

Change from Within

Gender-Sensitive Vocational Training



By Hadeel Rizq-Qazzaz



Mariam. Photo courtesy of Oxfam, Jordan, November 2020.

How many times has a woman, a mother, or a caregiver been in desperate need of a skilled worker to fix electricity in her house or attend to an urgent plumbing procedure? Skilled workers are usually hard to find and very expensive in Palestine. Most of them learned their craft by doing and through apprenticeships – or they were trained while doing odd jobs in Israel as unskilled workers. They are usually men and rarely have received adequate or appropriate vocational training.

Despite the huge interest in vocational training in Palestine, and even though many vocational training centers are spread throughout the West Bank and Gaza, labor is undervalued and frequently not considered a viable option for youth education. This outlook is in great contradiction to the supply-demand rule. But the huge demand and high compensation rates for skilled workers have not yet translated into a higher valuation and status of vocational education. Usually, youth with lower marks in the *tawjihi* (end-of-school exam) end up in technical and vocational education and training (TVET); many aim to prepare themselves for university studies later on, while others want to learn a skill that may help them find a job. This field is also male-dominated, with many professions considered to be “a man’s job.” This attitude is not surprising in a community where the gendered divisions of labor are very rigid. Such segregation is frequently hard to penetrate.

If TVET is generally undervalued, women’s participation in this vital sector is even more restricted. Numerous attempts have been made to engage women in TVET, but they have faced two challenging sets of problems. While the first is related to general perceptions of TVET, the second, most persistent problem is related to gender aspects and to social norms that limit women’s participation in the labor force in general and as skilled laborers in particular. In Palestine,

women’s participation in the labor market is very low. In fact, their participation decreased from 19.3 percent in 2016 to 17 percent in 2021, even though the majority of Palestinian women have attended post-secondary educational institutions. Their education is not reflected in their participation in the labor force because they most often study subjects that lead to professions and employment that are considered suitable for women, with a concentration in the humanities and in social studies.

However, vocational training could solve many problems: the opportunities it provides could reduce the unemployment rate for women and support them in pursuing a hobby or career interest. Observations gathered through a set of gender audits that were conducted on TVET institutions in the West Bank showed the reasons behind the lack of women’s participation in vocational training: Social norms and gender division of labor are the strongest limiting factors. In fact, and unfortunately,

some TVET staff and trainers hold community-typical perceptions and do not think that their female students should, or could, break taboos and stereotypes. One pioneer vocational program has been training students on repairing mobile phones, a flourishing profession, especially with the spread of smartphones. One of its female students told me that her tutor encourages female students to focus on the “software” aspects of repair. According to him, hardware repair requires women to be in the back shop, which is not considered “suitable” for women. But given that software repair can be done in the front shop, women’s families and the community would tend not to object.

In another pioneering program, female students were encouraged and even given scholarships to learn how to install renewable solar energy systems. The TVET center celebrated this achievement, and images of the female graduates were posted all over social media and the center’s website. But the tutors keep posing the question: Who will employ them?



Photo courtesy of Oxfam, Jordan, November 2020.

Women trained in the culinary arts told us that they could not work as chefs in restaurants because the owners usually trust men, not women, to fill these positions – even though women have much more experience since they do most of the cooking at home. Therefore, female students tend to learn the basics while male students enroll in more extensive and specialized courses to be able to work in restaurants.

As long as TVET staff adopt community social norms and are unwilling to challenge or change them internally, segregation in vocational training will persist. Women will pursue fields such as executive secretarial work, cooking, or software repair, while men may find other options that enable them to be employed as skilled workers – and gain higher incomes.

It is not enough to raise slogans around gender equality and the need to increase the number of women in vocational education and training. The necessary change to social norms can be achieved only when we challenge personal perceptions and practices and increase the visibility of success stories that break taboos within our society and meet the real demand that exists in our communities. Interestingly, one of the successful vocational training

programs in Jordan trained women in plumbing and marketed it by pointing out that women can enter homes at any time to provide the much-needed services that other women may need. This example indicates a gradual transformation in women's access to labor. The real transformation will happen when no woman shies away from a profession or a vocation she likes and when women do not need to be given special scholarships to learn such professions.

A gendered approach to vocational education and training will help alleviate the root causes of poverty, namely, marginalization and women's representation in public life. This change, however, must be transformative and challenge prevailing stereotypes to be more effective and sustainable.

Dr. Hadeel Rizq-Qazzaz is a gender and development researcher and women's rights activist. Her work includes focusing on gender equality and combating gender-based violence.

SCAN
TO SHARE

