

Typology of Transferable Skills for Women Employability in Kenya

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Abstract

The transition of women from tertiary education to gainful employment has remained low, despite efforts put in place to enhance this. This review paper is the outcome of a synthesis of the literature on transferable skills for women and girls to enhance their skills development and employability through evidence-based gender responsive policies. The study was based on an integrative review of literature on the nature of transferable skills in Kenya and their influence on employability of girls and women. To appropriately contextualise the problem, researchers sought to understand the nature of transferable skills. The literature search was conducted using several databases for literature published in the last 5-8 years. Using keywords such as transferable skills, employability, women, the initial search revealed over 150 references. A total of 58 sources were included in the review. The paper provides a typology of transferable skills that can enhance women's empowerment, as to what the literature suggests, and also based on the Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST) model used by CAP YEI in Kenya. The study was guided by the question: What is the nature of transferable skills provided in Kenya and what is already available in the literature? The findings reveal that practitioners' and researchers' conceptualisation of transferable skills varied across a narrow spectrum. These skills are typified as managerial, entrepreneurial, psycho-social, soft skills, life skills and 21st century competencies. These skills are essential for empowering youth to improve their employability in labour markets, especially in an African setting.

Keywords: Transferable Skills, Employability, Life Skills, 21st Century Competencies, Gender Responsive Policy, Kenya

Introduction

Transferable skills have gained significant attention globally, with several organizations and institutions recognizing their importance in achieving personal and professional success. According to World Economic Forum (2020), transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork are increasingly becoming vital in the workforce, and demand for such skills is projected to increase significantly in coming years. The World Economic Forum also highlights that by 2025, over half of all employees will require significant reskilling and upskilling to develop transferable skills needed for jobs of the 21st century.

According to World Bank (2018), economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa was 3.1 percent, and acknowledged the need to emphasize education skills and adaptability to strengthen long-term economic growth prospects. In the wake of COVID-19, the World Bank (2020) projected that the contraction of Sub-Saharan Africa economy would be the largest globally, fuelled by closed education systems, which consequently slowed human capital development. The Bank recommended maintaining access to education to impede irreversible losses in long-term human capital. In addition, World Bank (2020), reiterated, for example, that about 20 percent of Kenya's population comprised 15-24-year-old males and females, a potential asset to the Kenyan economy if they can gain economic independence by securing well-paying employment upon graduation. While the Kenyan economy has attained comparable high economic growth rates, positive macroeconomic development has not adequately benefited the youth (Hall, 2017).

To address this need, various initiatives have been implemented globally to enhance development of transferable skills. For instance, European Union launched the European Skills Agenda in 2020, which aims to promote development of transferable skills among Europeans to enhance their employability (European Commission, 2020). The initiative prioritises development of digital and green skills, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has emphasised the importance of transferable skills in achieving its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2017). In particular, UNESCO recognises that transferable skills play a crucial role in achieving SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Around the world, finding a job is much tougher for women than it is for men (Sun et al., 2022). When women are employed, they tend to work in low-quality jobs in vulnerable conditions, and there is little improvement forecast in the near future (Markose et al., 2023). A substantial gender gap in self-employment remains in the European Union (EU) (Faria et al., 2021). Less than one in ten (9.6%) working women were self-employed women in 2018, significantly below the share for men (16.9%) (Faria et al., 2021). Although this gender gap has closed slightly over the past decade, it is due to a decline in the number of self-employed men (OECD, 2021).

Kenya has started to focus on integrating a broad range of cognitive and non-cognitive transferable skills into schools and colleges' curricula systems, policy frameworks, and practices to prepare young people for the 21st century workplace characterized by globalization, technological innovations, and rapid urbanization (Nyerere, 2018). Specifically, Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) focuses on teaching transferable skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving, learning to learn, imagination and creativity, digital literacy, communication and collaboration, citizenship, and self-efficacy. Competency Based Education and Training (CBET), on the other hand, aims at preparing learners for the workplace through the acquisition of competencies while taking into account the technical requirements of the industry. The lacuna

that still exists is the apparent link between transferable skills and access to employment and entrepreneurship for women and girls in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2023). The article is part of an ongoing study on transferability of employability skills that was undertaken in one of the organisations that conducts training for youth to equip them with skills that enhance their employability in the labour market. CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute (YEI) is a non-government organization, that is committed to training the youth out of school in job entry-level skills. The training offered at CAP YEI is operationalized and implemented using the Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST) model through public-private partnerships for its sustainability and scalability. This study aims to assess the nature of transferable skills and their influence on employability of girls and women in Kenya. The objective of the programme was to determine the types of transferable skills that are imparted on women to enable them navigate the employment landscape. The study seeks to describe the typology of transferable skills and how they help women to find gainful employment and thus improve their economic status.

The current global labour force participation rate for women is just under 47% and for men, is 72%; a difference of 25 percentage points, with some regions facing a gap of more than 50 percentage points (ILO, 2020). Data reveals that 71% of women compared to 75% men (ILO, 2020) contribute to the labour force. Efforts to enhance development of transferable skills in Kenya have been ongoing for some time, but recent studies have highlighted significant gaps that need to be addressed. For example, a survey conducted by Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) found that only 38% of employers considered transferable skills important when recruiting new staff (KEPSA, 2022). This lack of emphasis on transferable skills in the labour market is reflected in limited inclusion of these skills in education and training programs.

Theoretical Review

The study is based on feminist research paradigm with a focus on liberal feminism theory. Liberal Feminism incorporates a variety of ideas, reflecting the array of women worldwide rooted in the movements of equality, freedom and justice. It also works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure (Ferguson, 2017). Further Liberal Feminism expounds on the systemic factors depriving women of essential resources such as education which disadvantage them in the labour market as a result of less education and experience (Pettersson et al., 2017). The focus on liberal feminism theory helps to articulate the theory of change aimed at economically empowering women in Kenya who have a systemic disadvantaged position that is caused by transition of girls from school to work and disempowerment due to women not engaging in paid employment activities that may alleviate their poverty situation thereby empowering them economically.

Liberal feminism theory originates back to social contract theory that proposes equality for women (Hirschmann & Sinopoli, 1991). Consistent with Jones and Budig (2008), liberal feminism argues that women's unequal access to legal, social, political and economic institutions cause women's oppression. Jones and Budig (2008) note that the remedy is to advocate for women's equal legal rights and participation in the public spheres of education, politics, and employment. Through designs, concepts and strategies of liberal feminism, this study reviewed policies and programmes on the nature and impact of transferable skills, employability, and entrepreneurship of women and girls in Kenya. It further appraised Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) (Akala, 2021) and Competency Based Education and Training (CBET) (Koros, 2021) program effectiveness on both enhancing girls' school to work transition and enhancing acquisition

of transferable skills for employability in women and girls. Liberal feminists hold that women should enjoy their individual autonomy in choosing their own lives (The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2013).

Along with Hirschmann and Sinopoli (1991), the conception of individual autonomy as self-determination and power over one's life heightens empowerment. Feminism assumes that there is widespread oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society which leads to inconsistencies in social patterns and results into oppression that is not natural but can be altered (Cancian 1992). Increased theoretical advances and the influence of feminism within social sciences have brought the issue of gender to the forefront of research specifically within the field of social sciences (Jansen, 1990). Liberal feminism theory has an intense interest in social context and structure of power to study real experiences of women and girls living within these structures. Harding (1987) established that women's personal lived experience is "a significant indicator of the reality against which hypotheses is tested" (Harding 1987: p.8).

The inclusion of women's experience leads to an all-round understanding of social experience and a more rounded approach to sociological inquiry, capturing all areas that are available to the researcher. Feminist methodology is the lived experience of women, especially women who are marginalised (Cook & Fonow, 1986). Du bois (1983) observes that centrality of feminist social science and scholarship is to address women's lives and experiences in their terms, to create theory grounded in actual experience and language of women. Feminist research ideally seeks to emancipate women from a traditional male-dominant viewpoint. Research is perceived as a tool of dominance and legitimizing of power among a given class to serve interests of dominated, subjugated and oppressed groups, particularly women (Mies, 1983).

Kiguwa (2019) points out that in a feminist methodology, researchers are able to produce new ways of seeing, rather than testing prior theory, allowing research to proceed in an innovative and progressive way. By using liberal feminism theory, this study will thus critically engage women and girl's lived social realities with a view to empowering them economically through enhancing employability by influencing policies and programmes that are geared towards skilling and mentorship to enable smooth school-to-work transition. Adoption of a multiple methodological framework remains an important strategy of feminism research. In that regard, this study will rely on quantitative and qualitative approaches to make sense of the social world and lived realities of women and girls on the issue of transferable skills, employment and entrepreneurship and consequently understanding what works for women's economic empowerment in Kenya.

Cohen et al (2011) demonstrate that research that focuses on women's empowerment is aptly guided by a philosophical paradigm that emanates from a feministic perspective of change and transformation. Amongst various feministic research paradigms, liberal feminism provides a relevant framework for situating theory of change and research approach. This is the essence of participatory research which emphasizes on research for change and development of communities rather than for its own sake. The agenda of participatory research is empowerment and liberation from oppression, exploitation and poverty. This agenda resonates well with the goals of feministic research which build on the importance of addressing power issues in research by dealing with questions of – whose research, research for whom, research in whose interests. Feministic research seeks to empower women, give voice, emancipate, and provide equality and representation for oppressed girls and women. Some characteristics of feministic research is increased use of qualitative introspective biographical research techniques (Ferguson, 2017).

Methodology

This study was a scoping review of relevant literature on transferables skills and women employability. The review consisted of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were articles in peer reviewed journals. secondary sources included grey literature found in reports and website-based sources. The review sought to summarise and synthesise findings and develop a typology of transferable skills based on the existing literature. Special attention was paid to literature that discusses the various types of transferable skills necessary for youth to fit in the 21st century workplace (Cheryl et al., 2014). The review also addressed the apparent link between transferable skills and access to employment and entrepreneurship for women and girls in Kenya. Integrative reviews critically analyse and synthesise diverse literature (Sethares, 2020). The scope of the current review is on the nature of transferable skills. The review further interrogates the hypothesis that transferable skills are important in enhancing the employability and productivity of young people and therefore, have an immense impact on various labour market outcomes.

Literature search covered the nature of transferable skills taught in programs to increase employability of girls and women; impact of transferable skills on employability and entrepreneurship of women and girls; and the effectiveness of competence-based programs in enhancing acquisition of transferable skills for employability among women and girls. Among the databases searched were Google Scholar, Kenyan university repositories and relevant Government websites, Science Direct, Emerald, Springer, Wiley, Scopus, Web of Science and Research Gate. Website analysis of the Kenyan government websites was searched for government publications related to competence-based curriculum and the competence-based education and training framework.

Gender policy in Kenya

The Constitution of Kenya, 2010 highlights principles such as equality, equity, inclusiveness and non-discrimination which provide an anchorage for gender equality (Republic of Kenya, 2010). In 2011 the National Gender Equality Commission was established with the overall goal to reduce gender inequalities and discrimination against all. Kenya has also ratified several international treaties and regional conventions on gender equality. Despite these efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, gender inequality remains a key issue of concern in Kenya. A key issue is the gender inequalities in job market with the percentage of women in formal employment in Kenya accounting for about 30 percent with the majority being in poorly paid jobs in the unregulated informal sector. According to the Kenya Economic Survey 2018, Kenyan women largely make a real but invisible contribution to the economy because their contribution to the GDP through the informal sector is not recognized. Women economic activity is largely concentrated in subsistence agriculture and the informal business sector while men tend to dominate in the formal sector. According to Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) (2019) the trends in total employment and share of women in wage employment reveal inequities in access to wage employment by women.

According to ILO (2017) although Kenya has experienced tremendous economic growth in the last 20 years, unemployment still stands at 11.65%. Females accounted for 50.2 percent of the total working population. Out of the total unemployed youths, 92 percent have no job training other than formal schooling (FKE, 2019). In our study, young people pointed out that employers demand skills and experience beyond them. This presents a disparity between training and the labour market calling for the need to promote the

acquisition of transferable skills to enhance employability. The 12th Academia-Public-Private Partnership Forum (APPPF) and Exhibition held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania it was observed that skills required to succeed in employment are constantly evolving hence the need for close collaboration between key stakeholders to keep pace with changing demands in the world of work. One of the objectives of the Education and Training Sector Gender Policy, 2015 is to ensure a gender responsive curriculum design, development and implementation. However, gaps continue to be witnessed with gender inequalities in employment. The National Policy on Gender and Development, 2019 avers that evaluations have pointed to clear gaps in promoting gender equality with disparities in education and economic opportunities. The policy therefore seeks to ensure inclusion of a gender perspective at all levels with some of the priority areas being improved livelihoods and women's economic empowerment. This can be achieved through adopting training models that embrace acquisition of transferable skills to empower men and women to have access to and control over economic opportunities and resources. There have also been reported disparities in wages and the National Policy on Gender and Development was enacted to provide direction in eliminating discrimination in access to employment, promotion and training including equal remuneration to enhance income security for both men and women.

Transferable Skills and Employment

Transferable skills comprise a broader set of skills including critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, information literacy, and creativity, among others (Foresight Africa, 2017). Brown et al (2015) observed that these skills include communication, leadership, perseverance, empathy, emotional regulation, financial, information technology literacy and entrepreneurship capabilities. These skills, also called transferable skills, have been found to improve employment and livelihood outcomes and increase productivity, particularly among women and marginalized groups (UNICEF, 2019).

Transferable skills have an immense impact on earnings especially for women who are underrepresented in quality employment (Brunello & Schlotter, 2011). Further, transferable skills constitute highly demanded skills in the job market (World Economic Forum, 2020). Kenya has started to focus on integrating a broad range of cognitive and non-cognitive transferable skills into the schools and colleges' curricula systems, policy frameworks, and practices to prepare young people for the 21st-century workplace characterized by globalization, technological innovations, and rapid urbanization (Nyerere, 2018). Specifically, Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) focuses on teaching transferable skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving, learning to learn, imagination and creativity, digital literacy, communication and collaboration, citizenship, and self-efficacy. Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET), on the other hand, aims at preparing learners for the workplace through the acquisition of competencies while considering the technical requirements of the industry.

The lacuna that still exists is the apparent link between transferable skills and access to employment and entrepreneurship for women and girls in Kenya. Emerging evidence indicates that cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal competencies can be taught and learned to promote the transfer of skills, facilitated by instruction that helps learners develop a deep understanding of the structure of a problem domain and appropriate solutions. Farrington et al. (2012), in their review on the importance of non-cognitive skills and educational outcomes, concluded that the best leverage points for improving student performance were in helping teachers understand the relationship between classroom context and student behaviours, providing

teachers with clear strategies for creating classrooms that promote positive academic mindsets in all students.

According to KICD (2016), all learners should be equipped with entrepreneurial and managerial skills to be self-reliant and job creators. Transferable skills prepare youths to find employment and create jobs (Nyerere & Warira, 2017). They enhance youth productivity and contribute to the country's socio-economic development. The shortage of individuals with the necessary transferable skills required by the job market is also reflected in high youth unemployment rates in Kenya. According to World Bank, youth unemployment rate in Kenya was 22.4% in 2020 (Wafula, 2023). This rate is way below the ideal employment threshold of 100%. These skills have been found to improve employment and livelihood outcomes and increase productivity, particularly among women and marginalized groups (Nyerere, 2018). Gaps in skills are impacted by changes in the world of work, which demand a workforce with a broader set of skills including critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, information literacy, and creativity, among others (Foresight Africa, 2017). These skills are a combination of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, which are also referred to as 21st-century skills. The skills enable individuals to adapt to diverse work and life situations (MasterCard Foundation, 2017). Nyerere (2018) notes that core transferable skills constitute the ability to unlearn that which is not useful and learn new things that are required and this calls for a change in teaching methodologies and assessment procedures.

Jayaram (2012) found a growing gap in the world between employers' needs and skills students acquire at the secondary and tertiary levels of education. KICD, in 2016 indicated that in 2009, secondary education curriculum content relegated practical skills necessary for economic development to non-examinable subjects; hence most secondary level graduates lacked adequate skills and competencies while joining the job market. Nyerere (2018) notes that Kenya is not building sufficient and relevant competencies and skills of the youth and that efforts made by the government on equipping youths on transferable skills are concentrated on the out-of-school youth. Notwithstanding, integration of these skills into the formal education curriculum is in process. An earlier study investigating skills gap analysis for graduates of youth polytechnics, vocational training colleges, and out-of-school youths established that besides low technical skills, graduates also had weak work attitudes, communication, and social skills (Republic of Kenya, 2012). The Kenya decent work country program 2013–2016 recommended improvement on youths and women industrial training relevance to reduce their skills mismatch in the labour market (Republic of Kenya, 2013).

The TVET Act of 2013 implemented reforms in TVET institutions aimed at stimulating employment among the Kenyan youths through enhanced competitiveness, productivity, and prosperity of individuals (Ngware et al., 2019). Ngware et al.'s (2019) assessment of the production of core values and capabilities among youth in TVET institutions in Kenya found that respondents felt that government interventions in soft skills met the labour demand and promoted whole youth development. However, integration of soft skills such as entrepreneurship and communication skills in TVET curriculum was perceived as not comprehensive to the private sector's dynamic labour market skill needs (Ngware et al., 2019). Ngware et al.'s assessment found that TVET students demonstrated low acquisition of functional literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills. Further, KICD (2016) acknowledged that most learners shied away from agriculture, entrepreneurial, vocational, technical, innovation, and information and communications technology (ICT) subjects at secondary education level. This explained skill gaps in these subjects in the TVET institutions in Kenya and the labour market.

Studies in Kenya confirm life skills training has a positive impact on youth. Ondieki et al.'s (2019) research on consequences of integrating CAP YEI's proven life skills curriculum in selected Vocational Training Centres (VTCs) in Kenya found a positive trend with the treatment group. In Ondieki et al. (2019) research, life skills offered to students were attributed to the observed positive trend in the treatment group. Moreover, White (2018) found that youth's livelihoods programs positively affected both young men's and women's access to income-generating opportunities. Murgor's (2017) study, on the other hand, found that TVET institutions did not inculcate soft skills content required for survival in self-employment. According to Murgor, time management was ranked highest but did not affect employment. Correspondingly, White (2018) noted that few programs provided catch-up basic education, often a blockade to labour market success, especially for young women. Iioetonma (2020) points out that both job-specific and transferable skills are vital for successful and more resilient employment outcomes.

A study by World Bank (2019) notes that individuals with higher education levels are more likely to be formally employed. Also, ILO (2019) confirms that imparting transferable skills to women workers through approaches such as activity-based learning and peer collaboration mitigate them from being displaced by robotic automation and artificial intelligence. However, Mutuku et al. (2015) observed that 76.9 percent of female entrepreneurs went into business without prior business skills and rarely actively searched for entrepreneurial knowledge or skills. Cusolito and Maloney (2018) argue that more than the basic education, technological expertise, managerial capabilities, and forbearance for risk are the crux to successful entrepreneurship. When program design takes gender into account and the monitoring data is gender-disaggregated, programs effectively respond to gendered challenges. The study further notes that limited gender analysis in evaluating programs offering job-specific and transferable skills and explained that few research documents reported systematically on gender-differentiated outcomes, a gap to be filled by the review (White, 2018).

Mungai and Ogot (2012) also observed that ethnic, cultural influences play a more significant role in women's inclinations towards entrepreneurship and their view of their community perception on the same as gender. Moreover, UNESCO (2019) notes that harmful social norms can inhibit education change from being realized among women, given the cultural opinion of women as wives, caregivers, and domestic workers. All the research reviewed seem to indicate that gender-specific training is required to enhance women and girls' employability hence the need to conduct a gender analysis of transferable skills imparted to evaluate the programs with a gender lens.

Conclusion

The literature that was reviewed in this paper reveals an interesting spectrum of transferable skills. There are various approaches used in the definition of transferable skills. Some scholars consider transferable skills as 21st century skills, soft skills, employability skills and social skills/life skills. Alternate viewpoints consider these skills as functional literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills. All these classifications have a common traction in the sense that skills are multidimensional consisting of cognitive, psycho-social, entrepreneurial and managerial skills. These skills enable the youth and women to live meaningful lives via gainful employment, whether in self-employment or formal employment within organisations or outside formal structures. Skills such as managerial, entrepreneurship and communication skills have been mainstreamed in TVET curriculum and are relevant for youth in their entrepreneurial pursuits. Empirical evidence has revealed that the 21st century is an era of embracing innovations and technological

transformations in the world of work. It is evident that as women increase their technological and entrepreneurial skills, productivity of enterprises increases. Whatever, the form that transferable skills assume, or whichever classification is adopted in typifying them, the evidence from the literature reviewed is that these skills are necessary for youth and women economic empowerment. However, the literature is not precise on the extent to which the transferable skills contribute to the employability of women in Kenya. Investment in education to enhance employment may yield better results for long-term economic empowerment for young women than investing in education to strengthen entrepreneurship. There is a need to identify the types of transferable skills connected to the formal education system that may ultimately be used by women to enhance participation in gainful employment. The findings of this study are relevant to policy and practice. In informing the direction of practice, the study recommends that there should be a deliberate effort to evaluate the impact of training on transferable skills on women employment. The study recommends that proactive policies should be geared towards enhancing the training of women to ensure the transfer of high impact skills for women employability.

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