

# GirlForce

Skills, Education and  
Training for Girls Now



International  
Labour  
Organization

unicef 



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**A generation of girls risks being left outside the labour force or trapped in vulnerable or low quality employment, due to a lack of skills, absence of quality jobs, and gendered expectations of their roles as caregivers.**

# Girls are not moving from schools into the workforce in high numbers.

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*In the last decade, investment by the global community has led to undeniable progress in girls' education, both in terms of access to and completion of school.*

In almost all regions, and particularly at the tertiary level, girls are increasingly more educated than their male counterparts.

Globally, gender parity has been reached in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school completion, although there remain marked disparities across regions and within and between countries. Even among girls, disparities are observed at the expense of the poorest and most disadvantaged.

Recent data collection by the International Labour Organization (ILO) provides a unique opportunity to understand the aspirations of female youth (aged 15-29), both those in and out of school, and the barriers they face in transitioning to the workforce. The research is based on the ILO School to Work Transition Survey (SWTS), implemented in the following 34 countries between 2012-2016 to youth aged 15-29:

Armenia, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Jamaica, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Montenegro, Nepal, Occupied Palestine Territory, Peru, Republic of Congo, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Samoa, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Ukraine, United Republic of Tanzania, Vietnam, Zambia





### **The Poorest Girls Have The Lowest Secondary Education Completion Rates in Low-Income Countries**

Despite global gender parity in completion rates, disparities persist at the regional and country level, sometimes at the expense of girls, other times at the expense of boys. For example, 86 females completed lower secondary education for every 100 males in sub-Saharan Africa, while in Latin America and the Caribbean, 93 males completed lower secondary for every 100 females.

In Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, more poor boys than poor girls completed lower and upper secondary education. In low-income countries, just 2 per cent of the poorest girls and 3 per cent of the poorest boys completed upper secondary education. In contrast, in Eastern and Southeastern Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean, more poor girls than poor boys complete lower and upper secondary education, although this has not translated into more young women accessing decent jobs in these regions.

Overall, through education, greater numbers of girls than ever before are developing their potential to become empowered, self-confident adults better able to thrive in the future, including in the economic sphere. And yet, recent research has revealed the persistent barriers female youth face in the transition from education to the workforce in a number of countries in every region. Gender gaps in labour market outcomes persist, despite girls' and young women's gains in education.

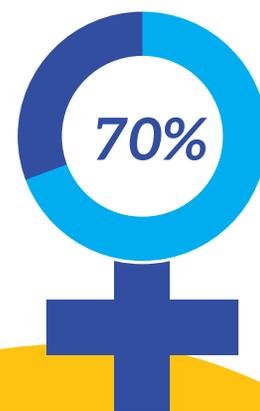
Many more female youth tend to be **economically inactive** (or outside of the labour force) **non-students** than male youth. Among the ILO's School to Work Transition Survey (SWTS) countries, female youth are three times more likely than male youth to be outside of the labour force and not participating in education (8 per cent versus 24 per cent). As a consequence, the NEET rate, which measures the proportion of youth **not in education, employment or training**, is twice as high for female youth than for male youth (at 31 and 16 per cent, respectively).

Regionally, there are wide dispersions in the female NEET rate, which ranges from 25 per cent (compared to 15 per cent for males) in the SWTS countries of sub-Saharan Africa, to 41 per cent (compared to 16 per cent for males) in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

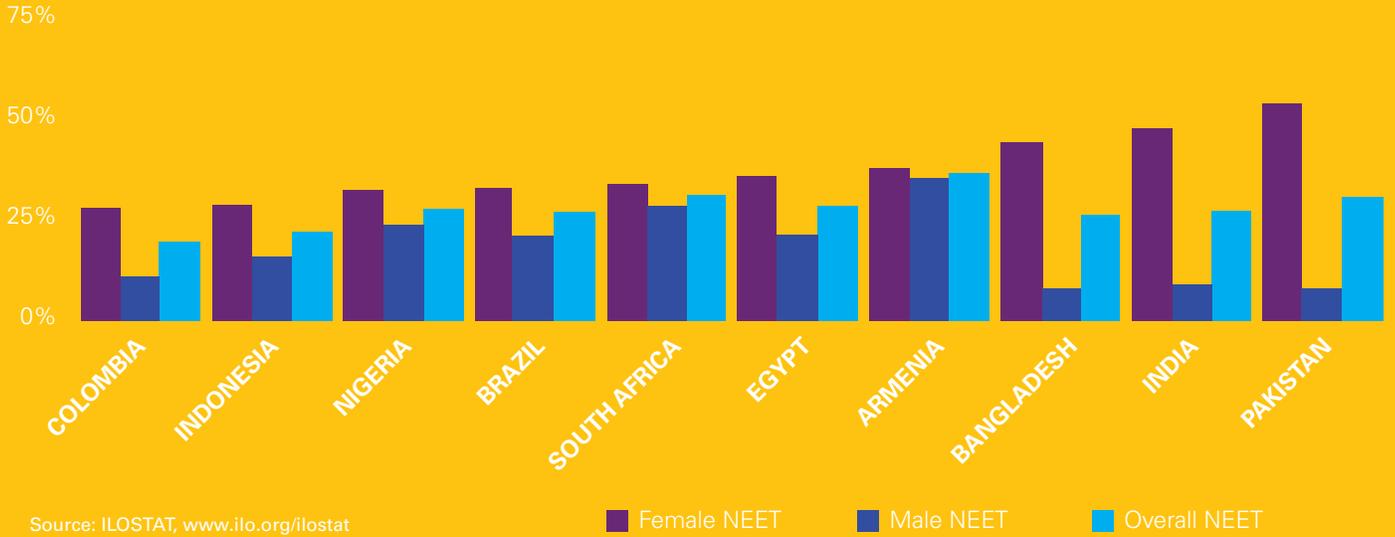
At the same time, girls' aspirations to work are not lining up with reality. Almost 70 per cent of economically inactive female youth aged 15-29, who are not in education, indicated that they **wish to work in the future**.

*Female youth aged 15-29 are **3 times** more likely than male youth to be outside the labour force and not participating in education.*

*Despite their economic inactivity, almost 70 per cent of non-student female youth aged 15-29 said they **wish to work in the future.***



**TEN COUNTRIES WITH PRONOUNCED NEET RATES, AND SIGNIFICANT MALE/FEMALE DISPARITY IN NEET RATES (%) AMONG YOUTH AGED 15-24**



**SHARE OF NEET FEMALES WHO ARE ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE**

PAKISTAN	<b>96%</b>
INDIA	<b>96%</b>
BANGLADESH	<b>93%</b>
COLOMBIA	<b>89%</b>
NIGERIA	<b>84%</b>
INDONESIA	<b>81%</b>
EGYPT	<b>78%</b>
ARMENIA	<b>69%</b>
SOUTH AFRICA	<b>61%</b>
BRAZIL	<b>58%</b>

**SHARE OF NEET MALES WHO ARE ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE**

PAKISTAN	<b>55%</b>
INDIA	<b>43%</b>
BANGLADESH	<b>61%</b>
COLOMBIA	<b>66%</b>
NIGERIA	<b>74%</b>
INDONESIA	<b>45%</b>
EGYPT	<b>40%</b>
ARMENIA	<b>74%</b>
SOUTH AFRICA	<b>53%</b>
BRAZIL	<b>41%</b>

**In the SWTS countries, the gender gap in the NEET rate widens as adolescents enter adulthood.**

The NEET rate refers to the proportion of youth **'not in employment, education or training'** and is used as an indicator to understand the youth labour market. It consists of two components: economically inactive non-student youth who are not in education (inactive non-students); and economically active youth who are unemployed and looking for work (unemployed non-students).

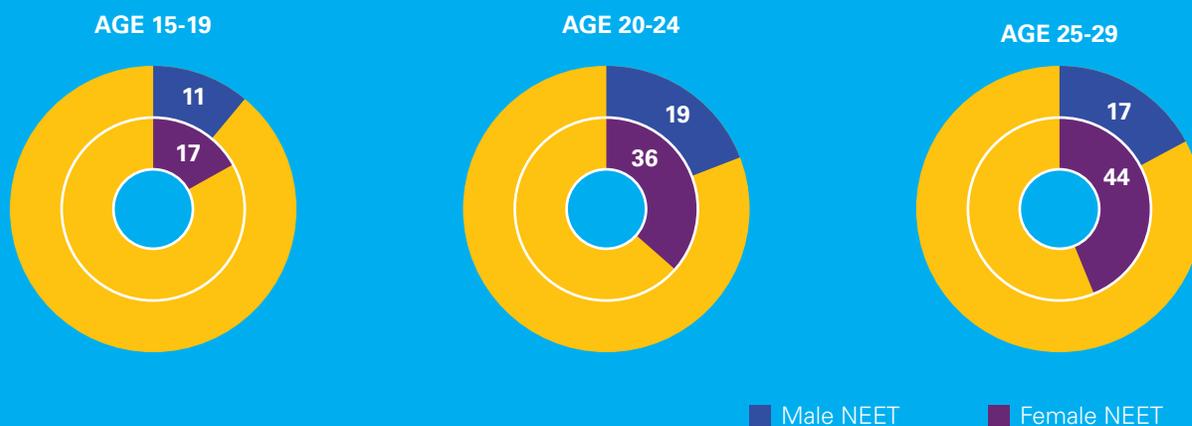
While even in adolescence, girls are more likely not to be in education, employment or training than boys in the SWTS countries, the gender gap becomes much starker as adolescents enter adulthood.

For adolescents aged 15–19 years, a period when youth should be in education or training, the NEET rate is 1.5 times higher for girls than boys (at 17 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively). This represents a gender gap of 6 percentage points. The gender gap jumps significantly to 27 percentage points for young adults aged 25–29, when the female and male NEET rates are 44 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively. Most of this disparity is driven by the strong female bias among economically inactive non-student youth.

Despite their aspirations for employment, female economically inactive non-student youth often remain “stuck” in inactivity, whether they move directly from school to economic inactivity or work for a period of time before leaving the labour force. Once a girl (not in education) becomes economically inactive, she tends to remain there. One third of currently economically inactive female youth (33 per cent) had no prior work experience, indicating they moved directly into economic inactivity, compared to just 18 per cent of currently economically inactive non-student male youth. This lack of prior work experience can limit female youths’ future job prospects since prior employment serves as a signal of an individual’s future labour market potential.

Yet, prior work experience alone does not imply a successful transition back to the labour force for currently economically inactive female youth. More than one third (35 per cent) of female youth in this category left work for family reasons, compared to about 7 per cent of their male counterparts. With a few exceptions, the majority of SWTS countries show that young women who dropped out of the labour market due to family reasons continued in their economic inactivity. Thus, while rates of non-student economic inactivity fall for male youth after 24 years of age, they continue to increase for female youth due to the barriers they face.

**AVERAGE SWTS COUNTRIES YOUTH NEET RATE BY SEX AND AGE GROUP (PERCENT)**

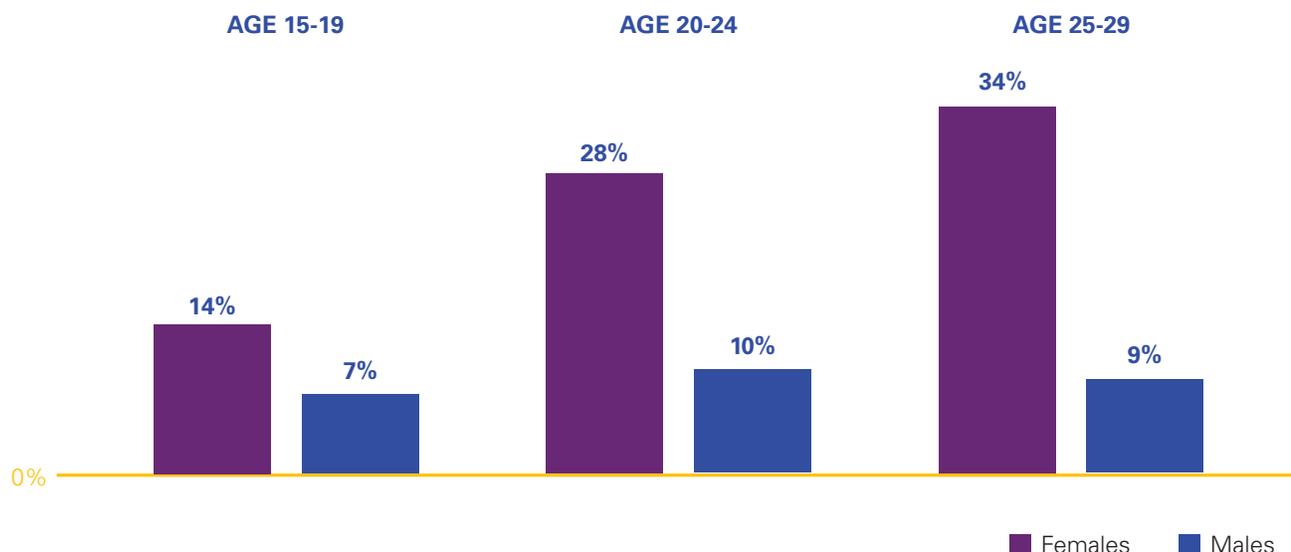


# Once a girl who is out of school becomes economically inactive, she tends to remain there.

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*As they age into adulthood, female youth are more likely to get stuck in economic inactivity than male youth, who are more likely to enter the labour force.*

**ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE NON-STUDENT RATES, BY SEX AND AGE GROUP IN SWTS COUNTRIES**





# What barriers do female youth face in the transition to work?

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## **Lack of Access to Quality Education and Skills Development**

Many children and adolescents go to schools of such low quality that they leave functionally illiterate and innumerate. **Globally, six out of ten children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.** Many schools are also failing to support girls and boys to develop transferable skills needed in the work place, like self-confidence, problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity.

Job-specific skills can be developed through a mix of classroom and work-based learning, but in many countries, **technical and vocational training programs are not designed or delivered in partnership with the private sector**, leading to outdated courses that fail to meet the needs of the labour market. In the SWTS sample, nearly

one in three (Asia Pacific) and one in five (sub-Saharan Africa) unemployed female youth reported that the entry requirements for their preferred career paths exceeded their education and training. Furthermore, while informal apprenticeships may provide many young people with training opportunities, particularly in low-income countries, these often suffer from poorly skilled master craftspersons, a lack of accreditation and gender biases in recruitment.

Globally, less than half of girls aged 15-19 are in school. Many of those that are in school are over-age for their grade and will not complete their secondary education. Even for those that are able to access learning opportunities, poor quality teaching and unsafe learning environments can prevent girls from developing the knowledge and skills they need to access employment or entrepreneurship opportunities.

### Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Girls' Subject Choices and Employment Prospects

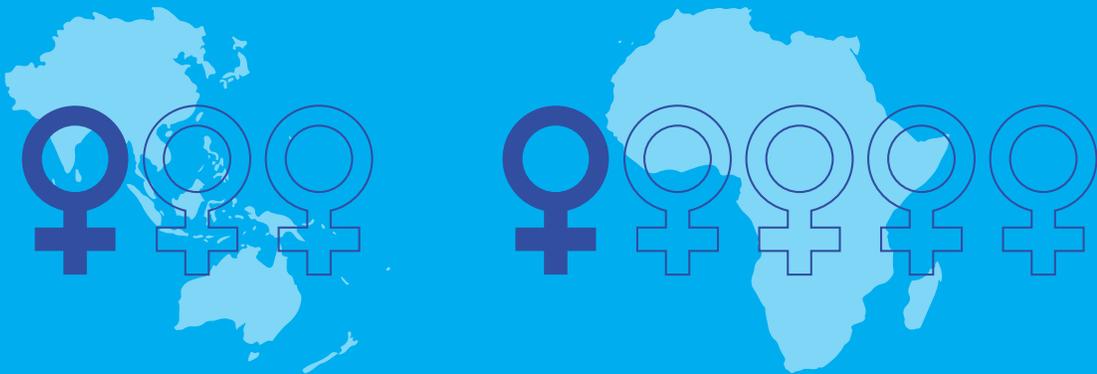
Gender bias can restrict the choices of girls in determining the subjects they wish to study, and the types of jobs and careers they aspire to or have access to. In all regions of the world, girls and boys are often steered into stereotyped study areas, traditionally "feminine" or "masculine." Girls are guided towards subjects that may offer few or no professional employment opportunities (e.g. humanities over natural sciences) or that lead to professional pathways that are paid less, such as secretarial or sales work.

The effects of this can negatively impact young women in non-technical specializations when it comes to finding work in an

economic landscape that is increasingly valuing skills in science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM). Only 7 per cent of young women aged 25-29 in the SWTS countries majored in STEM at the secondary level compared to 18 per cent of young men. At the tertiary level, the gap widens, with only 11 per cent of young women having majored in STEM compared to nearly 1 in 3 young men.

Gender stereotypes against the involvement of girls and women in STEM education begin in primary school. Lower expectations of girls' performance in STEM subjects, lack of encouragement and few role models are barriers to girls developing STEM skills, which in turn decreases their perceptions of self-efficacy and ability.

*Nearly 1 in 3 (Asia Pacific) and 1 in 5 (sub-Saharan Africa) unemployed female youth in the SWTS countries reported that the entry requirements for their preferred career paths exceeded their education and training.*



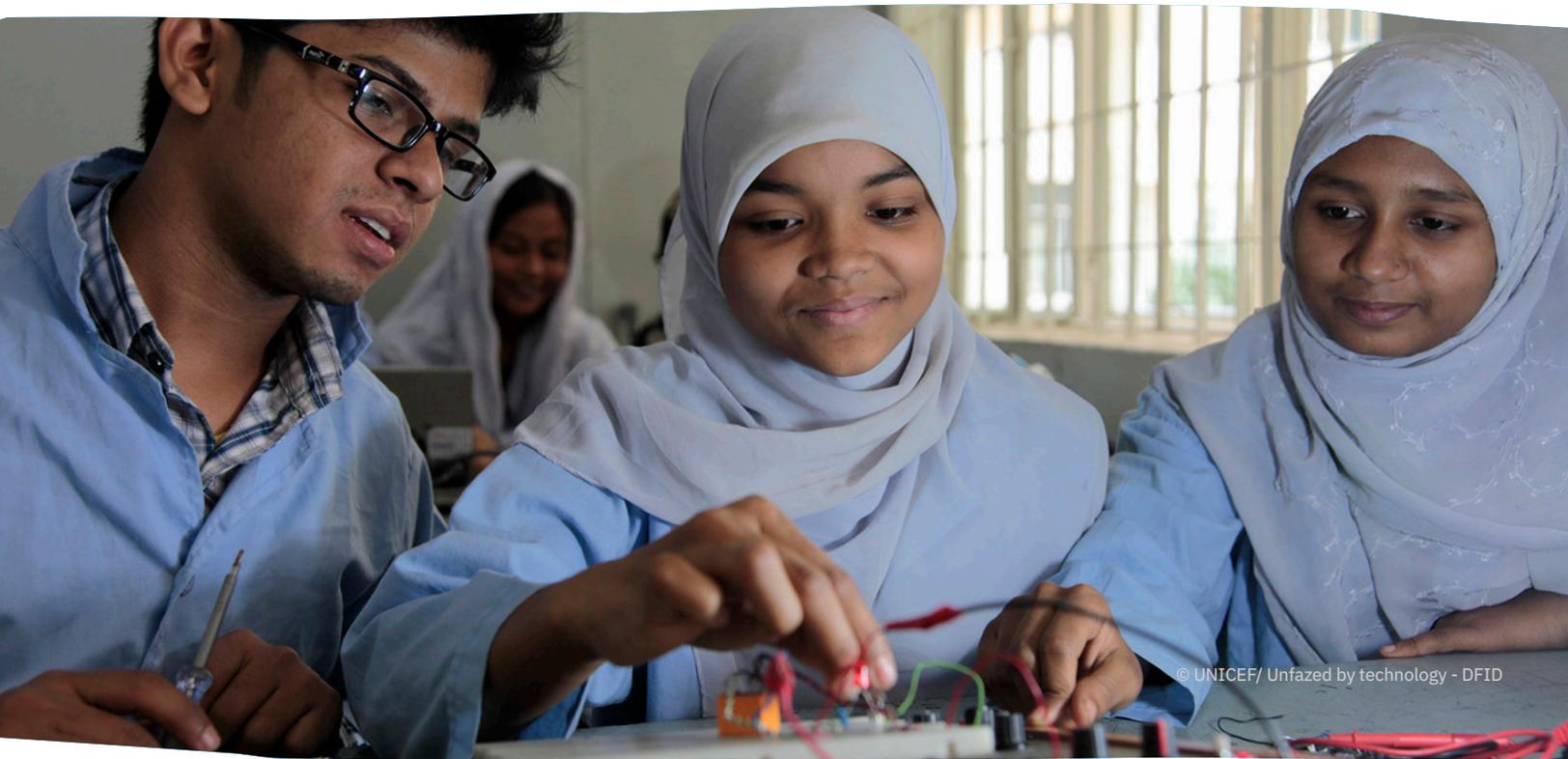
# Early marriage and early pregnancy can result in interrupted schooling, social isolation, and girls' limited access to job and training opportunities.

## **Pregnancy and Family Responsibilities**

Having children serves as a push factor towards employment for male youth but has the opposite impact for female youth. Less than one in two (46 per cent) young mothers aged 15-29 in the SWTS countries work compared to more than four in five (84 per cent) young fathers of the same age.

In many societies, female youth are also vulnerable to early marriage and early pregnancy, which can result in interrupted schooling, social isolation, and limited access to job and training opportunities. Socio-cultural bias about female roles, both at home and in the workplace, can impede girls' access to learning and training, preventing them from gaining necessary skills for future employability.





# Girls access alternative learning programmes in Bangladesh

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Almost 40 per cent of secondary-school age children in Bangladesh are out-of-school, and vulnerable to child marriage and child labour. An 'alternative learning pathway' programme started by UNICEF four years ago, is helping out-of-school adolescents with skills training to open up opportunities for employment and further education.

Armed with a small stipend, adolescents go through six months of hands-on training through apprenticeships, complemented with in-classroom skills development such as critical thinking and problem solving. They are then placed in either self- or waged-employment.

Since it started, more than 20,000 boys and girls aged between 14-18 years have gone through the programme. More than half of the cohort were girls. Ninety-five per cent have successfully gotten jobs and increased their monthly income by about six times on average.

In particular, the programme has significantly impacted female participants. Girls' savings rate was found to be nearly four times that of boys indicating that girls were more likely to invest their earnings to further increase their income. By placing girls in non-conventional trades, such as mobile phone and refrigerator repair, the programme also helped to challenge workplace gender stereotyping.



# Investing in girls' skills for employability

Changing gender norms that limit young women's desire and ability to work, coupled with investing in quality education – that includes critical skills for future employability – has the potential to build a future skilled GirlForce.

A quality education prepares girls not only with foundational skills, such as literacy and numeracy, but also with transferable skills such as self-confidence, communication and decision-making. These are crucial for female youth to find decent work, become entrepreneurs, and access further training and learning. Technical and vocational skills – and career aspirations - can be developed in school and through partnerships between business and the education sector, such as apprenticeships, job shadowing and work experience programmes.

- Education sector interventions can include working with teachers to: eliminate gender stereotypes about girls' ability in STEM fields; stop channeling girls into skills development tracks based on gender norms; and ensure that girls develop a healthy self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities from the early grades. Partnerships between the education sector and the private sector can prepare girls for the workforce through career guidance, mentoring, and apprenticeships.
- Beyond the education sector, policies for greater social protection, such as removing gender-based job discrimination and closing the gender wage gap are essential for improving work outcomes for girls and young women

Importantly, even if the gap between boys' and girls' skills development is addressed, the majority of young women will still not find decent work due to a lack of formal sector jobs combined with gender biases that prevent young women from accessing these opportunities. More than one in three female unemployed youth in the SWTS sample reported a lack of jobs and not knowing where to seek jobs as their main obstacle to employment.

*A quality education coupled with changes in gender norms can improve the ability of young women to find decent work, start a business, or access further training to be employable in today's workforce.*

# What skills are needed?

**Foundational skills** consist of literacy, numeracy and increasingly, digital literacy. These are essential for further learning, employment and civic engagement. Digital literacy includes the ability to use technologies, as well as the social and emotional skills needed to safely navigate the digital space.

**Transferable skills** include critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and confidence. Increasingly demanded by employers in today's fast-changing economic and social landscapes, transferable skills help young people to adapt to change, and improve their chances of finding and keeping decent work. Everyone needs these skills to function effectively in the home, at school, in the workplace and the community.

**Technical and vocational skills** are associated with one or more occupations. Some may have very narrow applications in a single economic sector, such as bricklayers in the construction industry; while others are more mobile across sectors, such as accountants and book-keepers. The wider the application of a skillset, the more flexible and responsive to change the holder of these skills can be in the labour market. Technical and vocational skills need to be constantly updated to keep up with the pace of automation and innovation today.





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# Lebanon: closing the gender gap in stem fields

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“I thought only men could learn robotics – now I am able to construct a robot!” Those were the words of one Lebanese teenage girl after she had completed a day-long Girls Got IT training, an initiative that UNICEF supports in Lebanon through its Youth Innovation Lab.

The day had started early, with talks by entrepreneurs from Lebanon’s start-up companies urging 400 girls to pursue studies and careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The girls went to hands-on workshops, where, with ‘Girl on Fire’ by Alicia Keys playing on the sound system, they developed websites and mobile applications, experimented with virtual reality and graphic design, and, yes, built robots.

STEM careers are poised to be the jobs of the future, but discrimination and restrictive gender norms prevent many girls from entering those fields of study. The risk is that girls and women will remain marginalized in

the global economy. Closing the gender gap in education is not going to be enough to achieve gender equality – we also need to close the gender gap in STEM education.

This is precisely the goal of Girls Got IT. Over the course of 2017, the initiative trained 18,550 girls from across Lebanon. It targets 15- to 17-year-old girls from marginalized and disadvantaged communities, including Syrian refugees – girls least likely to be exposed to STEM right at the time when they are planning their future careers and deciding whether to pursue higher education.

Girls Got IT is a joint collaboration between five local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – led by the Lebanese League for Women in Business (LLWB) – UNICEF and the Lebanese Ministry of Education.

# A skilled girlforce to help girls succeed

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A skilled GirlForce is a global effort to attract attention and investment to equipping girls and young women with knowledge and skills needed for work, so they can successfully transition into employment. It is a movement to enable young women and girls to gain confidence and overcome the barriers that prevent them from fully participating in the workforce – to find employment, build careers, start businesses and become economically empowered individuals.

## **The global community should work to:**

- **Deliver large-scale public and private sector programming for girls' education, skills and market-adapted training.**
- **Improve the quality and relevance of teaching and learning to enable girls to develop the foundational, transferable and technical/vocational skills needed for life and work.**
- **Challenge gender stereotypes, social norms and change unconscious bias in relation to gender roles to enable girls to have the same learning and career opportunities as boys.**
- **Provide the poorest girls, and single and young mothers, with financial incentives to stay in school or to participate in youth employment or skills development programs.**
- **Empower, motivate, encourage and create the space for girls and young women to consider careers in the growing digital world of work.**
- **Increase girls' participation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) learning.**
- **Create initiatives to support girls' school-to-work transition, such as career guidance, apprenticeships, and work experience programmes.**
- **Enable access to training, finance and enterprise development for female entrepreneurs.**

# Sources

- Brotman, J. S., & Moore, F. M. (2008). Girls and science: A review of four themes in the science education literature. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*: 45(9), 971-1002.
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# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This analysis specifically draws on Elder, S. and Kring, S. (2016). *Young and Female – A Double Strike? Gender Analysis of School-to-Work Transition Surveys*, International Labour Organisation, Geneva. It is complemented by further analysis of the SWTS data. More complete details of the surveys, and studies based upon them, can be found at the Work4Youth project webpage: <https://www.ilo.org/employment/areas/youth-employment/work-for-youth/lang-en/index.htm>. SWTS data has also been used extensively in two recent major ILO publications on young people: ILO. (2017). *Global employment trends for youth: Paths to a better working future*, Geneva, and O’Higgins, N. (2017). *Rising to the youth employment challenge: New evidence on key policy issues*, Geneva, ILO.

<sup>2</sup>Although country-level data are presented in regional groupings in some instances throughout this report, the data are representative at the country level only.

<sup>3</sup><http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs46-more-than-half-children-not-learning-en-2017.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Brotman, J. S., & Moore, F. M. (2008). *Girls and science: A review of four themes in the science education literature*. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 45(9), 971-1002

