

Background paper for the joint Skillman – ETF webinar

“Applying a gender perspective on Work-based learning (WBL)” 22nd September 2021 | 14.30 - 16.30

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INTRODUCTION

All UN Member States have committed themselves to the 2030 Agenda that includes the promotion and provision of equal and inclusive education and lifelong learning for all (SDG4). This highlights the importance of guaranteeing equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education. Vocational education and training (VET) is fundamental to make sure that people acquire and develop the right skills to enter the world of work.

In many countries, work-based learning (WBL) is a key component of vocational education programmes. WBL may vary in its nature and extent from one context to another and represents an effective way to facilitate the school-to-work transition and reduce the risk of unemployment. It can provide learners with valuable, in-demand technical skills that can lead to higher productivity and, consequently, higher economic growth.

What is WORK-BASED LEARNING?

According to ETF’s definition, WBL refers to learning that occurs when people do real work in a real work environment. It can be paid or unpaid work that leads to the production of real goods and services. This work may or may not be combined with school-based learning in a classroom or workshop.¹

Based on the status of the learner, work-based learning arrangements can be classified into two main types:

- arrangements in which the learner has the status of an employee (e.g. formal apprenticeship, alternance training, informal apprenticeship);
- arrangements in which the learner has the status of a VET student (e.g. traineeships, internships or work placements within school-based VET).

Apprenticeship is one of the major forms of WBL. Generally, it combines learning in the classroom with practical, work-related training in the workplace. Most of the time, the workplace-based training makes up the majority of the training process, sometimes up to 70%. Usually, the apprentice is considered an employee, has a work contract and receives a salary; moreover, at the end of the programme, which can last several years, the learner obtains a recognised qualification.²

Traineeships or internships are workplace training periods that complement formal or non-formal education and training programmes. They can last from a few days or weeks to months, and may or may not include a work contract and payment.

The boundaries between these different types of work-based learning are sometimes blurred. They may present similar characteristics, but variations exist depending on the context. For instance, apprenticeships may vary in their length, salary, balance between work-based and classroom-based learning, ages of

¹ ETF, *Work-based learning. A handbook for policy makers and social partners in ETF partner countries*, 2018.

² IAG-TVET, *Investing in Work-based learning*, 2018.

apprentices, and types of occupations covered.³ This is why a single and standardised definition for WBL programmes does not exist and countries tend to use different terminology.

In addition to the models mentioned above, other types of WBL exist. These include **on-the-job training**, which refers to a form of learning that is not incorporated in a VET programme but involves training in the normal work environment for employees to learn, for instance, how to use specific machinery, equipment or tools while performing their job.

GATHERING DATA ON WOMEN’S ACCESS TO WBL: A REAL CHALLENGE

Because of the great contextual variety in the way in which WBL programmes are organised and defined, finding data on access to WBL can be particularly hard. Moreover, the lack of sex-disaggregated data in this regard makes it even more difficult to gather information on female participation. Nevertheless, some data is available for European countries and ETF partner countries.

The EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) of 2016 provides some statistical information on WBL in the 27 EU Member States, the United Kingdom and three European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland), particularly with regard to apprenticeships and traineeships. The survey defined an ‘apprenticeship’ as ‘work experience occurring as part of the curriculum of the highest level of formal education attained, whereby all of the following characteristics are combined: (a) it is a mandatory part of the curriculum; (b) it lasts six months or more; (c) it is paid’. When one of these three characteristics was missing, the term ‘traineeship’ was used. The survey shows that generally, in Europe, WBL is most frequent in medium-level vocational education,⁴ where 61% of young graduates had a work-based learning experience, 31% of which was in the form of an apprenticeship and 30% in a traineeship. The distribution of female and male graduates in apprenticeships, traineeships or no work-based experience⁵ depends on the level of education considered. In the EU-27 as a whole, graduates from medium-level vocational education with a work-based learning experience that took part in the survey were more frequently men (Figure 1): more specifically, the share of male graduates was 55% among those with traineeship experience (compared to 45% for females) and 59% among those with apprenticeship experience (compared to 41% for females). Overall, for graduates from medium-level vocational education, the gender distribution of those with traineeship or apprenticeship experience does not differ considerably from the gender distribution of those who did not acquire any work experience during their medium-level vocational studies.

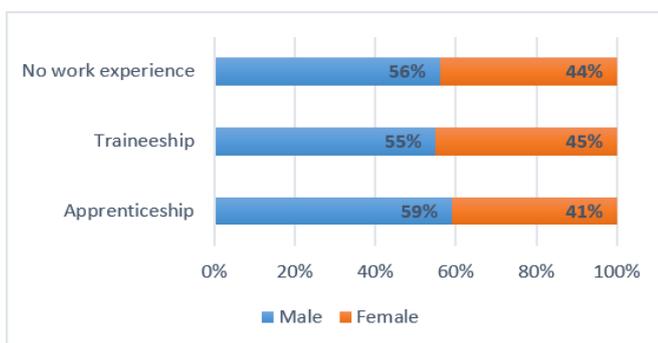


Figure 1: Gender distribution of graduates with at most a medium-level vocational qualification by type of work experience

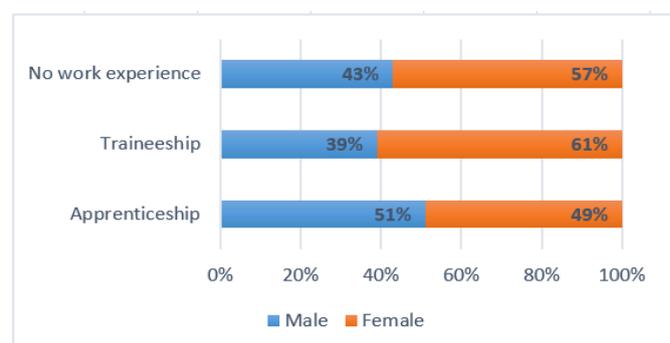


Figure 2: Gender distribution of graduates with at most a tertiary-level vocational qualification by type of work experience

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ In the survey, ‘medium-level vocational education’ refers to upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary: ISCED 3-4 of general and vocational orientation.

⁵ No work experience within or outside the curriculum.

Among graduates from tertiary education⁶ (Figure 2), for those who had apprenticeship experience, the share of males is estimated at 51% (compared to 49% for women), while the share of those who had access to a traineeship is around 39% (versus a higher share of women, 61%).

BOX 1: Similar data for WBL for ETF partner countries is not available. Most countries do still lack proper systems for data collection, especially for sex-disaggregated data. However, some figures can be observed for Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey and Kazakhstan:

- In Morocco, in 2015/2016, the share of female apprentices was **46%**, with most found in specific female-dominated occupations.⁷ In Tunisia, females represented 41% of all students enrolled in VET in 2018 and 29% of VET graduates. The same year, females represented 38% of apprentices enrolled (with very high over-representation in textiles).
- In Egypt, a wide range of WBL programmes is offered, but female participation in apprenticeships is low. In 2016, of the 22 000 learners who took part in industrial apprenticeships,⁸ only **10%** were women. The female percentage drops to 6% for those who went through integrated schemes⁹ (8 000 learners). The participation of women in short-term apprenticeships¹⁰ is considerably higher: out of 4 000 learners who took part in these programmes, **30%** were women.
- In Turkey, in absolute numbers, the distribution between males and females is relatively equal in vocational and technical Anatolian high school programmes (for grade 12: 459 404 males and 452 454 females) and vocational open education high school programmes (28 694 males and 25 250 females).¹¹ A pronounced gender gap does exist for programmes that are run by vocational education centres. These programmes include a significant component of work-based learning, and only 17.7% of those who took part in the programmes were women.¹²
- In Kazakhstan, where a dual system approach to WBL is applied, the number of students in dual education in 2019 was 54 775, of whom **38.8%** (21 254) were women. Almost the same proportion between males (58 673) and females (23 162) has been registered for 2020.¹³

Overall, both in countries that participated in the above-mentioned EU-LFS 2016 and in ETF partner countries, females are mainly enrolled in specific sectors, such as those related to food, beauty and social care services or the so-called HEED (health, early education and domestic roles) occupations, and are under-represented in

⁶ Tertiary education: ISCED 5-8.

⁷ UNESCO, *Reviewing Work-Based Learning Programmes for Young People in the Arab Region. A Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine and Tunisia*, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States – Beirut, 2019.

⁸ Company-based and specific apprenticeships with work and college-based components with a 3-year duration. These programmes are under the Productivity and Vocational Training Department (PVTD) of the Ministry of Trade and Industry and are mainly focused on the development of skills in the industrial sector. During the first 2 years, the training occurs in the vocational training centre, while training during the third year occurs mostly at the enterprise with one or more days a week spent in a training centre (the number of days vary depending on the vocation).

⁹ Integrating work-based experiences with school education. These programmes are usually regulated through protocols and collaboration agreements drafted between the Ministry of Education and Technical Education (MoETE) and individual private and public companies, where joint schools are established within the premises of the cooperating company or as a part of the company's training centre. Training is offered in different occupations based on company needs, though most are in the ready-made garments, engineering, agriculture and food processing.

¹⁰ Between 1- and 3-year occupation-specific apprenticeship based wholly at the workplace.

¹¹ Data refers to the 2019/2020 school year.

¹² M. Özere, *Ğitim Analiz ve Deęerlendirme Raporları Serisi*, No 16, T.C. Millî Eđitim Bakanlıđı, June 2021.

¹³ National Education Database.

STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) related apprenticeships.¹⁴ This both feeds into and reflects the labour market's horizontal and occupational segregation. Indeed, in addition to facing glass ceilings and vertical segregation, women all over the world tend to be over-represented in specific sectors (such as health and education) and, within the sectors, in specific occupations (teacher versus school manager, nurse versus doctor). Often, the latter offer lower rates of pay and require skill levels that are regarded as lower than those demanded by sectors and occupations in which men are over-represented.

Although there is no hard evidence available that there is a serious gap between male and female participation in WBL, different studies show that there are specific constraints that hinder women's access to and retention in WBL programmes. Those hindering factors affect women in almost every geographical context, from developed to developing countries.

MAIN BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ACCESS TO APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMMES

The main barriers preventing females from participating in WBL are the following:

- [Stereotypes, gender roles and laws](#)

Stereotypes and gender roles in society heavily influence women's educational and occupational choices and participation in WBL. Women are perceived as being suitable for specific occupations, such as hairdressers, beauticians and those related to food and social care, while they are not considered strong or skilled enough to access sectors such as manufacturing, engineering and construction. This can lead young women to lose confidence in their abilities and to limit themselves, seeing their job prospects restricted to specific fields and feeling unable to access the traditionally male-dominated sectors that tend to be more productive and better paid. Moreover, when women do choose to apply for apprenticeships in male-dominated sectors, they may suffer strong resistance from the employer and the other male apprentices. Furthermore, in some countries, such as Belarus, Egypt, Kazakhstan and Moldova among the ETF partner countries, there are specific occupations that are legally prohibited to women. This is because some jobs are considered to be too dangerous and physically demanding to be performed by female workers.¹⁵

- [Gender-biased career guidance](#)

When career guidance services are not sufficiently developed, young people make choices based on the limited information they have about apprenticeship options. The lack of gender-aware and gender-sensitive career guidance that should lead youths to make educational choices regardless of gender, may lead women and men not to have a clear perception of their future possibilities and orient them to make choices that do not reflect their true aspirations. Moreover, research highlights the strong role of parents in young people's career decisions, and that they are not well placed to provide advice, instead reproducing classic gender perceptions. This in turn may reinforce the gender-based occupational segregation on the labour market. Another element to take into consideration is the lack of positive female role models to whom girls can aspire, especially in non-traditional sectors. Indeed, you cannot be what you do not see, and research has showed

¹⁴ A recent UNEVOC study found not only that females were under-represented in STEM-related TVET programmes, but also that there was a gender-based segregation within the different TVET STEM subjects, and above all, that the 'pipeline is leaking', i.e. females transited less often than men to STEM-related occupations (or left them earlier to other types of occupations) following completion of the relevant TVET programme. UNEVOC, *Boosting gender equality in science and technology. A challenge for TVET programmes and careers*, UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020.

¹⁵ Wood J., *104 countries have laws that prevent women from working in some jobs*, 2018, available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/08/104-countries-have-laws-that-prevent-women-from-working-in-some-jobs/>.

that seeing women in different roles and being able to talk and discuss with them about their experiences is crucial, as it can help girls develop their career ambitions and encourage them to pursue new routes.

- [Work environment, transportation and gender-based violence](#)

An important factor that may inhibit young women's participation in apprenticeship programmes is an intimidating work environment and the fear of gender-based violence, within either the company or the school environment. This threat can be even more real in the absence of gender-sensitive infrastructures and facilities that can protect women from abuse. Commuting distance is also a constraint for women, as long distances between the home and the place of training or work can exacerbate sexual harassment during transport. This is especially true for developing countries, where safe transportation is often unavailable, particularly in rural areas.

- [Work-life balance](#)

Evidence from numerous studies suggests that as young women are responsible for the majority of domestic and care responsibilities for children and elderly people, they are less able than men to participate in apprenticeships. The lack of social protection measures (such as the lack of maternity leave and childcare provisions in many developing countries) and the insufficient flexibility of these kinds of WBL programmes make it difficult for women to balance their childcare and household responsibilities with their career aspirations, forcing them to refrain from applying to apprenticeship programmes or to leave them early.

- [Range of apprenticeship occupations](#)

In many countries, the choice of occupations where apprenticeships are available is often limited; most of the programmes are concentrated around traditional trades that are male-dominated, thus discouraging women from applying. Moreover, even when they decide to enrol, female apprentices are more likely to drop out from these programmes since they may not reflect their choice and aspirations or they may suffer from a hostile environment. A recent UNEVOC study indicates that women drop out more often from STEM-related programmes or do not end up working in the relevant occupation after graduating in this field.¹⁶

Sometimes, another factor that can preclude women's access to apprenticeships is the **financial cost**. This can concern both the fees for taking part in the programme and the expenses incurred in travelling to the place of training.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PROMOTE MORE WOMEN IN WBL?

Systematically including the gender dimension in the WBL discussion is crucial to include more women in apprenticeships and traineeships. Some ways to promote more females in WBL may be the following:

¹⁶ Reasons for leaving STEM jobs may be due to several factors, such as: underestimation of women's technical (STEM) abilities in the workplace; the expectation that girls and women should execute tasks that are considered feminine; unwanted behaviour from male workers and employers causing a feeling of insecurity; a physical environment poorly adapted to the presence of girls and women; a lack of mentoring services and opportunities for career advancement; a lack of female representation in advertising; and the use of gendered language to describe occupations. Moreover, considering that women are mostly underrepresented in managerial and decision-making positions, their needs and opinions are often ignored. For more information, see UNEVOC, *Boosting gender equality in science and technology. A challenge for TVET programmes and careers*, UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020.

1. ENSURE LIFELONG GENDER-SENSITIVE CAREER GUIDANCE – One of the most effective ways to support women in WBL is to provide gender-sensitive career guidance services¹⁷ that start from early childhood. The goal is to enable individuals to reflect on their aspirations and to empower them to break out of gender stereotypes. It is important to stress that career guidance should: 1) start early, especially as stereotypes are interiorised at a very early stage in life; 2) include sufficient female career guidance coaches so that girls feel confident in asking advice; 3) include practical experience with different occupations; and 4) also target the parents of the learners involved. A recent Austrian study¹⁸ confirms the importance of familiarising girls and young women with artisanal and technical activities from childhood onwards. This would have a meaningful impact on the increased number of women choosing technical occupations.

In addition to gender-sensitive specific career guidance, it is important to guarantee gender-sensitive learning content and teaching methods among all teaching staff, as well as a balanced composition of the teaching staff by gender to represent different roles of masculinity and femininity. Awareness should also be raised among supervisors and tutors at companies on how to tackle gender differences and challenge stereotypes.

2. USE FEMALE ROLE MODELS – Bringing female role models into schools to share success stories about their apprentices can have a very positive impact on learners. This can be done by inviting successful women into schools for the classroom training component of the apprenticeship, allowing them to interact with current apprentices, as well as by publicising positive images of women who have succeeded in different fields, especially in those dominated by men. The use of female role models can also be an effective measure to tackle parents' lack of support for women's participation in WBL programmes. Indeed, families/parents often represent the biggest barrier for young girls to undertake this path. This is especially true for developing countries, where most of the time parents do not believe that WBL can support their daughters in finding a job and where, when they cannot afford education and training for all children, parents usually decide to educate their sons rather than their daughters. Listening to the stories of successful female apprentices or visiting apprenticeship companies could help change parents' perspectives on WBL, convincing them of the importance of female participation in these types of programmes and making them aware of the benefits this can bring not only to women, but to society as a whole.

3. PARTNER UP WITH INCLUSIVE COMPANIES – Schools should consider promoting partnerships with companies that recognise the importance and benefits of employing women and are willing to encourage gender diversity in their programmes. Schools should monitor employers adopting non-discriminatory apprentice recruitment practices and encourage them to undertake outreach activities to specifically attract female applicants and to offer a female-friendly working environment (separate wardrobes, employee and employer awareness training on diversity and harassment, etc.). Experiences of good practices from successful male-dominated sectors should be shared with the other sectors. Moreover, school staff and employers should work together to raise awareness among girls, women, parents and communities on the advantages of guaranteeing women access to the world of work. This can be done, for example, by organising promotional events or information days in schools and visits to companies offering apprenticeships.

4. OFFER FLEXIBLE APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMMES – As already mentioned, family responsibilities represent a great constraint for women's access to apprenticeships. Providing part-time and flexible WBL programmes enabling female apprentices to find a balance between their family life and their training needs would be key to tackling this kind of problem. This measure could be particularly effective in a period in which the

¹⁷ The OECD defines career guidance as 'services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers'.

¹⁸ H. Dornmayr, M. Rechberger, *Girls in Technical Apprenticeships: Career Choice and Childhood Experiences*, 18 Ibw research brief, Issue no 109, 2021.

consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a major impact on the female population. Women have found themselves forced to take time off work, or even to leave their jobs, to care for children and relatives

during lockdowns. Flexible programmes offering flexible working hours or teleworking could therefore represent an effective solution to tackle the gender issue now more than ever.

This measure could be integrated with the introduction of family-friendly policies related to the workplace, such as the provision of quality and accessible childcare services (either at the place of training or by offering advice and referral services) and parental and family leave to care for children or elderly/ill family members when needed.

5. SET TARGETS AND PROVIDE FINANCIAL INCENTIVES – In order to break down barriers to participation, it could be a valuable and effective solution to set targets and quotas for reserving places for women on apprenticeships, and to provide financial incentives (such as tax exemptions, cash grants and subsidies) to female apprentices, trainers and employers committed to attracting and recruiting more women.

6. OFFER FEMALE PRE- (AND POST-) APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMMES – Apprenticeships often have eligibility criteria for admission, which may limit access for disadvantaged youths, including young women. Indeed, the latter may present some qualification gaps that prevent them from being competitive candidates for these programmes. Offering pre-apprenticeship training exclusively for women has proved to be a successful way to overcome this barrier, supporting potential female apprentices in developing academic knowledge, basic skills and readiness, especially in male-dominated fields.¹⁹ To be even more effective, these programmes could also include sessions on building self-confidence and raising women’s awareness of their rights and opportunities, thus helping young women to consider a wider range of apprenticeship options. Additionally, they could be followed up by tutoring programmes to kick off the careers of women in a specific sector or occupation. These actions to trigger initial incremental change could be targeted to sectors where women are heavily under-represented.

7. IMPROVE MONITORING AND EVALUATION – All countries should work on improving data collection, monitoring and evaluation in regard to work-based learning. Having data disaggregated by sex is fundamental to designing effective gender-responsive policies. Schools and organisations offering apprenticeships should collect, monitor and publish the number of their apprentices and the completion rates, with all relevant data disaggregated by sex, as well as evaluating the learning process offered. Data can be then collected and systematised in national statistical systems.

¹⁹ ILO.org, *Pre-apprenticeship training*, available at: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/apprenticeships/publications/toolkit/system-and-policy-level/inclusiveness/pre-apprenticeship-training/lang-en/index.htm>.

BOX 2: The Skills for Jobs Project in Albania (2016-2023)

Financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by Swisscontact Albania, the Skills for Jobs (S4J) project started in 2016 with the aim of addressing the main challenges affecting VET in Albania. Among these, the low participation of women due to gender stereotypes and cultural biases deeply rooted in Albanian society represent a major issue. It is for this reason that the S4J has been including gender in the design, planning, implementation and monitoring of its intervention, with a commitment to increase gender parity in students' enrolment in VET to 30% by its end, and to make partner schools gender-sensitive. One of the related expected outputs of the project has been the establishment of functional Gender Contact Points in partner schools, with a mandate to share gender-sensitive teaching methods and tips on how to address gender equality through education classes. Moreover, social media and awareness-raising campaigns (such as the 'Meet Every Girl campaign') and open days in VET schools have been organised to get girls closer to VET, present them stories of successful women who can serve as inspirational models, and to improve the image of VET to parents. Career guidance services are also offered to girls to make them aware of their training and career opportunities.

Up until now, the project has registered very good results, with more girls being enrolled in VET programmes with an economic focus. Of the newly registered students in the 2018-2019 academic year, 16.6% were female.