

# Gender and Vocational Skills Development



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
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Swiss Agency for Development  
and Cooperation SDC



Trainee electricians: A woman trainer in Nepal explains the concept of electrical circuits.  
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This guidance sheet is one of a series written to support SDC staff in ensuring that gender issues are taken into account transversally in different thematic domains – in this case, vocational skills development (VSD). It outlines key gender issues regarding VSD and how these can be integrated in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of cooperation strategies and project interventions.

## Key issues

- A. Be pro-active in recruiting trainees:** It is generally more difficult to engage women than men in VSD, particularly women who experience multiple, intersecting inequalities such as caste and ethnic-based discrimination, low income, and living in a remote geographical location. Depending on the project goal, either design training specifically for such women, or include certain courses tailored to their needs, and target them in recruitment campaigns.
- B. Gender-friendly teaching:** Ensure that training institutes are comfortable learning environments for women, with separate toilets, possibilities for child-care, and training materials that show women as well as men in employment. As far as possible, aim to have a mixed staff of women and men trainers.
- C. Link training to employment:** Work with potential employers to ensure that training is relevant and fits market demand, and that equal opportunities for women and men are championed. Aim to link training performance to the successful subsequent employment of graduates.

# 1. Definitions

The broad concept of VSD, as defined in the strategic guidelines of SDC (SDC, 2010), encompasses all organised learning processes for the development of technical, social and personal competencies and qualifications that contribute to the sustainable long-term integration of trained people in decent working conditions into the formal or informal economy, either on an employed or self-employed basis. VSD usually combines theory and practice, and can take place in schools or technical institutes, workshops, or in the workplace. The three broad sections generally distinguished in VSD interventions are pre-training; during training; and the transition from training to employment, as outlined in Figure 1.

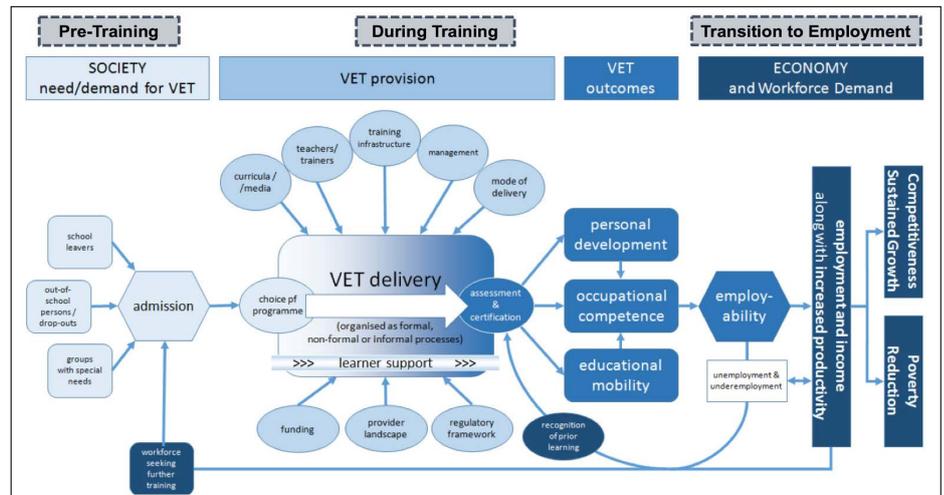


Figure 1: Vocational education and training system in an overview (adapted from Kehl et al., 2013)

## 2. Gender related challenges in skills development

Despite the progress achieved in girls and women's education, occupational segregation remains a predominant feature of training and labour markets, limiting women's choices and confining them to

lower-paid and lower-status jobs than men. VSD interventions provide an opportunity to reflect on existing roles, and to explore opportunities to question gender divisions in the labour market.

### 2.1. Gender division of labour and related gender roles and (practical and strategic) needs

Depending on context, certain occupations are considered "women's work", while others are perceived as "jobs for men". In some cases, this refers to men and women's biological adaptation to the task – but more often, such perceptions are embedded in cultural traditions and norms. Not only are women overrepresented in some occupations and under-represented in others; segregation often also occurs within occupations, with men holding the more responsible and better-paid jobs compared to women. Women are also more likely to work part time, in positions

with no or very limited job security and poor levels of safety.

Labour migration and the demands of globalised markets have resulted in an erosion in the gender stereotyping of jobs. Globally, women are moving out of agriculture into services, in particular education and health. The exception is Asia, where women are also increasingly moving into manufacturing. Men continue to hold more jobs in crafts, trades, plant and machine operations, and managerial and legislative occupations.

## 2.2. Access to vocational skills development and control over resources

The global progress in women's access to education obscures the wide discrepancies that exist across and within countries. Women in rural areas face the challenge of combining education and training with farming, household, community and care responsibilities. Educational and training offers are often difficult to reach, and inflexible in timing, duration, etc. These difficulties are particularly acute in traditional societies, where families are often less willing to invest in female education because of established practices of early marriage, domestic responsibilities, low remunera-

tion for women's work, and reservations regarding women working outside the home. These barriers prevent many girls from accessing even basic education, let alone further education and training.

Women also face more barriers than men in becoming entrepreneurs and starting their own business. Reasons include time constraints due to care responsibilities, lack of access to productive assets such as land and credit, and lack of access to information or relevant networks.

## 2.3. Participation and leadership

As noted, women are less likely than men to occupy leadership positions; this applies in political circles as well as the labour mar-

ket. Female role models who can inspire younger women to take up responsible jobs are often an important force for change.



Trainee masons: A woman trainer in Benin provides advice (© Helvetas/Simon B. Opladen)

## 3. Gender-responsive interventions in VSD

### 3.1. Before the training

Before training starts, there are a set of crucial points to consider in ensuring that the training is accessible for all trainees, especially women.

#### Select the appropriate target group

Depending on the target group, it may be necessary to introduce specific selection measures, taking into account financial aspects. Often the women most eager to undertake a training are not the poorest in the community; they seek to learn skills, but not to gain employment afterwards (or they are restricted from so doing by their families). It is generally more difficult to recruit women from disadvantaged backgrounds for training, for reasons of both cost and self-confidence; however, they are more likely to enter into and stay in employment after training.

#### Adjust eligibility criteria to accommodate disadvantaged women

Disadvantaged women are likely to have lower education levels and to enrol in training at a later point in life, having raised their children. Extending the age bar and being flexible in admission criteria (for example, lowering educational qualifications) favours such women.

#### Analyse the labour market in order to offer demand-oriented skills training

This is an essential step to avoid an over-supply of newly qualified workers. Market assessments provide information on which skills are in high demand in the local labour market and the number of new entrants (women and men) that a given sector can accommodate. Associations and

Chambers of Commerce are an important source of information in this respect. It is also important to conduct a skills gap analysis, identifying any skills that are missing or in short supply in the labour market for certain occupations. A list of trades with the respective labour market demand, tallied with other factors such as the prospective trainees' current skill level, social situations and preferences, is important in guiding each individual in selecting an appropriate training course.

#### Identify trades with flexible and secure working conditions

Flexible and secure working environments and proximity to home are often critical factors determining women's sustainable employment. Much depends on societal expectations. Often, home-based enterprises or part-time work positions are more attractive to women because they are compatible with household obligations, especially childcare and safety.

#### Training women in traditionally "male" occupations

Breaking gender stereotypes in employment is an important part of promoting change – but it entails risks. If not supported, women undergoing training in traditional male occupations may drop out, fail to gain employment, or experience strong societal disapproval. It is important to explore such matters in an individual assessment. For those women wishing to learn non-stereotypical skills, scholarships, temporary quotas for selected training programmes, and awards for successful performance are useful incentives.

### Communication and outreach campaign

Outreach is important, because women are harder to reach. This requires a communication strategy with an allocated budget, containing some of the following elements:

- **Social Mobilization:** Collaborate with dedicated grassroots organisations to reach potential trainees (mothers' groups, cooperatives, health groups, single women groups, groups for people with disabilities, schools, etc.).
- **Door-to-door campaigns** are useful, particularly in rural areas, in reaching women as well as sensitising family

members and the wider community to the benefits of training and employment. Where social mobilizers speak the local language fluently and know the context well, such campaigns are a highly successful means of trainee recruitment.

- **Use of the media to inform** about the training through radio, TV and newspapers, especially through local channels and in the local language. Other means are songs, radio plays, soap operas and documentaries as well as social media. Engaging popular singers or actors can reinforce the message.

## Recruiting female students

Run by the Lao government and supported through SDC (under the SURAFCO project), the Northern Agriculture and Forestry College (NAFC) focuses on upland hill agriculture in the Northern part of the country. A diversity of ethnic groups live in this area. Recognising that local people are more likely to listen to extension agents who speak

their language and know their customs, the NAFC encourages ethnic applicants, particularly women. A recruitment campaign used all three main languages of the North – Lao, Hmong and Khmu – in advertising the college on national and regional television and radio. A recruitment team backed this effort through school visits. In addition, two schol-

arship programmes, one run by the State (a quota system), and one offered by interested private companies, provide would-be students from poor families enough to cover the cost of their tuition, board and food. In just one year, from 2010 to 2011, women's enrolment increased from 13% to 30%, and now remains around that level.

### Incentives for training providers

Where training provision is through private institutions, projects can provide financial incentives for training women or certain (disadvantaged) groups. Here it is important not to merely incentivise participation in the training, but also employment as the outcome. Fixing a minimum participation rate of women or disadvantaged groups at any training institution can also help to ensure inclusion goals.

### Involvement of family members

In most contexts, family support is crucial for women's success in the workplace. Hence, counselling family members (mostly parents, husbands and parents-in-law) on the value of training and employment for women at a very early stage can remove potential hurdles for the trainees during training or at the time of transition to employment. In one study, women, but not men, cited "getting mar-

ried" or "family obligations" as the primary reason for not participating in skills training.

### Advocacy through community leaders and female role models

Engaging community leaders, schoolteachers and trainers in the communication is a very effective way of reaching women and their families. Women trainers are often particularly effective in convincing reluctant female trainees and doubtful family members of the benefits of acquiring skills.

### Career counselling and guidance

Often the information on which young women and men base their career choices is incomplete or inaccurate. Career guidance is thus an essential part of pre-training preparation; if done well, it can reduce the number of training drop-outs as well as the unemployment of young people who feel they ended up in the wrong job.

## 3.2. During training

### Gender-sensitive training facilities

It is advisable to check with women trainees at the beginning of the training on whether they have any specific needs. In addition to ensuring that the building is well lit, ventilated, and of a comfortable temperature, the most basic way of ensuring that women trainees will be comfortable is the provision of separate, clean sanitation facilities. Childcare provision is likely to increase the participation of mothers. The location of the training centre is important; generally, the closer to the trainees' home, the better. Where this is not possible, the provision of secure, well maintained and gender segregated residence quarters may ease parental worries. Training materials should be culturally appropriate, and show images of both women and men – ideally without reinforcing gender stereotypes.

### Tackle anxieties

Often, the first few weeks of training are particularly difficult for women. Unused to being away from home, they may lack confidence in their ability to complete the course. Counselling before and at the beginning of the training can help ease these anxieties, as can a life skills training component.

### Include a life skills component

Self-confidence contributes to success in the workplace. The life experience of women from disadvantaged backgrounds is often very adverse; changing their mind-set to one of positive possibilities is crucial. As a result, many VSD projects incorporate life skills components such as critical thinking, creativity, ability to organise, social and communication skills, and problem solving. Depending on the context, additional topics such as gender-based violence, women's rights, reproductive health can be included.

### Recruit female trainers

Female trainers are supportive to the learning environment, as they teach not only technical skills, but also advise female trainees on specific needs or concerns related to reproductive health, dress code, unwelcome behaviour from male colleagues, and family issues. In non-traditional trades, female trainers serve as role models (for female and male trainees).

### Train women in groups

This is usually not a concern for trades with high women's participation (e.g. beautician, tailoring, weaving). However, for training in non-stereotypical skills, it is crucial that there are at least a few women in a class together. The companionship they provide each other is important in upholding their motivation, and may make it easier to recognise any specific difficulties. Similarly, it is advisable to employ at least two women together in workplaces where male employees form the majority.

### Sensitisation of and collaboration with associations and chambers of commerce

Collaborating with employer associations and chambers of industries and commerce in the joint development of curricula can increase the relevance of training. At the same time, engaging them in on-the-job and workplace-based training can lead to better employment outcomes for graduates – especially women.

### Introduce "multi-skilling"

It is worth providing trainees with more than just one occupational skill (e.g. main trade electrician, additional elementary skills in plumbing). Multi-skilling provides an opportunity to supplement the primary income and gives the graduates more flexibility in the labour market – something that may be particularly important for women. It also offers better opportunities for income generation during off-season periods in seasonal occupations.

### Enhance basic competences (notably literacy and numeracy)

Poor women and people from disadvantaged groups often face barriers in attending skills training, as they are unable to properly read, write, calculate and measure. A functional literacy and numeracy component, with adapted didactic methodology, can provide an important "catch up" opportunity.

### Prepare for labour migration

Domestic and foreign migration is a common phenomenon around the world, but it is poor people, and often particularly women, who are most prone to exploitation and abuse. In contexts of high labour migration, VSD projects should consider including awareness raising components, or indeed provide training in skills required in the receiving countries' labour markets.

### 3.3. Transition of training to employment

#### Enable on-the-job training and internships

The practical application of skills helps graduates to gain work experience and facilitates their transition from training to employment. On-the-job training is especially relevant for women, who often have limited networks through which they can connect to potential employers.

#### Facilitate access to tools

Insufficient resources often hinder women's access to employment after training, as some initial investment is required – notably in tools (and protective clothing). Projects

can address this difficulty by factoring in the purchase of tools during training, or ensuring “soft” loans are available to pay for tools on graduation.

#### Make employment a project outcome

Employment does not “just happen” after training; it is an important part of project design. One way is to make gainful employment a performance indicator for training providers, stimulating them to coach trainees and to utilize their networks to find jobs for women. Through results-based financing, payment for training services can be conditional on the successful employment of graduates.

### Incentives to train disadvantaged women

The Employment Fund (2008 to 2015) in Nepal, funded in part by SDC in addition to DFID and the World Bank, had the specific aim of reaching young, disadvantaged individuals. Working through private training institutions, it used an incentive system. Four target groups were defined according to caste, ethnicity, wealth, and gender – the most disadvantaged being economically poor, Dalit (“low caste”) women and others

in disadvantaged circumstances such as disabled women and survivors of violence. Their participation attracted the highest premium, with payment in tranches. One tranche was paid on the trainee undergoing a skills test on course completion, another tranche after three months of employment, and the balance if the trained individual was found in gainful employment 6 months after graduation. An external evaluation

acknowledged the innovative and successful nature of the project, but noted that the definition of “gainful employment” was crucial. Many trainees from disadvantaged backgrounds had some income after 6 months, but not enough to be rated in gainful employment; the training institutions thus failed to receive final payment for their training.



Trainee carpenters: Two young women of the Tharu ethnic minority in Nepal learn new skills (© Helvetas/Flurina Rothenberger)

### Promote self-employment

Self-employment can be a viable alternative to wage employment, especially for individuals with only limited skill sets. However, successful self-employment depends on the provision of additional skills such as financial literacy, business skills, and marketing skills. Facilitated access to finance must be part of, or strongly linked to, VSD projects focusing on entrepreneurship and self-employment; here women often require particular support.

### Mentoring

It is important to complement on-the-job training by counselling, encouragement, and job placement. Mentors are a good

way of ensuring this – visiting graduates in the first year after training, helping them to overcome constraints, and to giving advice based on experience. Women graduates in non-stereotypical jobs often particularly benefit from such support.

### Tackle employers' gender bias

Employers often underestimate women's capabilities, especially if they work in a "male occupation". The establishment of durable relationships between training providers and employers, equipping women with the skills and confidence to be successful, can contribute to overcoming this bias.

## 4. Important aspects in monitoring and evaluation

The following points should be taken into particular account:

- **Collect and analyse sex-disaggregated data (for baseline, monitoring system):** Ensure the recoding and storage of all data on trainees at an individual level, identifiable by sex. In reporting, present and analyse disaggregated data.
- **Ensure gender-sensitive evaluation design:** Design tracer studies and other evaluations that specifically seek out any differences between men and women in employment, and analyse the suitability and prospects for men and women in specific occupations.
- **Include qualitative analysis:** Regularly carry out an in-depth qualitative analysis of trainees' perceptions on indicators such as empowerment, integration and recognition in society, decision-making power, control over revenue, self-worth, freedom and personal fulfilment. These indicators complement quantitative information on income and employment.
- **Link to employment:** VSD projects often focus intensely on the quality of the training process without considering the transition to employment. Monitoring systems should therefore consider "employment" instead of "training completion" as an outcome.
- **Remote monitoring:** Participatory measures for the continuous monitoring of training processes are worth considering. An innovative mechanism is to install a toll free telephone number through which trainees can pose questions and complaints; they receive an immediate response, whilst more serious issues are addressed to training providers afterwards.

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### Main authors

Sonja Hofstetter and Bettina Jenny, with contributions from Jane Carter, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

### Commissioned and overseen by

Ursula Keller, Senior Gender Policy Adviser, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation



Trainee land surveyors: Young people in Guatemala learn skills for natural resource management (© HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation)