

Beyond Training: What Actually Shapes Young Women's Economic Options

Adolescent girls and young women are not excluded from higher-value livelihoods because they lack interest or ability, but because gender expectations strongly shape the systems around them. These systems influence what training they access and the work they pursue.

BLOOM Africa's¹ Labour Market Assessments in Somaliland², Tanzania (Dar es Salaam), and Rwanda tell a consistent story: skills matter, but they don't determine if young women can earn, grow and make better livelihood choices. Family permission, safety, mobility, care work, employer attitudes, and financial and market access matter, too. BLOOM can help shift these systems so training leads to safer work, higher income, more choice and more control over income.

Similar patterns across three contexts

The same pattern appears across all three contexts, but it looks slightly different in each. Tanzania can upgrade familiar but crowded sectors and test safe pathways into higher-value work. Somaliland shows that getting work is a social transaction that depends on trust and referrals as much as skills. Rwanda shows how gender combines with poverty, motherhood, disability, safety and distance to deepen exclusion, even in sectors with market potential.

01 Gendered social norms strongly shape choices

HOW IT SHOWS UP DIFFERENTLY

Young women are drawn or directed toward socially accepted sectors such as hairdressing, beauty, food, handicrafts, tailoring or home-based work. These sectors are often crowded, informal and low-paying. Many young men and some young women prefer higher-value sectors such as construction, transport and digital services, which offer better income. But young women face more barriers to entry: gender-based violence (GBV), family opposition, stigma and employer bias. In Somaliland, social permission, mobility, and reputation also shape choices.

WHAT BLOOM CAN DO

Following young women's preferences alone can keep them in low-earning work and reinforce gender segregation. BLOOM can work on two tracks. First, upgrade sectors where young women already work, especially in growing urban areas. Second, test safe entry into higher-value work, including digital and green skills. This approach needs women mentors, protection from harassment, engagement with men and boys, employers committed to inclusive workplaces, and better access to finance and equipment. Training providers should avoid generic courses that only add more youth, especially young women, to crowded markets.

02 Training alone is not enough

HOW IT SHOWS UP DIFFERENTLY

Young women may finish training and still struggle to earn. Care work, mobility restrictions, safety fears, low employer trust, and a lack of money and networks impact the ability to work and earn. **Tanzania:** needs stronger training-to-earning support; **Somaliland:** needs trusted referrals to find work; **Rwanda:** needs action on GBV, distance, care work and information gaps.

WHAT BLOOM CAN DO

Pair training with work on social norms and with men and boys. The aim is to help shift gendered views on training and work, including work usually done by men, and negative attitudes toward teen mothers and young people with disabilities. Work with technical and vocational training (TVET) institutions on safe placements, finance that bridges the gap between training and first income, women mentors, and links with employers.

03 Safety and mobility shape participation

HOW IT SHOWS UP DIFFERENTLY

Young women may be interested and trained, but family permission, safe travel and harassment risks affect whether they participate and stay. **Rwanda:** three out of four respondents³ said sexual harassment and GBV are major obstacles to work. **Tanzania:** young women reported harassment and pressure to trade access for sexual favours. **Somaliland:** family approval and safe travel are the main concerns.

WHAT BLOOM CAN DO

Work with institutions and partners to strengthen protection from harassment and GBV, community engagement, flexible training close to home, inclusive facilities with private spaces, and safe placements with TVETs and employers. Engage and support partners to advocate for GBV prevention and workplace safety in career support.

04 Finance for growth is extremely limited

HOW IT SHOWS UP DIFFERENTLY

Mobile money and savings groups are easy to access and use, but financing to start and grow a business or pay for training is not. Family consent, collateral, guarantor, and documentation requirements block young women and young men from accessing formal finance.

WHAT BLOOM CAN DO

Push for finance that works for young women: savings-linked or group models, flexible requirements, guarantees, equipment and business support, and financial literacy. Advocate for changes to documentation gaps facing marginalized youth, such as internally displaced persons (IDP).

05 Employers and markets must be engaged directly

HOW IT SHOWS UP DIFFERENTLY

Employers, small businesses, and master craftspeople decide who gets practical experience, referrals and paid work. Much hiring happens through personal networks and referrals. Without direct engagement, bias and weak placement systems can keep young women out of higher-value work.

WHAT BLOOM CAN DO

Bring employers and TVETs together to design training and safe, supervised placements with certified master craftspeople. Sensitize employers on inclusion and protection from harassment and GBV. Build mentoring and apprenticeships through women, allies and alumni networks.

06 Intersectional barriers need targeted support

HOW IT SHOWS UP DIFFERENTLY

Gender barriers are not the same for everyone. They can combine with other factors to produce deeper exclusion, such as for adolescent mothers, youth with disabilities, IDPs, and minorities: travel is harder with a disability; young mothers without childcare have less time or mobility; and IDPs may lack the information and personal networks to find work and training.

WHAT BLOOM CAN DO

Include youth who are experiencing these barriers in the design and adaptation. Analyze data by combined groups when possible, for example, young mothers living far from training centres, not only by gender or age. Promote support that matches the barriers of each group. For example, advocating for mobile training options for young mothers who face mobility challenges.



Photo: World Vision Tanzania



Photo: World Vision Tanzania

What this means for BLOOM

Assessment findings support BLOOM's gender-transformative design. This means changing the norms and systems behind inequality, not only helping individual young women. Training matters, but it must be accompanied by changes to the systems that govern young women's access to non-traditional and/or higher-value work.

Young women should not carry the burden of overcoming these gendered barriers. BLOOM should work with young women, parents, communities, women's groups, training institutions and employers to collectively shift norms, improve safety, strengthen referrals and placements, and widen access to finance and markets.

Before scaling, BLOOM should keep gathering evidence on market demand, crowded sectors, safe entry into higher-value work, and TVET availability. The goal is not to help young women enter the labour market as it is. It is to help change the conditions they enter under, so skills lead to dignified work, agency, and income they control.

NOTES

1. A five-year gender-transformative project funded by Global Affairs Canada to strengthen the economic empowerment and livelihood opportunities of marginalized adolescent girls and young women, particularly those not in employment, education, or training. ↩
2. In this brief, young woman means adolescent girls and young women aged 15-24. ↩
3. Survey size of 33 adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) (59 respondents, 56% women). ↩

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