

Advancing Gender Inclusion in Youth Employment

03

FOREWORD

This brief is part of the **learning brief series**. The series of learning briefs distills six years of implementation experience from the **Challenge Fund for Youth Employment (CFYE)** into practical insights for designing and delivering youth employment programmes. Drawing on evidence across sectors and geographies, the briefs examine **what has worked, what has proved challenging, and which approaches have delivered sustainable outcomes for young people and businesses**.

Each brief focuses on a theme such as **delivery model, inclusion, business growth, or innovation**; covering topics ranging from job quality and gender inclusion to partner selection, localisation, and results-based financing. Together, the series moves beyond theory to offer **actionable guidance for practitioners, funders, and policymakers shaping future employment initiatives**.

Date Published: February 19, 2026

Subject Matter Lead: Dr. Janske van Eijck

Editorial Lead: Sarah Ebady

Editorial Review Team: Nimrah Karim, Emily Waters, Majina Mwasezi & Geja Roosjen

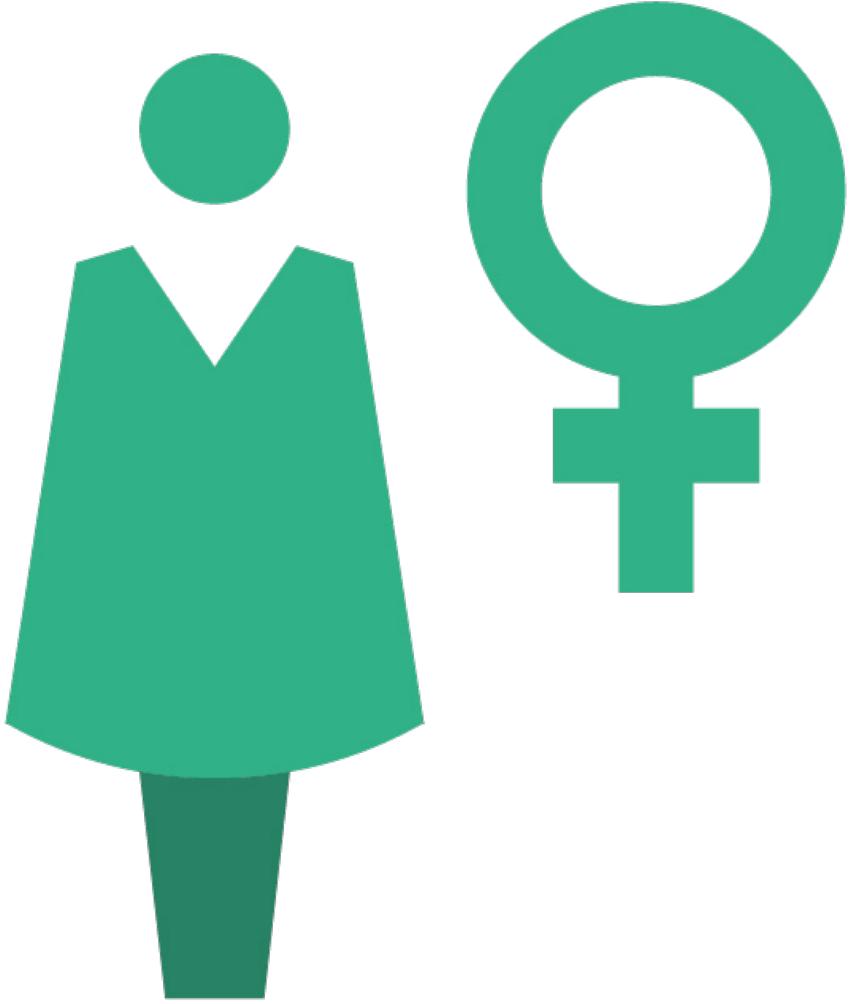
Icons Design: Machiel van Wijngaarden

Report Design: Faatimah Clarke

WHY THIS BRIEF?

Youth employment programmes cannot deliver lasting results without addressing persistent gender inequalities that shape labour market outcomes. Across sectors and geographies, young women continue to face structural barriers to entering work, remaining employed, and progressing into leadership roles. These barriers limit individual opportunity and constrain business growth.

This learning brief explains how CFYE integrates gender equality into youth employment initiatives and why this approach delivers stronger outcomes for women and businesses alike. It distills portfolio wide experience into practical lessons on setting targets, designing incentives, deploying technical assistance, and sustaining change.



KEY INSIGHTS

Gender Equality Strengthens Business Performance

Leaving half the talent pool behind limits business growth. Global evidence shows that companies with women in leadership outperform peers and innovate faster. Consumer markets increasingly depend on women as decision makers, and firms that fail to engage them risk losing relevance. CFYE's portfolio reflects this pattern: **implementing partners (IPs) that invested in gender-inclusive practices widened recruitment pipelines, improved retention, and strengthened enterprise resilience.**

Targets & Incentives Accelerate Action

CFYE embedded gender objectives from the outset, requiring that at least half of supported job outcomes benefit young women, while allowing flexibility in how partners meet those targets across job pathways. Project proposals were **evaluated on their ability to attract, retain, and support young women, with gender transformative interventions**, those that actively challenge harmful gender roles, scoring higher.

Results-based payments (RbP) reinforced this focus by linking grant disbursements to verified outcomes: total jobs created and the number of those jobs taken up by women. Partners only received payment once they had met at least half of the agreed milestone. The overall job results accounted for 70% of the payment, while female job results accounted for 30%, ensuring that job creation and women's employment remained central to delivery.

Tailored Technical Assistance Delivers Deeper Impact

CFYE shifted from broad awareness-raising toward targeted, hands-on gender support. Early webinars helped introduce concepts on inclusion, but **country level technical assistance (TA) support** in the form of local gender experts with private sector expertise, overseen by a central gender lead and **working with standardised tools** (organisational diagnostics, structured action plans) generated stronger results.

This evolution ensured that partners could translate gender commitments into operational change rather than isolated activities. It is important to note that Gender TA requires a customised approach, as context is crucial for gender related issues. Therefore, local experts are a must. While standardised tools make it easier to extract lessons, tools must remain adaptable.



TOOLS IN FOCUS

GESI Diagnostic Assessment Tool, Gender Action Plan, and CFYE E-learning Courses

The Gender TA led to specific improvements at IP level, some of which are:

- **Increased female participation** by relocating training to accessible areas.
- **Improved recruitment** by using female instructors and role models.
- **Enhanced retention** through inclusive workplace facilities such as lactation rooms.
- **Strengthened policies** including sexual harassment reporting mechanisms.
- **Expanded outreach** by collaborating with women's organisations.
- **Boosted confidence** and skills via mentorship.

The **GESI Diagnostic Tool** is CFYE's entry point for turning gender ambition into evidence-based action. It **assesses how organisations perform across core areas such as policies, leadership, workplace practices, staff composition, and sector specific risks, and scores dimensions including governance and gender-responsive monitoring.**

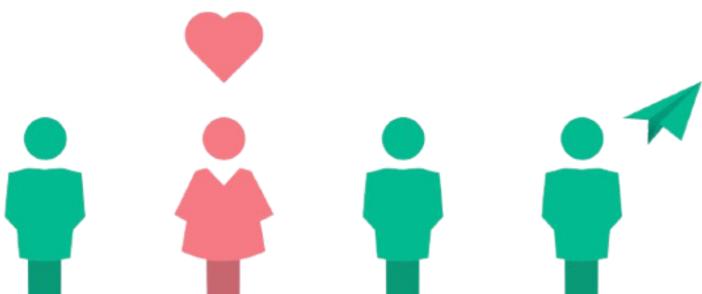
This tool, developed by CFYE, helps organisations move beyond compliance by pinpointing structural barriers and priority gaps, while the accompanying scorecard visualises results so teams can focus resources where change can be most impactful. It can be used as a self-assessment tool, but IPs can also be assisted by local experts.

Findings then feed directly into a **Gender Action Plan**, which translates diagnosis into delivery by setting concrete objectives, defining activities, assigning responsibilities, establishing timelines, and allocating budgets. Together, the diagnostic tool and action plan enabled the practical application of best practices for gender inclusion for IPs.

Furthermore, CFYE developed an e-learning course on gender inclusive practices, which is available on the [ILO's Jumu platform](#). It consists of two chapters; **Gender Inclusive Practices to Attract, Select and Retain Youth**, and **Gender Inclusive Strategy Development**.

In contexts where household norms strongly influence women's economic participation, CFYE deployed the **Gender Action Learning System (GALS)** to drive deeper transformation. Where community engagement was a key constraint to achieving their gender and youth targets, GALS proved effective.

GALS uses participatory visual tools and peer learning to help families and communities renegotiate decision-making, income use, and aspirations. Within CFYE's portfolio in Kenya, three agricultural IPs trained 63 local GALS champions who cascaded the methodology to more than 1,200 farmers.



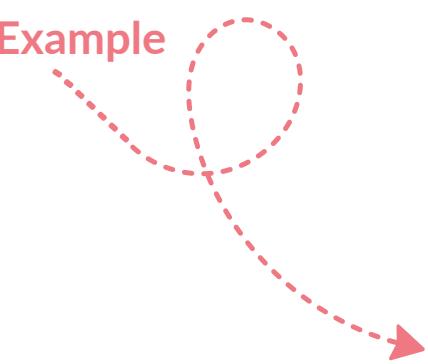
TOOLS IN FOCUS

Early results included stronger goal setting, improved household dialogue, and increased confidence among women and youth. Cooperatives and farmer associations proved decisive for scale, reducing mobilisation costs and accelerating uptake. **Applying GALS early in projects that rely on community engagement also helped prevent household tensions linked to rising female income.**

Organised groups (such as cooperatives, farmer associations, and Village Savings and Loans Associations) **played a major role in expanding GALS uptake by lowering mobilisation costs and enabling wider reach.** For instance, Happy Cow, an Agribusiness IP in Kenya, engaged 821 farmers through existing cooperatives, while another Kenya-based IP, SokoFresh, partnered with lead farmers to train 100 of their peers.

GESI Diagnostic Assessment Tool

Example



Parameter	Score	% Rating	Ratings	Key Insights
Leadership & Governance	22	73%	Gender Transformative	Good policies and reporting mechanisms are in place; limited representation of women in leadership and GESI focal structures require further strengthening.
Delivery & Implementation	36	90%	Gender Transformative	Comprehensive gender sensitive hiring, training, and retention practices are in place.
Knowledge Management, Communication & Gender-Responsive Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning	20	100%	Gender Transformative	Robust gender responsive MEL systems in place and ethical communications protocols in place.
Gender Awareness / Social Impact / Company Culture	15	100%	Gender Transformative	Internal culture supports gender equality and staff well-being; visible female representation in field roles reinforces positive gender norms at the community level.
Sector-Specific Diagnostic	14	93%	Gender Transformative	Gender-specific interventions and effective strategies support women's recruitment and retention across underrepresented value chain roles.
Opportunities for Gender Advancement at IPs	15	100%	Gender Transformative	Strong potential for scaling women's participation across all roles; targeted youth initiatives provide a solid foundation for improving employment outcomes for young women.
Overall GESI Score Ratings	122	90%	GESI sensitive because some parameter ratings is above 70%	Overall score places IP as "GESI Transformative," showing strong GESI alignment across its operations.

[Click Here for the Full Assessment](#)



ACTIONABLE GUIDANCE

- For real gender impact, embed gender objectives into programme design: Set clear female participation targets from the outset and link them to contracts, milestones, and payment mechanisms, such as CFYE's RbP.
- **Design Gender TA with intention:** CFYE TA prioritised local expertise by engaging with in-country gender experts who also had private sector experience, to ensure messaging resonated with businesses. Although experts were locally based, they received oversight and tools from a central gender lead. This structure strengthened consistency and contextual relevance while enabling cross-partner learning.
- **Timing is critical:** Executing Gender TA early in the project cycle allows sufficient time for implementation and measurable impact. A structured, phased approach which includes diagnostic, action plan, and coaching, ensures quality and prevents shortcuts that undermine results.



Actions



INNOVATION SPOTLIGHT

Background

Healthy Entrepreneurs (HE), a community health enterprise in Uganda, faced challenges in systematically embedding gender across its operations. The organisation lacked gender-disaggregated data, had no dedicated gender focal point or GESI working group, and had limited insight into childcare and safety barriers affecting women. Staff had received little formal gender training, and workplace policies and conditions had not yet adapted to women's needs.

TA Intervention

HE received targeted gender technical assistance, starting with a comprehensive GESI diagnostic. This process informed a tailored Gender Action Plan and follow-up coaching focused on gender-smart interventions and strategies. The support also strengthened gender indicators and built staff capacity through practical awareness-raising sessions.

Results

The intervention increased gender sensitivity across workplace facilities and policies, including aspects such as maternity leave and safety and sanitation. Additionally, the TA strengthened leadership commitment to women-focused initiatives and introduced a nine-month sales-growth pathway that created clearer advancement opportunities for female staff.

Why it Matters



These results demonstrate that by strengthening women's participation, HE improved both income generation and service delivery in remote areas. The changes also reinforced progress toward female recruitment and retention targets while building a more resilient and inclusive business model. By creating more inclusive environments, the initiative expands pathways for women to enter and thrive in public health careers.

LOOKING AHEAD

CFYE's experience confirms that **advancing gender equality in youth employment requires sustained commitment**, not stand-alone interventions. Clear targets, incentive structures, diagnostic-led support, and long-term accompaniment remain central to success.

Future youth employment initiatives will need to continue embedding gender into investment decisions, partner selection, management systems, and workplace cultures from the outset. Knowledge gaps remain around long-term norm change, cost-effectiveness of different support models, and scalable approaches in fragile labour markets.

