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Overcoming barriers and ensuring equal opportunities: Education, skills & work-based learning for developing employability of girls in India

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While the number of girls in India who are able to improve their future prospects and experience economic empowerment is increasing, they still face a number of barriers such as gender differentiations in earnings, career progression and occupational segregation in the transition from education to employment.

According to a 2018 ILO-UNICEF study entitled “[Skills, Education and Training for Girls Now](#)”, the global NEET rate, which measures the proportion of youth not in education, employment or training, is twice as high for female than male youth (at 31 and 16 per cent, respectively). In India, the NEET rate is 43 per cent for males and 96 per cent for females. *What inhibits the transition of female youth from education to work? What leads younger women to drop out of the workforce, and what prevents them from returning to paid work later on?* This blog discusses the barriers that female youth in India face in acquiring education and skills for improving their employability and proposes a set of measures that could help overcome such barriers.

Barriers that girls face

- **Gender roles and care responsibilities:** Socio-cultural norms, both within the family and in the public sphere (the workplace and the community), that emphasise the caregiving and reproduction roles of girls and women restrict their mobility and significantly shape their own and their family’s decisions on participation in education and training.
- **Concerns for girls’ safety:** Even though primary schools in both rural and urban areas are located in the vicinity of the girls’ homes, they are often required to travel long distances to pursue education and training. Given the distance between the home and education/training institutions, fewer female teachers and the predominance of male students in certain courses/skill training institutions also raise concerns about girls’ safety and generally discourages them from pursuing further education and training.
- **Preference for gender stereotyped study courses:** Family members in India often encourage girls to take up subject areas that are perceived as being compatible with their gender roles. In fact, the 2018 ILO-UNICEF study, recognises this as a global phenomenon wherein girls and boys are often steered into stereotyped study areas, regarded as traditionally “feminine” or



“masculine”. Observations in Industrial Training Institutes in India also reveal that technical/mechanical subjects are male-dominated. Furthermore, many girls end up opting for courses that may not be in demand in the labour market.

- **Gender bias in traditional apprenticeship training:** A large part of vocational skills in India is passed on through informal apprenticeships, typically, from a male master craftsperson to a younger male apprentice. This gender bias excludes girls who are led to acquire skills (embroidery, stitching, *bindi*¹ and bangle-making) only through female social networks. Such training, though vital for the transmission of traditional skills that often involve intricate workmanship and arduous labour, usually leads to informal employment that is irregular, low paid and does not provide social security or employment benefits.



To overcome these constraints, certain suggestions could be significant in moving towards a better future for girls and pave the way for the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education, Goal 5 on Gender Equality and Goal 8 on Decent Work & Economic Growth, namely:

1. **Sensitizing families and prospective employers:** Since gender bias is entrenched in social norms and stereotypes, it is not just the girls themselves, but also their families and prospective employers who need to be sensitized through social and digital media campaigns, and one-on-one counselling sessions to adopt new and different attitudes towards girls' education, skill training and participation in diverse occupations and job-roles.
2. **Popularizing role models and career counselling for girls:** We



¹ A decorative stick-on adornment worn on the forehead, traditionally a sign of a married Hindu woman in India.



need to have more role models in diverse and emerging fields to be able to inspire other girls. Campaigns to popularize these role models through social media and interactive events would play a significant part.

3. **Improving health, privacy, and safety at learning institutions:** The [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\) and World Health Organization \(WHO\) Global Baseline Report 2018](#) found that between 2000 and 2016, there was a sharp decline in India in the proportion of schools without any sanitation facility. A recent study using administrative school-level data has found that setting-up of sex-specific latrines in schools led to an increase in female enrolment.² Similarly, setting-up girls' hostels and separate toilets in skill training institutions as well as making provisions for safe transport facilities can significantly impact the ability of girls to opt for and continue vocational education, even when such institutions are located at a distance from their homes.
4. **Increasing the participation of girls in apprenticeships:** If girls are being excluded from certain kinds of apprenticeship training, as found in technical and mechanical trades in India, employers need to be encouraged and incentivized to recruit more girls. Female trainees also need to be motivated to join these apprenticeship programmes through support in the form of stipends/scholarships as well as transport and lodging facilities. At the same time, transmission of traditional skills such as embroidery, weaving etc. continued to be encouraged and women need to be supported with better avenues for marketing and brand building so that such work and craftsmanship receives better economic returns.
5. **Facilitating business and entrepreneurship for women:** Along with policy initiatives that support better opportunities for women in wage and salaried employment, initiatives supporting women's businesses and co-operatives need to be strengthened, particularly in rural areas. Initial institutional lending with easy terms to women's ventures and co-operatives needs to be complemented with assistance for marketing, improving the business through optimizing costs, use of new technology and branding, improving product quality and ensuring business sustainability.
6. **Ensure equal opportunity policies at the workplace:** Policy measures that ensure provisions of maternity leave/benefit, paternity leave, childcare facilities at or close to the workplace, flexi hours, part-time work, etc. are

² Adukia, Anjali (2017), "Sanitation and education", American Economic Journal: Applied Economics (2017): 23-59. Available at: https://harris.uchicago.edu/files/adukia_sanitation_and_education.pdf, accessed on 16th April 2019.



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imperative not just for encouraging women to participate in diverse sectors, but also for their continued employment.

Concerted efforts directed towards challenging stereotypes in ways that highlight the social prestige and economic gains of contributions by girls to their families, society and the economy, combined with efforts to introduce changes in education, skills and apprenticeships systems are both crucial in addressing constraints to their learning and participation in paid employment.

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