

INVESTIGATING SOFT SKILLS PROGRAM FEATURES WITH A GENDER LENS

A global review of education and workforce interventions for youth



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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A crucial determinant of educational success, employability, and reproductive health for women is the chance they have to develop “soft skills”—a broad set of skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals.

More malleable than personality traits, soft skills can be learned through direct interventions, and youth in different life stages can acquire soft skills in spite of limited prior opportunities to learn these skills or exposure to stressors such as poverty or violence.*

Yet girls and young women around the world face a series of obstacles to education and trainings like soft skills programs. These gender-based barriers eventually lead women to lower labor force participation:

- » The high cost of schooling and unequal investment between girls and boys leaves many young women with lower levels of educational access and attainment.
- » The reality that girls are typically more burdened with household responsibilities than boys results in less participation in education and training.
- » Security concerns and socio-cultural norms can constrain young women’s mobility as compared to young men.
- » For those who do have access to education, gender-biased teaching and school-related gender-based violence can prevent girls from developing the knowledge and skills they need to transition to employment or entrepreneurship.
- » Gender biases and stereotypes restrict girls’ agency in determining the subjects they wish to study, the careers they aspire to, and the types of jobs they can access.
- » Early marriage and pregnancy may lead to interrupted schooling, social isolation, and limited access to job and training opportunities for girls and young women.
- » Young women’s economic participation is further curtailed by gender-based discrimination, e.g., when approval of a father or husband is required to work or take out loans, or hiring and promotion practices favor men consciously or unconsciously.
- » Discriminatory labor laws can also perpetuate occupational segregation, wage gaps, and other structural inequalities in the labor market for girls and young women.

*Lippman, L., Ryberg, R., Carney, R., & Moore, K.A. (2015). Key “Soft Skills” that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a consensus across fields. USAID: Washington DC. Child Trends.

Given these barriers, it is important to understand the attributes that make soft skills programming accessible and effective for young women in particular. This report explores the design and implementation features of soft skill programs that have helped young people succeed, and ultimately looks to answer two questions:

1. What are the most common attributes of effective programs that leverage soft skills for education, livelihoods, and employment outcomes?
2. What constellation of program features is related to effectiveness for girls and young women?

To find the answer, we dove deep into the methodology and results of 42 different studies representing 36 soft skills interventions around the world. The review examined the design features and reported outcomes of programs that were **gender-blind** (those that don't consider differences in needs and provide the same training for people of any gender) and **gender-smart** (those that recognize gender dynamics in the implementation context in order to intentionally accommodate female and male participants).

We mapped the different design features of these programs, grouping these into four domains: (1) specific soft skills targeted; (2) recruitment and retention strategies; (3) personal and financial resources offered; and (4) activities focused on the enabling environment. We then looked at the relationship between these clusters

and different effects of the program on participants. We considered an "effective" intervention to be one that improved young women's educational opportunities, career opportunities, or workforce outcomes. Of the 36 programs researched, 30 had positive effects in at least one of these areas.

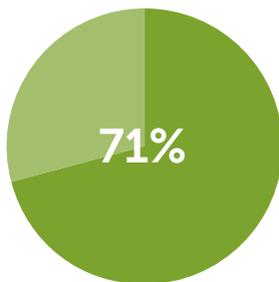
Below, we've summarized our most compelling findings and outlined recommendations to give practitioners the tools they need to build successful programs. We hope this review influences people who design, implement, fund, and evaluate youth programs to create and invest in solutions that not only empower the women and girls of today, but those of generations to come.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

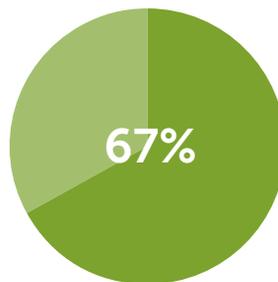
- » **We found that the most effective programs were those that emphasized holistic youth development and/or employer training.** Two general types of programs found to be most effective were: job training programs that target demand-side barriers and are tailored for vulnerable and marginalized groups; and holistic programs that use a positive youth development approach to empower girls and young women toward education, livelihoods or workforce success. For example, in Bangladesh, BRAC's successful Adolescent Development Program combined life skills-based education and livelihood training

"Gender-smart" Programs

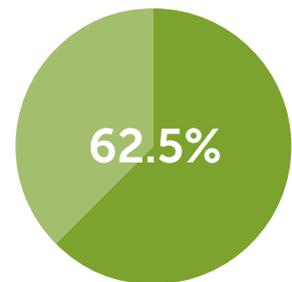
Of interventions that were effective for young women, 80% reflected gender-smart programming by recognizing and addressing different needs of male and female participants in program design, recruitment, and/or delivery.



Granted greater access by localizing the training



Intentionally reached out to vulnerable groups



Reported changes in gender-equitable attitudes

activities with opportunities for girls to socialize and interact, engage in cultural activities, and have open discussions with each other regarding social and personal issues. Combining these interventions showed an increase in employment for women as well as an improvement in participants' attitudes towards gender equality.

» **The majority of effective programs were “gender-smart.”** Twenty-four of the 30 programs (80%) found to have a positive effect on women reflected gender-smart programming, meaning that they were designed to accommodate differences in girls' and boys' needs and addressed gender-based barriers in the implementation context. For example, EquipYouth, a program that trained women for jobs in the industrial sector in Mexico and Peru, invited male family members to orientation sessions to learn more about the program and the economic opportunities it provided. This was done because the organization identified lack of family support as a significant constraint for young women in accessing these jobs.

Among the benefits of these gender-smart programs are their ability to provide safe spaces for women and girls, provide community-specific training, and recruit vulnerable groups. In our review, we found that most gender-smart programs intentionally reached out to vulnerable groups (67%) and localized the training (71%), granting women greater access by addressing awareness and logistical barriers to their participation. Of the 24 gender-smart programs we reviewed, 15 (62.5%) reported changes in gender-equitable attitudes among girls and their family members, particularly parents.

» **Overall, the evidence suggests that programs must target factors within a girl's or young woman's environment that influence her capacity to improve her life outcomes.** Unequal allocation of resources like income and education have a greater impact on women and girls than they do on men and boys, strongly correlating with lower social status, poor health, and compromised wellbeing. Programs must target the societal barriers impeding gender equality in addition to emphasizing holistic youth development. Reshaping gender norms gives women greater agency in expanding their professional lives as it allows for freedom of decision, mobility, and communication. Truly gender-transformative programming works to change



the attitudes, behaviors, and structures that foster harmful gender norms and social inequalities. They do this by changing how girls and women value themselves, and are valued in their families and communities.

» **Additionally, our review found that programming should be designed to address society-specific issues at the community level to provide women with actual job opportunities.** It is important for skills development opportunities to align with real private sector needs. For example, a program in Haiti combined soft skills training with technical skills related to sectors that were high-growth in the context of post-earthquake reconstruction. The program encouraged young women to consider non-traditional career pathways, empowering them to override gender norms and work in high-demand fields in their communities.



REAL-WORLD APPLICATIONS

Sample of top recommendations for program funders and designers:

- » **Modules that emphasize the four primary soft skills women and girls need for success: communication, positive self-concept, higher-order thinking, and self-regulation.** These are the skills most closely associated with improvements in participants' rates of employment, performance and promotion, income, and entrepreneurial success.
- » **Safe spaces**, especially when training vulnerable girls and young women. Offering sex-segregated classrooms or other safe spaces can help young people learn free from intimidation or shame.
- » **Recruitment and retention strategies targeted at young women**, which can remove gender-based barriers to awareness and participation.
- » **Holistic programming.** Programs solely focused on topics like financial literacy or health education may be less effective than programming that combines soft skills with multiple youth interventions, creating spillover effects across modules. Soft skills training may be especially effective if married to programs that let women and girls learn by doing—linking them with mentors, internships, and entry-level work.
- » **Focus on the enabling environment as well as the person.** Programs are more effective when they specifically sensitize participants' parents, brothers, and husbands, as well as address societal norms that dictate acceptable jobs for women and men. Comprehensive interventions that address not only supply but also demand of labor also tend to be most effective for workforce outcomes.

Complementary strategies with firms and employers can help address the educational, financial, workplace, and legal barriers that limit women's economic participation.

- » **Opportunities for participants to build connections and social capital.** Youth-led activities and peer support groups enable girls and young women to share their experiences with peers, grow confidence in their leadership skills, and expand vital networks.
- » **Labor market assessments in communities where programs are implemented.** Empower girls in context. Before selecting soft skills or vocational training curricula, investigate local labor demand. Make sure technical and soft skills targeted are relevant, and support young women to set achievable goals that still align with their interests.

For researchers:

- » **Track gender-smart indicators to understand differences** when evaluating the processes, immediate outcomes, and long-term impacts of youth soft skills interventions. In many of the cases we reviewed, monitoring and evaluation data were not narrowed down by sex, thus, programs lost valuable insights on the differential access and outcomes between male and female participants.
- » **Conduct follow-up evaluations on a longer time horizon** to determine maintenance of effects. There are tremendous insights to be gained by following youth cohorts to understand the long-term effects of interventions conducted in early and mid-adolescence. Currently, most long-lasting studies have been conducted in high-income countries. In-depth research is needed in low and middle income countries that investigates gender-differentiated impacts of interventions over time.
- » **Measure cost-effectiveness** so the most impactful soft skills programs can reach scale. Cost-effectiveness measures benefits such as returns to the national economy, added value to the private sector, and various social impacts. Quantifying social and economic returns and communicating a program's "value for money" proposition can help youth organizations attract greater investment from public and private donors, including partner companies.