

Women’s Education and Gender Equality in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Issues of Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Pakistan

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In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted at the United Nations in 2015, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is expected to contribute to achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). First, from the perspective of education policy, it will help “ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning” (Goal 4). Second, from the perspective of industrial policy, it will “promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all” (Goal 8). In addition, promoting economic participation of low-income people, including women, will help “end poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1) and “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (Goal 5).

In promoting TVET, gender disparities in economic participation, and the consequent income poverty among women are serious concerns to be addressed. In light of one of the principles of the SDGs “No one will be left behind,” it is important to be reminded of the gender dimension of TVET.

Behind the gender disparities in the labor market, there are occupational stereotypes in the society, in addition to the gender biases held by employers. On the other hand, women who seek employment opportunities often lack academic qualifications as well as technical and vocational skills, giving a rise to the interest in TVET for girls. However, there are cases in which TVET is restrictive to girls.

In Pakistan, government TVET colleges are generally segregated for boys and girls. Traditionally, it is discouraged for male and female adolescents to study in the same classroom. Men’s TVET colleges offer boys technical education in areas where traditionally considered men’s jobs such as engineering, while women’s TVET colleges offer girls technical education in areas where traditionally considered women’s jobs such as tailoring. This segregation in TVET has maintained and strengthened the gender stereotypes in the labor market, discouraging women to economically participate in certain business sectors. The current challenge is how to secure women equal access to quality TVET and promote women’s equal participation in economic activities.

The Government College of Technology at the Rail Road (GCT-RR) in Lahore, established by the Government of the Punjab, is basically a men’s TVET college. However, in 2010, its Department of Architecture started to accept female students. It has become the first co-education program at the Diploma level in

Pakistan. It is significant as a case to challenge the gender stereotypes in TVET.

There are a few factors that brought about this historical change. First, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as a third party, made a proposal for co-education, based on the needs assessment of the architectural design offices that had been open to female designers. Second, the JICA expert in architecture negotiated with the officials of the Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) of the Government of the Punjab, and the managers of GCT-RR sincerely and patiently. Third, JICA supported the construction of a lounge and toilets exclusively for girls in the Department of Architecture, as necessary facilities for the parents to send their daughters to GCT-RR. In addition, female teachers have been recruited for the first time at the GCT-RR, allowing them to become role models for female students and enhancing confidence among their parents.

The transformation of the GCT-RR's Department of Architecture from boys' program to co-education program in 2010 is considered as a successful case to remove obstacles for girls to have access to quality TVET in architecture. Nevertheless, there are still outstanding issues that need to be addressed in order to increase the number of female students in the GCT-RR's Department of Architecture. First, many parents, particularly fathers, are still reluctant to send their daughters to career-oriented technical colleges. In some cases, fathers send their daughters to secondary school just for the purpose of getting a credential for their better arranged marriage. Information sharing and education are also important for the parents so that their daughters career planning will be more respected. In this respect, the efforts to organize "open school" days for prospective students and their parents have been effective, allowing the fathers to come to the GCT-RR and become familiar with the curriculum and the facilities. Second, some parents are expressing their concerns over the safety of their daughters while commuting to the GCT-RR. Some private TVET colleges run their own school buses for pick-up and drop-off of their students, but government TVET colleges, including the GCT-RR, will not be able to secure budget for such operation. Therefore, it is important to improve the public bus transportation system in Lahore that is currently overcrowded and unreliable.

As the TVET sector reform is progressing in Pakistan, this case may be of a great interest for policy dialogues at the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) that is in charge of the public TVET in the country. It is hoped that the feasibility of replicating this case in other areas of technical education will be discussed at the NAVTTTC in order to promote co-education for the purpose of securing equal access to quality TVET for girls, contributing to reducing income poverty among women.