

Soft Skills Boost Job Prospects and Pay for Young Women in the Informal Sector

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Notwithstanding considerable improvements in women's education globally, the share of women officially employed or looking for paid jobs remains low in many developing countries, including Kenya. Women largely work in low-productivity sectors, informal jobs, and less profitable businesses. More women than men also engage in unpaid care and domestic work.

Evidence from the Kenya Women Economic Empowerment Community of Practice, a project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and convened by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW Africa), shows that gender-based employment segregation and regressive socio-cultural norms are some of the factors contributing to women's continued marginalization in the formal economy. These norms discourage and prevent women from pursuing higher education as well as from working in male-dominated jobs, thus constraining the supply of and demand for female workers.

Kenya offers a traditional well established technical, vocational education, and training (TVET) curriculum operating under the Kenyan Ministry of Education, which has played a key role in advancing employment opportunities for young women by addressing important gaps in technical skills. But the curriculum tends to ignore soft skills training, including non-cognitive or socio-emotional skills.

Soft skills are critical in addressing gender-based employment segregation and patriarchal socio-cultural norms by improving young women's agency and ability to make strategic life choices.

Considering this, a team of local and international researchers, supported by the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP), and funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) as part of their Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) – East Africa initiative, 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 in Kenya. Specifically, PEP researchers in partnership with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) explored whether gender-sensitive skills training could change young women's and men's expectations and perceptions about the labour market. Equally, they examined whether it could improve young women and men's labor market empowerment, and well-being outcomes.

The study also aimed to identify the skills and traits most beneficial to young women and men for transitioning from training to employment.

The study, conducted in collaboration with four public TVET institutions in Kenya, including the Kabete National Polytechnic, the Nairobi Technical Training Institute, the P.C. Kinyanjui Technical Training Institute, and the Kiambu Institute of Science and Technology, aimed to improve the ability of young women and men's navigation of interpersonal and social situations effectively, thus supporting their transition from school to work. The gender-sensitive skills training module particularly considered young women's unique interests, preferences, and constraints, with a view to empowering them to make strategic life choices.

Employing an experimental approach, about 3,700 youth (including 1,686 female and 2,053 male TVET students) were assigned to treatment and control groups. A baseline survey was conducted among beneficiaries before the gender-sensitive soft skills training was delivered (in October 2022) followed by two surveys conducted at an interval of six months (May 2023) and a year (November 2023) after the training was completed – to assess the impact on various outcomes.

Impact of Investing in Soft Skills Training for Young Men and Women

PEP's study found that gender-sensitive training demonstrated significant changes in the respondents' participation in the labor market. These changes were shaped by the respondent's degree of self-efficacy and locus of control. For instance, the study showed that young women were more likely to participate in the labor market as compared to their male counterparts with similar characteristics. More specifically, young women who believed that they had control over outcomes in their lives were more likely to participate in the labor market as compared to their peers who believed that "outside" forces controlled their lives.

Further, the study found that the soft skills training generated significant wage advantages by increasing the income earned by young women possessing a high degree of self-efficacy and locus of control. Similarly, the study also demonstrated that the soft skills training had a greater impact on the preference to be self-employed for young women. Additionally, access to the soft skills training triggered higher satisfaction with TVET training among such young women than among their male counterparts.

These findings have implications for designing effective and targeted interventions to improve youth employment in Africa. In particular, the findings highlight what type of training and related interventions may promote the transition of youth from school to the labor market. But, most importantly, these findings reinforce the role of personality traits and associated non-cognitive skills in shaping labor market outcomes.

Disseminating research findings to key stakeholders

On March 26, 2024 PEP researchers brought together relevant stakeholders from the fields of employment and vocational education, including government representatives, to share the evidence from the research study on how investing in soft skills training can help in improving labour-market outcomes for youth in Kenya.

Responding to the findings, Grace Kaome from the Federation of Kenya Employers said: *"The impacts you see in the studies are likely to come from the support and training given to girls that enhanced their confidence and capacity ... Employers are committed to helping institutions train graduates that are ready for the market and soft skills are important even for economic growth."*

During the panel discussion that followed the research presentation, Purity Mutea, Deputy Principal at the Nairobi Technical Training Institute said: *"Soft skills are key not only for the job market but also for the day to day life. TVETs are working with the industry to develop the curriculum."*

Nelson Vunyinda, a Senior Economist at the State Department of TVET agreed. *"Technical skills are important and soft skills are equally important ... As we train students, let us know their differences and enhance positive interactions to help in character building,"* he said.

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