



Equity in Action

Insights from a five-year-long intervention
with women in education and skilling



Adolescent girls and young women in India are faced with multiple barriers and disadvantages that manifest themselves early on both at home and in public spheres. These culminate in adolescent girls and young women having limited agency and decision making ability about aspects of their own lives, in low female labour force participation as well as unequal representation in public life and spaces.

An instance of the barriers that adolescent girls face is related to child marriage. Despite the presence of enforceable laws, nearly one in four women in India is married off before their 18th birthday. Early Marriage and subsequent pregnancy increases the chances of girls and young women dropping out of formal education and limiting their agency and decision making ability. Instances of child marriage are more prevalent in rural areas where nearly 27% of the women surveyed (during NFHS 5) reported that they got married before the age of

18. The same survey revealed that nearly 8% of the female respondents in rural areas (~4% in urban areas) who were between ages of 15-19 were already married or were pregnant at the time of the survey. According to a recent report, Indian women are 15% less likely to own a smartphone, compared to Indian men, and 33% less likely to use internet services¹. This lack of exposure to the digital world not only constricts young women's access to knowledge and networks, it also means that women continue to depend on male members/ patriarchs in their households to access essential services such as financial (banking, savings), healthcare etc.

Further due to prevailing gender and societal biases, only 57% girls are willing to take up a science and technology related career as compared to 85% boys³. There is a gender gap in vocational education as well, with women forming only 4.3% of enrollments in engineering trades as opposed to 54.7% in non-engineering trades⁴. Additionally, nearly 1/3rd of women in ITIs are believed to be enrolled in trades with low market demand.² This is concerning because of three reasons.

1. First, globally STEM fields continue to lack diversity of skills and viewpoints because of underrepresentation of women and other minority groups. This lack of representation puts the interests and sometimes even the health of women at risk⁵ because their particular challenges, physiology and needs aren't understood or acknowledged fully in the technology and solutions that are designed.
2. Secondly, the future of work and learning requires the population to not just be digitally fluent but also have the ability to work with and understand data and algorithms for improved adaptability and resilience in the face of technological advancements.
3. An area of growing concern is that female labour force participation in India has stagnated for the past few years despite an increase in attainment of education. According to PLFS 2021-22 results, 21.1% of women in the age group of 15-29 were part of India's Labour Force as compared to 60.1% of men in the same age group. Additionally, the wage gap between men and women who are engaged in regular wage/ salaried work in rural and urban areas was 35% and 21% respectively⁶.

While India has made admirable strides in improving access to education and healthcare for its citizens, it has some way to go to ensure gender equality in access to resources, opportunity and skills for its young female citizens.

1. National Family Health Survey 5
2. Internet in India, 2022 (Internet and Mobile Association of India)
3. <https://theprint.in/india/education/57-girl-students-85-boys-interested-in-pursuing-stem-as-career-survey-finds/687370/>
4. <https://dgt.gov.in/sites/default/files/StateworkshopPPT.pdf>
5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/grrlscientist/2019/10/22/invisible-women-exposing-data-bias-in-a-world-designed-for-men/?sh=24e5a07c3989>
6. Globally gender pay gap is estimated to be 20%, according to ILO

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Quest Alliance's intervention areas

Quest Alliance is a not-for-profit trust with a mission to transform learning ecosystems through education technology, capacity building, and collaboration to build 21st century skills for learners and facilitators.

To address the gender disadvantages outlined above, Quest Alliance has adopted the following strategies in its program design:

1. Building girls' agency and problem solving skills
2. Strengthening Career aspirations and 21st century skills
3. Improving negotiation and decision making skills to enhance female labour force participation
4. Building capacity and perspectives of educators and educational leaders on gender equitable learning spaces

Building Girl's Agency

Educational institutions can prove to be formative spaces where children first encounter the values of equity, develop their sense of self (independent of their immediate families) and practice exercising their agency with non-family members. However, adolescent girls from disadvantaged backgrounds may face pressure from their families to get married or to contribute to household chores (including care responsibilities) that may result in them dropping out of school. Secondary data as well as Quest's own experience indicates that economic pressure on families during Covid has left a lot of adolescent girls at the risk of dropout and early marriage. Another negative effect of Covid was that girls experienced a disproportionate increase in household chores which cut into their study or leisure time. 42% of the girls surveyed by Save the Children reported that they had experienced an increase in household chores.

Adolescent girls' access to digital devices and online learning is also policed more closely by adults as they fear that girls are more at risk in the digital world as compared to their male siblings.

In this context, the ability to exercise their agency and negotiate with their elders are key 21st century skills for adolescent girls (both in school and out of school) that Quest Alliance is helping develop.

By working with out-of-school adolescent girls and providing them with platforms and a peer support system, Quest Alliance is not only encouraging young girls to re-enrol in schools but also preventing early and forced marriages.

Quest's engagement with out of school girls focuses on building a stronger understanding of self, their aspirations and awareness on entitlements and existing laws. The engagement involves discussions around bodily autonomy, violence against girls and women, Sexual and Reproductive Health and assertiveness as well as the world of work. Quest also works with family members within communities, to build an enabling environment for girls' to have and exercise their agency.

Through its curriculum on self and gender, Quest is enabling adolescent girls in schools to

articulate and exert their identity, understand gender biases and build skills that help them in communicating and negotiating with their guardians. Through pedagogical processes such as hackathons, adolescents also apply problem solving mindsets and in the process get to experience themselves and their peers as problem solvers who can shape the environment around them. Development of a scientific temper is one of the core objectives enshrined in the NEP 2020. Further, NEP also stresses the need to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills to enable students to become thoughtful, well-rounded and creative individuals.



Strengthening Career Aspirations of Girls and Women

Quest's approach towards building career aspirations amongst adolescent girls and young women places an emphasis on breaking gender stereotypes about what constitute 'appropriate' careers and engaging with both educators and families to build an enabling environment for girls to pursue career pathways that are aligned with their abilities and choices.

This approach addresses implicit biases and systemic barriers that prevent girls from aspiring for certain types of higher education or career pathways. By encouraging adolescent girls and young women to explore the world of work through playful discovery, role model interactions, counselling services, mentorship support and apprenticeships Quest empowers them to make informed choices.

Recognising that access to technology is a significant barrier for girls and young women, Quest has also facilitated access to digital

devices in institutions by setting up mobile phone libraries as well as Raspberry Pi based LMS with pre-loaded online learning content and Apps to build self learning and exploration behaviours.

New innovations such as Career Quest, an immersive and experiential career exploration journey for adolescents, provides exposure to different career journeys and in the process brings their attention to how gender and stereotypes affect choices and how to navigate them.

Increasing Female Labour Force Participation

There is a gender gap in vocational education with women forming only 14% of the total enrolment in ITIs. Further, a mere 25.6% of women trainees (in 2018-19) from ITIs received job offers on passing out.

Anchored around employability skills and career development, Quest's approach towards increasing female labour force

participation places an emphasis on building the skills of self-awareness, problem solving, creativity, team work, digital fluency, communication, life skills and career development through blended-learning pedagogy that also seek to build self-learning attitudes among young women.

Quest seeks to increase FLPR by addressing issues of information asymmetry, lack of Employability skills and other systemic challenges in TVET ecosystem (such as lack of dedicated Employability skills trainers, gender agnostic processes towards enrolment, engagement and placement) that prevent young women from pursuing careers of their choices that match their potential. Young women are also supported to invest in self-learning habits to explore learning resources, build confidence and drive their own career journeys. Lastly, access to employer and alumni networks is enabled to bridge the work-skills gap.

The approach applied by Quest Alliance is consistent with the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015, which stresses the need to skill women in non-traditional roles and increase gender sensitivity in the workplace, in order to eventually increase female labour force participation.





Building Gender Equitable Learning Spaces

Quest recognises the critical role that educators and institution leaders play in creating an equitable learning environment where learners of all genders can experience inclusion and learn without fear. Quest invests in educator development in the schools and TVET ecosystem through blended learning programmes that comprise learning modules hosted on Quest App, in-person workshops, webinars and onsite support. The Master Coach for teachers- one of the largest in-service Teacher Professional development programmes- has a dedicated module on gender. As a part of our programming that focuses on building STEM mindsets and career orientation amongst girls especially also involves sensitising educators on the gender inequity in STEM careers and building a comprehensive landscape for specific states on dropout and transition of girls in formal education.

Our blended learning materials are designed to help both learners and educators process gender discourse in a relatable manner. The new Employability Skills Curriculum for ITI learners (launched in 2023) has dedicated modules on Diversity and Inclusion to help build both educators and learners perspectives on this important issue.

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Insights from Programme Implementation

Quest's experience suggests that issues related to gender equity and stereotypes manifest themselves in classrooms, playgrounds, at home, workplaces and in spaces dedicated to training educators. We have also seen how the intersectionality of gender with other social identities such as class, caste, religion lends complexity to the challenges and struggles of learners, especially females.



1. In a lot of government secondary schools where we work, interaction between boys and girls is strictly controlled through separate seating arrangements, division of responsibilities based on gender, gender specific peer groups et al. This prevents adolescents from fully knowing and appreciating each other as peers.
2. Students also see stereotypes reinforced in the learning environment through the gendered roles and responsibilities male and female educators shoulder within the school. For example, a female teacher is likely to be in charge of midday meal or cultural events at school while a male teacher may be incharge of sports or handling finances. Teachers are also likely to bring their own biases into the classroom through their actions such as preference for learners of a particular gender for certain tasks, or in the form of implicit expectation of excellence in academics, sports and arts from learners based solely on their gender.
3. We have also seen learners grow in awareness about gender related concepts and issues but the hesitancy to initiate dialogues about it with their own family members remains to a large extent. Communication gap between parents and learners born out of traditional family structures, social and economic realities, prevent many of the learners from questioning and challenging gender biases / stereotypes within their own homes.
4. We can take some comfort in the observation that while the learners believe that they may not be able to change their present context they do imagine a different future for themselves where they would have more agency and equal rights, for which they are willing to struggle. In the youth ecosystem, gender bias and differences become evident at multiple stages of a learner's journey within the TVET programs. Female learners often need to negotiate with their families to enrol, or to choose the trade of their own preference or to attend their classes regularly. During placement stages, they again may need to negotiate with family to appear for interviews and if they do secure employment opportunities to be able to take them up.
5. On the other hand, learners of different genders are equally likely to come up against employers that have an unstated bias for graduates of one gender. This bias in hiring is often justified by employers as stemming from the nature of the job, safety concerns, physiological differences etc.
6. Our experience suggests that learners stepping into adulthood are quite open and curious to have dialogues/ discussions on gender and its manifestations, however educators in both the TVET and school ecosystem are often either hesitant to dialogue with learners or are ill equipped to help them navigate their confusions and challenges.

Strategies that have worked well in engaging learners and educators on gender constructs and stereotypes



Girls agency

- Hackathon
- Youth clubs
- Bal sansads
- Stem clubs
- Change projects



Career aspirations of girls and women

- Career quest
- World of work
- Market/business scan



labour force participation

- Apprenticeships
- Financial and digital literacy
- Parental/family engagement
- Alumni interaction



■ When working with adolescents it is critical to build a rapport / comfort before broaching a complex topic such as gender. In our schools’ program design, gender is a topic that is introduced to learners after a few weeks during which learners have been able to know themselves, their interests and abilities and build trust with the facilitator and with each other.

■ The role of the facilitator in the learning space is very important. An astute facilitator can diffuse tension and awkwardness that adolescents feel when discussion about gender and biology are undertaken. This ensures that learners are receptive and engaged instead of being closed off or disruptive due to their own embarrassment. Getting learners to agree to a set of norms at the onset of the session and bringing the group’s attention back to the norms when they are getting violated also prevents disruption

■ A facilitator can also help learners process a sensitive topic by drawing on their own experiences. Sharing life experiences/ stories has often resulted in better comprehension amongst learners as well as reciprocity of trust and openness to sharing

■ For a lot of facilitators and educators, a topic such as gender takes them out of their comfort zone. By providing additional training sessions on the topic, resources with detailed session plans the confidence of the educator/ facilitator in leading a conversation on gender can be built. Quest Alliance recently released a Gender Toolkit which has been used to train educators in the TVET ecosystem.

■ Use of audio/ video resources to introduce the topic has worked well. There are useful resources that are available in the public domain that can be leveraged. The use of a familiar character whose journey learners can relate to also helps in engaging learners.

■ Male learners may on occasion be resistant to engaging with the topic as they commonly perceive such topics as being relevant for their female peers. In such an instance, dialogue with the male learners to help them understand why gender stereotypes and biases inhibit their own growth and development has been useful in overcoming resistance.

■ Creating spaces and opportunities for learners to engage with each other in a natural learning environment

helps break the barriers and divisions that institutions sometimes impose. Spaces such as interest clubs (STEM clubs/ Eco clubs/ Career clubs) or student body (Bal sansads) or project groups (Hackathons/ Market Scan) thus became an effective way to not only help students build 21st century skills but also to reset gender related stereotypes

■ While digital divide, exacerbated by gender, geography, class, caste and other parameters exists, we have also seen that technology based programs and interventions can be levellers. We experienced that when introducing a new coding language such as Scratch since all of the learners were new to it, learners of both genders showed interest and eagerness to explore and learn from each other.

■ We have also seen that female learners in the TVET ecosystem have utilised online learning opportunities to a larger extent as compared to male learners. While the number of female learners registered on Quest App (our platform for learning meant for educators and learners alike) are outnumbered by male learners, the curriculum exploration

and completion rate of female learners is higher than male learners.

■ Gender inequities cannot be understood devoid of its intersection with other marginal identities that a learner may hold. Thus, understanding the lived realities of the learner to address their specific needs is crucial. For instance, our partners who run Vocational training programs have family and community visits as an integral part of their mobilisation and placement strategy. In some cases, they also engage with the community leaders who may play an influential role in how the family within a community acts or what decisions it makes. The trust that the organisations have built can help in introducing ideas that challenge traditional norms or mitigate fears that the communities have.

■ The learning space (whether virtual or physical) is a microcosm, and it is important to acknowledge that young learners may face cognitive dissonance because of the differences with respect to gender discourse and norms in the learning space and their own home environment. This cognitive dissonance may be something that young minds are not able to handle well. It is therefore important to also

dialogue with the parents and communities to not only ensure that there is greater resonance between these two environments that shape a young person but also help parents/ communities understand the context from which learners are questioning or challenging established norms related to gender. PTAs/ parent days, online webinars that learners and parents can attend jointly have been effective in bridging the gap between the learning space and the home environment

■ Transformation can be a slow process especially when it comes to changes at an institutional level. Consistency in effort is needed to bring about shifts in attitudes or help functionaries confront and overcome their own biases. Through our efforts with women ITIs, we have been able to change attitudes within the institution towards placement efforts (such as job drives, job fairs) that were earlier seen as wasteful but now are a part of the institution’s regular academic and placement calendar.

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Impact of Quest interventions

Evaluations done by Quest Impact team as well as independent consultants has found that sustained participation in Quest's program has led to:

1. Improvement in the number of the girls from intervention institutions who feel empowered to make important life decisions

Agency

- 65% of female students said that they would make the decision about what is the highest level of education they get by themselves. This was less than 35% at baseline.
- 65% of female students said that they would decide what streams/ subjects they study in the future as opposed to 31% of the female students at baseline stage
- 40% of the students in secondary schools shared that they themselves will decide at what age they would marry which was an improvement of 100% as compared to baseline.

2. Improvement in career orientation and awareness amongst adolescent girls and young women

Career aspiration

- 63% of the adolescent girls had a clear career plan at endline as opposed to 56% of the girls at baseline
- 25% increase in Endline scores (compared to Baseline scores) on career orientation and decision making amongst female ITI graduates

3. Increase in participation of female ITI and VTI graduates in formal economy

% decrease in gender pay gap experienced by female graduates (compared to national average)

Female Labour Force participation

- An impact study carried out with alumni of women ITI found that 40% of the female alumni who graduated from ITIs in 2019 where Quest Alliance was intervening received job offers at the time of graduation vs 26% from non intervention ITIs during the same time frame.
- Between 2018-22 nearly 85,000 females graduated from TVET institutions where Quest Alliance is intervening. Nearly 42% of the graduating class were able to find jobs, apprenticeship opportunities or pursue self employment

4. Improvement in gender attitudes and understanding of equity in learning environments amongst educators

Fostering gender equity in learning spaces

- An independent impact study carried out by a 3rd party evaluator and commissioned by Quest Alliance found that 87% of the sampled alumni from its Master Coach program stated that the female and male learners in their classrooms interacted frequently with each other as opposed to 57% of non- MasterCoach educators
- The independent Study also revealed that 58% of the sampled MasterCoach alumni create mixed working groups to encourage learners of different gender and other social identities to mingle and learn from each other
- An internal study done with a sample of 1000+ ITI trainers in Haryana who had participated in the MasterCoach program indicated that by the end of the blended learning program an additional 10% of the trainers were more cognisant of the role that they can play in creating gender equitable learning spaces.
- An internal assessment conducted with 195 secondary schools educators who had completed a blended learning program on 21st century pedagogy showed that there was an improvement in gender attitudes amongst participants improved by nearly 10% upon course completion
- After undergoing the leadership development program, principals of women ITIs have taken efforts to organise guest lectures to motivate and sustain girls in the classroom. In some ITIs in Assam and Gujarat, principals have also made conscious efforts to encourage female aspirants to consider non-traditional courses or engineering trades and in building relations with industry to ensure better placement outcomes for female graduates.



@questalliance

info@questalliance.net
www.questalliance.net