



Where Dreams Meet the Market: **ASPIRES** Siyakha Girls Pilot Assessment



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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AGYW	Adolescent girls and young women
ASPIRES	Accelerating Strategies for Practical Innovation in Research and Economic Strengthening
BPC	Bulawayo Project Centre
DREAMS	Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IGA	Income-generating activity
KII	Key informant interview
MVA	Micro-value chain analysis
PEPFAR	U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
PSI	Population Services International
SME	Small and medium enterprise
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEI/B	World Education, Inc./Bantwana Initiative
ZEMOA	Zimbabwe Employment Market Opportunity Analysis

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) aged 15-24 are twice as likely as males in the same age groups to have HIV and nearly four times as likely to contract HIV (Ministry of Health and Child Care, 2017). A converging set of social, behavioral and structural factors contribute to AGYW vulnerability (Harrison, Colvin, Kuo, Swartz, & Lurie, 2015), with economic disempowerment playing a key role. However, identifying livelihood opportunities for AGYW in Zimbabwe's challenging economic context can be difficult. Programs benefiting vulnerable AGYW often struggle to understand what combination of skills and other assets can most effectively enable beneficiaries to access opportunities when much of the economy operates informally. To fill this gap, FHI 360, under the Accelerating Strategies for Practical Innovation and Research in Economic Strengthening (ASPIRES) project, produced the Zimbabwe Employment Market Opportunity Analysis (ZEMOA) paper in 2018 to build on existing research on Zimbabwe's labor market, identify changes and areas of growth in the country's economic context, and review best practices to improve incomes for vulnerable AGYW (ASPIRES, 2018).

The Siyakha Girls pilot, funded by ASPIRES and implemented by World Education, Inc./Bantwana Initiative (WEI/B) and Dot Youth, was a 6-month employability program based on recommendations from the ZEMOA. The pilot aimed to reduce HIV risk for AGYW participants aged 18-24 by equipping them with in-demand skills to obtain employment or self-employment in the leather, textile, and auto industries. Interventions included: training in life skills, leadership, financial literacy, social assets, and a youth-led micro-value chain analysis; two months of vocational training; and three-month internships with oversight from mentors working in local businesses. Participants were also linked to health, social protection, and financial services and encouraged to participate in individual or group savings. The activity was originally scheduled to be completed between December 2018 and May 2019, but due to delays caused by political unrest in Bulawayo in January 2019, the project period was extended. Between January and August 2019, 47 participants completed the program.

This report details findings from a qualitative assessment of the Siyakha Girls pilot conducted by ASPIRES in August 2019. This assessment reviewed the implementation of core components of the pilot, assessed the pilot's success in implementing recommendations from the ZEMOA, and documented lessons learned to provide guidance for implementers of the United States President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) programs, especially those funded under the Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe (DREAMS) partnership, and other programs promoting employment and self-employment for AGYW.

METHODS

This assessment used qualitative, non-experimental methods to explore operational features and key lessons learned from the Siyakha Girls pilot. A team of four researchers completed data collection between August 2-19, 2019. The team collected data from a total of 53 assessment respondents, including:

- Five focus group discussions (FGDs) with 32 program participants;
- Three key informant interviews (KIIs) with technical vocational trainers;
- Seven KIIs and one FGD with six with business owners or mentors from each targeted industry;
- One KII with a consultant economist;
- One group interview with three Dot Youth staff; and
- One group interview with two WEI/B staff.

All participants were adults over age 18. Data collection was conducted in English, with occasional translation in Ndebele provided by a translator, and audio-recorded. Prior to interviews, researchers read a verbal permission script to obtain respondents' permission to be interviewed and recorded. During the data collection process, no participant names were recorded. Data was structurally coded and thematically analyzed using NVivo 12.

FINDINGS

Implementation of core components of the Siyakha Girls pilot

To explore operational effectiveness of the Siyakha Girls pilot, the assessment team examined the implementation of the following core program components: recruitment of vulnerable AGYW; training in life skills, financial literacy, and leadership; vocational training; social asset-building training; and internships.

Participant recruitment and selection

Careful targeting of highly vulnerable program participants is important to ensuring a cost-effective allocation of program resources, and it is a key feature of DREAMS programming. WEI/B used a multi-phased recruitment process to ensure selection of highly vulnerable participants based on an assessment of factors related to economic and HIV-related vulnerability.

Siyakha Girls relied primarily on social media, namely WhatsApp, to recruit participants. Advertising was also conducted through an announcement about the program through DREAMS program implementers. Eight of 32 FGD participants noted that they had previously participated in a DREAMS activity. Participants were eligible if they were aged 18-24 and completed a rigorous application process, including submission of a CV, motivation letter, online application, and a paper survey assessing vulnerability factors, including questions about economic status, education, and sexual activity.

Seventy-five participants were selected to engage in the first phase of the program, which included life skills, financial literacy, and leadership training. These participants were informed from the outset

that a portion of them would be cut from the program after completing this training, and a portion would be retained to participate in the remainder of program activities. Participants were selected to enter the next phase of the program based on their participation in the life skills training, an interview, and an assessment of their vulnerability. Attendance and behaviors, such as the girls' ability to form groups, were tracked during the life skills training. Interviews were held by a panel including the vocational trainers, WEI/B and representatives from the auto, textile, and leather industries. WEI explained that the interviews were designed to help prepare the girls for interviews they might encounter in the workplace. The panel asked questions to gauge the participants' interest, aptitude, and skills that may be useful to the industry. WEI/B noted that the girls had to "sell themselves" during the interview to be selected. Forty-eight participants were selected through this process.

Challenges

A few key challenges emerged during the recruitment and selection process. Program participants noted that many of their peers did not have access to phones or WhatsApp and recommended a broader approach to advertising. Participants also described the selection process as burdensome, requiring investments of time and money to print documents, travel to interviews, and complete surveys that affected their entire households. Although WEI/B noted that the extended selection process helped implementers establish rapport and better assess participants' sexual behaviors and HIV vulnerability, participants reported that they were uncomfortable with the process and felt disappointed to see their friends "weeded out" through the selection process. Participants also stressed that advertising should have been broader and across different platforms, not just social media.

Caregiver engagement

Based on challenges encountered in DREAMS programs, implementers sought to gather support from participants' caregivers and reduce dropouts by requiring caregivers to sign a "social contract." To ensure that participants were able to consistently participate, Siyakha Girls provided them with transport stipends. By signing the social contract, caregivers agreed not to take these stipends for themselves and to allow participants to use it for transportation. The contract also stated that if a participant dropped out for unsatisfactory reasons, the caregiver would have to pay back all the money provided by Siyakha Girls. Furthermore, the caregiver agreed to cover 20% of the costs of participation in the program should the budget change or the school fees increase. Dot Youth saw this as a way to measure the caregivers' commitment to the program, and they did not ask for any money from the caregivers. With only one dropout to report, Dot Youth saw the contract as successful and recommended it for future projects.

However, several participants noted lack of caregiver support as a challenge to their participation in Siyakha Girls. In FGDs, several participants mentioned that their caregivers did not understand or respect the work they put into the program, and that they experienced conflict with their caregivers over balancing the requirements of program participation along with a full workload of domestic responsibilities. Future programs should carefully consider their outreach strategy and messaging to caregivers to ensure that caregivers understand and can accommodate the time commitment that program participation requires.

Life skills, financial literacy, and leadership training

The life skills course was based on a previous training implemented under DREAMS. It lasted five days and covered communication, CV writing, computer literacy, financial literacy, sexual reproductive services, and professional dress and workplace conduct. Implementers felt the training was right length and technical level. They also noted that the training improved upon the previous iteration under DREAMS in several ways. First, noting challenges with less-skilled trainers under DREAMS, Dot Youth engaged more specialized and experienced trainers for Siyakha Girls. This was linked to improved performance, as evidenced from participants' responses to questions in the participant handbooks. Second, Dot Youth engaged different trainers, who the girls did not know, for the sexual harassment portion of the training. They explained that the girls could more easily open up about this sensitive topic with trainers they did not know. Third, a training covering the definition of and how to handle and avoid sexual harassment was updated to directly address an issue WEI/B staff encountered in prior DREAMS programming, where participants used their internships as an opportunity to solicit transactional sex from their employers, who might be some of the only men with money in their lives. By addressing appropriate dress and workplace behavior directly in training, Siyakha Girls successfully avoided this issue.

Implementers recommended that future trainings offer more time on the topic of sexual harassment because this was a new topic for many of the participants and challenged some entrenched norms. They also recommended more training on computer literacy.

Skills gained and used

When asked what they learned from the training, most participants mentioned interpersonal skills such as communication, conflict management, and team work. Participants reported that the most important skills they obtained included savings and budgeting, teamwork, and building confidence. In addition all FGD participants said they used skills from the training during their internships, especially interpersonal skills such as teamwork, communication and self-esteem.

Implementers also shared many examples of how participants applied the life skills training during the internship period. Dot Youth observed improvements in communication, confidence, financial responsibility, and professionalism. They explained that, during the DREAMS project, they often received complaints from the trainers and mentors about the girls' lack of communication and inappropriate clothing; however, they did not receive these complaints during the Siyakha Girls pilot. Similarly, WEI/B observed improvements in savings, financial management and goal-setting, grooming, and professional behavior.

Vocational training

The next phase of Siyakha Girls comprised a two-month vocational training course at a local technical vocational training institution known as Bulawayo Project Centre (BPC). All participants were given the option to choose their training from three industries: auto mechanics, textiles, and leather. WEI/B reported that BPC was selected to provide this training based on an existing relationship with the institution, which had been a partner under DREAMS, and its flexibility in modifying the length and content of the curriculum. Other institutions reviewed, such as government-run institutions, did not have the flexibility to accommodate the short training period under the pilot, with typical training courses lasting at least six months.

Training site, content, and instructors

BPC is a small institution with several concrete rooms where learners take classes and trainers can operate their own businesses. Materials are moved from room to room depending on which class is occupying it. When observing the training space for the leather class, researchers noted dust-covered equipment. Trainers reported that the majority of training took place at BPC, with the auto mechanics trainer reporting occasional field trips to commercial sites to provide examples of different work activities within the industry. Siyakha Girls implementing partners visited vocational training centers twice a week, and disbursed stipends to participants to cover transport costs weekly.

The three trainers interviewed, representing each industry featured by Siyakha Girls, reported long-term experience working in their industries, ranging from 9-30 years, and all of them ran their own businesses. Experience with formal training, however, was more limited, ranging from less than a year to five years of training on an ad hoc basis at BPC.

Trainers described the length of training provided as two to three months, and class size ranged from 10 to 19 participants. The leather and textile trainers noted that their classes consisted of only Siyakha students, while the auto trainers' class was mixed with non-participants. Trainers described their approach as providing theoretical and practical experience, with the auto trainer noting that his course was more lecture-based and would have only moved on to hands-on experience after three months of training.

Trainers noted a lack of adequate materials and equipment to accommodate all of the girls in their classes. Participants had to share or take turns using tools, and tools were not always reflective of current technology common in industry. For example, the leather instructor taught the girls how to use knives to cut leather instead of the cutting machines more typically used in the industry. The machines available had mechanical problems and were reported to break down on a regular basis.

Preparation for internship and competitive advantage

All trainers acknowledged that the timeframe for the training was too short. The auto trainer emphasized the importance of ensuring girls have adequate understanding of their chosen industry prior to starting training, suggesting that girls with genuine interest would fare much better than those who lacked "self-motivation." The leather and textile trainers also acknowledged that girls needed more practice on the machines, particularly the larger, faster, electric industrial machines, which some feared using.

When trainers compared their courses to other TVETs, they noted that the training provided was at a lower technical level, or, as one trainer described it, "basic, basic, basic." In FGDs, most participants reported that they did not have a competitive advantage compared to trainees from other institutions. Trainers suggested that girls needed more specialized training focused on specific products or services rather than the high-level industry overview provided. For example, while a participant could not become an auto mechanic in three months, she might be able to obtain enough skill in one topic, panel beating, to obtain employment. Ideally, these specific activities would have been informed by a micro-value chain analysis completed earlier in the project.

Challenges

The top recommendation from implementers, trainers, mentors, and participants was to increase the length of the vocational training program from two to three months to six to 12 months and to allow participants to have more hands-on experience. In addition to limitations on timeframe and training resources, Dot Youth reported challenges around the perceptions of TVET training among participants and their families. Parents reportedly wanted their children to return to academic rather than vocational training. Other concerns had to do with the resources required for girls to attend classes, including covering childcare from 8am to 12pm for those who were mothers.

Trainers also noted a few challenges in working with the program participants. One trainer reported issues with discipline, describing participants as not taking class seriously. Another trainer asked girls to sign a code of conduct when tardiness became a regular problem. The auto trainer felt that some girls did not fit in with the male-dominated auto industry and were hard to motivate. One trainer felt it was challenging to communicate with girls, especially those that obviously suffered from “home problems.”

Participants, on the other hand, reported a number of challenges working with BPC. In one FGD, participants noted that they could not rely on regular access to basic furniture and equipment in their classes, as these items might be taken for use by teachers in other classes. Some participants considered the teachers to be “unqualified” and generally felt unprepared for their internships.

Finally, the economist recommended the use of training that is more oriented toward self-employment. Ideally, this would include entrepreneurship training. Participants also felt that the industries available for training and placement should have been more numerous, and selection should have been more amenable to self-employment. As one participant noted, it would be expensive for her to start an auto mechanic shop after her internship.

Implementers and participants noted that future programs should have a better link between what is taught in the classroom and what is implemented within companies and at internship sites, including similar processes and equipment. Some of the equipment used by BPC was outdated compared to computerized devices typically found in commercial settings, so it is recommended that training institutions have more updated equipment and closer links to internship sites. It is also recommended that training institutions have sufficient equipment to allow participants to have plenty of time to practice using it. Curricula should be structured around common practices in the program context. Several employers suggested including them in the start to help shape curricula, and one employer even offered in-house staff to train participants.

Social Asset-Building training

Siyakha Girls’ Social Asset-Building training was adapted from Population Council materials. WEI/B delivered training on social protection and sexual harassment, Dot Youth offered sexual and reproductive health (SRH), Zimbabwe Family Planning National Council offered family planning, and FHI 360 offered body mapping training. Implementers reported positive views about the content, although WEI/B reported that it should have been delivered over a longer time period.

Implementers and participants saw the training as useful and reported that participants actively used it during their internships. Dot Youth observed participants utilizing training on saving, communicating more openly, and demonstrating knowledge of family planning and use of SRH services. In FGDs, participants reported that education on how to dress properly and recognize sexual harassment was the most beneficial part of the training, followed by increased confidence and self-esteem. 29/32 FGD participants said they used the skills they gained from the training in their internships, with the same emphasis on avoiding sexual harassment and self-esteem.

“A man asked for my number and was touching me inappropriately, which I didn't like. So, I told him not to touch me. I was able to recognize that it was inappropriate and that it was sexual harassment.”

- Siyakha Girls participant

Implementers had several suggestions for future programs using Social Asset-Building training. First, Dot Youth emphasized that social assets training should be introduced prior to vocational training, and that it should be preceded by strong engagement with the community and mentors to ensure buy-in and support for participants. As one staff member explained, “the community needs to understand health” for related interventions to be sustainable after the project. WEI/B recommended additional training beyond the four days allocated for the training, noting that there was not enough time to cover everything.

Internships

Identifying mentors and matching interns to placements

Implementers worked with business leaders, including an association of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the National Employment Council, to identify potential companies to place interns and mentors to oversee them. After conducting interviews, implementers assessed potential placements against a checklist detailing their physical status and financial performance. Overall, respondents described the process as time-intensive. Implementers identified a mix of smaller, informal firms and larger, formal firms as potential matches for participants. WEI/B noted that informal firms presented greater opportunities for skills transfer for AGYW because of their smaller size and participant exposure to different aspects of business. Larger firms provided more space and resources but tended to be more bureaucratic and might involve engaging multiple mentors, which complicated the provision of sexual harassment training.

Internships: informal vs. formal firms

There are benefits to placing interns in either type of firm, depending on their interests. Small, informal firms often provide opportunities for interns to see all aspects of a business and help prepare them for self-employment. A larger, formal firm may not provide the same kind of exposure but can provide interns with a better chance for employment after their internships.

After identifying firms, implementers needed to match participants with internships. Companies were asked to provide a list of skills and needs, participants provided a list of the skills they wanted to develop, and WEI/B made matches based on best fit, with some companies also requiring interviews. WEI/B noted that this process was also time-intensive.

Employer value proposition

To ensure that mentors had incentives in place to invest in providing interns with a high-quality learning experience, implementers sought to present the business case, or value proposition, of the internship to potential mentors. This was primarily discussed in terms of the value of free labor. To offset costs for participating companies, implementers offered a small insurance fund to cover damages that participants might cause. Dot Youth also offered to support linking firms to financial institutions by conducting an assessment and matching them to recommended institutions. However, many companies were unwilling to disclose the more sensitive information required for this process.

Most mentors reported that their primary motivation for participating in the program was to provide a social benefit to the participants, rather than responding to a market-based incentive. Mentors described a personal, moral motivation to enhance the livelihoods of vulnerable AGYW. When asked if they would take an intern again in the future, nine mentors said yes, and two said no. Mentors described the benefits of participating in terms of supporting a good cause, building up potential workers needed for surge capacity, and a positive experience working with motivated participants. A drawback of hosting interns was that it cost companies materials that girls might waste or require to practice skills; increased limitations on equipment availability; and time spent on skills transfer.

Mentors had several suggestions for structuring internships to better align with their business needs. Textile and leather mentors suggested the future interns provide their own materials, such as scissors, thread, and tape measures, because they had limited quantities of these items. A textile mentor suggested more advance notification about the placement and better alignment with the company's existing practice, which is to take trainees at the beginning of the year. Finally, mentors agreed that participants should enter programs with at least basic skills in their industry.

Participant preparation for, completion of, and success in internships

In participant FGDs, a minority of participants (13/32) reported that they felt prepared for their internship, with one group emphasizing the importance of being introduced to a given industry through field visits. Another group emphasized the importance of learning soft skills to support their preparation, including "how to behave and dress properly."

In one FGD, no respondents reported feeling prepared for their internships. Participants reported that the topics they were trained on did not align with the tasks they were assigned, which was "terrifying" to at least one participant. Participants in this group felt disadvantaged compared to other trainees, who attended long-term vocational training. They saw BPC as "stupid college" or an "unrecognized college."

Most mentors reported that they felt adequately prepared for their placements, indicating they felt it was helpful to know the girls' background and receive orientation on how to work with them. However, one mentor working in leather noted that only one month elapsed between agreeing to take interns and starting the internship, and that he did not receive guidance on how to work with

girls. A textile mentor expected the girls to bring their own materials to the internship, which was not the case.

“We had to teach her all the tools, the basics.”

- Leather industry mentor

In six of eight interviews, mentors reported that the girls were not adequately trained before starting their internship. Girls were reported to need more time and more practice, especially using tools and machines. A leather mentor explained, “We had to teach her all the tools, the basics.” Another reported that the interns lacked a basic knowledge of the industry, which he attributed to BPC:

“The Bulawayo Project Center is poorly equipped; they have an outdated curriculum; and teachers are underqualified.” (mentor)

Effective skill-building

All Siyakha Girls participants in FGDs reported learning new skills from their mentor, but not all felt that their mentors valued their skills. Two participants described feeling underappreciated because they were given few opportunities to gain hands-on experience. In one case, in an auto shop, a participant felt like she was treated differently than the men she worked with because when she was unable to complete a task, her mentor would call over male employees to do it for her. One textile participant described getting limited experience because she was given only one task: making hats.

Mentors who worked with Siyakha Girls interns appreciated their enthusiasm and willingness to learn, but widely believed their skills were extremely limited. Mentors agreed that although the tasks girls performed advanced over time, they could only offer participants limited tasks, especially since they were not trained in how to use the machines in use at their place of work. As a mentor explained:

“Like we said they were not yet knowledgeable, so I started off saying she must watch, then slowly trying to teach her, but the time was short, so we didn’t get very far.” (textile mentor)

Mentors had mixed responses on how Siyakha participants compared to other potential employees as candidates for hire. Overall, participants had less training than other TVET graduates, including less education in theory and practical experience. Though some trainers admired their interest and ability to do their work as told, one leather mentor did not want to compare participants to other interns and mentioned taking it easy on them because of their hardship, suggesting that they were not taken seriously as candidates for hire.

The majority of the mentors stated they would want to hire the interns by the end of the pilot, though most lacked the capacity to do so. Mentors cited the interns’ willingness to work hard, stay late, and learn and their discipline as reasons to hire them on.

When asked about the most useful skills they obtained, participants referred more often to soft skills (two FGDs) such as communication and customer service, and self-esteem (three FGDs) than technical experience (one FGD). Girls cited several instances where they felt they did not obtain the technical skills needed from their internship. A participant from a leather shop said the owner did not trust interns to use machines, so interns did not gain experience in that area. Another said she only

learned how to make shoes and did not learn how to use different kinds of leather for different products. A participant in auto said that she had to work in the kitchen while male employees did auto repair.

Safety and sexual harassment

Two of five participant FGDs discussed safety issues, including physical hazards and sexual harassment. Mechanical issues were discussed as safety hazards in an auto shop, where one girl was hit by a tyre and in one instance a grinder came off.

Although all mentors underwent orientation that covered the topic of sexual harassment, in one FGD interns reported experiencing sexual harassment in an auto shop. Participants described feeling unsafe when men used the women's bathroom while they were changing clothes. They reported that gawking customers would frequent the shop, and they would be blamed for "being distracted by men" if they made a mistake in their work. Finally, participants reported that their uniforms shrunk and became tight, attracting unwanted comments from other workers in the shop and leading them to exchange their uniforms for baggier clothes. Four of the five participant focus groups were reserved when asked questions about harassment. Given the reticence of the FGDs on this topic, it is likely that other participants may have experienced similar challenges with harassment in the workplace.

Implementers had several suggestions for improving participant security. Dot Youth suggested that future programs help companies hosting interns to develop sexual harassment policies, and that implementers sensitize them on women's needs including issues related to menstrual health. Dot Youth also proposed more sexual harassment training for girls. One staff noted that some of the girls were still unable to distinguish sexually harassing behavior from "normal" behavior.

Monitoring

WEI/B and Dot Youth used several layers of internship monitoring to make sure that girls were engaged in relevant skill-building tasks and were working in a safe environment. This included facilitating private communications via WhatsApp with one trusted female staff member at WEI/B as a platform to report safety issues, enlisting "class representatives" to report safety issues, conducting regular site visits twice per month (once per month for auto), and requiring girls to complete written diaries as individuals and activity logs which were signed by their supervisors. Dot Youth also reported conducting separate interviews with girls and mentors at the sites. However, though participants reported harassment issues to the assessment team, they did not utilize monitoring mechanisms to report them to implementers, possibly out of fear of losing their placements. Implementers have proposed adding one-on-one check-ins with participants at a separate location from internship sites to encourage reporting of inappropriate behavior.

Post-internship employment

Implementers encouraged participants to think about the future but did not offer entrepreneurship training or other post-project transition activities. At the end of the pilot, implementers reported that seven of 47 participants (15%) had accepted offers for full-time work, with 13 participants (28%) starting their own businesses. Roughly half of participants ended the pilot either seeking employment and without a clear plan moving forward, as noted in Table 1 below. It should be noted

that these employment figures were reported immediately following the end of Siyakha Girls and may improve with time.

Table 1. Participant employment status reported by WEI/B (August 27, 2019)

	Textiles		Auto		Leather		Total	
Full-time employed	2	(11%)	5	(26%)	-	(0%)	7	(15%)
Extended internship	1	(5%)	3	(16%)	-	(0%)	4	(9%)
Starting own business	7	(37%)	-	(0%)	6	(67%)	13	(28%)
Seeking employment	6	(32%)	5	(26%)	1	(11%)	12	(26%)
Pending	3	(16%)	6	(32%)	2	(22%)	11	(23%)
Total	19	(100%)	19	(100%)	9	(47%)	47	(100%)

WEI/B noted that ideally, the transition between the attachment and the next opportunity would have a longer time frame. WEI/B encouraged participants to stay in touch in case they needed additional support.

Challenges

Mentors, participants, and implementers agreed that participants would have benefited from longer training and internship periods. While evidence of optimal length for vocational training was outside the scope of data gathered in this report, these perspectives are supported by other evidence. For example, in USAID’s “What Works in Entrepreneurship Education and Training for Youth?” guidance report, a broad analysis of programming indicates that for “At -Risk” populations, offering vocational training contributes to greater probability of success in supporting entrepreneurial endeavors if training support is offered for six months or more.¹ In Siyakha Girls, participants were matched to their internships by program staff, and some participants advised that future programs should allow participants to choose their own placements and the activities they wanted to focus on during internships. Most often, respondents suggested a minimum six months of training and six months of internship.

Mentors described a lack of materials and machines as a challenge. At least two mentioned that some materials were wasted because participants needed a chance to practice or made mistakes, suggesting that additional support from the project on material purchases would have helped.

Though implementers used a robust monitoring system, they did not indicate awareness of incidents of sexual harassment that were reported in FGDs. Check-ins with girls offsite, and assurance that they would not be penalized for coming forward, would likely help girls feel more comfortable reporting these issues.

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Implementation of ZEMOA recommendations

Major recommendations from the ZEMOA report included the following program components: linkage to external health and social protection services, conducting a micro-value chain analysis to support demand-driven training and internship placement, supporting participants to form group businesses, and working with local partners to provide specialized services.

Linkage to other health and social protection services

The ZEMOA emphasized the importance of layered, comprehensive interventions to meet the complex needs of AGYW, requiring linkages to external health and social protection services. Implementers reported connecting girls to other DREAMS platform implementers, especially linkages to Population Services International (PSI) services, including family planning, HIV testing, and gender-based violence (GBV) referrals. Participants were also connected to financial services through Women Bank as well as a presentation by Youth Empowerment Bank. All five FGDs reported getting linked to SRH services and one group mentioned that bank representatives were brought in to teach them about financial services. All FGDs considered the services useful because they helped them learn more about how to protect their health, know their HIV status, and access family planning resources. One participant mentioned that she received a diagnosis that PSI was not able to address, so they referred her to a hospital for care.

Micro-value chain analysis (MVA)

In accordance with ZEMOA guidance, Siyakha Girls engaged a consultant economist to conduct a micro-value chain assessment to examine highly localized opportunities across value chains in selected industries in Bulawayo. The economist used a participatory approach which involved engaging with national employment councils, SMEs, and AGYW participants. Unfortunately, due to the limited duration of the activity, the micro-value chain analysis (MVA) was not finalized until after the pilot was underway, findings were not available to finalize sector selection for the pilot or substantially inform the vocational training curriculum or internship placements.

MVA findings

The MVA verified that the leather, automotive repair, and textile sectors presented employment opportunities for AGYW in Bulawayo and affirmed WEI/B's selection of these industries, which was based on ZEMOA findings, for the pilot. Further confirming the findings of the ZEMOA report, the economist noted that as formal Zimbabwean firms continue to close, informal SMEs have become a greater source of employment opportunities. The economist saw the most valuable contribution for AGYW from his report was the message that marketable skills, rather than higher education, are crucial to obtaining a good livelihood in the current Zimbabwean context.

The MVA also identified specific products and approaches that presented opportunities for AGYW within selected sectors. In leather, beadwork skills add value to products like sandals, shoes, bags, and belts. In textiles, opportunities were identified in developing products like school and work uniforms and handbags, and home decor such as cushions and curtains. It also identified embroidery skills as useful for obtaining both employment and self-employment. In automotive, opportunities for self-employment included vehicle servicing and retailing of spare parts, and opportunities for employment included skill-development in panel beating and spray painting.

Process for youth-led MVA

In addition to an initial MVA, the consultant facilitated a youth-led mapping activity to support participant engagement in identifying market opportunities. The consultant identified local companies in the selected industries, then divided Siyakha Girls participants into groups of three or four to meet with firms in their industry and assigned geographical area. Implementers transported participants to a central area where they could walk to the identified firms. Participants used a tool with three to four questions about the opportunities, skills, and needs of the company. The company representative was asked to sign off on the tool to confirm the girls had asked the questions. Each group had to speak to at least three companies, and a debrief was held after participants returned.

WEI/B staff saw the exercise as valuable for boosting participants' confidence and generating private sector interest in the program. One staff member noted:

"...the feedback was really amazing because ... when they go to a motor mechanics company and they say ... 'I'm doing this under the Siyakha project and I'm also doing motor mechanics,' the gentlemen, they will be like, 'A lady? Okay! This is interesting – okay, explain more,' and some of them are actually being asked, 'Oh, how come we don't know about this? Oh, we would also want to have interns!'"

Three participant FGDs stated that conducting the micro-value chain analysis changed how they saw opportunities. When asked what they learned from the youth lead micro-value chain analysis, most respondents described learning about opportunities across their value chains that they did not know about previously. Many respondents also learning about the skills needed for the industry and the importance of diversifying their skill sets. Four of the five participant FGDs said they were inspired to consider starting their own businesses, and one group specifically noted they wanted to start a group-based business.

WEI/B acknowledged that they were unsure of the best strategy to share market information resources such as the MVA with future programs for AGYW. They suggested that associations of firms could have a shared platform for market demand information in urban areas, and that in rural areas, market information could be held by social protection volunteers, social workers who could then share the information with AGYW. WEI/B also mentioned Women's Affairs or the Ministry of Youth as potential government entities that could be responsible for housing and sharing market information.

"...Motor mechanics is not only about fixing a car, it can be fixing a pump, you can be fixing a windshield, the windscreen – it's part of the micro-value chain and you can make a living out of that. So, it opened up a whole new side of the industry that needs to be tapped into!"

- WEI/B staff

WEI/B recommended using and taking advantage of findings from an MVA early in the project cycle, including establishing partnerships with private firms at different entry points of promising value chains. This was echoed by several participants, who found the value chain analysis to be eye-

opening and help them think about specific skills and products to focus on. The economist recommended making sure projects are designed based on local level value chain analyses and a good understanding of local markets.

Supporting group businesses

The ZEMOA recommended supporting group businesses to mitigate informal sector risks, achieve economies of scale, and facilitate access to finance. Although group business formation was not a formal component of Siyakha, the program did encourage participants to save, and some girls opted to form Internal Savings and Lending (ISAL) groups. Participants received financial literacy training, which covered the topic of savings and mentioned savings groups as an option, but participants did not receive training specifically on group savings. During the program two girls joined ISALs external to the project, and four joined ROSCAs or “came up with their own models.”

The majority of participants from all FGDs reported participating in ISALs. They initiated their own groups, typically with other participants from their industry. Participants reported challenges in covering transport expenses to travel to the group and problems with members contributing money late, with one group reportedly closing due to these challenges. Some participants from all groups indicated they planned to continue saving in groups. Most respondents were receptive to the idea of starting a group business, but only one had firm plans to start a car washing business.

Working through local actors

The ZEMOA report emphasized the importance of working with local organizations, trainers, and mentors with local contacts and knowledge of the implementation context. Siyakha Girls implementers Dot Youth and WEI/B both operate locally and know the Bulawayo context. They contracted vocational training support from Bulawayo Project Center (BPC), to offer tailored courses in leather work, automotive repair, and textiles. BPC is not a formalized training center under regulation from Zimbabwe’s Ministry of Education. Its informal status granted BPC the flexibility to modify its curricula to suit the timing needs for Siyakha Girls, something that would have required Ministry of Education approval for other local training alternatives. However, BPC did not have the time or funding to make anticipated modifications to the content of the curriculum. This is partially due to the fact that the Siyakha Girls pilot budget did not account for these adjustments.

DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

Overall, implementers overcame major constraints in terms of funds available, timing, and a challenging economic context characterized by serious inflation, regular power outages, and political unrest to deliver Siyakha Girls. Participants reported that the program helped them increase their self-esteem, build soft skills, expand their SRH knowledge and access to services, and develop technical skills. After six months of implementation, more than half of the 47 participants who completed the program were employed, self-employed, or continuing to gain skills through extended internships.

However, participants and employers described limitations to participants’ technical skills and employability compared to other candidates in the labor pool, and vocational training emerged as the

weakest component of the program. Another major concern pertained to participant safety during internships. Despite multi-faceted program monitoring designed to encourage honest feedback from participants, several instances of sexual harassment went unreported.

Furthermore, though many employers expressed interest in hiring participants after their internships, most lacked the capacity to do so. Nearly half of participants were either seeking employment or still deciding what to do at the end of the pilot, and Siyakha Girls was unable to provide post-internship transition support to assist them with either starting a business or finding a job. Interns tended to fare better when their training aligned with industry realities. For example, despite challenges with the male-dominated auto industry, interns in that sector were the most successful at gaining full-time employment, likely due to specialization in key in-demand sub-specialties such as panel-beating or spray-painting, which were identified during the MVA.

Scaling up Siyakha Girls will require more investment in time and resources to adequately equip vulnerable AGYW to be competitive in the labor market. It will also require stronger market incentives for mentors taking on interns, rather than relying on altruistic intentions. It is likely that providing stronger training that is more linked to market realities and employer needs will enhance the value that interns can provide to mentors. Siyakha's approach to offsetting the risks of hosting interns by providing a fund to cover internship-related company losses also holds promise. Sustainable programming may require systemic approaches to expand SME capacity to hire interns and support capacity-building for vocational training centers.

Recommendations for future programs

Recruitment

- **Engage caregivers early and use a “social contract,”** including a commitment to repay programmatic costs if participants drop out. The social contract should be used to ensure good understanding of the project, including the time commitment required from participants, ensure that stipends are used for project purposes, and facilitate overall buy-in. Periodic home visits with caregivers can also give implementers a chance to ensure sustained buy-in and help monitor and address issues participants might experience at home that could affect their participation in the program.
- **Avoid multi-phased selection of vulnerable AGYW,** as it introduces burdens in terms of time and financial resources and may cause emotional harm.
- **Ensure application processes are accessible and inclusive.** This may include providing training on CV writing if it is part of the application or making a printer available for print applications.
- **Expand recruitment beyond social media,** as participants note most vulnerable fall outside the population of those with regular cell phone or social media contacts.

Life skills and Social Asset-Building training

- **Ensure training builds skills perceived as useful to participants,** including communication, self-esteem, and goal-setting, awareness of sexual harassment, professional behavior and dress, and SRH knowledge. Population Council's evidence-based Social Asset-Building materials are recommended.

- **For sexual harassment training, engage external trainers** to encourage participants to be direct and open about sensitive topics.
- **Conduct trainings early** in a project to support success in vocational training and internships.
- **Provide or link participants to psychosocial support.** Emotional challenges were cited by trainers and employers as a barrier to engaging with participants. Early engagement with caregivers to monitor and address psychosocial issues is recommended.

Financial literacy

- **Build a strong foundation in the basics of saving behaviors and financial literacy early** to establish and reinforce good habits. This will support appropriate management of stipends and help participants plan for when they become self-employed or start earning income.
- **If resources allow for a savings group component, plan to provide dedicated training and support to groups for at least a year.** Provide training to groups after building a foundation of individual financial literacy, including the basics of group savings and group business development. Groups should form autonomously, and members should self-select.

Vocational training

- **Provide vocational training of sufficient depth and duration.** This may require longer-term training (at minimum, 6 months) to build broader skill sets required by private sector employers or shorter-term, focused trainings on specialized skills for employment or self-employment. In Siyakha, rather than training for years to become auto mechanics, participants successfully gained employment by specializing in spray-painting and panel-beating.
- **Curricula should be designed to develop specific, in-demand skills.** Implementers should incorporate monitoring mechanisms to track successful achievement of milestones according to vocational training curricula and work with trainers to adapt approaches as needed.
- **Ensure that vocational training centers have adequately skilled trainers and equipment** to train participants at local industry standards. If a program must engage with vocational training institutions of limited quality and resources, implementers should budget time and resources to build the capacity or infrastructure of these institutions before using them for participant training.
- **Engage multiple vocational training centers** so that the program can track and learn from differences in curricula and training approaches.
- **Add value to engagement with vocational training centers by linking them to employers to align curricula and equipment with industry needs.** This approach can help raise the profile of training centers and introduce a market incentive for participating in the program.
- **Engage AGYW, trainers, and employers in the curriculum development process.** Obtaining input from different stakeholders can help ensure that training material is relevant to AGYW needs and employers' market demands.

Micro-value chain analysis (MVA)

- **Conduct an MVA during the design phase.** Conducting an MVA at the design phase of the project will inform sector selection, identify specific value chain opportunities for youth to define training curricula, and engage private sector actors interested in acting as mentors. It should be conducted by a professional economist with experience in value chain analysis, knowledge of a region, and links to private sector actors.

- **Do not select sectors prior to the MVA.** Otherwise, the program could risk sending vulnerable AGYW into an industry that may be shrinking or dying out, which can exacerbate their vulnerability and undermine trust in employment and livelihood programs.
- **Engage companies from the MVA in program development,** including training curricula adaptation and other program goals. Siyakha Girls found that firms were interested in engaging with a program that understood their needs.
- **Use follow-up MVAs periodically, especially a youth-led MVA,** to ensure that programming stays aligned with the market and avoids flooding the local market with skills that are out of sync with demand. A youth-led MVA can be used to provide industry exposure and help participants decide on their training trajectories. Projects should defer to an economist or other expert about how often this might need to be conducted, based on the dynamics of the market.
- **Ensure a good match between participants and their selected industries through early industry exposure.** Facilitate talks with industry experts, engage participants in a youth-led MVA, and facilitate field visits to firms in selected industries to help participants select the industry and internship placement that is a good fit for them.
- **Use the MVA to inform segmented approaches for formal and more informal companies.** Formal firms are more capable of hiring full-time employees, but often demand more complex technical skills and provide less overall exposure to business operations. Informal firms give participants a broad exposure to the workings of a micro-businesses and may better equip them for self-employment but may provide less rigorous technical skill training and are less likely to hire participants at the conclusion of the project. Making sure participants understand this will help them identify where they want to end up at the end of the program – either employed in a formal company or running their own informal micro-enterprise – and provide the appropriate internship experience.

Internships

- **Make a strong value proposition to employers considering taking on interns.** Sustainable engagement of employers will require programs to make sure they have market-based incentives to mentor new interns. In the case of Siyakha Girls, mentors took on interns out of compassion, a motivation that may be exhausted after a few rounds of an ongoing program.
- **Align internship timelines with industry norms.** Employers, especially from formal firms, may have expectations around appropriate timing for internships. Employers should be consulted prior to the start of a program to determine when they normally take on interns. Internships typically start at the beginning of each year and last a minimum of six months.
- **Facilitate participant goal-setting early to inform internship placements.** By helping participants set their own goals about employment or self-employment, programs can help make sure they are placed in the appropriate internships and get what they need out of the experience.
- **Budget for resources used during internships.** Programs can offset the costs of taking on interns by agreeing to compensate mentors up to a limited amount for damages caused and extra materials used by interns. In Siyakha Girls, employers' fear of interns making mistakes and wasting materials limited participants' opportunities to learn hands-on skills.

Monitoring

- **Hold one-on-one check-ins with participants away from their internship or vocational training sites.** Participants should be encouraged to disclose any issues, including sexual harassment, without fear of losing their internships or being removed from the program. Offsite meetings will encourage openness about sensitive topics. Compensation for any travel to a monitoring meeting should be provided, and meetings should be set in advance.
- **Direct supervisors or business owners should not have final approval of participant work logs.** Participants should be responsible for reporting their activities to ensure honest reporting and protect participants from exploitation.
- **Help companies develop sexual harassment policies.** This may provide added value to companies seeking to formalize.
- **Conduct caregiver check-ins and offer support and resources at the household level.** This could be additional information about program, knowledge around youth or SRH issues, linkages to care, as well as psychosocial support.
- **Develop standard operating procedures in case participants experience sexual harassment.** This information should be shared with employers and participants to clearly lay out consequences of such behavior.

Transitions to employment

- **Offer training and support to help participants transition to work or self-employment after their internships.** This is particularly important for participants going into self-employment, where linkages to loans, grants, entrepreneurship, toolkits and trainings, and the ability to access resources through entrepreneurship hubs (e.g. Impact Hub) can support successful business development. Other follow-on services may include deeper technical training, access to market information, or logistical support to help new businesses succeed. Further piloting and research would help clarify how and exactly what of these types of resources would best support AGYW in Zimbabwe to succeed in work or self-employment.

Resource considerations for future programs

The lives of vulnerable AGYW are complex, and programs designed to meet their needs are necessarily high-touch and resource intensive. The Siyakha Girls pilot cost approximately \$100,000 for start-up and implementation for 47 participants over six months, though it ran for eight months due to unforeseen disruptions. We recommend that future programs plan for a minimum of two years in duration. Recommended components and estimated timeframes include:

- Hiring an economist to conduct a micro-value chain analysis (1-3 months);
- Engaging employers in the process of modifying available vocational training curricula (2 months or longer if working with government to obtain approval to change state-approved curricula);
- Employer training in sexual harassment and development of sexual harassment policies (1 week per employer, based on their availability to engage in the training, with ongoing monitoring check-ins);
- Participant training in soft skills, including life skills, leadership training, financial literacy, and Social Asset-Building (minimum of 3 weeks);

- Vocational training (minimum of 6 months for traditional vocational training, or 3-6 months for in-depth training in very specialized skills identified during MVA, as dictated by feedback from specialized skills trainers or employers);
- Internships (minimum of 6 months);
- Individual participant, household, vocational training, and internship monitoring (bi-weekly); and
- Post-internship transition support, including entrepreneurship training (2 months).

We recommend that future programs use a longer timeframe than Siyakha Girls and add components such as more in-depth soft skills training and post-project transition support, which will add to overall project budgets. However, group-level interventions will gain efficiencies and start-up investments such as initial assessments and modifications to vocational training curricula can be leveraged with greater scale.

CONCLUSION

By taking a demand-driven, market-based approach to vocational training, the Siyakha Girls pilot represents a departure from existing programs for AGYW identified in the ZEMOA. The positive response to the pilot by implementers and participants demonstrates the feasibility and acceptability of the approach, and early employment outcomes suggest that it holds promise as an effective model for DREAMS and other youth-oriented programs. The pilot also demonstrates key lessons learned that future programs should use to scale up similar approaches.

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