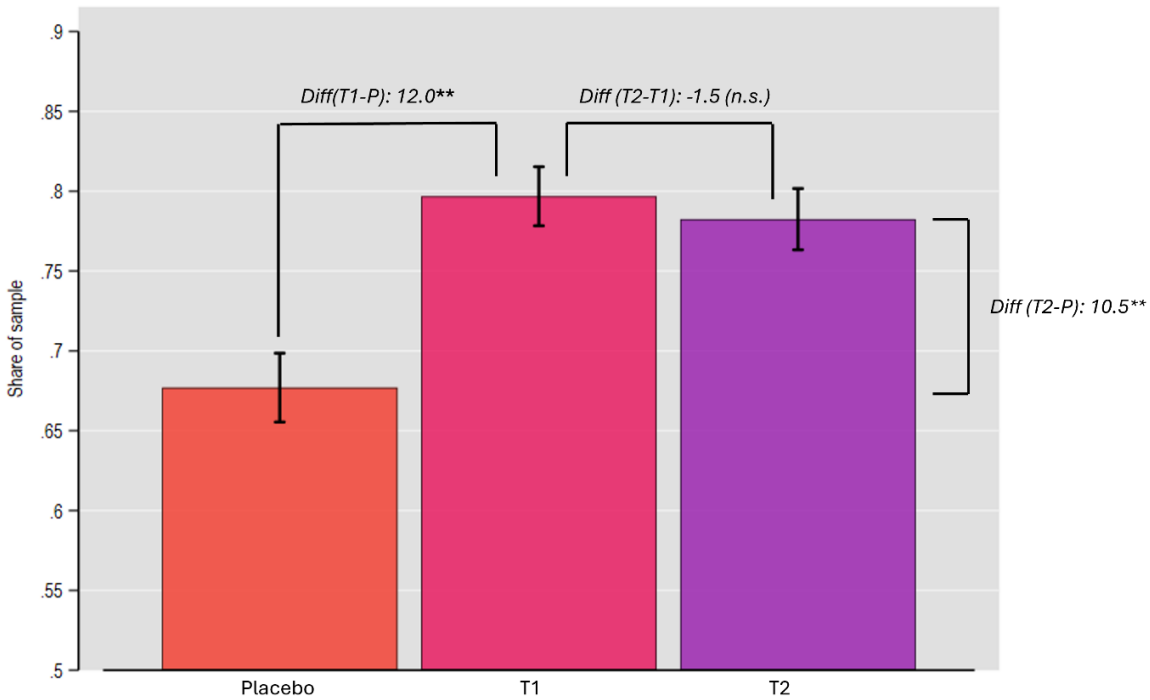
Self-efficacy and social ties among trained women also improved (Figure 4), as evidenced by trained women’s increased confidence in their ability to rely on other women for support (this outcome ranges from 1 to 5). However, T2 women experienced smaller gains compared to women in T1. Trained women in both T1 and T2 also felt more assured that they could borrow money from the set of women assembled for the preliminary meeting, illustrating the strengthened social and economic networks among these women created by the intervention (Figure 5). Here, we find between a 10.5 percentage point (for T2) and 12.0 percentage point (for T1) increase in perceived access to borrowing, with no significant differences across T1 and T2. Additionally, trained women in both T1 and T2 were more likely to engage in income-generating activities outside the home (Figure 6), suggesting that the training empowered them to take greater control of their economic well-being. Trainings resulted in between a 2.6 (for T1) and a 2.8 (for T2) percentage point increase in the likelihood of earning income outside of the home (again, T1 and T2 faced statistically similar improvements).

**Figure 4: Self-efficacy and social ties**



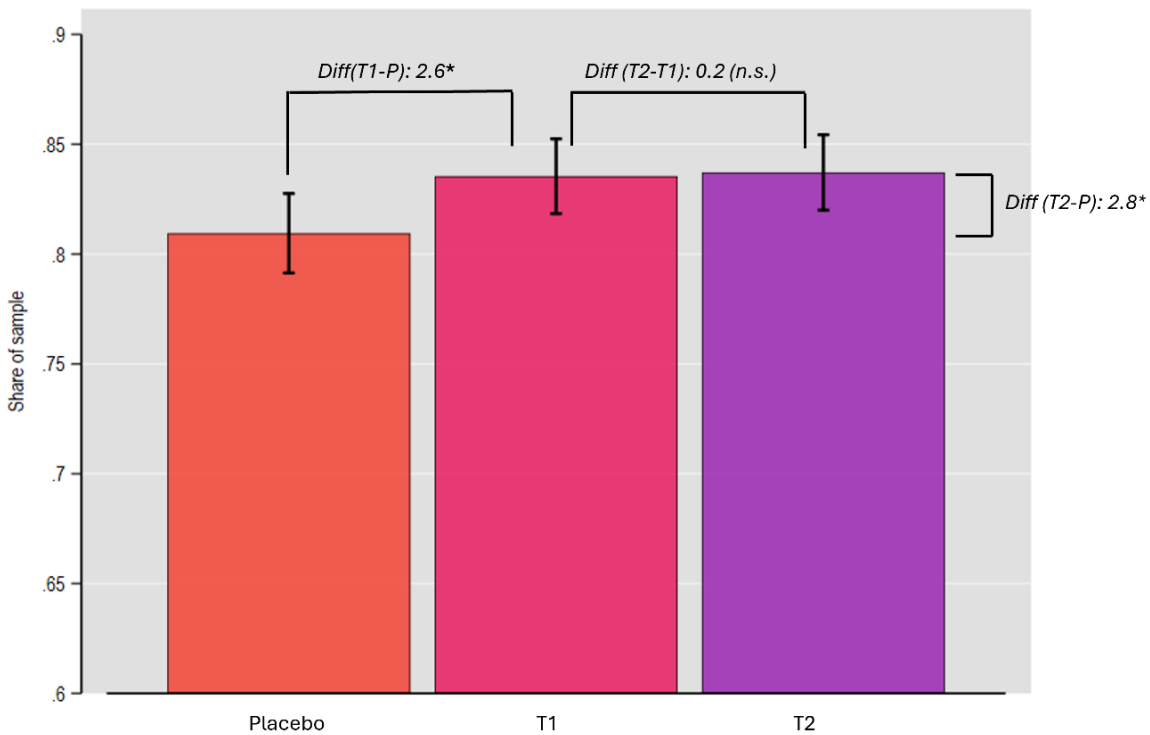
Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. \*\* indicates a  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ; \* indicates a  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ , and + indicates a  $p$ -value of  $< 0.10$ .

**Figure 5: Perceived access to borrowing from other women**



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. \*\* indicates a  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ; \* indicates a  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ , and + indicates a  $p$ -value of  $< 0.10$ .

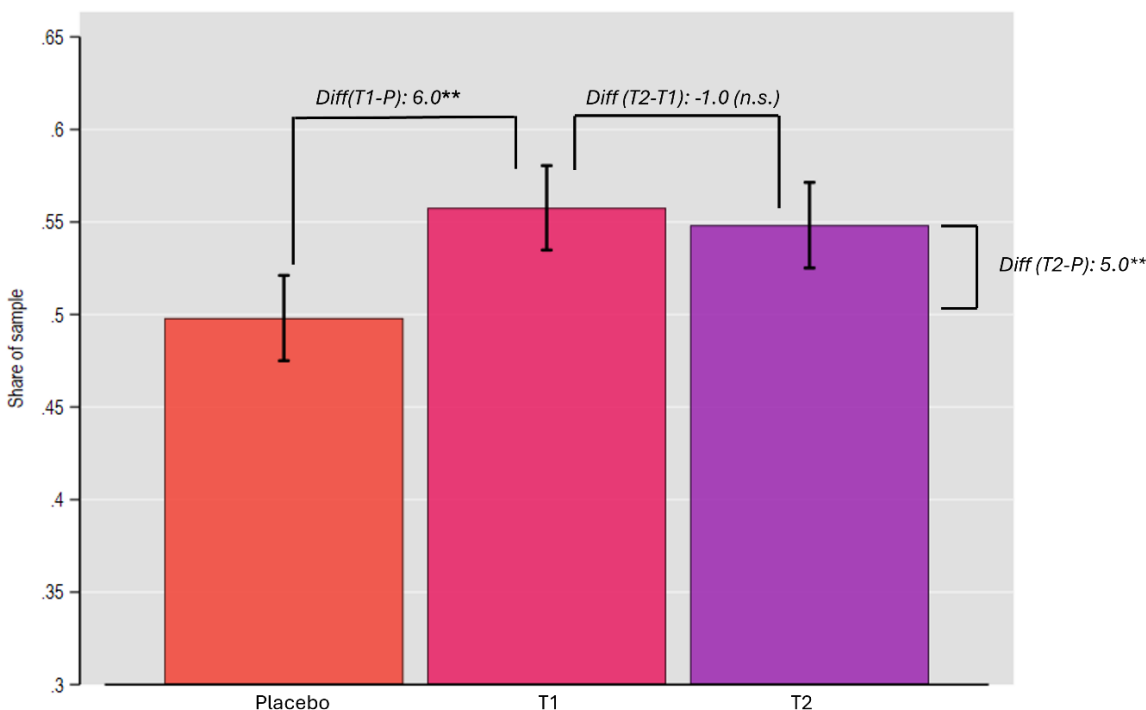
**Figure 6: Earning income outside of the home**



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. \*\* indicates a  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ; \* indicates a  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ , and + indicates a  $p$ -value of  $< 0.10$ .

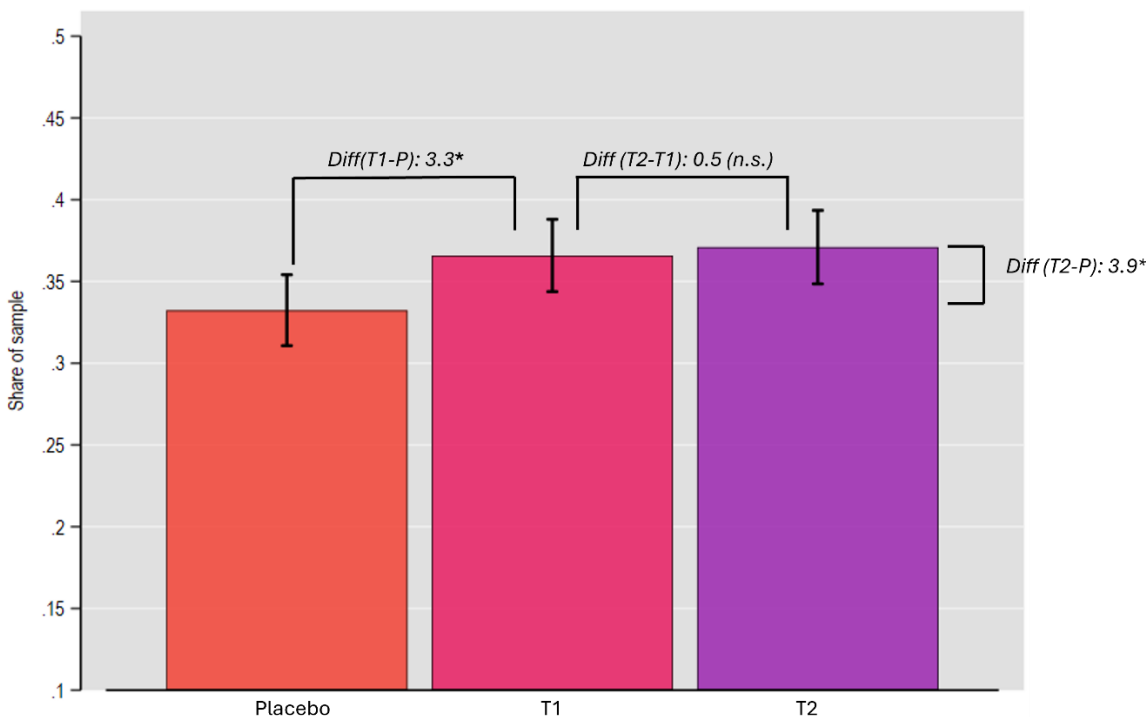
Treated women also demonstrated a stronger orientation toward future investments. They were more likely to report starting to save money with the intention of investing in a business (Figure 7), reflecting a long-term shift toward economic planning and self-sufficiency. Specifically, trained women were between 5.0 (for T2) and 6.0 (for T1) percentage points more likely to save for a business (with no statistically significant difference between the impacts on T1 and T2). Many of these women also reported experimenting with new crops or crop varieties to increase their income (Figure 8), indicating a willingness to take calculated risks and adopt innovative strategies to improve their financial situation. Effect sizes ranged from 3.3 (for T1) to 3.9 (for T2) percentage points, with no statistically significant difference between T1 and T2.

**Figure 7: Saving to invest in a business**



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. \*\* indicates a  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ; \* indicates a  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ , and + indicates a  $p$ -value of  $< 0.10$ .

**Figure 8: Trying a new crop or varietal**



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. \*\* indicates a  $p$ -value < 0.01; \* indicates a  $p$ -value  $\leq$  0.05, and + indicates a  $p$ -value of <0.10.

In summary, the RCT showed that advocacy training for women had substantial effects on women’s economic activities as well as their participation in a grants program designed to promote community development. These effects were not augmented by allyship training for men, and, for participation in the grants program and self-efficacy, were actually moderately lower for women whose husbands were also trained.

## 5. Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings of this study offer important insights for promoting women’s livelihoods and well-being through targeted interventions. Advocacy training for women demonstrated clear improvements in women’s economic agency, access to resources, and engagement in civic activities. These results suggest that scaling similar training programs in contexts with entrenched gender inequities could have meaningful effects, particularly when designed to align with local cultural and socio-economic conditions. However, the allyship training for men (T2) did not significantly enhance these outcomes. In future analyses, we plan to examine potential heterogeneous effects as well as results from our endline survey with men to better understand the effects of the men’s trainings.

The integration of a community grants program alongside advocacy training appeared to reinforce the training’s impacts, as evidenced by a significant increase in grant applications among women in treatment communities. This suggests that combining advocacy training with practical opportunities to apply new skills could enhance the overall effectiveness of empowerment programs and that women would

take advantage of such opportunities if provided. The intervention's success in fostering collective identity among women also highlights the potential value of strategies that strengthen women's networks of mutual support and collective action, though further evidence would be needed to determine the sustainability of these networks over time.

While the training showed positive impacts on women's economic behaviors—such as saving to invest in businesses or experimenting with new crops—the extent to which these behaviors translate into sustained improvements in livelihoods requires further exploration. Conducting follow-up studies to assess whether the observed changes persist and to identify the conditions under which these programs most disrupt prevailing harmful gender norms could result in more effective programming.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Katrina Kosec ([k.kosec@cgiar.org](mailto:k.kosec@cgiar.org)) is a Senior Research Fellow in the Poverty, Gender, and Inclusion (PGI) Unit at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington, DC.

Jordan Kyle ([j.kyle@cgiar.org](mailto:j.kyle@cgiar.org)) is a Research Fellow with IFPRI's PGI Unit, Washington, DC.

Cecilia H. Mo ([cecilia.h.mo@berkeley.edu](mailto:cecilia.h.mo@berkeley.edu)) is the Judith E. Gruber Associate Professor of Political Science at University of California, Berkeley

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