

# Technical Education and Vocational Training for Women

## A case study of Yemen

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### Youth and Women in Yemen's Labor Market

Soaring population growth in Yemen has led to approximately 200,000 young people entering the labor market each year. Figures are outpacing labor demand, in a country where the deteriorating economy is leading to less job creation. The majority of youth in Yemen works mostly in the informal economy with no prospects of regular contracts, social security, or forms of insurance. The limited ability of the formal education system to prepare young people for the labor market is also leading to a chronic 'skills shortage' in Yemen.

Against this background, the Technical Education and Vocational Training (TEVT) System in Yemen absorbs only 0.2 percent of each annual cohort in upper secondary education and of this only 13 percent are young women, a figure that is consistent with the overall low participation rate of women in Yemen's labor market (MOT EVT, 2007).

To understand the above situation one must look into the main challenges that are being faced by women wanting to enter the work force. Women workers have been constrained by a number of factors that include low educational levels, early marriage<sup>1</sup>, high fertility rates, and persistent cultural negative perception regarding "women workers". The traditional gender roles that are still observed in Yemen mean that women are often concentrated in sectors that are traditionally associated with their roles. In fact, a look at formal sectors where you find women (excluding the agriculture sector where rural women are the backbone), shows that the vast majority are mostly occupying jobs

as teachers, nurses, secretaries, and as customer services, in sectors that are considered 'appropriate' and 'feminine' (Durr, 2004). The situation is however expected to change. The recent increase of poverty levels in Yemen is forcing more and more women to seek work and support their families. Sole incomes from male 'breadwinners' are not proving enough to make ends meet, a situation that is becoming a trend across various social classes in Yemen. Financial necessity is therefore increasingly dictating the entry of women into the work force.

Within this context the following article makes the case that better access and integration of women in TEVT and their empowerment through provision of practical skills that are demanded in the labor market can significantly enhance their opportunity to find gainful employment. The methodology used entailed: a review of strategies and documentation from the Ministry of Technical Education and Vocational Training in Yemen (MOT EVT) and other relevant United Nations reports, along with semi-structured interviews with MOT EVT technical staff, institute deans, teachers, and NGOs in Yemen working in skills training. Focus group meetings were also conducted with over 200 TEVT students across three governorates in Yemen namely Sana'a, Taizz, and Aden as well as interviews with employers from the private and public sectors in Yemen.

### TEVT in Yemen and its Challenges

In Yemen and arguably in many developed and developing countries, cultural bias against technical education and vocational training is evident and is shared by parents, young graduates, employers,

and society at large. To many the TEVT sector is an institution associated with 'drop-outs' and an educational system that is 'second-class'. Simultaneously, this system mostly targets the urban youth, mostly males from relatively well off backgrounds. Limited capacity to absorb the graduates that are increasing in numbers means that graduates are chosen according to their grades, a system that arguably marginalizes the economically vulnerable and socially excluded.

In Yemen, institutionally, the TEVT system is mostly supply-driven, with not enough linkages to the private sector and almost no linkages with employment institutions or with the secondary school system. This is consistent with the perception in Yemen, especially amidst the private sector and the business community, that this education system needs to produce graduates with high quality skills that are more relevant to labor market needs.

Young women's low enrolment rates in technical education and industrial institutes mainly stem from the perception that these institutions provide skills associated with 'manual labor' and are therefore dominated by men. Particularly in the context of Yemen where strong traditional gender roles prevail, women continue to be underrepresented in technical education and vocational training centers. The majority of women enrolled in TEVT institutions are found in the traditional specializations such as sewing, embroidery, handicrafts, and hairdressing - sectors which are already over saturated and with limited returns in terms of income. "The main issue with Technical Education and Vocational Training is that it is considered as manual labor which is exhausting and generates low income. That is what vocational training means in the mind of the majority of people in Yemen. (personal communication, teacher in Al Moalla Industrial Institute-Aden).

### Pockets of Diversified Participation

According to recent data from the MOTEVT, there is evidence of women entering less traditional sectors. Enrollments of women in TEVT institutes for the year 2008-2009 across Yemen are as follows (according to the rate of enrollment starting

from the highest): computer programming, office management, accounting, child nursery, marketing, management, photography, desktop publishing, interior design, PC maintenance, plants production, networks, telecom engineering, engineering construction, and building construction.<sup>2</sup> Graphic design and digital multimedia was in fact the most popular course for women in Sana'a Community College for the year 2008-2009. Women participation is also increasing in the newly established National Hotel and Tourism Institute (NAHOTI) in Sana'a where you find young women wanting to become tourist guides, a sector where traditionally participation of women was generally unheard of. Nawal, a student at the institute, expressed the following in her interview: "When I take the bus and I am asked by a woman next to me what I do and I tell her I attend the center for hotel and tourism she gets cold and distant. Even at the institute, amidst my fellow students, I feel I am being judged as a 'female' in this field".

Enrollment of women in TEVT centers is mostly found in the main governorates and main cities of Yemen, with participation in smaller cities/districts close to nil. Significantly, despite being the capital city, Sana'a has a small percentage of women entering non-traditional sectors, the highest numbers being concentrated in commercial institutes (secretariat, administration, accounting) or traditional skills (such as sewing, ceramics, hairdressing, etc). Increased and diversified participation, however, is noticed in Community Colleges in courses such as information technology, graphic design, and internet technology. Aden is also witnessing similar scenarios when it comes to women's participation in the TEVT sector, despite its past historical experience of women flourishing in non-traditional fields such as marine technology, carpentry, electrics, and mechanics during Aden's socialist period.<sup>3</sup>

### Main Challenges Facing Young Women

Despite evidence pointing towards more women entering non-conventional trades, the numbers are small and based on unique cases rather than up-coming trends. There are a number of important factors that have been identified as main obstacles

to both the entry of women in these centers and to the success of women TEVT graduates who are trying to find employment. Some of these factors are summarized in the following;

#### a. Double Discrimination Facing Women

In comparison to their male counterparts, young women in Yemen are doubly disadvantaged when entering this sector due to a) the traditional perception that TEVT provides second class education and b) a system that is dominated by men. Interviews conducted for the purpose of this research with young students, parents, and teachers, however, indicated that cultural hindrances, while important, do not pose the main obstacle preventing more women from enrolling in this type of education and joining non-conventional trades. As expressed by the female dean of the Girls Commercial Institute in Sana'a; "... If we are talking about cultural inhibitions in Yemen preventing women from entering the technical education and vocational training system, these could be easily overcome by general awareness. People in Yemen are ready to change" (personal communication, ). Lack of awareness about what these technical institutes have to offer is more likely to be the key inhibiting factor. Due to the limited capacity of these institutes to absorb the increasing number of graduates (mostly young men) enrolling, school campaigns to reach out to potential applicants have been, by the admittance of many heads of these centers, restricted. In comparison to men, women are generally more restricted to the private sphere and have therefore less of a chance to know about vocational training opportunities.

#### b. Lack of Infrastructure

Non-mixed classes in mixed vocational and technical institutes where the majority of students are young men (i.e. industrial institutes focusing on mechanics, carpentry, etc) are clearly inhibiting the entry of young women. Priorities must be given to women, particularly to ones entering domains that are un-conventional and normally dominated by men, even if this would mean initial provision of non-mixed classes until a more balanced participation between men and women is achieved.

#### c. Saturation of Traditional Fields with no Potential for Making an Income

With the increasing levels of poverty in Yemen, more and more women are enrolling in TEVT institutes offering traditional feminine specializations in skills such as sewing, embroidery, handicrafts, dress making, ceramics and so on, in the hope of providing an additional income for their family. Yet the majority of these institutes offer very basic skills training which is often not enough to master a trade. The products are often of low quality and no connections to the market are made by these centers (in terms of targeting tourists, expatriates, export, the Yemeni urban middle class, etc). Women graduating from these courses therefore find it hard to find real income generating opportunities.

#### d. Lack of Initiatives that can Further Support Women Breaking into Employment

Entrepreneurship training in basic business skills in the TEVT sector as a whole is neglected despite the fact that the economy of Yemen is based on micro and small family businesses. The need to encourage and nurture an entrepreneurial spirit in the TEVT system, and integrate entrepreneurship training into regular curriculums for these institutes is also recognized in the Ministry's national strategy for TEVT. Little evidence of entrepreneurship training integrated into the institutes' curriculum is found to date. There is also a lack of awareness regarding the link between self-employment and technical education and vocational training.

#### e. Gaps in the Search for Employment

For both young men and women graduates job search and job counseling services are limited. Employment offices in Yemen are structurally weak with little linkage with either the TEVT system or the private sector. The majority of hiring in Yemen is done through personal networking. This is particularly so for men who are more active in the public life and who therefore have more chances to access information on what is available. This method of job search, however, has an implication for young women who are mostly restricted to the private sphere. The high rate of women's unemployment feeds on itself: young unemployed women relying on other unemployed

women to look for a job are likely to have a hard time finding one. The majority of young graduate women interviewed from the TEVT sector for the purpose of this research quoted individual approach to companies as their style of job search and many admitted that this approach mostly fails.

#### **f. Limited Capacity of the Lead National Institutions to Support Women in TEVT**

At the institutional level, the Ministry of Technical Education and Vocational Training in Yemen, the responsible branch for all state owned centers, has made some important efforts in attracting more women in their centers. These include a) added flexibility when it comes to women with regards to their qualifications and b) reduced fees for women enrolling. The Ministry also established the Department of Woman and Qualitative Training that is in charge of addressing women, people with disabilities, and the socially marginalized. As in many other countries, following the Beijing conference on gender equality and the establishment of national women machineries worldwide, women departments located in major institutions are not proving to be efficient as they possess no human, technical, or financial resources to carry out their mandates. What is more, this approach tends to further marginalize and exclude women by treating them as separate 'targets' as opposed to equal beneficiaries as young men. When it comes to achieving an increased participation of women the ministry is mostly working in isolation and with little partnership with other key organizations in Yemen that can help promote further the advancement of women in various sectors.

#### **g. Lack of Research and Reliable Data Informing Policy Planning**

As of yet, the biggest challenge that is being faced by the ministry and that is relevant for both young women and men graduates is the lack of a solid monitoring and evaluation system that traces the progress of young graduates as well as reliable qualitative and quantitative data on TEVT graduates. An absence of reliable disaggregated data and studies identifying the needs of the labor market and the performance of graduates in the

sectors they have chosen, as well as a lack of a systematic monitoring and evaluation system mean that no objective policy and planning can be done that can improve the chances of graduates entering the labor market.

### **Possible Policy Responses**

In light of the above, the following are a set of recommendations are proposed in order to address the above gaps. There is a need to raise awareness and encourage more young women to enroll in TEVT centers due to an identified need to change the static and stereotyped perception associated with TEVT in order to reach out to more young girls. Initiatives can include: launching a wide-scale national media campaign featuring both young men and women graduates working on TEVT specializations that are not just focusing on 'manual labor'; launching a large-scale systematic secondary school awareness campaign focusing on reaching out to young girls as well as parents and revising the ministry's and institute's promotional materials (institutes brochures, annual reports, website); developing visual imagery that includes both men and women doing interior décor, desktop publishing, or multimedia; and producing pictures that show women as successful agents in the system and not passive recipients (i.e. women handling electronic devices not just sitting at desks).

According to Rina, a TEVT teacher:

Society is still not aware that these new fields of study have demand in the labor market. Fathers and mothers are still holding onto the idea that their daughters should ensure their future by going to universities, even though realistically there are lot of university graduates who do not find jobs. (Rina, Video Photography Teacher at Commercial TEVT Center in Aden)

Creating an appropriate infrastructure for young women to enter the TEVT is another way of bridging the gap. Introducing non-mixed classes in industrial institutes where there is a majority of male students is an easy step that can significantly achieve results. This can be done

through strengthening the current TEVT curricula with training in life skills and livelihood skills, as well as job search, CV writing and job interviews among others. Training in Basic Business Skills and Self Employment could also be incorporated in the current TEVT curricula by using business start-up packages that can be adapted and specifically target traditional centers where women from poorer backgrounds are found.

Finally, the Ministry's capacity needs to be strengthened. In particular, its Woman Department should be supported to mainstream gender issues

in its work. The Ministry can play a vital role in coordinating among national organizations promoting women's employment, including links with the private sector. The Ministry should also take the lead in a gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation system to generate qualitative and quantitative data on young women.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Early marriage in Yemen is high. A recent early marriage campaign indicated that the average age for women has risen from 10.2 years to 14.7 years in contrast to that of men which has risen from 20.9 years to 21.5 years. See OXFAM early marriage campaign.
2. Participation is limited ranging from 256 enrollments for computer programming down to just three enrolments in construction.
3. Under the Socialist period in Aden 1969-1990, Aden was known to have witnessed an increased number of women working in various industrial fields.

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