Despite a long history of technical, vocational education, and training (TVET) in Kenya—including substantial investments in the development of vocational training institutions—youth unemployment remains high, particularly among women. Several supply-side and demand-side factors are believed to contribute to existing gender gaps in labour market participation and gender-based employment segregation.

An ongoing research project is evaluating a multifaceted TVET program to generate new evidence on how effective gender-sensitive soft-skills training is for addressing both gender gaps in labour market participation and gender-based employment segregation in Kenya.

The research involves an experimental design, where beneficiaries (TVET students) are assigned to treatment and control groups. A baseline survey of the beneficiaries was conducted before the training was implemented (in October 2022). A midline survey was conducted in May 2023 to assess the effects of the training on various outcomes (by comparing with the baseline data). An endline survey is scheduled for November 2023.

This policy brief summarizes the key preliminary findings from the midline survey, which already provides relevant insights regarding how providing gender-sensitive soft-skills training can contribute to addressing the supply and demand-side barriers faced by young women as they make the transition from school to work.

Key findings from the baseline survey

- More women respondents would prefer to be employed in the public sector than their male counterparts, while more men would prefer to run private businesses.
- Female respondents report being more willing to accept lower salaries for any type of employment than their male counterparts.
- Female respondents are more likely than their male counterparts to perceive that more women work, and are likely to work, in an environment where most employees are men, and that women have, at some point, been harassed while commuting or at work.

Key findings from the midline survey

6 months after training

- The gender sensitive soft-skills training appears to be more effective in improving job search and ultimate labour market outcomes among female (vs male) graduates.
- The training encourages women graduates to consider self-employment as a career path.
- The training generates larger effects in improving the perceptions and attitudes about women’s labor force participation among young men than among their female counterparts.
What’s at stake

There have been considerable improvements in women’s education globally, yet the share of women officially employed or looking for paid jobs remains low in many developing countries, including Kenya. Women are more likely than men to work in low-productivity sectors, informal jobs and less-profitable businesses, and to engage in unpaid care and domestic work.

Evidence suggests that the factors contributing to these undesirable outcomes include gender-based employment segregation, and social and cultural norms (Das & Kotikula, 2019; Hicks, Hicks, & Maldonado, 2016; Sahai, 2021). These factors discourage and prevent women from pursuing education or working in certain types of jobs. This, in turn, constrains both the supply of and demand for female workers.

While the traditional technical, vocational education and training (TVET) curriculum addresses important gaps in technical skills, it tends to ignore soft-skills training, including non-cognitive or socio-emotional skills. However, soft-skills training improves agency and the ability to make strategic life choices, which are critical for addressing gender-based employment segregation and social and cultural norms.

Considering this, a team of local and international researchers sought to examine the effectiveness of gender-sensitive soft-skills training in addressing gender gaps in labour-market participation and in tackling gender-based employment segregation. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

• Can gender-sensitive skills training change social norms, women’s perceptions and attitudes towards traditionally male-dominated jobs?
• Can gender-sensitive skills training improve young women’s labour market, empowerment, and wellbeing outcomes?
• Which skills and traits are the most beneficial to young women for entering traditionally male-dominated, high-value jobs and sectors?

This study is conducted in collaboration with four public TVET institutions in Kenya:
- Kabete National Polytechnic
- Nairobi Technical Training Institute
- P.C. Kinyanjui Technical training Institute
- Kiambu Institute of Science and Technology

The intervention

The gender-sensitive skills training intervention was designed to build socio-emotional (“soft”) skills that would improve the trainees’ ability to navigate interpersonal and social situations effectively, supporting their transition from school to work. The gender-sensitive skills training module considered young women’s unique interests, preferences and constraints. It included components to empower young women and enhance their ability to make strategic life choices.

The course content was developed by Alkimia, a consulting company specializing in the development of socio-emotional gender-sensitive trainings. The course comprises a series of 10 one-hour video episodes, an instructor’s manual and a trainee’s workbook. The training was delivered using the videos with in-person facilitation by class teachers who had been trained to give the gender-sensitive soft-skills training.
Key findings from the baseline survey

1. More women respondents would prefer to be employed in the public sector than their male counterparts, while more men would prefer to run private businesses.

Overall, both male and female respondents preferred to be employed for wages in the public or private sectors, rather than pursuing other types of careers.

More female respondents (47%) indicated a preference for working in the public sector than their male counterparts (39%).

Equally, fewer female respondents (13%) aspired to be self-employed (i.e., operate their own businesses) than their male counterparts (22%).

The proportion of male and female respondents who aspired to work for wages in the private sector and to pursue further education is similar (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Labour-market preferences by sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Be employed in public sector</th>
<th>Be employed in private sector</th>
<th>Run own business</th>
<th>Further studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women (47%)</td>
<td>Woman (39%)</td>
<td>Woman (24%)</td>
<td>Woman (13%)</td>
<td>Woman (15%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men (39%)</td>
<td>Man (24%)</td>
<td>Man (24%)</td>
<td>Man (22%)</td>
<td>Man (14%)</td>
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Source: Authors’ analysis: Baseline survey on the effectiveness of gender-sensitive skills training in addressing gender gaps in labour-market participation in Kenya, 2022.
2. Female respondents report being more willing to accept lower salaries, for any type of employment, than their male counterparts.

There were striking differences in the monthly salaries that male and female respondents were willing to accept if offered employment.

Male respondents reported higher salary expectations across all employment categories, in informal jobs as well as formal jobs, and in the private and public sectors.

Furthermore, both male and female respondents would require a higher salary for formal jobs in government than for formal jobs in the private sector or for informal jobs (see Figure 2).

These expectations and perceptions are likely to explain and affect the ultimate labour market outcomes for women.

Figure 2. Lowest monthly salary male and female respondents are willing to accept if offered employment

3. Female respondents are more likely than their male counterparts to perceive that:
   • more women work, and are likely to work, in an environment where most employees are men,
   • women have, at some point, been harassed while commuting or at work.

Respondents were asked to share their perceptions about women’s labour-market participation by considering 10 women they knew, including relatives, friends and neighbours.

Female respondents reported that six out of these 10 women worked, while their male counterparts reported that five out of 10 women worked.

Equal proportions of male and female respondents perceived that women worked outside their home (four out of 10), and that women were putting their reputation on the line by working (two out of 10).

However, female respondents were more likely than male respondents to perceive that women worked in an environment where most employees were men (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Perceptions about women’s labour-market participation
Policy lessons from the baseline survey

The baseline survey reveals striking differences between male and female respondents’ labour-market preferences and their perceptions about women’s labour-market participation. The descriptive statistics provide important insights that help evaluate the effectiveness of gender-sensitive soft skills training for addressing gender gaps in labour-market participation.

Gendered differences in perceptions and expectations are likely to affect ultimate labour-market outcomes, including wage differentials.

The salary demands of female respondents were consistently lower than those of their male counterparts. Complementing the traditional TVET curriculum with gender-sensitive soft skills training (including non-cognitive or socio-emotional skills) is likely to empower young women and enhance their ability to make strategic life choices, such as negotiating higher salaries and employment benefits.

It is imperative to raise awareness of women's needs for better workplace safety and security, particularly as there are important differences in how men and women perceive the challenges. Unsafe public transport undermines women's rights and freedoms in accessing and enjoying mobility, which may have a negative impact on their perceptions of women's labour-force participation. As such, gender-sensitive public transport services and policies are needed to consider the unique needs of women in public transportation.

Key findings from the midline survey

1. The training appears to be more effective in improving female graduates' job search and ultimate labor market outcomes (than male graduates' outcomes).

Female youth are more likely than male youth to benefit from the soft-skills training. Specifically, at the time of the survey, female youth assigned to receive the soft-skills training were:

- More likely to be searching and applying for jobs in the four weeks preceding the surveys (i.e. associated with more intensive efforts to transit from school to work), than their male counterparts.
- More likely to have worked for earning income, than their male counterparts.

We note that these are sizeable impacts given that only five to six months had passed since the candidates graduated.

2. The training encouraged female graduates to consider self-employment as a career path.

Access to soft-skills training was effective in encouraging more women to consider self-employment as a career path. The training increased the likelihood of women opting for self-employment by six percentage points. This is significant, especially considering the disproportionally low preference for self-employment among women in our baseline data.

3. The training improved young men's perception of and attitudes about women's work.

Young men who received the training were much more likely to agree with the statement that men and women should be paid equally for the same work.

Similarly, the soft-skills training significantly improved the male trainees’ perception about women’s rights to work. In particular, they were less likely to agree with the statements “education is more important for a boy than a girl” and “when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.”
Policy lessons from the midline survey

The analysis of the midline survey indicates that the gender-sensitive training triggered diverse responses and effects across the young male and female candidates. While the training appears to be more effective in improving the job search and ultimate labour market outcomes for female graduates, the soft-skills training generated larger effects in improving young men’s perceptions and attitudes about women’s labour force participation. These findings have implications for designing effective and targeted interventions to improve youth employment in Africa.

Furthermore, investing in programmes that aim to train more women in male-dominated courses, thus increasing their employment in male-dominated sectors, is likely to address perceptions related to women working in male-dominated environments.

Investment to develop curricula that include gender sensitive soft-skills training will have important implications for women’s labour market outcomes.

Providing gender-sensitive soft-skills training alongside the technical training offered by TVETs appears to be critical for improving women’s job search and associated efforts to transit from school to work.

Investing in programs supporting gender sensitive soft-skills training is likely to improve female entrepreneurship.

Equipping women with the necessary gender-sensitive soft skills is likely to increase women’s participation in self-employment and entrepreneurial activities.

Investing in gender sensitive soft-skills training is effective for improving young men’s perceptions and attitudes about women’s work.

Gender sensitive training can improve men’s attitudes and perceptions regarding women’s labour force participation and working conditions, including their perceptions on the equal-pay principle, which could help reduce the gender wage gap.

References


This brief summarizes the key findings from the baseline and midline surveys conducted as part of the PEP-led impact evaluation project “Gender-sensitive training to improve women’s labour market outcomes”.

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of PEP.