

Policy Brief

Understanding the barriers to women's participation in traditionally male-dominant industrial trades

Experiences from WEE-North

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Introduction

This policy brief focuses on women’s experiences of participating in male-dominated industrial trades and the barriers to their sustainable participation in the context of existing labor and gender equality legal frameworks and laws. Based on the findings, the brief provides recommendations towards informing and shaping policies for the stakeholders, notably, Ghana Government’s policymakers, CTVET, researchers, the development community, and senior decision-makers in the Ministry of Education, training institutions and civil society actors to work to promote women’s effective participation in industrial trades.

Women’s participation in industrial trades—such as electricals, mechanics, construction, and tiling—offers important opportunities to improve their access to employment, increase their income, enhance their contributions to household decision-making, and advance their sense of agency in family and community life. Indeed, economic empowerment has been shown to contribute to overall empowerment, liberating women from gender-based violence and other vulnerabilities, especially in inherently male-dominant and deeply patriarchal settings such as Northern Ghana. Northern Ghana, the setting of this policy brief, is ecologically fragile with widespread endemic poverty. Poverty and pervasive inequalities have been caused by many factors such as the prevalence of male dominant cultural norms, beliefs and practices and their roles in creating subordinate positions and oppressing women. In addition to these are political factors such as historical and socio-political state policies that have wittingly or otherwise contributed to the underdevelopment of northern Ghana¹ Within this context are also barriers to the participation of women in industrial trades, which are traditionally perceived to be masculine such as building and construction, electricals, and carpentry.

These barriers persist despite laws and policies that guarantee women’s equal participation in the labor market and their right to decent jobs. International legal frameworks such as the International Labor

Convention, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979, Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) recognize women’s right to decent jobs, economic empowerment, and social protection. CEDAW aims to eradicate discrimination against women in all fields and responsibilities, holding both state and non-state actors accountable for rights violations. The Maputo Protocol entreats States Parties to implement and enforce measures to ensure that women have equal opportunities in work, career advancement, and other economic opportunities, promoting employment equality.

Locally, there are laws and legal frameworks as well as policies and agencies that theoretically should undo the barriers as well as facilitate women’s participation in industrial trades dominated by men. These include the Ghana Labor Act 2003, National Gender Policy (2015), Local Governance Act 2016 (Act 936), Education Sector Regulatory Act 2020 and National Employment Policy (2015). Other frameworks include the Affirmative Action Bill and Women in Manufacturing Whitepaper (2021). All these frameworks recognize the importance of women’s economic empowerment, explicitly or otherwise, and include provisions for realizing this goal. The Education Sector Regulatory Act which established various commissions in Ghana, including the Commission for Technical and Vocational Education Training (CTVET) is mandated to adopt measures to provide high-quality, equitable and inclusive access to technical and vocational education and training as well as source funding for activities related to technical and vocational education and training. The primary responsibility of CTVET is to regulate, promote and administer technical and vocational education and training for transformation and innovation for sustainable development. The Women in Manufacturing Whitepaper (2021) aims to address gender barriers and stereotypes in the manufacturing industry, promoting economic, social, and environmental value for women in the aftermath of

¹ Hawkins, S. (2002). *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana: the encounter between the LoDagaa and "The world on paper"* (Vol. 18). University of Toronto Press. Thomas, R. G. (1974).

Education in northern Ghana, 1906-1940: a study in colonial paradox. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 7(3), 427-467. GSS

the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the National Gender Policy (2015) which is currently under review, seeks to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into Ghana's national development process to enhance social, legal, civic, political, economic, and cultural conditions, with involvement of both women and men. The policy seeks to achieve this by, among others, enhancing women's access to entrepreneurial skills and access to start-up capital and by creating new opportunities nationwide to provide women with access to technical and vocational training. As well, the Affirmative Action Bill, when passed into law, counteracts biases by ensuring that underrepresented groups, especially women, are given greater consideration in the hiring process. It will address social, economic, and education disparities, aiming to eliminate discrimination and ensure equal opportunity for both men and women.² Furthermore, the Labor Act has provisions that should set out the minimum wage, regulate working hours, overtime, and termination of employment, and ensure workplace health and safety.³ Nonetheless, the implementing agencies and departments at the national, regional and sub-regional levels are deeply constrained in implementation by inadequate budgetary allocations with the implication that these policies are rarely

implemented effectively. Meanwhile, traditionally male dominant trades can contribute immensely to women's sustainable access to income and gender equality.⁴ While there are no statistical data on the specific contribution of male-dominated trades to women's empowerment in the context of Ghana, qualitative research has shown that there is great potential.⁵

How do we define the problem of women's participation in male dominated industrial trades?

Industrial trades fall within skills trades that are highly disaggregated by gender identity in the labor market.⁶ While in Ghana aggregate statistics are unavailable, it is estimated that out of all workers in the construction sector, only 3% are women. Out of all welders, 7% are women. Additionally, a tradeswoman estimates the overall percentage between 8-10%.⁷ Women's participation in these trades is often marked by barriers that are well documented in research on this subject matter.⁸ For instance, researchers identify the presence of 'masculine organisational cultures that offer poor flexibility and devalue the skill level of women' as challenges women face in these trades (Bridges et al, 2020: 894).⁹ Other challenges include social exclusion, discrimination, sexual harassment and

² Ghana National Gender Policy (2015). Affirmative Action Bill.

³ Akorsu, A. D. (2013). Labour standards application in the informal economy of Ghana: The patterns and pressures. *Economic annals*, 58(196), 157-175.

⁴ Bridges, D., Wulff, E., Bamberry, L., Krivokapic-Skoko, B., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Negotiating gender in the male-dominated skilled trades: A systematic literature review. *Construction management and economics*, 38(10), 894-916.

⁵ Samy, Y., Adedeji, A., Iraoya, A., Dutta, M. K., Fakmawii, J. L., & Hao, W. (2023). Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment: Qualitative Analysis of SMEs from Ghana, Madagascar, Nigeria, and Senegal. In *Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment: Evidence from Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises* (pp. 105-144). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. <https://www.usaid.gov/engendering-industries/results>

⁶ Bridges, D., Wulff, E., Bamberry, L., Krivokapic-Skoko, B., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Negotiating gender in the male-dominated skilled trades: A systematic literature review. *Construction management and economics*, 38(10), 894-916.

⁷ <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/women-work-engaging-young-women-construction-ghana>.

⁸ Whittock, M. (2002). Women's experiences of non-traditional employment: is gender equality in this area a possibility?. *Construction Management & Economics*, 20(5), 449-456. Bridges, D., Wulff, E., Bamberry, L., Krivokapic-Skoko, B., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Negotiating gender in the male-dominated skilled trades: A systematic literature review. *Construction management and economics*, 38(10), 894-916. Samy, Y., Adedeji, A., Iraoya, A., Dutta, M. K., Fakmawii, J. L., & Hao, W. (2023). Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment: Qualitative Analysis of SMEs from Ghana, Madagascar, Nigeria, and Senegal. In *Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment: Evidence from Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises* (pp. 105-144). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. <https://www.usaid.gov/engendering-industries/results>.

⁹ Bridges et al (2020: 894). Fielden, S. L., Davidson, M. J., Gale, A. W., & Davey, C. L. (2000). Women in construction: the untapped resource. *Construction Management & Economics*, 18(1), 113-121.

rigid management strategies that ignore women’s multiple burden, and lack of critical mass of women required to serve as mentors for young women.¹⁰ Similarly, an analysis of policy documents and field data gathered with tradeswomen and female trades apprentices—in male-dominated industrial trades in Northern Ghana revealed numerous barriers. They face gender-role stereotyping insinuating that depicting women in non-traditional trades are out of place. They experience differences in remuneration, unwillingness of families to support young women pursuing the trades, and few female role models to inspire young women. As well, barriers include unfair treatment of women on the job, limited access to financial resources required to establish independent trades businesses, and lack of employment opportunities upon graduating from skills training. Other challenges identified include lack of institutional support for women during pregnancy and childbirth and care responsibilities, including paid maternity leave, conducive workplace, and lack of financial incentives for female apprentices. These challenges resonate with research on women’s participation in industrial trades. Together with numerous others, these challenges serve as bottlenecks to women’s participation, contributing to poor experience during training and threatening their ability to practicing their trade after training. Barriers to women’s involvement in industrial trades persist despite the various global and local legal and policy environments outlined above that in theory should resolve many of these problems.

Motivation for pursuing industrial trades

Analysis of the field data reveals varied sources of motivation for choosing a career in normatively male-dominant trades, including inspiration from a range of sources, such as family members, friends and role models, mostly males who practice or practiced a trade in the past or a father who pursues the interest of their female children and determines that these trades could position the beneficiaries advantageously to earn a living. This demonstrates the important role of family and friends in guiding and supporting young females, particularly in male-

dominant trades. The success story of a tradeswoman who was supported entirely by her mother exemplifies this narrative, illustrating the empowering effect of family support. Additionally, the analysis found that some women are driven by personal passion to acquire skills in a male-dominated trade and to become economically empowered despite societal norms and expectations that serve as limiting factors. Consequently, self-motivation has been shown to propel young women to enter the trades. Overall, motivation, communal, familial, and personal determination are central to embarking on an industrial trade career and exceling in it. Motivation for embarking on business has been linked to both pull factors such as the need for self-actualization and economic empowerment and push factors, including difficulties in finding work and poverty.¹¹

Similarly, motivation and inspiration also stem from the training institutions such as GRATIS and other TVET institutions established by the Education Sector Regulatory (Act 1023) and the supporting roles of the facilitators at the institutions. The Education Sector Regulatory Act, which promotes sustainable economic advancement plays a role in the positive experiences of tradeswomen because of its emphasis on equal educational opportunities, mentoring and overcoming gender-based discrimination. For instance, a mature tradeswoman recounted the support she received during her training at the GRATIS Foundation, which also covered meals and personal items. The support, she explained, met her immediate needs, enabling her to successfully complete the training. Aligned with its mission, GRATIS Foundation takes pride in facilitating technical apprenticeships and industrial internships that enable students, both males and females, to apply theoretical learning in practical industry settings, bridging the gap between theory and practice. Moreover, TVET institutions with direct funding from government have increased enrolment in all TVET institutions across the country, enhancing their focus and targeted approaches towards promoting females in the trades. The outstanding performance of these tradeswomen

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Walker, E., & Webster, B. (2004). Gender issues in home-based businesses. *Women in management review*, 19(8), 404-412. McClelland, E., Swail, J., Bell, J., & Ibbotson, P. (2005). Following the

pathway of female entrepreneurs: A six-country investigation. *International journal of entrepreneurial behavior & research*, 11(2), 84-107.

is a product of personal motivation, family, community, and institutional support.

However, despite the many sources of motivation to pursue the trades, tradeswomen face multifaceted challenges, stemming from deeply entrenched gender stereotypes at the training institution, in communities and families because of discriminatory societal norms and practices. For example, technical institutions and apprenticeship centers lack childcare facilities and support for mothers and children. These constraints are demotivating factors and serve as stumbling blocks to women's participation in industrial trades.

Perspectives of both experienced tradeswomen and their newly trained mentees point to the prevalence of socio-cultural norms that discourage young women from pursuing a career in industrial trades. These trades are perceived as a masculine realm and women are stigmatized and bullied for 'intruding' into a 'masculine space'. They are told that they are risking their femininity and jeopardizing their opportunity to get married. A review of the policies reveals a gap in addressing these bottlenecks that demotivate women, discouraging them from pursuing careers in male-dominated trades.

Gender role stereotyping and discrimination against women in the industrial trades

Gender role stereotyping and discriminatory norms, assumptions and practices are some of the central themes to emerge from the analysis of perspectives of tradeswomen and their mentees and a review of relevant policies. Deep-seated societal norms, male-dominant cultural practices and organizational cultures, parental pressures, and societal beliefs that frame male-dominated industrial trades as 'unfeminine' interact to obstruct women's participation and success in these trades. These constraints function to limit the possibilities of women exploring opportunities in these fields. Many women face disrespectful behaviors and bullying from friends and community members such as name-calling, associating them with masculine identities such as '*pog gandoa*', a stigmatized concept used to refer to women who transgress

normative feminine norms among the Dagaaba people of northwestern Ghana.¹² The stigmatization thus hinders women's choices and perpetuates gender inequalities in these trades. Both tradeswomen and their mentees also experience discrimination in task assignments, such as being assigned the most difficult tasks. Their views are trivialized, and they receive unequal remuneration and opportunities for growth. The inequitable treatment is perceived to emanate from the male-dominated and inherently patriarchal societies of Northern Ghana where women are mostly treated as subordinates and rarely involved in family and community decision-making activities. Thus, the challenges are reflections of a spillover of the stereotypes and biases from the 'private' spheres of the home.¹³

Additionally, the analysis highlighted significant challenges in promoting gender responsiveness and equality within TVET institutions. Tradeswomen interviewed highlighted outstanding issues, namely the pervasiveness of discrimination against women in terms of the devaluation of women's experiences and perspectives, disregard for their expertise, prevalence of sexual harassment and physical abuse. To complicate women's experiences, there is a general lack of awareness concerning the widespread gender inequalities in the leadership of these institutions and the victimization of women who dare to speak up and or challenge the status quo of influential individuals, mostly male. Indeed, in the workplace there is the tendency for the men to expect 'wifely' roles from the women, such as serving food and drinks and cleaning up. These gendered stereotypes and the challenges they pose to women's career in the male-dominated trades are daunting. Over time, however, the work environment has improved, resulting in a reduction in gender role stereotyping. However, there remain outstanding challenges for women in trades such as gender-neutral or -blind workplaces, lack of affirmative action measures, pay equity, access to government contracts for those in self-employment and gender responsive practices such as procurement. These obstacles often overlook crucial

¹² Akurugu, C. (2020). Redeploying the abjection of the Pog Gandoa 'wilful woman for women's empowerment and feminist politics in a mystical context. *Feminist Review*, 126(1), 39-53.

¹³ Tseer, T., Akurugu, C. A., & Adjuik, R. Y.

(2023). The gap between us: Perceptions of feminism and womanhood in Northern Ghana-evidence from Sagnarigu Municipal District. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(1), 2174480.

nuances that impact women and men differently, emphasizing the ongoing hurdles in attaining gender diversity within industrial trades.

Undervaluing of women in trades in formal and informal employment

Women in both formal and informal traditionally male-dominated trades have varied experiences and challenges. In Ghana, the Labor Act works in various ways, including setting a minimum wage, regulating working hours, overtime, and termination of employment, and assuring workplace health and safety. The Labor Department enforces the Employment Act under the supervision of the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations. Simultaneously, labor groups and unions are important in promoting workers' rights and keeping companies accountable. While the narratives of tradeswomen in the formal sector showed that they enjoy provisions in the Labor Act, the informal sector is characterized by precarious working conditions and few standardized benefits, including access to paid maternity leave for women and sick leave, job security, and protection from exploitation. Indeed, analysis of data from young women in placements revealed that sometimes no monetary reward is given for working, although their male counterparts get rewarded for equivalent work. This devaluation of women's labor is in sharp contrast with Ghana's Labor Act (Ghana Labor Act 2003). Yet importantly, it mirrors the broader issue of undervaluing women's labor, a problem prevalent across various contexts as highlighted in the National Gender Policy (2015).

Since 2017, TVET has undergone several reforms, starting with a 5-year strategic plan for transformation. The strategic plan seeks to transform Ghana's labor force to enhance productivity and employment by focusing on TVET governance and management, increased access, improved quality, TVET financing, and environmental sustainability. The aim is to establish a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for the TVET sector, ensuring equitable access and gender mainstreaming, and enhancing quality assurance in accordance with internationally accepted standards. Despite this, women frequently lack the necessary encouragement and financial support when entering trades. They encounter negative peer pressure and isolation, inequitable opportunities, prohibitive costs of training and

unpaid apprenticeships. Furthermore, even when women enter these fields, retention becomes a persistent issue due to low remuneration, limited access to jobs and contract opportunities, family demands, and childbearing.

Recommendations

Various stakeholders, including the Government of Ghana, through its state institutions and decentralized departments and commissions such as the CTVET and TVET institutions, in addition to civil society organizations working around women's economic empowerment should put in place measures to remove the barriers to women's participation in traditionally male-dominant industrial trades, and to enhance their participation in these trades and sustainability.

Issue 1: Despite the availability of free TVET education at the senior high school level, knowledge of such opportunities is low among rural communities and girls in general. One significant challenge highlighted in the interviews is the pervasive gender stereotypes deeply rooted in the training institution, community, and family influences. To tackle these issues effectively, there is a crucial need to raise awareness and implement complementary programs designed to mentor girls in the trades.

The National Commission for Civic Education, Ministry of Information, CTVET, TVET service, and NGOs should:

- Advocate for the effective implementations of the Labor Act and its provisions of equal pay for work of equal value in formal and informal institutions. The institutions need to collaborate with relevant departments such as the Department of Gender to design and implement gender responsive policies and ensure their effective implementation in both formal and informal sectors.
- Related to the above, they must educate tradesmen, master craftsmen, and apprentices on gender sensitive and inclusive practices to foster better interactions with female trainees and to respond to the needs of the young women. This endeavor should include sexual harassment awareness creation to promote an understanding about what it is and how to avoid it. These measures are critical to overcoming the biases and stereotyping inherent in the

informal sector as they may protect the young women from harassment and create a positive and gender-responsive workplace environment.

- NGOs should actively advocate for government initiatives that provide incentives for women in the trades such as tax waivers for women in TVET, and financial or start-up package for girls who complete TVET education. Creating supportive policies and incentives can significantly encourage women to actively participate in traditionally male-dominated fields and start their own enterprises.
- The Girl's Education Unit (GEU) should collaborate with community leaders, NGOs and NCCE to conduct sensitization activities in communities and provide follow-up with families to support girls' education. This can be done by holding community durbars and forums to dismantle gender role stereotyping and the negative societal perceptions about women in male-dominated trades and to shed light on the need to support and encourage more women to enroll in industrial trades.

Issue 2: A primary challenge faced by women in industrial trades revolves around the delicate balance between work, family, school commitments and the financial capacity to start up their own business. These obstacles often overlook crucial nuances that impact women and men disparately, leading to persistent challenges in attaining gender inclusion within industrial trades. Addressing these requires CTNET to establish in the national TVET policy well-defined incentives for women to be retained in the trades.

- The Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations should enforce the implementation of the provision under Section 27(2) of the constitution that mandates childcare facilities. The establishment of childcare support systems, such as nurseries for female TVET trainees and trainers, will encourage retention. This initiative will promote female enrolment in all TVET institutions.
- The Ministry of Education should strengthen its provision of short-term training programs, specifically to address the unique needs of girls in training institutions:
 - Innovate program structures by incorporating shorter, flexible, and more intensive modules that allow for focused skill development of young

women who cannot stay the duration of a regular school term.

- Implement a continuing education format within TVET institutions, offering flexibility for women and girls to engage in training alongside other commitments (family and home chores).
- Recognize and accommodate the diverse schedules and responsibilities of women and girls by offering training sessions during alternative hours, e.g., provide evening or weekend classes to ensure their accessibility and participation.
- The Ghana Skills Development Fund (GSDF) which aims to enhance the skills and technological capabilities of Ghanaian enterprises needs to be expanded to meet the needs of women in male-dominated trades. The aim of the Fund is to boost productivity and competitiveness of the skilled workforce, especially women, low-income individuals, and people with disabilities, through quality-oriented training programs and complementary services.

Issue 3: The unequal pay gap is a persistent issue showing that contractors pay men more than women for similar work in the trades. This biased practice often stems from an assumption that a woman's financial needs will be met by her male partner. It also shows that women's skills are not as valued as men's. Consequently, women in the trades face ongoing challenges due to this discriminatory payment structure. This requires an enhanced support for women.

The Ministry of Education, Ghana TVET Service, and National Board for Professional and Technician Examinations should ensure that:

- The Ministry of Education and TVET Service spearhead actions to develop a gender responsive policy that will ensure that women in trades receive priority in the award of state-led contracts. The priorities may be in the form of encouraging women in trades to apply for government contracts and committing to award a quota to women-led companies and associations. Most tradeswomen who are independent contractors face financial barriers and are unable to compete favorably with men. Instituting affirmative action measures that lead to granting contracts to women in the trades will

motivate them to stay and to develop their businesses further, and this can in turn inspire other women to pursue the trades. Government's key initiatives under the Ghana Industrial Transformation Agenda (GITA) such as Strategic Anchor Industries Initiative, Industrial Parks, and Special Economic Zones, Small and Medium-Scale Enterprise Development, Export Development and Diversification, and Business Regulatory Reforms Strategy present important opportunities to implement this affirmative action in awarding contracts to women in the trades.

- Develop and implement gender responsive targeted support programs focused on addressing the basic and strategic needs of women entering the trades within the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector to address the differential needs of men and women particularly in the procurement processes. Women have the skills and can compete in the trades, but societal prejudice limits their ability to compete fairly when it comes to getting government contracts. Without the institutionalization and enforcement of policies to favor women in the trades, they may learn the trades but may not be motivated to practice them.
- The Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations should collaborate with the Public Procurement Authority, Ministry of Works, and Housing to ensure that guidelines are in place and implemented to promote gender-responsive contracting in the trades field. This will incentivize women in trades to apply and receive government contracts.
- The National Labor Commission and the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations should strengthen the enforcement of equal remuneration for equal work done as outlined in the Ghana Labor Act to address the reported disparities in salary between male and female workers.

Issue 4: Combatting gender stereotypes entrenched in trades requires institutional strengthening. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, CTVET, TVET Services, Ministry of Labor and Employment, National Labor Commission should:

- Recruit Gender Desk Officers for relevant TVET institutions and provide them with continuous training to enhance their effectiveness in addressing gender biases.
- Enforce a zero-tolerance policy for workplace harassment, equal opportunities for women in trades, emphasizing non-discriminatory practices in task assignments, mentorship, and growth opportunities, and establish reporting mechanisms to address incidents promptly.
- Establish mechanisms for regular monitoring and reporting of gender-based discrimination within TVET institutions and workplaces.
- As the Ministry of Education works on formulating the new National TVET policy post the 2018-2022 plan it is imperative to incorporate a strategy for a sustainable TVET financing mechanism that strengthens the Ghana Skills Development Fund. This strategy should include explicit guidelines governing utilization and access. Unlike the previous policy, which overlooked the challenges faced by girls in TVET, the upcoming policy must outline clear and targeted strategies for addressing the challenges. Specifically, it should focus on making TVET more appealing to women and actively combatting negative stereotypes associated with their participation.
- The Ministry of Education should develop a data management system to capture gender-specific data spanning enrollment, school retention and employment. This will allow for evaluation of the effectiveness of gender promotion initiatives.

Issue 5: The implementing agencies and departments at the national, regional and sub-regional levels are deeply constrained in implementation by inadequate budgetary allocations with the implication that these policies are rarely implemented.

- The Ministry of Education should increase budgetary allocations to TVET at the national, regional, and sub-regional levels.
- MoE should work with GES, CTVET and TVET institutions to ensure that allocated funds are strategically distributed to critical areas within the TVET sector, such as infrastructure development, instructor training, and curriculum enhancement.