

Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This article presents findings from the Upskilling for Future Generations Project (Gen-Up), a participatory, collaborative project designed with and for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone to understand the links between technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and sustainable employment. The aim of the project is to provide a model of gender mentoring that can help communities to challenge gender stereotypes and to empower young women to build careers in male-dominated labour sectors. The article calls for a deeper, gender-just understanding of ‘skills’ necessary to fulfil the United Nations’ ‘decent work’ goals in the context of deepening urban inequality and gender discrimination. The article situates gender at the centre of future TVET policy, arguing that without a gender-just and gender-sensitive approach, skills programming will continue to have limited success in rebalancing patriarchal and discriminatory labour markets.

Keywords: TVET, decent work, skills, gender disparities, aspirations, transition to employment, Cameroon, Sierra Leone

Note on the authors: see end of article.

Introduction

African cities are undergoing unprecedented growth, with the United Nations (UN) predicting that over half of Africa's population will live in urban areas by 2050 (UN-Habitat 2016). Within these urban centres, expanding informal settlements (slums) act as 'spatial poverty traps' (Unterhalter 2009: 16) with limited social services and work opportunities, and with exploitative relationships of (gendered) power and patronage that come to bear particularly heavily on young women (Chant & McIlwaine 2016). In many sub-Saharan African economies, as many as two-thirds of young people are unemployed, employed irregularly (mainly in the informal sector but also in undignified conditions within the formal sector) or not engaged in either education or training (Elder & Koné 2014). Nearly 70 per cent of those who are working live in extreme or moderate poverty (ILO 2016).

Cutting across these aggregate trends is the persistence of gender gaps in decent work opportunities. Despite improvements in education and skills, labour force participation rates among women in Africa remain well below those for their male counterparts, and when they do participate women face a higher likelihood of being unemployed or in vulnerable employment, as socio-cultural norms and stereotypes shape gender roles that identify women with restrictive capabilities in the labour market. Young slum-dwelling women in particular are profoundly disadvantaged compared with men (Tacoli & Satterthwaite 2013) and are at risk of being 'left behind' in settings in which poor infrastructure, deficient services and weak local economies, coupled with patriarchal systems, a huge burden of unpaid domestic labour and experiences of violence, frequently constrain their access to education, job opportunities, and socio-economic and geographical mobilities (Brouder & Sweetman 2015; Chant & McIlwaine 2016; Chant *et al.* 2017).

While there is growing recognition that different forms of skills provisioning can offer significant opportunities for young women to overcome these issues by combining individual change with social, economic and political empowerment (McLean & Modi 2016; Morton *et al.* 2014; UN Women 2013), significant challenges remain for governments and (inter)national civil society in knowing how to expand access to sufficient and equitable opportunities for decent work through 'gender justice' (Nussbaum 2011). Consequently, 'gender just' policies seek programming with an awareness of entrenched gender inequalities at their core, situating young women in complex webs of relationships with multiple layers of vulnerability including early marriage, sexual and gender-based violence and the neglect of female education (Marcus & Harper 2014; Najoli 2019; UN Women 2022; UNESCO 2016). However, while a strong gender and development lobby has brought the issue of gender inequalities into the mainstream, this has largely translated into a narrow focus on achieving gender parity

or economic growth, rather than challenging the socio-cultural norms underlying and maintaining gender inequalities (Harper & Marcus 2018: 26).

This article addresses these issues through preliminary findings from the pioneering Upskilling for Future Generations Project (Gen-Up). Working with technical and vocational education and training (TVET) providers in Sierra Leone and Cameroon, Gen-Up targets a gender gap in current TVET provision by focusing on gender equality as an essential foundation of ‘decent’ work and the Sustainable Development Goals in creating more inclusive and work-ready TVET programmes for aspirational young women and mentorship in their transition from training to employment. Working in partnership with the largest skills provider in Africa, the Salesian Don Bosco professional centres, in two rapidly expanding cities, Yaoundé in Cameroon and Freetown in Sierra Leone, Gen-Up is working with youth researchers to explore how TVET can operate as a vehicle to challenge wider societal gender discrimination.

Our primary local partner is Don Bosco Technical Schools, part of a network of 102 vocational training centres situated in forty-two countries in Africa. With a focus on marginalised young people including slum-dwellers and street children, Don Bosco is an internationally recognised vocational training service provider at the forefront of local, national and international TVET initiatives. We focus on the particular model of TVET training offered by the Don Bosco holistic approach, which is designed to endow specific skills combined with an ‘intensive values formation program to form them into responsible members of their communities’ (Don Bosco 2022). This unusual injection of personal empowerment into TVET programming offers a new vision of holistic skills development which contradicts a narrow focus on ‘skills for employment’ and sees skills training as part of broader ‘social’ landscapes (see Brennan 2014; McGrath 2012).

Methods

The Gen-Up project uses a combination of youth-led ethnographic and participatory methods to generate in-depth empirical data. Our research design and impact strategy are locally grounded, comprising female-led knowledge creation (through peer-to-peer research) and exchange, user engagement and co-production of evidence-led solutions to overcome gendered barriers in transition to decent work. The data collected for this article stem from qualitative interviews with Don Bosco staff members in both countries (fifteen in each country) and preliminary focus group discussions (FGDs) (ten in Cameroon and eleven in Sierra Leone) and follow-up interviews (seventy-five in Cameroon and 100 in Sierra Leone) with young women either currently engaged in TVET courses or seeking jobs after completing training (aged 16–35). Staff informants

were identified on the basis of their experience working with young people, with informants ranging in role from everyday trainers to centre managers. Where possible we tried to select informants from a range of different roles and levels to give a fuller portrait of everyday life at a Don Bosco centre.

As such, our partnership offers a fruitful platform to explore the potential of TVET centres to act as levers for gender transformation in wider society. Local researchers have been selected for their experience of working on participatory projects involving youth researchers, a history of work on gender and their ability to broker local networks. The phase of the project reported here is part of our stakeholder engagement and mapping process, which attempts to situate the Don Bosco model of holistic TVET programming in both the broader skills landscape and the local landscapes of gender equality and policy around education–employment transitions. We aim to trace the contribution of the Don Bosco TVET approach towards more gender-sensitive and responsive skills programmes and to understand the complex connection between gender, social change, skills and education–employment transitions. In the following section we outline our preliminary findings to date, beginning with a discussion of the specific Don Bosco model before exploring how gender and TVET intersect in the work of Don Bosco educators and staff.

Gender in TVET policy

In the late 1980s, gender studies began to emphasise how patriarchal gender stereotypes and divides have permeated not only wider society but also education and training systems. As such, girls and women have experienced persistent discrimination in labour markets, schooling and TVET (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022; Niemeyer & Colley 2015: 1). In time, these insights fed into policy attempts to broaden ‘education for all’ (McGrath 2010; see also Chisamya *et al.* 2012; McGrath *et al.* 2020a, 2020b), as demonstrated in the gender objectives of the UN Convention on Technical and Vocational Education (UNESCO 1989), the World Declaration on Education (1990) and the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) Framework for Action (1990) (King & Palmer 2007). At the turn of the millennium, the link between gender and universal education was further reinforced (Jackson 2009) through the UN’s Millennium Development Goal to ‘Promote gender equality and empower women’ (Lewin 2020: 1–2; UNESCO 2000), the gender objectives of the World Education Forum (2000) and the UNESCO (2003) Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality Global Monitoring Report. Yet as these attempts were largely geared towards primary and basic education, policy attention to TVET – and gender within TVET – was neglected (King & Palmer 2007; McGrath 2010: 538; Palmer 2007). For instance, the UNEVOC

Network is UNESCO's global network for institutions specialized in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and was developed in 2002 to cater exclusively to TVET development, the agencies' first 'Strategy for TVET 1', which was not implemented until 2010 (running until 2015), despite referring to girls and women, offered no gender-specific objectives or targets (Broek *et al.* 2015: 47).

More recently, however, attention to TVET – and its gender dynamics – has been renewed by international calls to harness female-focused training towards alleviating development concerns (Idris & Aluko 2013), including growing youth unemployment and gender disparities beyond basic education (Chea & Huijsmans 2018: 39; Hilal 2012: 686; Meath *et al.* 2021). A significant influence has been the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Cheruiyot & Munyi 2019), as implemented in 2015 by UN member states. In particular, SDG 5, towards achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (UN Women 2022: 5–8), has worked alongside SDG 4, which acknowledges the importance of TVET in ensuring decent, sustainable and gender-just employment. Aimed at these objectives, TVET is now acknowledged as a 'necessary element in the development strategies of developing countries' (Wilkins, in Miller 2020: 2). Illustratively, UNESCO's 2016–21 and 2022–9 TVET strategies urge governments to develop gender-responsive policy frameworks and to increase funding, data monitoring and gender mainstreaming at local and national levels.

Recent literature has also highlighted how contemporary changes to education, employment and labour organisation have had profound impacts on women's relationships with TVET (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022 Niemeyer & Colley 2015). In some respects, the impacts have been positive. For instance, the globalisation of certain trades has raised the status of some feminised occupations, such as Ghana's hairdressing sector, which, due to global marketisation, has become a high-status career choice. This has birthed multiple Ghanaian hairdressing TVET courses, which are applauded by young women for their relevance and employment prospects (Langevang *et al.* 2015). Moreover, employment needs within typically 'male' professions, skills mismatches and labour migration have all disturbed gender divides, thus broadening policy approaches towards male-dominated roles and widening female opportunities and aspirations (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022; Niemeyer & Colley 2015).

However, such processes have also had disproportionate consequences throughout the Global South (Newman *et al.* 2014; Niemeyer & Colley 2015). For instance, increasing privatisation of the TVET sector and low governmental budgeting towards TVET means that girls often incur unaffordable costs and lack financial support from training providers. Moreover, growing youth unemployment across many African countries has reduced the availability of apprenticeships (with those that remain prioritising males) and led many young men to migrate in search of better employment,

which further constrains women's access to TVET due to additional work and domestic demands (Gaidwanza 2008: 8–9, 30; Niemeyer & Colley 2015: 5).

In recent years, the COVID-19 crisis has only heightened inequalities. Namely, the closures of training institutions and a shift towards online working and learning have disadvantaged girls and women across Africa, due to their lower access to information technology (IT) and internet connectivity (Langthaler & Bazafkan 2020; Porter *et al.* 2020). In particular, those living in poverty and informal contexts such as slum areas struggle to use or access digital technology due to a lack of resources or literacy and basic education (Ayyappan & Shalaby 2021). Thus, the pandemic has amplified an existing digital gender divide while narrowing female access to TVET (African Union & UNICEF 2021; Chun *et al.* 2021: 43, 46). However, the COVID-19 crisis also appears to have opened up some opportunities for girls in poor communities across sub-Saharan Africa due to increased use of distance learning and more flexible or hybrid approaches to instruction, though there remain significant doubts over the long-term viability of this mode of learning (Odoni *et al.* 2022).

Is adding women enough?

As stated, attention to gender in TVET has been reinvigorated. However, prevailing inequalities have led to debate regarding the most effective approach to achieving gender equality (see Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022; Lopes Cardozo *et al.* 2015; McGrath 2012). Simply put, this approach involves integrating gender within policy not only as a means of equality, but also as a crucial element of wider sustainable development and economic growth (Meath *et al.* 2021: 8; North 2010). Having roots in human capital theory, this economic development approach stresses that female inclusion in TVET makes 'good economic sense' (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022: 155) as it will increase employability, productivity and earning potential (Carneiro *et al.* 2010). This is also the dominant approach in Africa, where female inclusion across education, employment and training has become an essential component of remedying youth unemployment and achieving a sustainable social and economic vision (Meath *et al.* 2021; Najoli 2019). For instance, goal 6 of Africa's Agenda 2063 towards 'transforming the continent into a global powerhouse' aims to ensure 'an Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth' (African Union 2022).

Sometimes described as the 'add women and stir' approach, many commentators argue that gender action has become a 'de-politicised, technical exercise' (Parkes *et al.* 2020: 2) which fails to address structural issues that limit women's access to both individual job opportunities and broader labour markets (Eyben & Napier-Moore 2009:

298; [Månsson & Färnsveden 2012](#): 7). Across most African countries, men consistently fare better in terms of enrolment, participation and pass rates, and the continent continues to have the lowest global rates of female participation in ‘technical’ TVET subjects ([UNESCO & UNEVOC 2020](#): 12; [ILO 2017](#)). For instance, in 2019, only 30 per cent of Kenya’s TVET trainees were female ([Najoli 2019](#)) and just 991 of the 5,251 students who sat for Uganda’s November–December TVET examinations were girls and women ([Mawanda 2020](#)). Moreover, although noting some increases in female participation, critics maintain that the economic development approach has failed to address the root causes of inequality and that women continue to experience discrimination and subjugation ([Bray-Collins et al. 2022](#); [Niemeyer & Colley 2015](#)).

Signs of transformation

In a positive shift, the recent evidence shows that a number of organisations are, in differing ways, providing policy and programming which demonstrate a commitment to both understanding and challenging the causes of disparities ([Crea 2016](#); [Pongo et al. 2014](#)). At the regional level, UN bodies including [UNICEF \(2016\)](#): 3), [UN Women \(2022\)](#) and [UNESCO \(2015\)](#) have all developed agendas which seek to address barriers such as child marriage, gender-based violence and the de-prioritisation of female education ([Najoli 2019](#)). The African Union (AU) is developing a continent-wide gender-transformative TVET framework and programming network in order to challenge gender inequalities, assumptions and divides, as well as undertaking community-based research on how gender norms play out in localities ([Pongo et al. 2014](#)).

Moreover, some recent interventions demonstrating attempts to harness girls’ education to challenge the foundations of patriarchal structures ([Maclure & Denov 2009](#); 613), or recognising that female participation in policy and programming development has often been tokenistic ([Asante & Shepherd 2020](#)), have attempted to centre local women’s perspectives, either in TVET design or by utilising TVET as a vehicle for public participation. For instance, Jesuit Commons ‘Higher Education at the Margins’ (JC:HEM) not only offers girls opportunities to undertake an online university diploma but also aims to empower women to become gender role models with an eye to enhancing local non-governmental organisation (NGO) and community action. In discussing the programme, a trainee in Malawi’s Dzaleka refugee camp stated that in the light of constrictive gender stereotypes and domestic constraints, the programme ‘uplifted’ and ‘empowered’ her ‘as a girl’ ([Crea 2016](#): 14–16).

Similarly, Baraka Women’s Centre, in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya, combines skills building with gender transformation, offering courses in local trades such

as sewing, IT and banking, while it also provides gender violence training for men and women, leading to both profitable enterprises and self-transformations ([First United Lutheran Church 2021](#); [First Love International 2021](#)). As one graduate stated, ‘I am in tears of joy when I recall where Baraka Women’s Centre removed me from and who I am today ... If it were not for BWC, I would not be who I am today’ ([Women’s Centers International 2021](#)). Additionally, the NGO 50/50 in Sierra Leone aims to achieve gender equality in the country’s political system. Combining education with advocacy, the group offers training to equip women with the skills and resources to become actively engaged in political processes – particularly surrounding gender issues – as well as providing women and community leaders with workshops on how to ensure that women’s rights provisions make a tangible difference ‘on the ground’ ([Maclure & Denov 2009](#): 617–18).

As we discuss in the next section, positive developments such as these need to be situated in relation to ongoing global instability and the precarity of sub-Saharan African nations already struggling with deep-rooted structural issues. As we show, TVET in each research context needs to be understood as part of broader gender norms and ingrained socio-cultural aspects which are often not taken into account when attempts are made to implement complex TVET policy.

Sierra Leone

The impact of the 2014 Ebola outbreak – which led to 3,145 deaths in the country ([WHO 2015](#)) – on top of legacies of a decade of civil war that ended in 2002, accelerated an economic downturn, exacerbated already deeply rooted gender inequalities ([UNDP 2014](#)), increased the cost of living and heightened political and social tensions in the run-up to the 2018 elections. The destruction in rural areas also led to a stream of migrants arriving in large urban areas, particularly the capital Freetown, with informal urban settlements expanding in the city and beyond the city limits, in some cases creating dangerous potential for erosion and mudslides ([World Bank Group 2018](#)). By 2030 the country’s total population is projected to be 8.6 million, with 44 per cent living in urban areas ([UNDP 2014](#)). This is coupled with one of the highest unemployment rates in West Africa, with one in two youths unemployed in 2015, 78.5 per cent of employed youths either in vulnerable employment or unpaid family workers, and nine in ten young workers in informal employment. According to World Bank and International Labour Organization (ILO) data, youth employment is growing rapidly, with the share of young people neither in employment nor in education or training was 13.4 per cent in 2014, with young women more likely than their male counterparts to be out of school and not working ([ILO 2017](#)). The country has high

youth labour underutilisation rates, particularly among young women at 72.8 per cent (in contrast to 59.9 per cent for male youth) (ILO 2017).

TVET in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has a rich history of educational aspirations and programmes, with an academic system based on British standards which led to it being seen as the ‘Athens of West Africa’, with scholars coming from all over sub-Saharan Africa to study at its new universities. However, as education came to be seen as the primary route to social mobility and thus social status, this system also inherited some of the prejudices inherent in the British academic tradition which placed vocational education at the bottom of the educational pyramid (Matsumoto 2018: 16). This changed following the decade-long civil war which partly resulted from, and led to, the existence of large groups of disenfranchised young men. Since the 2000s, policy emphasis has increasingly been placed on TVET programmes, initially as part of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process which focused on incorporating ex-combatants back into society (Paulson 2009). New TVET programmes were implemented and incorporated into the educational system, creating a more sustained flow of students and graduates for the workforce. However, this project has stalled in recent years, with a relatively small number of TVET centres compared with secondary schools and a minor budgetary allocation in the government education strategy, leaving the TVET system suffering from ‘low quality, low relevance, limited access, inefficiencies, and cutbacks’ (Peeters *et al.* 2009: 102).

However, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) takes TVET as a key priority to support youth employment and economic growth incorporated it into the Medium-Term National Development Plan 2019–2023: Education for Development. In the recent past, formidable organisations, for example TVET Coalition Sierra Leone and National TVET, have been founded to support the cause of the TVET scheme by helping to improve the employability of TVET graduates nationwide. In terms of access to education, girls have been hit hardest by the impact of the civil war, Ebola and most recently COVID-19. TVET has been promoted as a missing link between education systems and labour markets (Peeters *et al.* 2009), but the legacy of the focus on civil war combatants and victims has left it, like many youth-focused policies, leaning heavily towards young men. For example, for many young men, driving motor-bike taxis (*okadas*) has proven an important mode of simultaneously earning a decent living and practising a form of autonomous, stylised manhood in keeping with the independence, power and prestige they developed during the conflict (Bolten 2012; Buccitelli & Denov 2015; Menzel 2019).

The TVET policy framework features three key aims. The first aim is to address inadequate key skills responsible for market failures, which prevent private sector

firms from increasing productivity and maximising economic benefits in the sectors prioritised by the government. The second goal is to address the major challenges confronting the TVET system in Sierra Leone with the aim of transforming and positioning it to contribute to economic development through demand-driven skills for employment. The third aim is to produce a highly skilled workforce to support the government's economic transformation objectives, with a focus on key sectors as stated in the National Development Plan 2019–2023 (National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy for Sierra Leone 2019).

Despite these ambitions, the implementation of TVET policy has been uneven, with riots and protests erupting around the placement of skills centres and training institutes in 2016 highlighting their symbolic significance (David 2016). These issues have perpetuated the lingering intergenerational tensions which led to the conflict and which have continued to create feelings of economic and social marginalisation among the youth, including their strong reaction against mistreatment by chiefs and elders, prompting young people to 'revolt' against their elders and the corrupt state in pursuit of recognition and empowerment (Tom 2014). This has led to a surge of youth mobilisation structured around Western human rights discourses aiming 'to secure economic and political advantage' as 'youth who view traditional authorities as corrupt and failing to protect their interests against politicians are claiming accountability from below' (Tom 2014: 335). Despite this movement, traditional authorities continue to dominate, with elders, chiefs and politicians invoking customs and traditions to maintain their authority, leading to an ongoing need for policies and programmes that foster dialogue across different cultural and social boundaries (Tom 2014: 336).

For young women, the 2014 Ebola crisis had a devastating effect on an already weak economy and reversed important development and equality gains made after the end of the civil war. This increased young women's vulnerability to multiple forms of sexual and gender-based violence such as transactional sex and severely hampered their efforts to achieve parity with their male peers. For many uneducated young women in rural areas, the options were stark as economic insecurity became more prevalent with early marriage and sex work becoming increasingly common (Menzel 2019; Oosterom *et al.* 2017). This can also lead to other problems as when a girl falls pregnant ('gets hard belly') out of wedlock, she can be disowned or abandoned by her family or forced into early marriage leaving her further vulnerable. Despite these multi-layered challenges, some women in Sierra Leone were also challenging gender boundaries in order to find work, as we describe below, fighting discrimination and stigma at each stage of their journey. Even as they try to find work through vocational training they are still not guaranteed a secure job, even when starting at a very low entry level, or entering into insecure self-employment to make use of one's new skills. Many of the young women in the study displayed great resilience in the face of both

short-term shocks and longer-term systemic problems, but only through interventions designed around them and what they are already doing to challenge gender norms can sustainable economic empowerment be created through vocational programmes.

Cameroon

In Cameroon, the economic crisis of the 1980s caused a disruption of the agropastoral economic model that was in place in the 1960s and 1970s. This led to several changes in terms of job restructuring, redefinition of priorities in terms of education and vocational training offer, and reconsideration of the economic and social roles of women (Mairama 2014). These reforms led to rapid urban migrations, resulting in more than half of Cameroonians living in urban areas (53 per cent) and an estimated 60 per cent of urban inhabitants living in informal settlements and slums (UN-Habitat 2016).

With an urban growth rate of around 5 per cent, the challenge of aiding slum-dwellers in Cameroon remains critical (UN-Habitat 2016). The proportion of youths not in employment, education or training is estimated to be 17 per cent, with women almost twice as likely as men not to be in employment, education or training. Overall, young people comprise 52 per cent of the total unemployed population (ILO 2017), with female youth unemployment rates higher (6.8 per cent) than those for young men (5.8 per cent). Consequently, the dynamics of women's participation in the labour market are underpinned by three key factors: limited employment prospects, differences in education level and power dynamics within households. In 2014, the informal sector was the main provider of jobs, accounting for nearly nine out of ten workers (89.5 per cent), of which 86 per cent were men and 93.2 per cent were women. These informal jobs are divided between the agricultural (48.6 per cent) and non-agricultural (40.9 per cent) sectors. In addition, jobs are mostly informal: 30.1 per cent of workers are informal agricultural operators, 27.2 per cent are self-employed informal non-agricultural workers, and 14.6 per cent are non-agricultural informal employees.

TVET in Cameroon

There is also an ongoing gap between the employment policies set up by the public authorities and the intrinsic aspirations of young people. For young people, aspirations in the employment market are circumscribed by these limiting policies and the lack of essential infrastructure to help them transition from education to employment. While recent years have seen the increasing implementation of employment promotion agencies such as the National Fund for Employment, the informal sector remains the starting point for many young people in the search for work. As a result

of this continuing fragmentation, family and friends remain the primary channels through which young people enter the labour market and sustain a professional position. Recent analyses note that family plays an essential role in the decision-making process of young people when entering the labour market, with family influence overriding salary expectations (Alpes 2014).

The cost of schooling and funding constraints are also inhibiting factors. Girls especially are subject to child labour where household work is needed to contribute to family income. Furthermore, the economic value of girls through marriages makes them an important source income (the dowry and other presents during marriage alliances), thus limiting their access to education and employment. 'Girls have to face the widespread belief that it is a waste of money to educate a girl who will leave home when she gets married, and will not contribute to the maintenance of her birth household' (Mouchingam Mefire 2006). Schools are not neutral, as educational and training institutions play an active part, with the support of families and communities, in the construction of responses to traditional gender roles. The educational institution is a place of transmission and reproduction of gender stereotypes with a strong gender bias in vocational training courses which is slowly being addressed by giving women better access to traditional male professions.

It is also important to note that public discussions around Islam and religion play into traditional gender stereotypes, discouraging some parents from sending their female children to schools seen to be promoting 'Western' ideals or values. The armed conflict in the north of Cameroon instigated by the insurgent group Boko Haram, which translates loosely as 'Western education is forbidden', has, since 2009, killed tens of thousands of people in Nigeria and displaced more than two million others mainly affected the north-eastern Anglophone regions of Cameroon. The group is considered a violent Islamist group, and this has led to a focus on its religious ideologies as the main motivator for people to support or join its activities, while the conflict is often framed as a religious one between Islam and Christian communities (Mang 2014). Its formation has also been linked to international Islamist groups within the global context of terrorism. However, Dowd (2015) shows that an Islamist group such as Boko Haram emerges from *local* conditions, from a long history of economic and political marginalisation of certain groups at subnational level, and a history of violence on which Islamist militants capitalise. In fact, some parents opt to enrol their daughters in Khoranic schools for fear that a Western education will promote values and behaviours contrary to cultural and religious norms among girls.

Since 2013, the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP), responsible for post-primary education and vocational training, has set up new training structures including vocational training centres offering non-agricultural training in rural areas, rapid vocational training centres and vocational training centres

of excellence. Pending its effective implementation, the skills system in Cameroon still faces significant challenges incorporating gender balance into its TVET systems. These include (1) fragmented governance of TVET (if gender policies are included: eleven ministries have some policies related to TVET, gender and employability); (2) limited training offer, particularly offers attractive and affordable for the most vulnerable and for those involved in the informal sector; and (3) insufficient material, financial and human resources, including trained teachers and up-to-date didactic material.

Furthermore, apart from gender-disaggregated data, gender considerations are mainly absent from TVET policy. Data from the Ministry for Secondary Education's statistical directory shows that, for the year 2015/16, the number of students in public TVET was 343,597 students, including 117,601 girls (i.e. 34.2 per cent), while in 2011, 145,516 students were enrolled in the public TVET, of which 53,450 were girls (or 36 per cent) (Ngathe Kom 2015: 2–4). However, these statistics do not take into account formal vocational training regulated by MINEFOP. TVET covers formal training, non-formal or informal training, including apprenticeship training and accelerated training for entry into the world of work. Traditionally, apprenticeship in Cameroon consisted of on-the-job training implemented by the informal sector. The existing literature shows that most workers (66.9 per cent) in the informal sector learn or have learned a trade on their own or through practice; a significant number (24.4 per cent) were trained in small businesses; and only 5.3 per cent of employed workers learned a trade in a TVET establishment (Ngathe Kom 2015: 2–4).

TVET policy and programming can offer a mechanism to address a number of these issues, providing a motor for broader gender and generational changes. As we discuss in the next section, the Don Bosco model focuses on the 'whole person' and in doing so addresses some of the ways current TVET programming is failing its learners.

'A place of sense': lessons learned from the Don Bosco pedagogical model

'We must train the whole man: the head, the heart, his faith.'

– Mr Guy, Don Bosco Trainer

The Don Bosco model (also known as the Salesian Preventive system) is built on similar characteristics worldwide. It is an integral/holistic model built over four spaces. The first space, the school, provides training and technical development skills. Secondly, the recreational ground provides a safe and secure space to develop social skills and share experiences through the development of a friendly and comfortable

atmosphere and a place of trust. This is an essential part of the pedagogical process which aims to create a community of learning and a community of practice, peer-to-peer learning, and to celebrate success through sports and cultural events. The third space is a shelter and a home for displaced youth and street children, with a home atmosphere for those returning to their family and community at night. Young people need a place ‘of their own’, where they feel at home and where they get the necessary space to be themselves, to express their feelings and to shape their own personality. Finally, the fourth space is a parish where values and ethics are the basis of pastoral care but also of youth behaviours. As a Christian organisation, the Salesian community integrates spiritual values in their pedagogical project, which is open to youths of all faiths. It becomes a ‘place of sense’, where young people have the possibility to search for meaning in their lives. As one trainer put it: ‘Don B’sco’s preventive system allows us to get closer to our young people, to know them better, to listen to them, to be attentive to their daily concerns and thus to better support them’ (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

Another characteristic of the Don Bosco pedagogical model is that it avoids short-term programmes targeting only technical skills (except for joint ‘non-formal’ projects, for example on demobilisation of child soldiers, usually seen as a step towards reintegration in the formal sector). The integral approach, which goes beyond technical skills development, calls for long-term training; it is quite common that a vocational training will be developed over two to four years including quality education, practical training and, when possible, work placements in order to support access to ‘decent work’. It is difficult to train a qualified technician in a couple of months, but just as importantly, it is even more difficult to develop social skills in a couple of months.

An emphasis on social skills and holistic development reflects calls in the literature to reorient TVET around ‘human-centred’ training programmes which also empower young people to be more autonomous (McGrath 2012: 629). Don Bosco carries this strategy through their work in two ways. Firstly, the entire Don Bosco community is included in the educator’s team, from the gatekeeper to the secretary and the youth ‘facilitators’ (animators), developing their sense of responsibility towards others and becoming role models as well. Peer-to-peer learning is part of the pedagogical project, as is the provision of support by the alumni organisation (financial, internships, networks, experiences/success sharing). Secondly, advocacy on social issues is incorporated into the young people’s education, primarily around employment, civic engagement and emergencies such as COVID-19. Our informants reported a lack of direct action on gender stereotyping, with more of an emphasis on employment as a catalyst for social change, with all efforts leading back to the following combination of factors: quality vocational training, social skills, civic engagement and responsibilities, and Christian/spiritual values.

Many Don Bosco trainers acknowledge these limitations while extolling the Don Bosco success story. In the next section, we first address some of the gendered issues Don Bosco faces when trying to turn its training into sustainable employment opportunities. Secondly, we look at some of the ways Don Bosco is challenging these stereotypes. Finally, we analyse how the staff and system of Don Bosco can offer pathways for a more gender-just and inclusive skills landscape which can be synergised with the ‘decent work’ agenda.

Gender perspectives from the field

‘If you can send us a boy, it would be better’: discrimination and durable gender bias in employment

The Don Bosco professional centres have employment bureaus which rely on building long-term relationships with employers, creating a network of possible placements for young people as they move from their skills training programme to the real-world labour market. This point of transition is seen as key by the Don Bosco personnel for creating a sustainable livelihood for the young people they work with but is also often the pivot point for discussions around gender. Specifically, it is at these crucial transition points that prejudice and discrimination against young women and in favour of young men tends to mobilise. As one trainer told us, employers will often say: ‘If you can send us a boy, it would be better’ (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

As the trainers in Cameroon told us, the complexity in young girls’ lives often begins before they even encounter the Don Bosco institution as they are burdened with household chores, domestic responsibilities or adding to the household income, or they are subjected to early marriage or pregnancy (see [Harper et al. 2014](#)):

It is not easy for them to follow the training and at the same time to be a mother ... At the beginning, some came because they are pushed, but afterwards, when they arrive at the centre and discover the atmosphere they feel interested and make an effort to get started. (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

This was also reported in Sierra Leone, where young mothers especially were targeted as a group who would benefit most from the care and training at a Don Bosco centre, but who also found it most difficult to commit to and complete a training programme. As one coordinator put it, many of the young women attending his sessions had ‘mixed feelings’ about the programmes and were unsure about their continued commitments as they juggled their many responsibilities. However, he also observed that

most of the young women enjoyed the training once they got used to it as ‘they really want to change their lives and are working hard to make things happen. They have passion for what they are doing ... and are working hard to change things’ (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

In both contexts, gender bias was ever present, and the difficulties faced by young women engaging in Don Bosco training were also reflected in biases stemming from the employers with whom the Don Bosco TVET centre tried to place the young learners during and after their training. Young men were generally seen as better prospects due partly to their physical strength in some roles but also heavily linked to the perception that young men were ‘freer’, as this instructor stated:

In companies, especially in our field, men are more in demand than women, given their physical strength. Given their occupation, women are less considered, they are not often free. Women are already mothers ... have concerns about children who go to school, children who are sick. Then there is security, at work hours, it can be late hours. They are exposed to assault, and often companies make us understand that. There are companies that solicit more men and tell us clearly, if you can send us a boy, a man, it would be better. (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

This ingrained perception around the availability and flexibility of young men as opposed to young women tied down by household responsibilities and motherhood was just one of the stereotypes and assumptions which Don Bosco institutions struggled with when placing their young learners. We heard instructors in both centres discuss this disparity. As one female instructor told us, discrimination was often linked to family responsibilities for young women, which meant that during the recruitment process ‘the young girl is less considered than the young boy, because we think that there will be cases of maternity [leave] and childcare’, with employers assuming that ‘the young girl after childbirth will have a long maternity leave. Then she is the one who sometimes has to accompany the children to school, she must ensure the family duty, that is to say, to clean her home’ (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

Moreover, she also cautioned that some of these perceptions are based on everyday realities of the lives of young women, who do often have more responsibilities than age-equivalent boys and also often have to travel further due to the lack of local opportunities. This can have a significant impact on their ability to engage with training, keep up with the young men and subsequently give potential employers the impression that they are equally reliable. ‘Sometimes the girl arrives a little late and the boy is there on time, sometimes it’s the girl who picks up the child from school, what do we do with these experiences?’ For this trainer, extra care and attention built into the Don Bosco pedagogical system can counter these prejudices and give young women vital support at points of crisis: ‘I always have to go back to work with those

who have these problems, who have special cases' (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

This added layer of individual care extends throughout the Don Bosco model and is helping to change the relationship between employment and gender equality. Trainers in Yaoundé seemed to be more proactive on this point, telling us how they were specially targeting these points of connection between young learners and their employers to overturn prejudicial practices and cultures:

Let's say that in companies, the integration of a young girl is not always easy, you see, if we don't reject her at the beginning, she can have long-term difficulties, in particular of harassment, so the young girl is really vulnerable to the company. What do we do, at our level? We sensitise them, we prepare them for that, to know how they are going to go about it, and when we put them in companies, we talk at length with those in charge of the structures to which they are sent, and we follow up on a daily basis, to make sure that the young girl is at ease. It is the same thing to find work. Sometimes, the young girl is recruited if she is competent, other unorthodox practices are imposed on her. So, I think, we have to sensitise society for respect vis-à-vis the girl; respect for their dignity, for their choices. (Interview, Ebolowa, December 2021)

In both contexts, the young women who came to Don Bosco were highly vulnerable. However, it is worth noting that the girls in Yaoundé were often slightly older, more experienced and less often susceptible to sexual forms of exploitation. In Freetown, gender discrimination had increased during the conflict/post-conflict period and the Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics, creating multiple layers of gendered discrimination and vulnerability which were not present in some of the young women's lives in Yaoundé. As such, each Don Bosco centre had to tackle idiosyncrasies specific to the particular locale. In Sierra Leone, some of the young women used the Don Bosco centre as an informal form of social protection, coming for food, financial assistance, medical help, mental health help and day-to-day support. Many of the girls in Sierra Leone had been alienated, and in some cases they were being protected from their families, creating a dependency on the Don Bosco staff and centres. For the Yaoundé learners, the Don Bosco centre also offered this form of holistic support but as the girls were less vulnerable and less isolated from other support networks (i.e. family and friends), their experience at Don Bosco had a powerful professional focus which helped emphasise the pathways from education to employment as paramount.

For trainers, social workers and staff in both locales, the Don Bosco pedagogical system not only created productive and effective workers but also threaded the holistic model through the training–employment connection, aiming to empower young women as well as make them into reliable and skilled workers. As we now explore, in a number of ways they are using their training programmes as a vehicle to challenge these persistent and obdurate gender inequalities in a variety of interesting ways.

‘A holy environment, a holy workspace’: decent work and COVID-19 at Don Bosco training centres

Decent work is work ... which does not give young people headaches. (Don Bosco Social Worker, Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

It is also important to note that the Don Bosco system emphasises the quality of the employment young women can find. ‘Decent work’ in this context was often vernacularised along Don Bosco teams’ terms as involving ‘working conditions’, ‘dignity’, ‘safety’, ‘happiness’, ‘comfort’ and ‘trust’. For young women, this was defined by one trainer as having economic autonomy:

Yes, in a nutshell, as a friend I would say, work is decent, it’s work that feeds her man, that allows her to be supported, the girl to be supported, in our context it’s maybe: paying the rent, getting food, clothing, medical care ... for me, that’s decent work. (Trainee Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

Another trainer in Cameroon, for example, discussed the importance of having enough security (‘safety’) to be able to retire comfortably (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021), with a heavy emphasis on a fair salary. ‘Without salary, we do not speak of work, when there is a salary that corresponds to the profile of the person, we can already speak of decent work.’ Reflecting on this, he also stressed the need for a social workplace where the employer respects the employee:

In an environment where no one can say hello to you, so you also need a holy environment, a holy workspace, so that the employee feels comfortable, it takes a relationship of trust between employee and employer, when there is this trust, the employee will be able to feel, use and be able to give the best of him, to achieve better results. So, there’s a bit of my perception of decent work. (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

The invocation of the term ‘holy’ here is something that would not always be used in more secular settings; however, in the work of the Don Bosco trainers, it seems appropriate as they are trying to foster a culture in line with the Don Bosco principles. ‘Holy’ in this context is also a container term for values, well-being and the holistic approach to skills development and ‘decent work’, which encapsulates many of these aspects of employment and training in secular terms and also captures the difficulties of attaining this type of secure, stable employment. Learners during our focus group discussions insisted on the importance of the spiritual aspects supporting the development of value-based attitudes at work based on (self) respect and (self) discipline, solidarity and empathy towards others. Many said they came to understand the importance of this aspect gradually. ‘At the beginning we did not like it, we were there for a technical training and not for being treated as a child, though we were already mothers, but slowly we realised that it was one of the most important aspects of our

learning experience that will last and be transferable to other work or aspects of our lives' (FGD, Yaoundé, March 2022).

In fact, despite the group's Catholic origins and observation of Catholic ritual and celebration, Don Bosco centres pride themselves on their inclusive nature, with spaces for different forms of worship, and they were often commended by informants for the spiritual nature of their work. Spirituality more broadly was seen as a positive element of the Don Bosco programmes, creating greater emotional and personal investment and a greater sense of community. When we asked specifically about being a Muslim at Don Bosco, the learners emphasised that they were given space to worship as they needed, though some mentioned that they had become attracted to Christianity by being at Don Bosco and because of the generosity of the trainers and the Don Bosco priests.

This sense of Don Bosco as an inclusive safety net has also helped Don Bosco learners navigate recent crises. For example, when we asked further about 'decent work', it was also often linked to the COVID-19 crisis by the Don Bosco trainers and to the ability of their graduates to find opportunities in a decimated economy. For Don Bosco personnel, COVID-19 has had a largely negative impact, with restrictions on movement and contact meaning they have been hampered in recruiting new students from both local schools and other settings such as children's shelters. They have also found it difficult to place young learners into roles with local employers, as one trainer in Sierra Leone told us: 'food centres were closed as well as tailoring and designing Restaurants were closed and even those who were on training had to stop. Most of the employers are now saying that they don't have to pay workers and so most were laid off and even to help the young people with internship opportunities is difficult' (Trainer Interview, Freetown, December 2021). For young women this was particularly hazardous as it could mean losing an entire year of work, education or training, though much of this was mitigated by the Don Bosco system, which tried to keep contact with all their learners throughout the various lockdown restrictions:

We worked during the confinement period with lessons on Zoom, Skype and even WhatsApp. We tried with the means of edge, to tinker with something, and among the centres, we were much congratulated, because we did not really stop our activities. (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

However, as other trainers told us, there were false starts and obstacles to be overcome as the crisis deepened, with unequal access to lessons and facilities causing issues: 'it was the reality a bit difficult because not all houses are electrified for example, or all houses do not have a computer and not all children have Android phones, so it was already a big difficulty for us, to transmit the lessons online' (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

Equally, many trainers noted the difficulties faced by young women returning to training or trying to find work. As one trainer observed in Yaoundé, even as they tried to reintegrate their learners, they found that some young women who had previously been in training could no longer continue as they had fallen pregnant during the pandemic, with added health risks due to their isolation. ‘In the recovery, some of the women, found themselves in situations where they could no longer really easily continue training, I mean pregnancies for some who had painful pregnancies, pregnancies at risk’ (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021). Another knock-on effect has been the increased levels of childcare, with one trainer reporting how young women were caring for the younger children of their relatives who could no longer attend school. Finally, one trainer told us how the scarce employment placements, which already prioritised young men, had now shifted even further away from a gender balance. ‘Very quickly those who ask you, for example, to place a young person who has been trained as a priority’ it’s the young boy we take ... so it will always happen that all the young boys who have been trained, are more quickly recruited, inserted. While young girls toil a little more’ (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

‘We are now a family’: TVET at Don Bosco’s professional centres

For young women in both Cameroon and Sierra Leone, Don Bosco’s professional centres provide a welcome relief and offer a chance of success in an economy weighted against them. In both contexts, girls engaged in TVET often face multiple prejudices, with families often preferring formal educational pathways, secure formal employment or even migratory routes out of the country, even when these pathways are dangerous or unrealistic (Maïrama 2014). In such a context, TVET is frowned upon because it does not offer many formal job opportunities and may keep the young graduate in informal jobs or in precarious self-employment. It is stigmatised as a less lucrative option, particularly as families often support TVET trainees financially. However, as a young woman from the Don Bosco centre in Ebolowa (Cameroon) recounts, the particular Don Bosco system of pastoral care, with its religious connotations and personal touch, helped convince her mother that the course was worthwhile:

Coming here (to the Don Bosco training institute) was not easy because my mother wanted something else for me, for me to go to another school where you can obtain the BTS (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur) or a professional BA, but I told her I am looking for a training course where I will be supported, a centre that does professional integration. ... but really it was difficult for her to let me come her’, I’m not going to lie to you. She said to me, what is it going to do for you, she was really against this training, I had to call on the pastor of our church to convince her, but she was still

reluctant, Finally, she saw the way we treat visitors here to Don Bosco, that convinced her. (Trainee Interview, 24Ebolowa, November 2021)

For many of the girls we spoke to, finding their way to TVET courses was far from a linear or straightforward experience. In Cameroon, a number of girls have tried one career or another, been unemployed or in some cases even tried university courses, though they realised that university courses did not give them the right skills for finding a job: ‘During job interviews, employers asked me, “what can you do practically”, and I realised that I could not do practical work’ (FGD, Yaoundé, November 2021). Many families choose to give priority to the schooling of young boys, considering that it is more profitable in the long term. Moreover, for many female trainees, starting a TVET training meant navigating the multiple care, work and familial responsibilities placed upon them:

It is always the woman who takes care of everything at home. I have a colleague who lives in ODJA, he takes his motorcycle at 5am, he parks it at Mobil ÉMANA, he takes a taxi, he comes to work, he is on time every day. I arrived at work one day with my baby, his nappies and his bottles. He had a lot of respect for me; he explained to me that when he gets up in the morning, he is just getting ready, his wife has already prepared his breakfast, he takes his breakfast, he goes to work. I have to get up, I prepare breakfast, I have to put the house in order, I get the children who go to school ready to go, before I get ready ‘it’s really not easy’. It’s not easy for mothers who still have young babies; those who have older children are better off because the first children can take care of the others but until then it’s not easy for mothers. (Trainee, 23, Yaoundé, November 2021)

In Sierra Leone, Don Bosco targets young women from marginalised backgrounds, many of whom have are orphaned and/or neglected children who permanently live on the street, or primarily depend on illegal activities, including commercial sex work, for survival. Testimonies from girls indicate that some girls enter into commercial sex work as early as 12 years, staying on in the practice for a long time. It is in the street that Don Bosco social work teams initiate relationships with most of the girls that the organisation has supported. To these girls, Don Bosco is perceived as a provider of rescue services, as one girl told us: ‘Don Bosco has done a lot of things for me, because I am alive because of Don Bosco, because they saved me from the street. If it was not Don Bosco I would still be on the street’ (Trainee Interview, 16, During Town). Due to its approach of building relationships with the girls while in the street, and over time influencing their decision to exit the street and enrol in TVET, and for some to return to school, Don Bosco was often referred to as a family:

They [Don Bosco] paid our fees and supported us with other needs until we graduated, and up till now they are supporting us; sometimes they supply us with food, and we are now a family and I’m confident with what I have achieved. (Trainee Interview, 17, During Town)

Most girls targeted by Don Bosco come from difficult family situations, including parental neglect, orphaned, extreme poverty and depravity in the household. This is the backdrop to why the girls drop out of school in the first place then live much of their lives on the street until they come into contact with Don Bosco social workers, who eventually enrol them in Don Bosco services. For a number of girls the Don Bosco environment allied with the more immediate returns of practical skills training suits their more immediate needs, as this informant details:

I do not have the intelligence for school, that is why I like skills training, because in school it takes one year to get promoted but in skills training you can learn a lot in months. Like for one hair style that you plait someone, they can pay you 1.5 million Leones. I like skills more than school because that is what my heart tells me to learn. (Trainee Interview, 16, During Town)

TVET is not for everyone though, and for many of the girls joining a TVET programme requires some initial vetting to see if the girls can fully commit, with Don Bosco offering a carefully calibrated infrastructure which begins with medical and psychological support before girls are identified as suitable for the commitment of a long TVET course. Some girls take short starter courses to prepare them for TVET training, which can take up to two years. In Freetown and their nearby complex at During Town, Don Bosco mostly offers TVET courses in the hospitality sector, including catering, hairdressing and cosmetology, and tailoring and dressmaking, with most of the training currently outsourced. While this feeds into traditional gender profiling around TVET training, importantly an increasing number of girls are training in male-dominated professions. One trainee told us how she was breaking the mould by learning welding due to the career prospects and the social respectability it offered. 'It is rare to find women learning welding in this country. We know that with the focus that we have on learning welding, the men will be admiring us when we graduate' (Trainee Interview, 18, During Town).

Despite the fact that the situation of female trainees in Cameroon is not as difficult as that of those from Sierra Leone, the Don Bosco professional centres are still perceived as peaceful places which allow them to escape everyday hardships and concentrate on their dreams and the development of their future, and they perceive the staff and their fellow trainees as a second family.

In Sierra Leone, the precarious nature of everyday life made the Don Bosco trainees much more vulnerable. For a number of the young women we spoke to in Sierra Leone, despite a package of support from Don Bosco, entering the labour market had proved a challenging process. Don Bosco TVET programme delivery is structured such that the transition to employment begins in the closing months of training, when trainees are placed with industry and businesses for a three-month

internship. Job placements have a dual objective. The first is to expose the trainee to the professional practice of skills in the market setting, providing the opportunity for the trainee to improve their technical proficiency through more and intensive practical experience while simultaneously creating the space to interact with clients and customers in the market environment. Secondly, internships create the space for trainees on the verge of completing their training to build relationships with prospective employers through which they may find a job. Results from these pathways proved mixed, with low salaries, difficult employers and a lack of jobs local to their homes meaning it has been difficult for many of the girls to retain regular employment: ‘Don Bosco helped us find work, but that job is also difficult. The pay is so small, and we have kids ... that is why we have continued to work there’ (Trainee Interview, 23, Freetown).

The Don Bosco workers were deeply frustrated by this situation but explained that a lack of continuous funding coupled with the deteriorating job market in Sierra Leone made finding secure work very difficult. For example, catering jobs had dried up due to the lack of tourist and business visitors, with most jobs being taken quickly by the ever-expanding pool of catering graduates. In this context, in a setting where jobs are scarce, many Don Bosco graduates are forced either to rely on informal networks and relationships to seek and eventually land a job or to start a business on their own. When graduates spoke about ‘having connections’, they referred to having someone in a network that can open the door to potential employment. The network might comprise family and relatives, politicians and other influential people in society. The aspiration for most graduates is to set up and operate a business in the sector for which they have been trained, sometimes with the support of their networks. Graduates in hairdressing and cosmetology naturally desire to run hairdressing salons, while graduates in catering express a preference for cookery and the fast-food business.

In addition to acquiring technical competencies in their respective TVET occupations, most graduates acknowledged that the TVET provider taught basic business management skills, which seemed to have promoted an understanding of managing business revenue, marketing skills and so forth. Graduates generally believed that if they had the opportunity to start a business now, they could manage it successfully, with significant growth in the size of the business in the next five years. However, the major barrier to realising this aspiration is the lack of capital for business start-ups. Graduates believe £200–300 is a reasonable amount of money with which to launch a start-up. Don Bosco has in the past provided micro-business start-ups, but that depends on the availability of funds for individual projects, and even where they have provided support many Don Bosco staff noted that success was never guaranteed.

Conclusion

As we have shown, the potential for gender-transformative TVET systems in precarious contexts where young women are most vulnerable is nearly unlimited, with significant opportunities to directly challenge persistent and sometimes invisible gender barriers through the development of social and transferrable life skills as well as integration in the concrete world of work and employment. According to trainers at Don Bosco, empowering young women to follow and achieve their broader goals will lead to economic empowerment and autonomy, as well as broader social changes. However, the limitations of the job market, attitudes of employers and everyday constraints may hinder actual opportunities.

However, if the Don Bosco pedagogical model offers many innovative and well-grounded positive aspects, some points of improvement may need further investigation. The fact that the model targets individual development and does not directly challenge community or structural inequalities except through the role model approach of successful young men and women may be questioned further. Another area for improvement which is shared with other local organisations may be the need for ongoing monitoring of the context in order to have reliable data on the social realities and the evolution of the labour market.

As we move forward with our project and explore more directly the everyday lived realities of young women engaged in TVET programmes, we encounter multiple and intersecting challenges which show that the potential of TVET to transform gender realities exists but needs to be put in synergy with a careful reflection on labour market stereotypes and real opportunities; impacts of sanitary, political and economic crises; and improvement of social care facilities. As the literature suggests, overcoming 'durable' gender inequalities (Kabeer 2006) which negatively impact the lives of young women cannot be accomplished overnight, and complex barriers must be overcome if young women are to experience any real changes as they transition to precarious employment landscapes.

As we discussed at the beginning of this article, policymakers need to find new ways of understanding girls' lives and livelihoods as they move through the TVET architecture and experience the gendered realities of education, training and employment transitions. With young girls facing reduced pathways in terms of work, especially after long periods of school absence and rising vulnerability during times of crises, the dream of 'decent work' seems even more remote. In this context, the concept of 'decent work' urgently needs to be redrawn in terms which more accurately chime with lived experiences, entrenched gender inequalities and the fragmented local job markets in which workers live. While the girls we worked with did have aspirations which matched the decent work objectives, in most cases they struggled to achieve their own

modest aspirations (feeding their children, getting by), let alone to achieve more difficult targets such as having job security, dignity and safety. If girls in the Global South are to have a ‘decent future’ as envisaged by the UN and ILO, then a greater understanding of intersections between gendered identity and experience and skills training is now more urgent than ever.

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