



# Up-skilling women or de-skilling patriarchy? How TVET can drive wider gender transformation and the decent work agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Despite decades of focus on gender and skills training, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa remains deeply gendered and rooted in wider structures of patriarchal inequality and exploitation. Engaging with recent theoretical moves toward gender-transformative and gender-just TVET programming, this paper explores how a gradual revisioning of TVET can be mobilised to challenge broader gender inequality and discrimination in precarious settings. Bringing together insights from feminist scholarship and the UN's decent work agenda, which seeks to align fair and secure working conditions with the aspirations of workers, we ask what a gender-transformative future for TVET might look like where labour rights, sustainable livelihoods and wellbeing are incorporated from the ground up. Drawing on findings from Cameroon and Sierra Leone, from the innovative 'Gen-Up' project which aims to investigate possible gender-responsive TVET programmes and policies in collaboration with the TVET provider, the Don Bosco network we ask what is both possible and permissible in the fractious economic climate, where the focus on basic survival and income generation inhibits a genuine challenge to entrenched gender norms and stereotypes. For young women especially whose aspirations are multiply damaged by persistent discriminatory frameworks and who become further vulnerable at times of economic and social crisis, we ask whether current TVET programming is helping them escape the multiple forms of marginalisation they face. Even in cases where women may be portrayed as successful entrepreneurs or achieving sustainable livelihoods, the evidence suggests these individualistic narratives are leaving many young women behind. In this context of instability, precarity and increasing global and local socio-economic and gender inequalities we argue that only holistic TVET programming based on social and moral values and empowerment and proposing diverse pathways to decent work, creating forms of solidarity, collaboration and a contextualised enabling environment can act as both a lever for gender transformation and also an engine for broader socio-economic change fitting the 'Decent Work' vision and a constantly changing world of work.

## 1. Introduction

In expanding urban job markets, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is increasingly being championed as an important pillar of job creation, and in Sub-Saharan Africa as an antidote to proliferating levels of youth unemployment and its associations with insecurity and instability (Greene et al., 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015; Ngugi and Muthima, 2017). At the same time, TVET has also been recognized as a vehicle for better social integration, youth empowerment, citizenship and sustainable livelihoods offering more stable and secure forms of

employment and aspirational fulfilment (Hilal, 2012). However, recent evidence has highlighted how urban centres are deeply gendered spaces with young girls especially vulnerable to multiple forms of discrimination, exploitation and violence (Brouder and Sweetman, 2015; Chant and McIlwaine, 2016; Chant et al., 2017). Here, the lack of social protection, infrastructure, job opportunities and so on restrict young women's abilities to draw on the broader economic growth occurring around them, leaving them further vulnerable to gendered relations mired in power, privilege and entrenched forms of gender-based discrimination (Chant and McIlwaine, 2016; Dejaeghere, 2020).

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In this context, TVET can offer a direct route for young women's economic empowerment, with skills and training a way of elevating their employment opportunities and equally raising the ceiling for their wages and aspirations (McLean and Modi, 2016; Morton et al., 2014; UN Women, 2013). This aligns with the ILO 'decent work' agenda which seeks to promote more dignified working conditions which integrate 'a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families' with both freedom of voice and equality of opportunity 'for all women and men' (ILO, 2017). With the majority of women entering the informal sector in the Global South, TVET is increasingly being viewed as a mechanism for empowering women towards 'decent work', generating better job opportunities, a bigger worker pool and simultaneously meeting several urgent policy goals especially in rapidly expanding urban economies (UNESCO and UNEVOC, 2020).

In this paper we interrogate the confluence of these agendas by reflecting on the last ten years of discussion around gender and TVET in light of our recent research on the Gen-Up project. Inspired by African feminism, feminist geography and participatory practice the Gen-Up project has been piloting peer and gender mentoring systems with young female TVET learners in Cameroon and Sierra Leone to investigate where forms of female solidarity and support can generate better outcomes for young women transitioning to the labour market when they complete their TVET programmes. As such, we draw on data collected from this project to explore the potential of TVET to challenge patriarchal structures, broadly defined as social, cultural, economic and political systems which are organised to prioritise men over women and other genders and institutionalise forms of persistent gender discrimination and inequality (UN Women, 2022). We argue that whilst TVET can offer a mechanism for empowering women and girls, it is severely hampered by structural inequalities in both the local social context, local employment landscapes and the national policy context.

Our argument brings two important themes together from the TVET literature to understand how TVET might contribute to a both 'decent work economy' (Sumberg et al., 2020) and a more stable employment environment, particularly in fragile or post-conflict scenarios (van der Veen and Datzberger, 2022). First we draw on recent discussion in this journal and others around the 'social life of skills' (see Brown and De Neve, 2023; Carswell and De Neve, 2022; Rajendra, 2022) and 'skills ecosystems' to understand the 'human development' potential of skills training beyond simple employability (see Allais, 2012; Brennan, 2014; Hilal, 2019; McGrath, 2012; McGrath et al., 2020a; Powell, 2012, 2021; Powell and McGrath, 2019) and some of the ongoing issues with the implementation of skills programmes in precarious settings (van der Veen and Datzberger, 2022). To do this, we focus on our primary local partner, Don Bosco Technical Schools, part of a network of over 100 vocational training centres situated in 42 countries across Africa. Don Bosco's pedagogical model focuses on individual empowerment and offers an important platform to understand how socially embedded skills relate to socially embedded gender norms. We combine this focus with learning from gender focussed and feminist literature from TVET and other development writing which can shed light on how development can become more gender-aware and even gender-transformative (Marcus and Harper, 2014).

The first part of the paper documents some of the intersections of gender, TVET and informal economies in Africa, highlighting the durability of patriarchal systems and gender inequalities. The second part details some of the background and context to the project and the environments in which the Don Bosco centres work. The final part presents vignettes and findings from the Gen-Up project in Sierra Leone and Cameroon before circling back to some of the issues in the literature and suggesting some ways TVET can be truly transformative for young women and girls.

## 2. Methods

Our research design incorporates a range of qualitative, participatory

methods which are designed with young people in mind and in some cases co-designed with the young people themselves to generate in-depth empirical data (Apitzsch et al., 2008; Chambers, 2014; Mullings, 1999). In both countries we have worked with large local teams to design and refine the project in the process of performing the research. In Sierra Leone we have worked with Njala University researchers and a team of four young researchers (ages 20–24) drawn from Don Bosco staff and beneficiaries who either had good education levels, or research experience combined with an interest in gender issues. We selected with the Don Bosco centres' assistance two male researchers and two female researchers to create two gender balanced research teams who were then mentored by experienced male and female researchers. In turn, we paired these research teams up with Don Bosco beneficiaries to create a mentoring framework and conducted a series of participatory projects with young female TVET learners (16–25 years old) who we will refer to as 'beneficiaries'. We worked on a series of different projects and conducted over 100 beneficiary interviews with a number of repeat interviews, a number of FGDs and combined these with participatory workshops around resilience, skills audits, skills mapping and skills futures. In terms of language and translation, as we working across multi-lingual contexts we conducted interviews in the language most respondents were comfortable with local translation where necessary. Transcripts were transcribed into either English (Sierra Leone) or French (Cameroon) with local language terms included where appropriate.

We triangulated these interviews with stakeholder interviews with gender activists, TVET trainers and Don Bosco staff members. In Cameroon we conducted a parallel project which differed slightly in that we were able to recruit and train 6 women trained in the three main TVET Don Bosco's centres as our young researchers team. They were trained on similar topics including research ethics, methods and resilience, definition of skills and decent work. They were mentored by 3 women serving as role models, supported by Don Bosco development office and local researchers from UCAC (Central Africa Catholic University). They conducted over 75 peer-to-peer interviews with young female TVET learners (18 and 25 years old), stakeholders, Don Bosco staff and entrepreneurs and key members of their communities, more than 20 FGDs, participatory workshops and training events. In both locations we adopted a 'biographical' approach (Apitzsch et al., 2008) and followed different groups of learners through their TVET journey and graduated students through their search for employment and alternative livelihoods. In the following section we outline the project in relation to the debates around TVET, socio-cultural gender barriers and gender before discussing our findings so far.

### 2.1. Patriarchal legacies in TVET policy

Gender and TVET have often mirrored each other in development circles, each neglected by different degrees at different points in time. Gender itself was marginalised by the millennium Development Goals before being re-prioritised at the institution of the Sustainable Development Goals, with a new dedicated gender goal (SDG 5) and incorporation of specific gender targets throughout the other SDGs (see Sweetman, and Rowlands, 2016). Similarly, TVET has often been overlooked in education and development planning and programming (Ngcwangu, 2015; Akanbi, 2017) and is still often excluded from national educational strategies in favour of traditional primary, secondary education (King and Palmer, 2006; McGrath, 2010: 538; Palmer, 2007). For example, although UNESCO-UNEVOC was developed in 2002 to specifically mainstream TVET development, it offered no gender-specific objectives or targets (Broek et al., 2015: 47).

More recently, TVET has moved up the policy agenda with a renewed focus on its potential as gender 'game-changer' (Magdalene and Lim, 2022) linked to the empowerment of women as a development 'multiplier' (Jones, Holmes, and Espey, 2010) where educating women is seen to lead to benefits which are magnified beyond the individual in a way that yields "enormous intergenerational gains" (USAID, in Suen, 2013:

61). Recent studies have highlighted how TVET can act as part of a broader gender oriented education policy which incorporate a wider range of learners and educative models (Idris and Aluko, 2013) which includes reaching beyond basic education to address gender inequality and youth unemployment more broadly (Chea and Huijsmans, 2018: 39; Hilal, 2012: 686; 2017, Meath et al., 2021). Thus, female inclusion in TVET provides a long-term solution to economic, development and peacekeeping dilemmas (Greene et al., 2015; Hartl, 2009: 5; Jackson, 2009; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015: 29; Ngugi and Muthima, 2017: 19; Van den Bergh Collier, 2017). Consequently, the intersection of TVET with gender objectives is now recognised as a ‘necessary element in the development strategies’ of emerging markets (Wilkins, in Miller, 2020: 2) with UNESCO’s (2016)–2021 and 2022–2029 TVET strategies urging national policymakers to incorporate gender-responsive frameworks at local and national levels (King and Palmer, 2006; Meath et al., 2021: 8; North, 2010: 427).

Nevertheless, men still dominate Africa’s TVET sector (IDRC, in Bray-Collins et al., 2022: 153). Across most African countries, males consistently fare better in terms of enrolment, participation and pass rates and the continent continues to have the lowest global rates of female participation in STEM and ‘technical’ TVET subjects (Andiema and Manasi, 2021; Meath et al., 2021; UNESCO and UNEVOC, 2020: 12). Demonstratively, in 2019, only 30% of Kenya’s TVET trainees were female (Najoli, 2019: 1) and just 991 of the 5251 students who sat for Uganda’s November–December TVET examinations were girls and women (Mawanda, 2020). What’s more, critical literature argues that the “liberal” economic development approach has fundamentally failed to challenge the structural foundations of inequality so that women enduringly experience discrimination and subjugation (Matenda, 2020: 112; McGrath et al., 2020b; Niemeyer and Colley, 2015; Wilson, 2015). Honing in on specific aspects of this approach, critical studies have demonstrated various ways in which gender equality has been neglected or perpetuated (see Hilal, 2019). For example, Hayhurst (2013) and Boyd (2016) examine sport and entrepreneurship training provided across Ethiopia, Nigeria, Malawi, Rwanda, Kenya, DRC and Uganda as part of the Nike Foundation’s ‘girl effect’ initiative. Boyd (2016) maintains that whilst the campaign sought to create an enabling environment, its understanding of achieving such, related to achieving neoliberal objectives so that the initiatives have been about market procurement of “third-world adolescent girls”, not about proving girls with empowering opportunities. Drawing upon Girl Effect policies, Boyd (2016): 151–153) holds that a focus on entrepreneurial TVET has been part of the alignment of women’s empowerment with national economic competitiveness. Boyd (2016) also problematises the emphasis on women in TVET as a means of ‘intergenerational’ development, where female participation is seen to not only benefit women, but also the families and communities they nurture’ (Bray-Collins et al., 2022: 155). As an example of the “Women in Development” approach, the critic holds that this notion reasserts patriarchal understandings that women should primarily be caregivers whilst situating women as tools of development whose educational gains can be extracted as development assets.

## 2.2. Feminist approaches to TVET

From this standpoint, the first step in challenging gender norms is to acknowledge the complexity of TVET learner identity, especially young female learners in precarious contexts and informal job markets and the plural ways they exert their agency in ways similar to other young female entrepreneurs (Brown and Ali, 2022; Hilal, 2012; Thorne, 2021; see also Langevang et al., 2015). Initiatives from the UN and other related international institutions situate young women in complex webs of relationships with multiple layers of vulnerability including early marriage, sexual and gender-based violence and the neglect of female education (Najoli, 2019; UN Women, 2022; UNESCO, 2016). Crises such as Covid-19 tend to exacerbate these vulnerabilities, with studies showing that during times of instability young women are more likely

than young men to drop out of school as families and households need boys to go out to work and girls to contribute to domestic labour with girls, adjusted net enrolment rate in primary education just 77.5 per cent in crisis-affected contexts (UN Women, 2013).

We situate these concerns in the context of recent discussions in the TVET literature that place experience of TVET in relation to complex social life (see Allais, 2012; Brennan, 2014; Brown and De Neve, 2023; Carswell and De Neve, 2022; Hilal, 2019; McGrath, 2012; McGrath et al., 2020a; Powell and McGrath, 2019; Rajendra, 2022) and increasingly on how a social focus can disrupt entrenched inequalities rooted in ethnicity, caste and gender etc. (Brown and Ali, 2022). The idea of ‘social ecosystems’ developed in the Global North and now being applied to Global South contexts (see Brown and Ali, 2022; Carswell and De Neve, 2022) moves away from traditional supply-demand models of employment and labour, and focuses more on ‘the problem of skills’ underutilisation in the workplace’ (Brown and Ali, 2022: 11) and ‘how relations within social systems are marked by inequalities and asymmetrical power’ (Ibid.: 12). Building on this work Carswell and De Neve (2022) who advocate for better understanding of the ‘social life of skills’, defined as ‘the social processes, relationships, and ideologies that enable (or constrain) people’s access to skills, and subsequently to employment, wages, satisfaction, and dignity’ (Carswell and De Neve, 2018: 313; cited in Brown and Ali, 2022: 12; see also Brown and De Neve, 2023) Brown and Ali, (2022: 11) argues, moving these concepts to the Global South requires a recalibration of the ‘ecosystem’ framework to accommodate ‘how the environments in which skills are deployed are marked by informality, precarity, power imbalances, and inequality’ (see also Carswell and De Neve 2018. 2020; see also Powell, 2021; Rajendra, 2022).

Similarly, Powell (2021) has shown in her work on South African TVET that combining Sen’s capabilities approach (see Sen, 1993 for example) with a social ecosystems perspective can help to better understand how the informalised economies in the Global South operate through complex constellations of actors, centres and circulations of people, concepts and materials which feed into policies and TVET programming (Powell, 2021). Sen’s capabilities approach focuses on human aspects of work, challenging economic analyses of labour, and incorporating ideas of dignity alongside recognising aspects of work such as unpaid care and community recognition (Powell, 2021; see also Sen, 1993). In this way, it both aligns with the UN Decent Work agenda whilst also acknowledging the local social and community value of work inherent in the social ecosystems framework (Powell, 2021). This is particularly important in the context of declining formal sectors, where recent studies have shown, informality may be the norm with some sub-Saharan job markets having up to 95% of jobs which would be categorised as ‘informal’ in Global North economies (Brown and Ali, 2022; Metelerkamp and Monk, 2023; Nguimkeu, Okou, 2020) with estimations of up to 75% of young people (15–29 years) engaged in informal employment in the 20 poorest countries (Shehu and Nilsson 2014). Consequently, as Powell (2021) argues the complex links between formal and informal sectors need to be more thoroughly examined to ‘move away from instrumental understandings of skills and to recognise the multiple roles that education and training could potentially play in expanding human flourishing through expanding the capability for work, the capability for voice, and the capability for education.’

Building on these ideas, we bring the idea of social ecosystem and human development into conversation with African Feminism to understand how local understandings of ‘decent work’ intersect with ideas of gender more generally. African feminism builds upon and contests Western concepts of feminism in favour of an understanding that social equality for women can only be found when rooted in social transformation and collective praxis (Day, 2008; Decker and Baderoon, 2018; Kwachou, 2020; Mikell, 1995; Mougoué, 2019; Nkealah, 2016; Steady, 1981, 2011). It also recognises the distinct plurality of African identity stemming from multiple post-colonial and pre-colonial forms of

hierarchy and oppression, including plural forms of patriarchal inequality and religious tradition (see Kwachou, 2020; Gatwiri and McLaren, 2016; Ogunjipe-Leslie, 1994). As Nkealah : 62) (2016) argues, one common feature of African feminism are 'indigenous feminist models' that engage with feminism from either an African cultural perspective, African geo-political location and/or an African ideological viewpoint'. Importantly, Africa feminism incorporates an intersectional concept of female identity which 'allows for the intersection of gender with many other forms of social difference, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic class, and faith; thus allowing a community to reflect on – and respond to – wider inequalities' (McQuaid et al., 2017: 2). Both Cameroon and Sierra Leone have a rich history of African feminists working from and within local frameworks and contributing to both community mobilisations and national gender policies (see Day, 2008; Decker and Baderoon, 2018; Kwachou, 2020; Mikell, 1995; Mougoué, 2019; Steady, 2011). For example in Sierra Leone, Steady's (1981, 2011) work has helped draw on indigenous knowledge to craft distinctive African brand of feminisms founded on ideas of motherhood, the body and family which contrasted with individualistic notions from Western feminism (Day, 2008: 496). Drawing inspiration from these pioneers we suggest that personal, gendered narratives rooted in local culture and context can offer a more intersectional reading of TVET. Youth experience is often discounted in policy circles in favour of more experienced and seasoned voices and actors (see Wignall, 2016). However, we contend that youth narratives are integral to understanding how TVET operates in particular socio-economic and educational 'ecosystems' and how these linkages can be more effectively transferred into local, regional, national and international policy initiatives.

Moreover, as Joan DeJaeghere (2017) has explored in Tanzania, under increasingly unilateral models of training favoured by neoliberal economic models, the transversal aspect of learning has often been ignored in favour of technical skills. She proposes an approach based on Sen's capabilities approach which incorporates the transversal dimension to craft a 'relational transformative' model defined as 'by relational, I mean that these values, perspectives, and skills are situated within relationships with others and within societal structures, and therefore youths' power to enact these skills requires changing unequal relationships to other people and structures.' Combined with this, recent studies of TVET environments emphasise the need to combine socially attuned appreciations of TVET with the experience of women and girls to create more sustainable forms of social change and sustainable income-generation (Brown and Ali, 2022). As Metelerkamp and Monk : 81) (2023) in their research in Gulu, Uganda have argued that informal learning environments or 'ecosystems' can offer unexpected routes to express agency for young learners, recognising that 'informality, especially for the most vulnerable and excluded, can offer significant potential for transgression and development' (See also Brown and Ali, 2022; Hilal, 2012; Rajendra, 2022). For example, Hilal's (2012) analysis of women accessing skills training in Palestine has shown how TVET centres helped build and scaffold learner's aspirations beyond a limited understanding of skills as marketable job training: 'such expectation went far beyond narrow economic considerations and included a clear sense of social responsibility as well as personal wellbeing' (p.694). Drawing on two case studies of VET provided by international church-related organisations: the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in their vocational training centres (VTCs), Hilal shows how they encoded deeper life skills into their programmes often in line with spiritual principles which allowed trainees to participate in different income-generating activities as well as giving them 'the opportunity to mature, to network, to know how the market worked, to get some life skills, and to make the transition from school to work and real life' (p.694). For women, these programmes were not only a promising route to fulfil their aspiration they were often the only route to find sustainable livelihoods in a situation of protracted crises, conflict and poverty. However, despite some positive gains and efforts to link their training to the job market, access proved

uneven for women in practical terms 'severely undermined by social and labour market constraints' as Hilal argues 'this suggests the need to add new innovative interventions for women employment and increased linkages with the labour market' (p.694).

Building on this example, we suggest that we need to understand skills for both their 'transgressive' potential (Brown and Ali 2020) and their ability to impart 'transversal' skills which can more broadly help young women navigate the labour market (Tien et al., 2020; see also DeJaeghere, 2017). Transversal skills can be defined along a spectrum ranging from the less tangible skills gains from TVET such as self-confidence, leadership and teamworking (sometimes call 'soft skills') to more concrete but transferable skills such as ICT, analytical ability and planning (see Tien et al., 2020 for a full taxonomy). Similarly, Brown and Ali (2022) have shown in a different context, 'transversal' skills can often become transgressive by both creating systems of solidarity and support and building individual's confidence and self-awareness. They draw on Sen's (see Sen, 1993 for example) capabilities approach to understand how skills training can both serve to disrupt social norms such as 'culturally entrenched gender roles' by 'giving women the means to enhance their control and agency whilst performing seemingly traditional household roles' (p. 2455; see also McGrath et al., 2020a; Hilal, 2012, 2019; Powell, 2021). As they suggest, whilst change was slow to show in the women's lives, it was the economic power of these activities which enabled women to subtly challenge the status quo of their local environment, creating a more 'sustainable impact, gradually reshaping the contours of the patriarchal bargain in women's favour' (p.2465). As we show the 'enabling environment' advocated at Don Bosco institutes also creates space for girls to go beyond simple skills acquisition, offering routes to see how 'transversal' skills might help challenge locally enforced gender norms.

### 2.3. Comparative context

The Don Bosco system offers an important route into understanding both issues with current TVET delivery and opportunities to develop TVET provision as a lever for social change. Founded by sainted and Priest and Educator Don John Bosco, during the second half of the 19th Century to support young men into apprenticeships in Turin (Italy), the Don Bosco method aimed for young men to become 'good Christians' and 'honest citizens' lending them spiritual and socio-economic support alongside training them for specific jobs, offering guided apprenticeships and mediation with employers. Don Bosco also founded the Salesian religious congregation with a mission to achieve "the Christian perfection of its associates obtained by the exercise of spiritual and corporal works of charity towards the young, especially the poor." Expanded with sisterhood to include young girls, the Salesians of Don Bosco spread across Europe and the world and now operate in over 120 countries. One reason their method has proved so versatile is the implementation of a 'preventative' educational model which aims to promote 'the three pillars of reason, religion, and lovingkindness' in place of strict, or repressive educational regimes (see Don Bosco, 2022). As such their centres often offer multiple services alongside educational and training facilities such as shelter for vulnerable street children, medical assistance, therapeutic centres, sports and activities for young people and children and areas for worship and other religious events and ceremonies. This portfolio of support, mentorship and education and training opportunities is a modern interpretation of the preventative system and also opens the door for gender empowerment through creating strong support networks for young girls to break into both traditional and non-traditional TVET sectors. It is also important to note that whilst the Salesian order tends to be conservatively minded with regards gender they are dedicated to the pursuit of gender equality with a raft of initiatives supporting gender-based development objectives. We may address this tension in future writing.

In Sierra Leone, the Don Bosco operations began in 1992 with a focus on education but today they are mainly focussed on street children and



highly marginalised youth victims of extreme poverty, victims of war violence and the impact of Ebola and Covid-19 pandemics. In Sierra Leone, Don Bosco centre's preventive system in child protection initiatives is implemented by supportive mechanisms which aim to help young people in different dimensions of their lives. As such the Salesians have not developed direct TVET centres but shelters and therapy centres for those children that they are rehabilitating and empowering through TVET training initiatives including sending them to two 'sister' organisations' TVET centres following the same pedagogical system rooted in Catholic principles: the Murialdo TVET centre (based on the same Salesian pedagogy and originally designed for young adult workers) and the Lunsar Tvet centre which has a gender focus and strong links with local industry such as the nearby mines.

The Salesian presence in Cameroon dates from 1979 with two large TVET centres in Cameroon. In Ebolowa in the South, the community has 481 boys and 132 girls and offers training in the fields of car mechanics, audiovisual, carpentry, electricity, secretariat, accountancy and a driving school. In Mimboman (Yaounde), the TVET centre has 90 girls and 139 boys and offers IT (computer maintenance, audiovisual, accounting and management, graphics and webmastering) and industrial sectors (clothing industry, carpentry and furniture making, welding). The Salesian sisters also have a TVET centre in Yaounde named the Marie Dominique Institute specialised in hospitality and catering with 64 girls and 24 boys studying. The two cases were chosen to investigate how Don Bosco's TVET initiatives and the holistic Salesian pedagogical system offer ways to integrate vulnerable young women in society in a context of child protection and rehabilitation through TVET (Sierra Leone) and of TVET schools and training centres open to the most vulnerable (Cameroon). The longitudinal experience of the Salesians and their pedagogical model was from its conception based on an idea that quality TVET leads to decent work and an approach to integral skills aiming from its inception social integration and empowerment. For these reasons, the Don Bosco's model offers a unique experience and context to host our research.

#### 2.4. TVET in Sierra Leone

The legacy of colonialism continues to have an impact on Sierra Leone's current educational framework. Colonized in 1787 by slaves freed and rescued from the slave trade arriving from England and other groups arriving from Nova Scotia (1792) and Jamaica (1800), Sierra Leone was controlled by the private Sierra Leone Company until 1808, when Britain made Sierra Leone a crown colony. Under British rule, Sierra Leone administration was reorganized into a system of "paramount chiefs" which still remains today and allowed the British to organise labour and resource extraction of precious metals and timber more efficiently (Acemoglu et al., 2014). Under British rule, a colonial system of education was implemented which led to high levels of educational attainment and a well-educated local civil service, with the reputation of its two universities lending it the reputation of the 'Athens of West Africa' (Matsumoto, 2018: 16). However, this system also inherited some of the hierarchical problems inherent in the British academic tradition which relegated vocational education to the bottom of the educational pyramid and prioritised mainstream primary and secondary education (Matsumoto, 2018: 16).

Young people, especially young men, continue to dominate discussions of Sierra Leone's development strategy and are part of an ongoing policy focus on youth employment and skills training which is linked to maintaining national stability. Youth were heavily involved in the Civil War, often in leadership roles, as volunteers or forcibly recruited as fighters and consequently were also targeted as part of the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission which helped maintain peace after the truce in 2002. After the war, many young men were pressed into informal jobs such as driving motorbike taxis (Okada) but a large number of young men remain un/under-employed and are subject to media attacks, police brutality and hierarchical traditional authority.

Added to this the 2014 Ebola crisis has caused economic conditions to worsen and has heightened both political and social tensions in the run-up to the 2023 elections.

The 2014 Ebola crisis increased young women's vulnerability and severely hampered their efforts to achieve equality with their male peers. For many uneducated young women in rural areas, the options were stark as economic insecurity became more prevalent with early marriage and sex work becoming increasingly common (Menzel, 2019; Oosterom et al., 2017). Moreover, according to the World Bank and ILO data, youth employment is growing rapidly, with the share of young people neither in employment nor in education or training was 13.4% in 2014, with young women more likely than their male counterparts to be out of school and not working (ILO, 2017). The country has high youth labour underutilisation rates, particularly among young women at 72.8% (in contrast to 59.9% for male youth) (ILO, 2017).

Since the 2000 s, policy emphasis has increasingly been placed on TVET programmes initially as part of the post-civil war Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process which aims to incorporate ex-combatants back into the workplace and wider society and built into the Government of Sierra Leone's national education strategy (Peeters et al., 2009; van der Veen and Datzberger, 2022). Whilst this resulted in an initial flow of students and TVET graduates into the workforce, this project has slowed in recent years with secondary schools prioritised over TVET centres and a TVET system suffering from 'low quality, low relevance, limited access, inefficiencies, and cutbacks' recreating the traditional hierarchies seen in traditional British education (Peeters et al., 2009: p. 102). The implementation of TVET policy has been uneven with riots and disputes erupting around the placement of skills centres and training institutes. These issues have perpetuated the lingering intergenerational tensions which led up to the conflict have continued to create feelings of economic and social marginalisation amongst youth including the strong reaction against mistreatment from chiefs and elders, prompting young people to 'revolt' against their elders and the corrupt state in pursuit of recognition and empowerment (Tom, 2014).

#### 2.5. TVET in Cameroon

Cameroon has a long history of colonial rule and educational change. From 1884–1945 Cameroon was a German colony and was then split into a French colony and a British colony before merging in 1961. Similarly the education systems were based on a primarily French model with French imposed as a national *lingua franca*. This has sparked continual and often heated debates, especially in minority Anglophone parts of the country where British educational models were used, and led to long-term discussion about the future direction of education at a national level (Kuchah, 2016). Today, with rapid urbanisation and rural-urban migration, Cameroon is gradually transitioning from a traditional agricultural economy to a more varied and urban based economic foundation. This has resulted in greater pressure on urban spaces and urban job markets with more than half of Cameroonians living in urban areas (53%) and an estimated 60% of urban inhabitants living in informal settlements and slums (UN-HABITAT, 2016). This has led to several changes in terms of job restructuring, redefinition of priorities in terms of education and vocational training offer and reconsideration of the economic and social roles of women and young people (Mairama, 2014). In this context, young people make up 52% of the total unemployed population (ILO, 2017) with female unemployment rates higher (6.8%) than for young men (5.8%) and the informal sector was the main provider of jobs with nearly nine out of ten workers (89.5%), of which 86% were men and 93.2% were women.

In this context, TVET forms an important pillar of the Government's education policy with a 26.8% share of secondary enrolments up until 1980. but was neglected during the 1980 s and 1990 s with enrollment declining to 16.6% by 1994 (Oketch, 2007; Atchoarena and Delluc, 2001). The Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training

(MINEFOP) sought to redress this trend by setting up new vocational training centres (CFM) offering non-agricultural training in rural areas, rapid vocational training centres (CFPR) and vocational training centres of excellence (CFP). However, the skills system in Cameroon still faces significant challenges incorporating gender balance into its TVET systems which are common in sub-Saharan Africa with poor quality instruction and facilities, a lack of qualified instructors, a limited range of courses and fragmented oversight and governance (Zouliatou, 2017). In terms of gender, TVET in Cameroon is also noticeably absent from TVET policy. In 2016 117,601 girls (i.e. 34.2 per percent) were enrolled in TVET courses out of 343,597 students overall. However, these statistics do not reflect the wider picture where the majority of skills training takes place outside of formal institutions, with most workers (66.9%) in the informal sector learn or have learned a trade on their own or through practice; an equally large fringe (24.4%) was trained in small businesses, and only 5.3% of employed workers learned a trade in a TVET establishment (Ngathe-Kom, 2015).

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Vignette 1: Sierra Leone

*Alice, 23, has been working on the street since she was 14. Her mother died and her father left her, so she travelled to Freetown to live with her Auntie. The Auntie was hostile and she decided to leave and, with few opportunities for work, she found herself on the street in commercial Sex Work. When she was 16 she had been made pregnant by one of her clients and was found by Don Bosco social workers, whose job involves travelling through urban informal settlements and getting vulnerable young girls off the street. They engaged with her over the next few weeks and encouraged her to join a Vocational Training programme. After doing some preparations and basic English and Maths training she joined a Hairdressing training programme and moved into a Don Bosco shelter. Two years later she graduated and the Don Bosco placements officer found her an internship position in a local hairdressing salon. By that time her child was a toddler and she found it difficult to find childcare and could not always come to work without her child. She also found the salary barely covered her living and transport costs and after a while she had to quit. She returned to sex work whilst trying to sell small items such as ice, drinks or food on the street to complement her income. She stayed in touch with the Don Bosco social workers who supported her mainly with emotional support, as their own funds were limited. When the Gen-Up arrived she was selected to participate in our mentoring program and we placed two young researchers, one male and one female and a social worker to support her. The support she received helped her develop her selling business and stop doing sex work as she put it 'Right now, I'm not going outside to go and sell myself.' She now offers bespoke 'plants' (local name for a 'weave' hair extension) to local neighbours from her small room in the informal settlement area in which she lives and supplements this work with a small business selling energy drinks at the ferry terminal. She tells us that she, is managing to put 10,000 leones (5 dollars) away each week into a local savings scheme (Osusu), she hopes the savings can help her get her own hairdressing salon in the future and keep her as she put it 'off the street'.*

#### 3.2. Vignette 2: Cameroon

*Corinne, 26, grew up in a female-headed household. For her mother, the most important thing was that her children went to school. Due to the lack of transport and the work at home, the children woke up at 4 am. When they were young, Corinne felt that it was easier for her and her sisters than for her eldest brother as he was the one doing the heaviest domestic tasks. However it reverted when they grew up as women they became the only ones responsible for domestic tasks. The choice of her vocational training was done by her mother 'because, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, the future can bring its surprises'. Corinne was a bit reluctant to start TVET training as she was already trained as a social worker and loved working with children but she understood her mother's choice when her mother passed away and that she*

*found herself forced to do petty trade to feed herself and her siblings. She gained experiences particularly with her internships but she also realised 'what women were facing in the world of work in terms of harassment and discrimination'. Corinne did not find a decent job after being trained in catering and before that as a community worker. She was forced to accept some work in a gravel factory, crushing stone. Working in the gravel factory gave her self-confidence and a sense of perseverance and determination. 'When I say to a man that I work in a gravel factory, he sees me as being vulgar, an easy woman. It is not easy. Though I am developing my shoulders, it is a real charisma and I am so proud of it'. Corinne became one of our young researchers. Impressed at the beginning by the fact that 'she was entitled to talk equal to so many people including employers', she built on her own story to understand barriers and conditions faced by women at work and become even more determined to support others in finding decent work. She hopes to open a small canteen, as decent work for her is first of all about becoming autonomous, and by doing so be able to create jobs for others and be able to offer decent work opportunities.'*

#### 3.3. Theme 1: Patriarchy ingrained in the world of work

We met Alice several times during the project, exploring her experience of job-seeking in the Sierra Leone employment market. We found that her ability to translate her skills into sustainable employment was highly challenging though she had started to save some money, pay her children's school fees and diversify her livelihood options. Even so, her story highlights some of the issues facing female TVET graduates in Sierra Leone. Many graduates come to TVET as a result of their difficulties in accessing education, which in many cases have left them open to exploitation, vulnerability and extreme poverty. The graduates we worked with were all trying to make a living both in their chosen skilled profession and usually another 'side-hustle' which could range from selling drinks or small food items to sex-work. As Alice and other stressed they were very keen to get out of sex work and create their own business but faced problems when they entered the workplace where work was often not only scarce but poorly paid leading them back into precarious, informal work or in some cases back onto the street: "Conditions are really rough with us... I pay 250,000 Leones a month [£ 30 approx.] for where I stay, and I do not have work. I have not been able to find a job unless I return to prostitution and risk my life for that just to be able to get shelter and take care of myself". (Interview with Graduate, 25, Fort Street, Freetown). For instance, two hairdressing graduates had recently lost their house to floods and had nowhere permanent to live, and perhaps more disturbingly, one informant we spoke to had recently had to return to commercial sex work and was despairing about the insecure conditions after recently being assaulted by a customer: 'I had spent all night hustling and I got attacked, beaten and everything was taken away from me. It's a lot of risks involved, really...I have the scars on my body as we speak'. (Interview with Graduate, 25, Fort Street, Freetown).

In Cameroon, Corinne's story highlights how patriarchal social barriers are directly embedded in the world of work with a combination of female domestic responsibilities, child care, gender stereotypes and discriminatory and in some cases abusive attitudes of employers. First of all, formal employment available for women is really limited and the few available presents regularly undecent working conditions: working hours forcing young women to travel during insecure hours, long and costly commuting or very low salaries not covering related costs (transport or child care) as one informant told us: 'coming home from work, I was lucky that I didn't get mugged. In our house two girls were assaulted' (interview, trainee, Yaounde). On top of the threat of violence Corinne's story shows how gender stereotypes limit what women are allowed to do and amplify the multiple forms of violence and harassment they experience. For women who get pregnant early or who

become single mothers,<sup>1</sup> their options are even further limited as this informant explained:

‘I got pregnant when I was going to grade 9, and my mom asked the school to give her the registration fee back because I became pregnant, she no longer wanted me to continue studying. On the spot I thought it was over for me. In life, because a young girl has a certain load (early pregnancy) we tend to harm her.’ (Young researcher, Ebolowa)

In many cases we found these types of gender stereotypes were also self-reproduced and reinforced by the women and their female relatives. This can be related to lack of physical strength limiting women to supervision tasks, the selection of women on physical appearance considered normal by some women as women’s role is also to please men. But myths or beliefs are constituting stereotypes for example a woman cannot work next to a fire (bakery oven, ...) as heat can deter her possibility to conceive a child.

At household level, women are over-supervised and urged to do domestic work whilst they are training or even when they gain qualifications, though particularly in urban areas, this is changing. However, the main constraint placed on TVET learners and graduates is the abuses that they have all faced during their internships or their first employment: sexual assaults and harassment, labelling and discrimination, verbal violence, etc. This has short term and long term impacts: it creates distress and loss of self-esteem but also reputational damage which will hinder her capacity to find another job. Therefore, she believes that her only livelihood opportunity is to become self-employed.

In these cases, young women find themselves carrying out tasks other than those related to the skills they acquired during their vocational training, and which are supposed to be valued in their work environment during internships or once recruited. For example, some have even been forced to leave their jobs due to the exploitative nature as this trainee describes: ‘During my professional internship. We had to clean the executive’s office, get her breakfast, I wondered what the hell I was? was I a cleaner? [...] I wondered if that was my job. (Trainee, 22, Yaounde). Another catering student mentioned how she had been persistently harassed by a male colleague: ‘The cook over there persecuted me, he always told me “you’re a beautiful woman”, and since I have a fairly developed bottom, he told me that when I’m over there I have to give myself to him. He constantly pressured me.’ This type of situation seemed daily commonplace amongst our informants, with varying degrees of harassment and discrimination and a lack of support when facing these issues. For many graduates this created a number of problems, it meant they had to leave the workplace or gave them a difficult reputation, making it more difficult to find work and leaving them more open to exploitation.

### 3.4. Theme 2: TVET as an alternative form of social protection

‘They [Don Bosco] paid our fees and supported us with other needs until we graduated and up till now they are supporting us sometimes they supply us with food and we are now a family and I’m confident with what I have achieved’. (Trainee Interview, 17, During Town)

In both contexts, family networks act as informal modes of social protection whilst also becoming one of the primary ways for accessing the job market in some cases foregoing their education to support their families: The image that ‘Girls have to face the widespread belief that it is a waste of money to educate a girl who will leave home when she gets married, and will not contribute to the maintenance of her birth household.’ (Mouchingam Mefire, 2006; see also Charmes and Njonkam, 2022) has changed immensely and despite the fact that women

spend on average 8.2 h more per week than men on unpaid domestic work and remain only consulted in the family decision-making process and over control of strategic family assets (land, livestock, money, children’s education, access to health care, etc.), their education is a family priority. In Corinne’s example, her family valued highly traditional education. However acquiring technical skills directly usable for livelihoods is seen as a way to be protected against unforeseen events.

As mentioned earlier, most of the main gender barriers lie in the economic and social environment and the socio-economic ‘ecosystems’ (see Brennan, 2014; McGrath, 2012). Holistic skills can lead to both individual empowerment and wider employment markets. However, the lack of understanding of market dynamics, gender barriers lead TVET centres to offer skills in traditional feminine arenas which reinforce traditional division of gender roles and reduce work opportunities in already saturated marketplaces. There are two strands to this issue: firstly, in general terms girls in Sierra Leone depended directly on skills training programmes, centres and trainers to extract them from extreme vulnerability and economic precarity. In Cameroon, many girls were stuck having dropped out of school, college or in some cases university programmes leaving them without a clear pathway for future progression and as such at risk of becoming further financially dependent and vulnerable:

‘In order to find a decent job, for women like us, It would be through a family business. If not through a relationship. Or she needs to be her own boss or she is the boss of others. Because sometimes it’s not so much the merit that counts, but relationships and acquaintances’. (Unemployed graduate, Yaounde)

In this context, skills represents more than simply education or training or even empowerment and independence, it represents a form of safety net or to go as far as a form of social protection which is not currently recognised in policy or the TVET literature. However, it is also important to note that these relationships remain ambiguous: kinship and friend networks can serve as a web to access local/community decent work market, can provide protection (social and physical), and offer bridge support between opportunities whilst waiting for more sustainable livelihoods.

### 3.5. Theme 3: Transversal skills and a holistic approach to TVET

Despite these durable forms of discrimination, the stories of Corinne and Alice, highlight how organisations such as Don Bosco also offer important environments for young women to battle against the difficulties they face in the workplace and wider society. For many of the graduates we worked with Don Bosco offered an important lifeline and buffer against the vagaries of the outside world. As one informant put it: ‘I was apprehensive about doing a training in a place where I didn’t know many people, but I was surprised by the warm welcome. I was like family, I was well supervised in every sense of the word, they taught me a lot, in all areas of life’. (Young researcher, 24, Ebolowa). For other learners, it was the discipline and routine of the Don Bosco system that enabled them to succeed and carried over into their business: ‘At the beginning we did not like it, we were there for a technical training and not for being treated as a child, though we were already mothers, but slowly we realised that it was one of the most important aspect of our learning experience that will last and be transferable to other work or aspects of our lives’ (FGD, Yaounde, March 2022).

In Cameroon some of the young women we worked with were also proud of their achievements, whether gaining skills training and starting businesses of their own or simply changing the circumstances in which they worked. As this graduate described, the gradual empowerment of women in some fields of work was enabling women to gain confidence in questioning their employers or colleagues behaviour and seeking out support and better situations. as this informant told us: ‘Generally for most women, what matters most in life is her dignity. If a woman has a bad reputation, she cannot work in a structure(enterprise). And if you

<sup>1</sup> 28% of women aged 20–24 living in Central and West Africa became mothers when they were still teenagers. (See Erken et al., 2020)



are in a structure and the conditions do not suit you because it will undermine your dignity, it is not worth continuing' (unemployed graduate, Yaounde, 2022). More generally, despite persistent gender discrimination the environment is subtly changing with more women in positions of political power, increasing numbers of highly active and visible female business leaders and targeted campaigns aiming to challenge gender inequality and empower female children through education (Mouich, 2007). One informant how she had experienced this change as a rebalancing of gender roles which have added a different kind of pressure on women: *'There is a change, when we were little, my mum wanted to work and my dad refused, the woman's place was in the home... Nowadays the man wants to take a woman who works. He wants the one who will pay for the water if he pays the rent, if he wants to build while he pays for the concrete blocks, she pays for the cement or the sheets* (Interview, Ebolowa, 2022).

One graduate in Sierra Leone, Bantu 24, who we worked with told us how, like Alice, the support of Don Bosco had enabled her to develop her own business and business skills. Trained in catering she tried working in a hotel but struggled with travel and the long hours. In Freetown, like many large urban areas, the best jobs are in the commercial centres or tourist hubs but the workers have to live some distance away. Freetown has a largely underdeveloped tourist sector but does have a number of large hotels servicing its international business clientele. Most of these hotels are positioned on the picturesque Western tip of Freetown along the coast and difficult to get to from the Eastern side which is where most of the poorer communities are situated. On top of this, the price of fuel and consequently transport has been steadily increasing adding both time and expense to these types of jobs which are often not reflected in the wages. Placed in one of these hotels after graduating, Bantu only lasted 3 months before workplace jealousy caused her to leave her job: *I had already refused to do what she told ... she wanted to dismiss me, she pays me, so if I don't do what she tells me, she will fire me. ... So, she ended up throwing me out, I left.* After this, she started catering to her neighbours, travelling to the market at night to purchase ingredients and cooking in the early hours so food was ready for the morning rush. She said she was 'doing well, making business' before she was robbed whilst out of the house one day: *'They stole everything, the pots, even the door, they removed it. That was the time I had started selling and cooking.'* Despite these setbacks, for both Bantu and Alice, becoming self-reliant was a key element of their current and future plans, as Alice put it *'where you walk, let me be the boss. Now you're the boss, they would give me a small monthly salary but now I earn my side (own money), they pay less money in the salon, my children can have lunch every day...so I prefer myself.'*

#### 4. Conclusion

With TVET's rebirth failing to eradicate various forms of gender discrimination the literature presents distinct literary debate vis-à-vis the dominant TVET response to gender equality. We have brought together arguments which focus on the 'social life of skills', social ecosystems and human capabilities to begin a conversation that integrate African feminist worldviews. As we have shown, life narratives of young women engaged with TVET centres can show these centres operate as part of the important circulation of both expertise and social support mechanisms which are lacking in fragmented African states. The stories portrayed her of both staff and students at Don Bosco point to some of the ways current TVET policies are failing to both capture the reality of everyday life in poorer communities who wish to engage with TVET and failing to connect the complex series of potential intervention points in the lives of TVET learners. This not only requires better understanding of TVET, but how TVET is implicated in complex, idiosyncratic cultural hierarchies and structures including local forms of patriarchy and gender inequality.

In this context, skills education is much more than technical training, it offers both an environment and a support network which can be

invaluable to girls both individually and collectively. Don Bosco offers an important corrective to the majority of skills provisioning by focusing on the 'whole person' and allowing young people to develop with and through their skills training. Their focus on spiritual-moral development alongside the skills training in many cases creates stronger, more resilient learners with a portfolio of both technical and transferable skills. However, many girls also lacked basic business skills and increasingly entrepreneurship is being advocated for as a solution to the lack of jobs on the market, which can lead to further exploitation and hardship (see Dejaeghere, 2020). Moreover, their focus remains rooted in traditional educational values which focus on individual achievement and progression which fail to take into account the wider social issues and ultimately leaves individuals scrambling to cope with the volatile world of work outside the Don Bosco safety net.

Building on this, it is important to note that whilst many girls and young women undertook skills training to gain qualifications and find a job, they learnt other invaluable skills along the way such as self-confidence, self-management, entrepreneurial business skills and the rare ability to challenge forms of discrimination. Although sometimes exceptional, these examples point to ways forward for projects such as Gen-Up and organisations such as Don Bosco who cater for so many girls and young women in precarious settings. By focussing more on 'transversal' skills they may actually augment their existing skills provision and create a more powerful 'enabling environment.' At the same time, they may be able to transfer 'transversal skills' into a form of 'transgressive' empowerment which may incrementally allow more girls and young women to challenge and break through the durable gender barriers we found in both contexts.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Brigitte Piquard:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft preparation, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Ross Wignall:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft preparation, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Emily Joel:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft preparation, Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

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