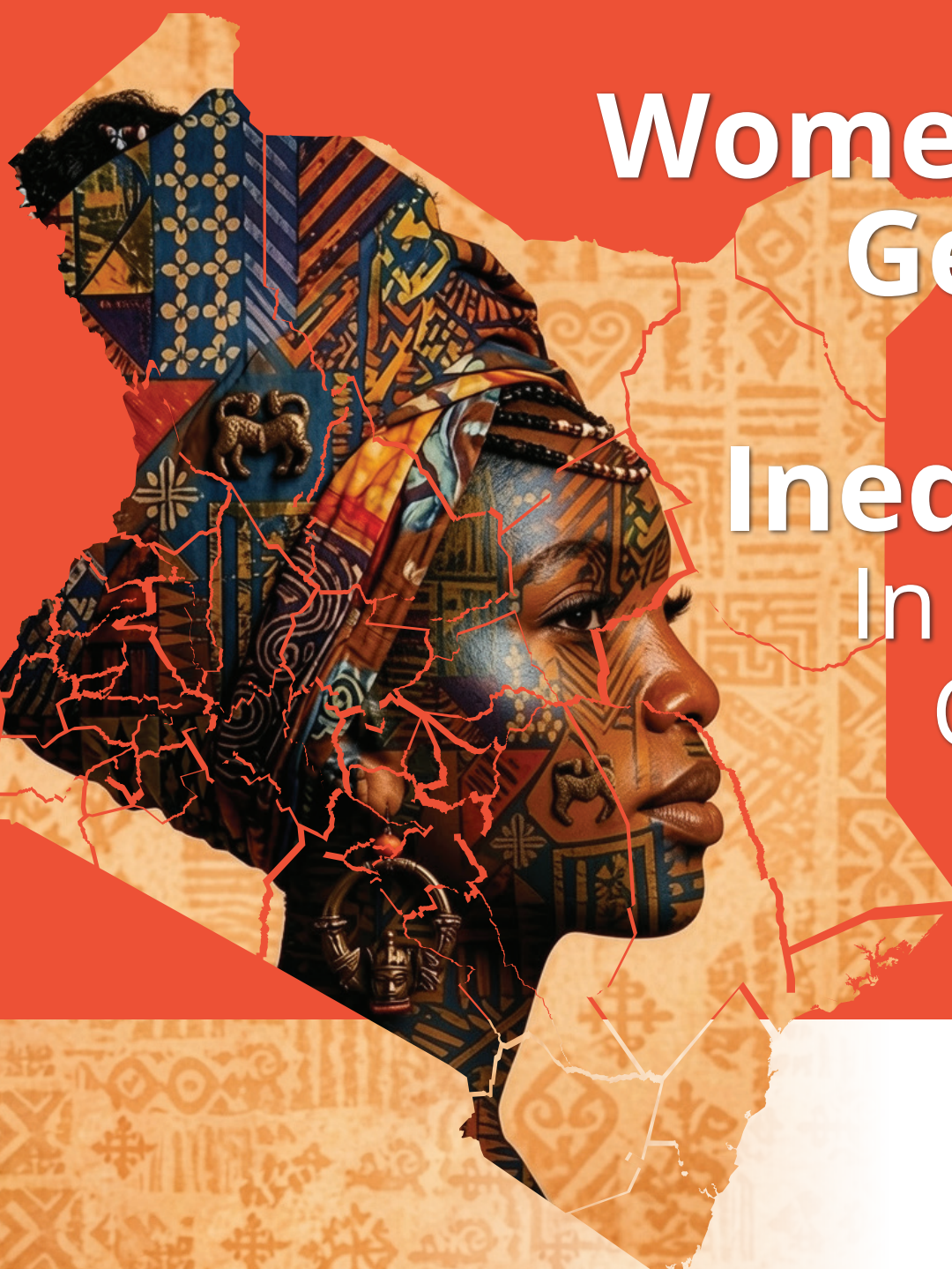




Young Women And Gender-Based Inequities In Kenya's Creative Sector

January, 2026

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Abbreviations

EY Global	Ernst & Young Global
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDI	In-depth Interview
ILO	International Labor Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Executive Summary

The report presents a comprehensive study on the gender-based challenges that young female creatives face in Kenya's rapidly growing creative sector. As a high-value economic sector with significant potential to create jobs for Africa's burgeoning youth population, the creative industry may be positioned as a key driver of sustainable economic opportunities. However, despite their significant contributions, our study has found that young women in Kenya are disproportionately affected by systemic barriers that impede their ability to realize their full potential in the creative sector.

We employed a mixed-methods, multidisciplinary approach in gathering data from a survey of 422 female creatives, 7 focus group discussions and 20 in-depth interviews for young female creatives, and 10 key informant interviews for key industry stakeholders across government, private sector, and anchor groups, across seven counties in Kenya. The findings reveal a predominantly young demographic of creatives, many of whom are single and navigating the initial stages of their careers. A significant portion of these young women, particularly those who are also mothers, face pronounced challenges related to balancing caregiving responsibilities and their career demands. The study found that key barriers women face include limited career progression opportunities, unequal pay, harassment, safety concerns, and lack of awareness and training in crucial professional areas such as intellectual property rights, contract management, and fair compensation, leaving many vulnerable to exploitation.

The findings underscore that the challenges faced by these women are not a result of a lack of talent or ambition, but are deeply rooted in gender norms, power dynamics, patriarchal culture and a lack of supportive infrastructure, both at the societal and institutional levels. The report recommends cultivating an equitable ecosystem for young female creatives in Kenya through targeted action from policymakers, industry leaders, and donors. These actions include developing and enforcing policies for intellectual property protection and fair contracts, embedding financial literacy and digital safety training in arts curricula, and establishing accessible funding and investment opportunities. Furthermore, the study urges the creation of industry-wide fair wage standards and the establishment of safe, inclusive, and flexible workspaces to combat exploitation and accommodate caregiving roles. It also urges stakeholders to foster an equitable, dignified, and supportive environment for young women in Kenya's creative industries. Finally, it calls for increased funding for practical business skills training and public campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and celebrate female creative success.

1.0

Introduction



According to Sinha and Getachew (2024) and the African Development Bank (2024), Africa's population is projected to reach approximately 2.5 billion by 2050, a demographic shift that places the continent at the center of global growth. This transition is defined by a significant "youth bulge," where young Africans under the age of 25 are expected to constitute 60% of the continent's population and roughly 42% of the global youth population by the same year (El Habti, 2022). Within this landscape, the creative sector—spanning music, visual arts, film, and digital media emerges as a high-value economic driver with the outsized potential to generate millions of transformative jobs for this burgeoning labor force (AfDB, 2023; Abedin et al., 2026).

Strategic investments in this sector can drive sustainable economic opportunities and improve livelihoods for local communities while expanding

business opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (Leke & Yeboah-Amankwah, 2018). However, to fully capitalize on this potential, the African Development Bank notes that investments must support and expand youth participation, inspire more creativity and entrepreneurship, and address gender and other inequities (AfDB, 2023). The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) also maintains that maximizing the potential of Africa's creative economy requires interventions that address injustices and inequities, and support participation, access, safety, and dignity for all creatives, particularly women and girls (United Nations, 2024).

The contributions of young female creatives to the global creative industries are increasingly acknowledged, yet their journey is often fraught with systemic challenges that hinder their recognition, economic empowerment, and artistic expression (Izugbara et al., 2025). Gendered inequities are a leading factor hampering female creatives from fully benefiting from opportunities in this booming sector (GIZ, 2023). Yet, evidence-based, systematic understanding of how gender dynamics affect the participation of young women in the creative sector remains limited. The absence of specific policies addressing gender inequities for young women in Kenya's creative sector has also not been given much attention.

Despite their growing influence, young female creatives continue to face gendered barriers that limit their ability to thrive in this booming sector. These include unequal pay, sexual harassment, and entrenched societal and cultural stereotypes (British Council, 2023; GIZ, 2023; Hivos East Africa, 2020; Izugbara et al., 2025). Addressing these challenges through targeted policies, equitable access to resources, mentorship, and a continued commitment to gender equality is crucial for fostering a truly inclusive and thriving creative ecosystem. Focusing on Kenya, this report presents findings from a study that sought to understand how gender norms and power dynamics intersect with other socio-economic and contextual processes to shape young women's experiences in the industry, and the implications for their ability to participate in the industry, benefit from it, and realize their full potential.

The study responds to the growing demand for deeper insights and rigorous evidence to inform effective strategies aimed at bridging the gender disparities in Kenya's creative economy (United Nations, 2024). This report is part of a larger multi-country study for "Behind the Scene" (BtS) project focusing on gender-based inequities among young female creatives, which is being conducted across 7 African countries: Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Senegal. By examining the policy landscape and gleaning insights directly from female creatives' recounting of their experiences, we are able to identify critical areas for advocacy and reform. The study also explores the emerging issues in the creative sector, and how they affect female entry and participation in the industry.

2.0 Background

The creative sector is increasingly recognized as Africa's next goldmine and most dynamic economic growth area. Over the last two decades, the growth rate of creative economy exports has outpaced that of other industries in Africa. Creative and cultural productions, including digital artistic entrepreneurship, employ millions of young Africans and generate billions of dollars in revenue (United Nations, 2024). The region's video, movie, and film sub-sector alone currently generates over \$5 billion in annual revenue and employs over 50 million people in a region that has historically depended on agriculture and non-renewable resources (International Finance Corporation, 2025; UNESCO, 2021). By 2030, the sub-sector is expected to generate an additional 10% of annual GDP and create over 50 million new jobs (International Finance Corporation, 2025; United Nations, 2024).

Globally, creative industries contribute between 0.5 to 7.3 per cent in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and employs between 0.5 to 12.5 per cent of the workforce (United Nations, 2024). This is as a result of the rise in digitalization and Artificial Intelligence (AI) which drives innovation and inclusive growth (United Nations, 2024). Recognizing this contribution to revenues and employment, most countries including Kenya, possess at least one ministry or agency tasked with supervising creative economy, according to the United Nations (2024) report. In addition, over 70 per cent of these countries have implemented national plans, policies and strategies dedicated to fostering and monitoring the creative economy progress (United Nations, 2024). This demonstrates the value that nations are attaching to the creative industry.

Kenya's creative economy has also emerged as a promising frontier for inclusive growth and youth empowerment (Onyango, 2026). The growth has rapidly provided strategic response to the chronic youth unemployment through self-employment, that provide sustainable livelihoods (Asena et al., 2026; Onyango, 2026). This growth is indicative of the immense potential within the country's creative economy. Across the continent, social media platforms from vlogs and Facebook to TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter have broadened opportunities for creatives to generate, distribute, and monetize their creative work. In response to this, the government of Kenya has prioritized the creative sector through initiatives like Talanta Hela, Ajira digital, and the Kenya Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship Accelerator Program (K-YEEAP), aimed at nurturing creative talent (Onyango, 2026).

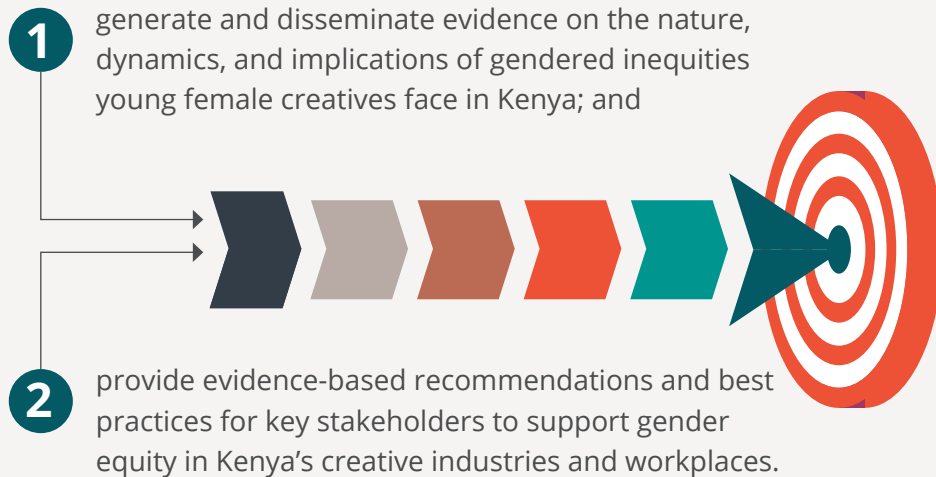
Kenya's creative industry is experiencing exciting growth, but it faces significant social, economic, equity, and inclusion challenges (Kamau et al., 2024). Stakeholders in the country recognize that to fully harness the sector's potential, efforts must extend beyond simply creating more jobs (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2023). They must also focus on understanding and addressing the working conditions and the intersection of gendered, structural, institutional, and cultural issues that limit the ability of creatives to share in and leverage opportunities on their own terms (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

There is also a significant need among Kenyan stakeholders for clear information on effective and workable solutions to promote equity and inclusion in the creative sector, and to maximize its benefits for young people of all genders (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2023).

2.1 Study Objectives

This study aims to assess the challenges that young female creatives face in the industry, and to explore effective and workable solutions to promote greater equity and inclusion within the creative economy so its benefits are maximized for all young people.

The specific objectives include:



3.0 Study Design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of young women in Kenya's creative sector. Data for the young female creatives were collected through a quantitative survey and qualitative methods including photovoice, creative presentation, storytelling, focus group discussions, in-depth Interviews, and key informant interviews to capture stakeholders' views and perspectives in relation to gender inequities in the creative sector.

3.1 Study Sites

The study sites included seven counties in Kenya, which were purposefully selected to represent a diversity of views from both urban and rural localities. The counties included were Mombasa, Nairobi, Kisumu, and Nakuru representing the urban experiences, while Vihiga, Kisii, and Kilifi represent the rural perspectives.

3.2 Study Population and Sample

For the quantitative component, a survey of 422 respondents with young women aged between 18 to 35 years was conducted to collect a broad range of data on demographics, work-related experiences, career satisfaction, and challenges. The qualitative component involved seven focus group discussions (FGDs) with 6 to 12 young women each across seven counties selected for the study, 20 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with young female creatives, and 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) with key stakeholders in the creative industry. This multi-faceted sampling strategy (involving a mix of stratified random sampling, snowballing, and maximum variation sampling) ensured that the findings were robust, drawing from a wide breadth of experience while also capturing the specific, nuanced challenges faced by different groups within the industry.

The participants for the survey and qualitative research were recruited through multiple-point snowballing and referrals, specifically targeting a diverse sample from the core creative sub-sectors. This method was used to ensure the inclusion of underrepresented participants, such as less popular creatives, those from rural areas, creatives with disabilities, and local language creatives.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data were gathered through surveys of young women, which provided a broad statistical overview of the experiences and perceptions of young female creatives. For qualitative insights, the study conducted FGDs and IDIs with young female creatives, and KIIs with key stakeholders in government, private sector and the creatives' representatives.

3.4 Data Analysis

All recorded interviews were transcribed, and detailed notes were developed. Through iterative reading of the transcripts, the research team collaboratively developed analytical codes from the narratives. Emerging codes and themes were employed to code and analyze the transcripts in NVivo 14. Thematic analysis was used to distill the data into a narrative study report.

Quantitative survey data were collected via Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing, downloaded, and analyzed using STATA software. Descriptive statistics were generated, and bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted with a significance threshold of $p \leq 0.05$ or a 95% confidence interval.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with strict adherence to internationally accepted ethical standards. Ethical approval was first secured from the Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology (JKUAT) ethical review board. Following this, the necessary research permit (License No: NACOSTI/P/24/414310) was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) to conduct research in the selected counties before prior to engaging with study participants. To ensure the autonomy and safety of all participants, written informed consent was obtained prior to each survey and interview. At the start of every session, the researcher clearly explained that participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.



4.0 Findings

4.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics

4.1. 1 Self-Identity

The study's participants were a predominantly young, urban, and single population (99.76%, n=420), of female creatives, reflecting the key demographic being explored. Over 88% of respondents were between 18 and 30 years old, with the largest segment (50.24%, n=212) falling within the 18–24 age bracket, followed by 38.63% (n=163) aged 25–30. One participant expressed a non-binary identity. This emergent gender diversity, though limited within this specific survey sample, was also recorded twice within a particular FGD, suggesting a subtle but present shift in self-identification beyond the binary within the population.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

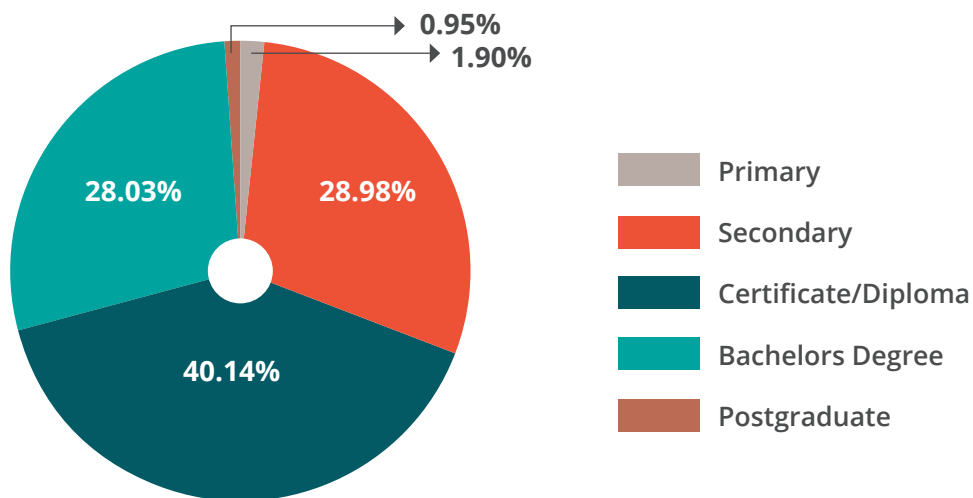
Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Self-identity	Female	420	99.76
	Others	1	0.24
Age category (years)	18–24	212	50.24
	25–30	163	38.63
	31–35	47	11.14
Highest level of education completed	Primary	8	1.90
	Secondary	122	28.98
	Certificate/Diploma	169	40.14
	Bachelors degree	118	28.03
	Postgraduate	4	0.95
Received training in creative sector		204	48.34
Marital status	Single-never married	351	83.37
	Married/ cohabitation	54	12.83
	Separated	10	2.38
	Divorced	6	1.43
Type of residence	Rural	62	14.69
	Urban	360	85.31
Have a spouse (who is working)		48	92.31
Have children		120	28.44
Number of children	1	74	62.18
	2	22	18.49
	3	21	17.65
	4	2	1.68

4.1.2 Educational Background

The educational profile of participants indicates a strong representation of individuals at key transition points in their academic journeys. The largest had completed a certificate or diploma (40.14%, n=169), followed by those who completed secondary education (28.98%, n=122). Qualitative data support these figures, with many respondents identifying as “form four leavers”¹ or holders of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education, indicating a substantial cohort transitioning to college-level studies.

Additionally, 28.03% (n=118) of respondents had attained a bachelor's degree, corroborated by qualitative accounts of individuals engaged in or having completed undergraduate programs. A smaller segment (0.95%, n=4) held postgraduate qualifications, including one participant with a master's degree in business administration. Additionally, qualitative insights revealed that some participants were pursuing diplomas in diverse fields like media and hospitality, and three mentioned engaging in vocational or short courses, underscoring an interest in skill-based learning paths not represented in the quantitative categories. Overall, the data point to a sample largely comprising young adults navigating college enrollment, degree pursuits, and skill acquisition.

Figure 1: Highest Education Attained



4.1.2 Training and Capacity in the Creative Sector

Beyond formal education, participants demonstrated a rich tapestry of training and capacity-building within the creative sector. Nearly half of the respondents (48.34%, n=204) had received formal or informal training in creative fields such as fashion design, beauty therapy, music, acting, culinary arts, graphic design, and photography. These skills were acquired through institutions, workshops, self-taught through online platforms, and family mentorship:

¹The form four/secondary level certificate is broadly comparable to the O-level, which is the standard for secondary school completion in many international systems.

I studied Fashion and Design... I do tailoring” (Female IDI 1 Kisii County), one respondent said; another stated, “I’m currently doing a diploma in graphics and design, and I am still learning UI and UX” (Female FGD 4 Kisii County).

Other respondents share their experience of family mentorship:

“My mother is a businessperson who creates delicious dishes. That is how I learnt to cook” (Female IDI 1 Kilifi County), and “No, I learnt the skills from my father” (Female IDI 1 Kilifi County).

These diverse pathways reflect the multifaceted nature of creative development among young women in the sector.

Despite a relatively well-educated cohort in this study, many young women were found to be facing significant information and capacity gaps that limit their ability to thrive professionally. Consistent themes across interviews and focus groups were the lack of awareness around creative rights, intellectual property, contract management, and fair compensation:

“Most creatives... don’t know their rights or how much they’re supposed to be paid” (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County)

“We work with a lot of contracts, but we don’t know how to protect our intellectual properties... they take 70%, and you’re left with 30%” (Female IDI 6 Vihiga County).

This lack of information and guidance has left many creatives vulnerable to exploitation and unprepared for the realities of professional creative work. This, coupled with the absence of standard rates, payment systems, and structured training, means that clients often dictate prices, undermining the sustainability of creative careers:

“There’s a gap in terms of information on how we can monetize the creatives that we have” (Female IDI 6 Vihiga County).

“Most of us don’t know how much we should be paid... It’s all about information gaps” (Female IDI 6 Vihiga County).

Some respondents noted the need for institutions that can train and support young female creatives. While small craft schools and colleges exist, there is a pressing need for more structured, professionalized education in both technical and business aspects of the creative industry.

“We don’t have institutions that necessarily craft artists well or mold them... there’s so much one needs to learn to comfortably say they are confident and earning from their art” (KII 4 Kisii County).

The issue of limited government and partner support also emerged as a critical concern. Exposure to successful models and international practices was seen as essential for growth and sustainability. While some training opportunities exist, many felt they were inaccessible due to lack of outreach and exposure.

“I’ve had to sit through trainings and workshops and learnt from countries where art is thriving... fully supported by their government” (KII 4 Kisii County).

“Most young people don’t have exposure or information... so they will not contribute” (KII 7 Kilifi County).

4.1.3 Care Responsibilities among Young Women Creatives

Young female creatives across various contexts often shoulder significant caregiving responsibilities, which directly shape their professional participation and opportunities. According to survey data, 28.44% of the young women creatives surveyed have children, and among them, 10% also cared for household members with special care needs (Table 1). This dual caregiving role imposes emotional, social, and professional constraints, as echoed in multiple qualitative accounts as well. Participants described how caregiving responsibilities shaped their daily routine and limited time for creative work. One mother shared:

“I really have to wake up early... kids have to go to school, I have to do it myself, the time for weaving becomes very limited” (Female FGD 3 Kisii County).

Women creatives with children were found to turn to a variety of support systems to be able to work. Table 2 indicates that most rely on other caregiver options (39.17%) and school attendance, (27.50%). Just over a fifth of respondents use a babysitter or nanny (21.67%), and some (8.33%) even take their children with them to their workplace. Only 10% rely on a partner or spouse for childcare while working.

Table 2: Childcare Responsibilities

Who is responsible for childcare while you work?	Frequency	Percentage
I take my child/ren to where I work	10	8.33
Partner/spouse	12	10.00
Babysitter/ nanny	26	21.67
Daycare center	8	3.81
My older child/children	1	0.83
Children are at school	33	27.50
Others	47	39.17

Beyond the logistical challenges, women also face intense judgment for balancing motherhood with a creative career, particularly if their work is considered controversial. One participant recalled being told, **“You’re writing those things online and you have a child”** (*Female FGD 3 Kisumu County*).

Another spoke of the community’s lack of understanding about their professional schedules:

“[We are asked], ‘What time do you get home to take care of your home?’ This unfortunately has affected women in the creative sector” (*KII 4 Kisii County*).

These pressures reinforce traditional expectations that women should prioritize caregiving over professional aspirations. As a result, caregiving responsibilities profoundly influence the careers of young women in the creative sector, who must navigate both cultural scrutiny and a lack of supportive infrastructure.

4.2 Perceptions of the Creative Workspace Environment

4.2.1 Creative subsector

The creative sector for young women in the study is a vibrant and diverse space, with performing arts emerging as the most dominant subsector, engaging 45.78% of respondents and receiving the highest number of qualitative mentions. Other areas with significant participation include design (29.16%), audiovisuals (24.82%), and new media (24.10%), reflecting a strong presence in both traditional and tech-driven creative fields. Within the study sample, visual arts (22.41%) and traditional cultural expressions (20.96%) also show notable engagement, underscoring the continued relevance of heritage and artistic practices. In contrast, those working in the creative services (4.82%) and cultural sites (5.54%) were the lowest in numbers, both in survey responses and qualitative data. Overall, the findings highlight a dynamic and interconnected creative landscape, with young women actively contributing across multiple disciplines.

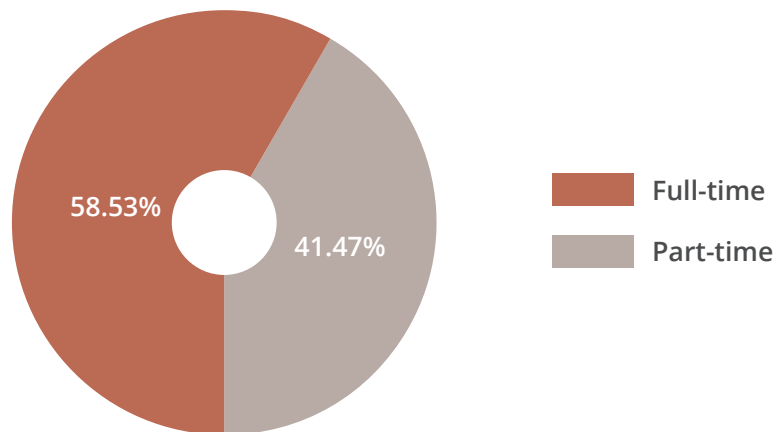
Table 3: Creative Sub-sectors

Category	Frequency	Percentage
1. Performing arts (live music, theater, dance, opera, etc.)	190	45.78
2. Design (interior, graphic, fashion, jewelry, and toys)	121	29.16
3. Audiovisuals (films, TV, radio, other broadcasting)	103	24.82
4. News media (software, video games, blogging, digitalized creative content)	100	24.1
5. Visual arts (paintings, sculptures, photography, and antiques)	93	22.41
6. Traditional cultural expressions (art, crafts, festivals)	87	20.96
7. Advertising and marketing	62	14.94
8. Publishing and printed media (books, press, other publications)	42	10.12
9. Cultural sites (archaeological sites, museums, libraries, exhibitions, etc.)	23	5.54
10. Creative services (architectural, advertising, creative R&D, cultural & recreational)	20	4.82

4.2.2 Time of work

The creative sectors for young women are characterized by diverse and often inconsistent work patterns, with the work frequently described as irregular, seasonal, part-time and unpredictable (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Time of Work for Creatives



The qualitative data reveal that even years of experience do not guarantee a steady income. One respondent explained that she had been monetizing her craft for a decade but was only realizing more steady earnings in the last three years. The work is not a typical 9-to-5 job, as one participant reported:

"These jobs are not daily... maybe in a month, but a gig twice... or even once... maybe in a year you only get six gigs... maybe only one of them had good returns,"(Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

This is supported by another who stated, **"Our industry is not full-time... you can go a month without any job"** (KII 5 Kisumu County).

Furthermore, the hours can be long and demanding. Participants described working shifts of up to 12 hours on set, with rehearsals and shows often ending late at night. For those in journalism and emergency media, the demand can be even more extreme, with a participant noting she could be called in for work as early as 3am. Another commented:

“So, I saw myself working here, sometimes I’m forced to work night shifts till 2:00 AM” (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County).

Despite these challenges, many young female creatives remain driven by passion, recognizing that irregular schedules and long hours are often a prerequisite for success in their field. As one stated, **“I do this interior, I’m doing it as my passion and full-time job” (KII 7 Kilifi County).**

4.2.3 Use of Social Media

Social media is a critical but complicated tool for young female creatives in Kenya. Quantitative data show that WhatsApp (92.21%) and TikTok (82.48%) are the most widely used platforms for engagement, followed by Instagram (78.35%) and Facebook (70.07%) (Table 4).

Table 4: Use of Social Media

Category	Percent
Instagram	78.35
WhatsApp	92.21
X	37.47
Facebook	70.07
TikTok	82.48
Telegram	25.55

Qualitative evidence supports this, with participants enthusiastically talking about “blowing up YouTube and TikTok” and praising TikTok for saving a lot of creators. As one respondent noted:

“We can talk [on TikTok], we can voice these things out. We don’t have to be silent just because I’ve been placed at a compromising situation... let other women come and support me” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

These platforms are a source of empowerment and professional growth. Creatives use them for self-promotion, discovering new skills, and finding support when facing harassment. As one participant noted, **“We can decide to be professionals, and then we are so lucky in our current world, there is the power of social media”** (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

However, this access can come at a cost. Many creatives face significant emotional challenges, including cyberbullying and online harassment. Some participants reported being criticized by other women for speaking out about abuse, highlighting a troubling trend of female-on-female criticism:

“There’s no women’s enemy more than women themselves... artists who have come out [about abuse]... have been bashed by fellow women” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

The fear of negative comments can be so intense that it discourages some from posting their work. While social media is a vital part of the creative landscape, it requires immense resilience to navigate the associated risks.

4.2.4 Gender Imbalance and Differential Compensation in the Creative Workspace

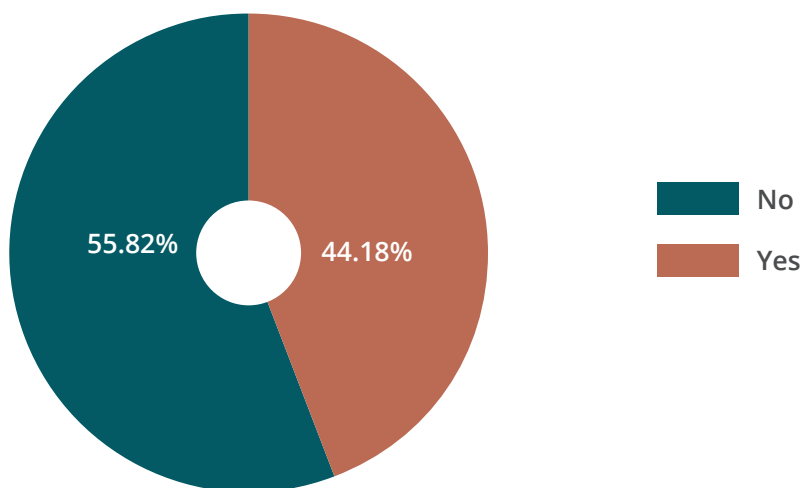
Gender imbalance remains a persistent issue in the creative industry, marked by male dominance, unequal pay, and limited opportunities for women. Evidence from the study sample revealed that many sub-sectors, such as acrobatics, music, photography, and broadcasting, are male dominated. Women reported needing to work harder to prove themselves, often facing exclusion during recruitment and promotion. As one participant noted, **“There are brands that... you can’t work for them if you are a lady”** (Female FGD 6 Kilifi County).

Survey data support these testimonials, with 55.82% of respondents stating they felt they had limited opportunities (Figure 3). Many described being the only woman in male-heavy environments. This highlights a widespread feeling of being disadvantaged and marginalized within the industry. One participant noted that “In a room of 10 men, it’s one woman” (Female FGD 5 Kilifi County). Another said, **“Even in entry-level or intern roles... [you] only have one lady working there, despite many women applying”** (Female FGD 6 Kisumu County).

In some instances, women are only sought out to perform on specific occasions revolving around the recognition of women, reducing their visibility on general platforms and undermining artistic identity. One poet shared her frustration:

“Don’t get me started on how we are only sought out to perform on Women’s Day or Mother’s Day. Only at events talking about or celebrating women. Because ‘our art is not art enough for general platforms.’ And where’s the need to give women opportunity to entertain unless it’s women’s month. Then now you definitely have to do it. When in reality my female body parts have nothing to do with the way I write. I am a poet. I am a creative. That is all. I ain’t ever heard a man being introduced as a male poet!” – Poet 1

Figure 3: Perceived Access to Opportunities



Pay disparity remains a major concern, with women frequently earning less than men for identical roles. This is not only a matter of less money but also of a gender-based devaluation of labor. In photography and videography, for example, men are often assigned high-paying documentary work while women are limited to roles perceived as less valuable, such as weddings or baby showers. As one woman explained,

“Even if we are doing the same job, they will pay the man three times more” (KII 5 Nairobi County).

Despite these challenges, there were signs of progress. Some respondents noted an increase in female participation and leadership, especially among younger creatives:

"It's gotten better... the older generation is learning to embrace both genders" (Female FGD 4 Kilifi County).

Women were positioned as increasingly taking on technical roles and winning awards, with many breaking barriers in their fields. However, this progress often comes at a high personal cost, requiring women to work on themselves and push significantly harder to succeed (Female IDI 6 Nakuru County). Interestingly, a notable resistance to tokenism was also expressed. Some women voiced a desire to earn their positions based on merit rather than gender quotas, with one stating, **"Let it be a competition. You're handing me the position now and then... eventually, I'll need to earn it myself" (Female IDI 6 Kilifi County).**

Sectoral differences in gender balance were also observed. While fields like fashion and beadwork tended to have more women, technical sub-sectors like lighting, directing, and sculpture-making remained predominantly male-dominated (Female IDI 1 Kilifi County; KII 5 Kisumu County).

4.2.5 Perceived Growth in the Creative Sector

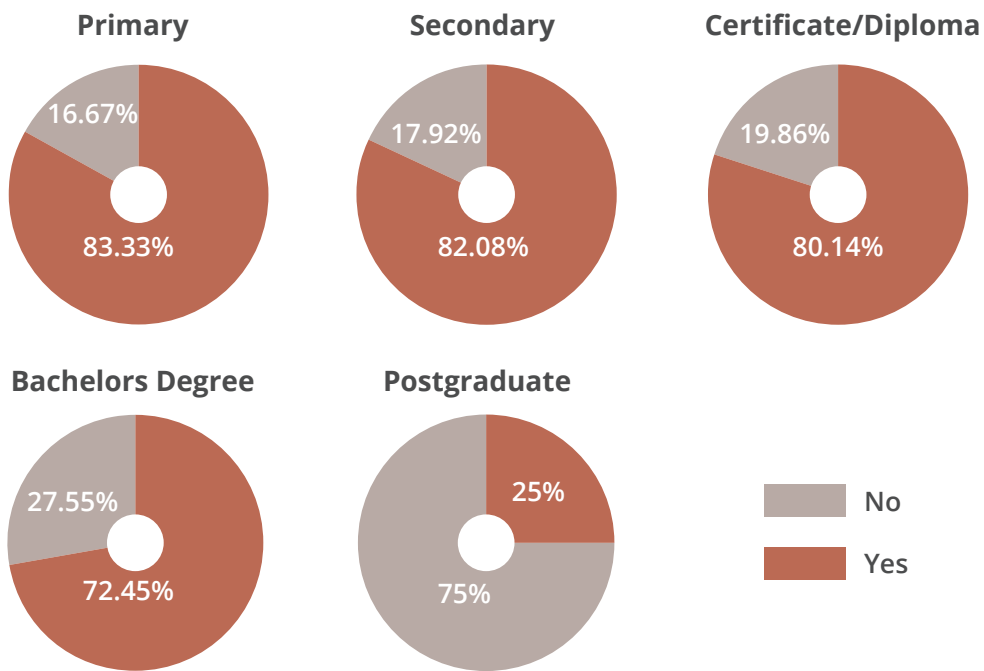
There is a widely held perception of significant growth and transformation in the creative industry, with many creatives reflecting on their personal and collective progress. One respondent noted, **"From my perspective, and from what I see, we have grown; like me, I have become an actress, we are growing, and people are getting this" (Female FGD 6 Kisii County).**

This optimism is often tied to the increasing inclusion of women in the sector. Another participant stated, **"... we are having more female creatives nowadays than we used to... I am so proud of my fellow female, because it is not easy" (Female IDI 2 Mombasa).**

The quantitative data revealed significant disparities in perceived opportunities for professional growth, depending on their level of education obtained (Figure 4). For those with a primary or secondary education, over 82% felt they had opportunities for growth, with the figure dropping to 25% for those with a postgraduate degree. This suggests that the nature of these opportunities may

be uneven, potentially favoring less formally educated creatives in certain lower cadre roles or projects. Mentorship, collaboration, and community support are also cited as instrumental in enabling this growth, with creatives highlighting the importance of peer-to-peer empowerment and guidance from mentors.

Figure 4: Perceived Opportunities for Growth, by Educational Levels



Graphics by A4. Highest Education level completed

Alongside observed progress, many creatives stressed the persistent presence of gatekeeping and inequity in accessing opportunities. New or lesser-known artists often felt sidelined in favor of those with renowned brand. The dominance of men in decision-making roles was also a point of frustration for many women. As one woman stated:

“[The] ‘shadow’ of a man is supposed to be there even when a crew is predominantly female” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu).

In addition, economic limitations further constrain growth, with many respondents reporting receiving low pay. A troubling undercurrent was the prevalence of sexual exploitation and gendered expectations, with some women describing how vulnerability and economic precarity can lead to coercive situations. As one participant explained,

"You are vulnerable... you find your pay is even less... or you end up succumbing to sexual advances... you need to give in to that because you feel like that's how you'll be coping" (KII 5 Kilifi County).

The data also reveal a complex and evolving picture of perceived growth in the creative industry. Despite encouraging signs of development, many participants express that systemic barriers, power imbalances, and gendered exploitation continue to shape the trajectory of growth, both individually and across the sector. As one respondent aptly put it, **"We need a million steps up there... and it's up for the people who are there first to do something" (Female IDI 6 Kilifi County).**

Progress is happening, but it is entangled with structural inequality, limited access to resources, and persistent gendered discrimination. The path forward lies in fostering mentorship, equitable opportunities, systemic reform, and addressing the intersection of economic precarity and gender vulnerability.

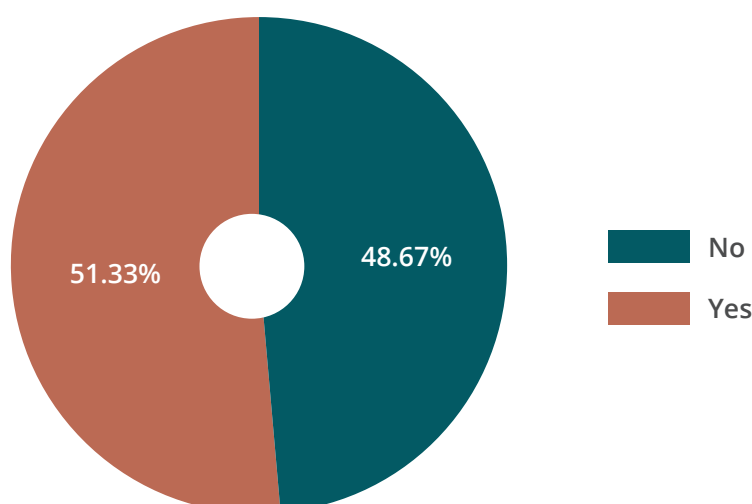
4.3 Workspace Challenges.

This section delves into the significant and pervasive workplace challenges that hinder the ability of young female creatives to thrive in Kenya. These challenges are not isolated incidents but rather are deeply embedded in the industry's culture. The key challenges include widespread discrimination, career progression obstacles, harassment, and a severe lack of resources and institutional support. These interconnected problems point to the urgent need for targeted interventions to create a more equitable and safe working environment for women.

4.3.1 Discrimination in the workplace

Discrimination is a significant and multifaceted challenge for female creatives, manifesting in various forms that affect their careers and well-being. Many respondents (51.33%) reported experiencing some form of discrimination at work (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Have You Encountered Discrimination at Work



A primary concern was pay discrimination, as many women writers and creatives were silenced, sidelined, or had their work stolen or consistently undervalued. In one instance, a female student who wrote a legislative play script was not paid for her work, with the financial benefits going to a male “director” who was “obviously” trusted more because he was a man. In the view of one aspiring young writer:

“This story isn’t just mine. It’s the story of many women writers—silenced, sidelined, and stolen from. In an industry that often preys on passion and hides behind ‘exposure,’ we pay the cost of trusting too soon. Of being too ‘grateful.’ Of staying silent because we don’t want to burn bridges that were never even real. If I had known what I know now, I would have protected my ideas more fiercely. But I write this not with bitterness, but with boldness—for every woman who’s ever watched her name disappear from a page she wrote. You’re not alone. We see you. And we will write anyway.”

Beyond financial bias, discrimination extends to physical appearance, where women are judged on factors completely unrelated to their talent. This includes discrimination based on physical appearance. Similarly, others are judged for their weight after childbirth or are held to constantly shifting beauty standards. As one creative noted, “Someone can see you... you will be judged already according to your physical appearance” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu). And another participant recalling being told, **“You were chosen because you are a light skinned girl”** (Female FGD 6 Kisii County).

For some, discrimination was also tied to their sexual orientation. A poet shared that her “homosexual” write-ups and personal expression made it a challenge to get a chance to perform in “a heterosexual ground,” and she was immediately categorized and judged for “not living a normal life” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County). This highlights how personal identity is scrutinized and can be a barrier to professional opportunity.

Age and gender bias often prevented women from advancing in leadership. Participants noted that women were not trusted with leadership positions, with men seen as “stronger and more committed.” Even when women were given opportunities, they were often “undervalued”. One participant lamented about the practice of being included to satisfy a gender quota without being given a real voice. Supporting this assertion was a comment made to one respondent by a male colleague, which demonstrates how a seat at the table does not always translate to power or respect:

“My friend, you are nominated. We are elected. So, whatever we decide, you do” (Female IDI 2 Kisii County).

The most alarming form of discrimination reported was sexual harassment and exploitation, where female creatives contending with unsafe or exploitative conditions as hidden costs of participation. One dancer was poignant, noting that:

“You are told to sleep with someone to get a part,” (Female FGD_05 Kisumu)

The data and personal accounts paint a clear picture of an industry where discrimination is a persistent barrier. From financial and leadership bias to prejudice based on appearance, identity, and motherhood, these challenges systematically undermine the ability of female creatives to thrive. Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive approach to dismantle deeply ingrained biases and create a more equitable and safer environment for all.

4.3.2 Career Progression Challenges

While many creatives, (93.35%) had the goal of a long-term career in the creative industry, the progression path has been fraught with systemic and cultural challenges. A significant disconnect existed between their desires and reality. While 75.77% felt that they were “thriving,” only about half of the respondents (49.4%) felt satisfied with their career progression and opportunities (Table 5).

Table 5: Career progression and satisfaction

Have the goal of a long-term career in the creative industry		
	Frequency	Percentage
No	28	6.65
Yes	393	93.35
Thriving in the creative career		
No	102	24.23
Yes	319	75.77
Satisfied with career progression and opportunities		
No	212	50.6
Yes	207	49.4

Participants highlighted that gaining meaningful opportunities often hinged on personal connections and exploitative practices rather than merit. Auditions and selection processes were frequently perceived as mere formalities as one creative put it:

“They’re just wasting other people’s time... there are already people who were selected for these particular jobs” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

This unfavorable environment is further reinforced by a transactional culture where creatives are expected to exchange sexual favors for roles or visibility. Such transactional practices sideline merit, disempower ethical creatives, and create an unfavorable ecosystem where authenticity and skill are secondary. As one participant expressed,

“It’s either you know someone or you’re sleeping with someone. It’s not about your talent, it’s about what you’re willing to give in return” (Female FGD 2 Kisii County).

Beyond these individual-level barriers, creatives also face structural and cultural hurdles. The creative sector is often not regarded as a “profession” by society, with one participant noting that **“It’s seen as “just something small” (Female FGD 3 Kisii County).**

In rural and traditional communities, patriarchy further limits women’s opportunities, often forcing them to rely on male managers for advocacy.

4.3.3 Harassment in the Creative Workspace

Harassment is a widespread and deeply entrenched issue in Kenya’s creative industry, particularly for young women. A significant number (68.13%) of survey respondents had experienced some form of harassment (Table 6).

Table 6: Harassment

Ever felt harassed	Freq.	Percent
No	131	31.87
Yes	280	68.13

This issue transcends inappropriate comments and extends to severe physical and emotional abuse. One harrowing account described a well-known artist who was physically abused and raped after refusing a manager’s sexual advances. For many, rejecting such advances comes with dire consequences, including losing jobs or being blacklisted. One particularly disturbing account involved a well-known artist who refused a manager’s sexual advances:

“This manager locked her in a certain room... he would come now taking it forcefully... she has acid burn on the hand... she was being physically abused and raped at the same time” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

While extreme, this case exemplifies how power, when unchecked, leads to gross violations of safety and dignity. Creatives often feel forced to give in because they need the job for survival.

A lack of institutional seriousness and a culture of victim-blaming further perpetuate impunity. When online harassment is reported, law enforcement agents may dismiss it. One woman described a typical response as, **“He has not touched you physically, it’s just online” (Female FGD 6 Kilifi County).**

This lack of support, coupled with the fact that even other women can shame survivors online, creates an environment where reporting abuse is often futile and professionally dangerous.

4.3.4 Resources and Facilitation in the Workspace

Creatives in Kenya face significant structural challenges in accessing the resources and support needed to thrive. Financial constraints remain a major obstacle, with many unable to afford basic tools like cameras, studio time, or costumes. This forces many to “settle for less” and accept low pay, reinforcing a cycle of economic precarity. One artist rhetorically questioned, **“Entry-level camera is forty-five thousand... I have a child. So, what do I get?” (KII 5 Kisii County).**

Many participants expressed frustration with a lack of government support, arguing that the creative sector is often overlooked in favor of other industries like sports. As one creative lamented, **“The government is letting us down because they believe it is only Christians that have to be helped or footballers” (Female IDI 1 Kilifi County).**

In the absence of institutional backing, creatives resort to personal sacrifices or accept exploitative situations to fund their work. This disproportionately affects women, who are also more vulnerable to sexual exploitation when seeking support. As one woman shared,

“They want to support me... but there's one thing that they want first... they claim, ‘I want to have you first before you get to do all this’ (Female IDI 2 Mombasa County).

Beyond financial hardship, creatives frequently endure substandard and unsafe working conditions. Basic amenities such as private changing rooms, clean water, and food are often missing. This is particularly difficult for women, who face a lack of gender-sensitive spaces. The absence of accommodation not only creates discomfort but also exposes women to vulnerability and harassment, especially when changing their clothes in shared areas. Because workspaces in Kenya do not offer vending machine with sanitary products, the burden of providing these necessities often falls on fellow creatives, as one respondent noted about providing sanitary products for colleagues:

"I buy the pads myself. You come, I ask you, 'Why didn't you come?' You say, 'I'm on my periods and I didn't have a pad.' And I'm like, okay, take" (Female FGD 7 Kisumu County).

This informal support system is crucial but also highlights an urgent need for formal, gender-responsive policies. Ultimately, the lack of institutional support, accessible resources, and legal protection pushes many creatives to the brink of burnout and economic despair.

4.3.5 Persons with Disability

This study reveals that persons with disabilities, particularly women, face significant barriers within Kenya's creative sector, including a lack of access, pervasive stigma, and limited opportunities. These challenges stem from a combination of inaccessible infrastructure, systemic exclusion, and deeply ingrained societal attitudes. Event venues and audition sites often lack ramps or elevators; one interviewee explained:

"And also, another challenge. It is like when you go to these places where you're supposed to perform, they're not accessible. Maybe the stage is so high you can't climb there, you know? It limits you to some places, even in terms of accessibility." (Female IDI 6 Vihiga County).

Even more challenging are the societal attitudes that lead to the devaluation of their talent. Participants described being overlooked or patronized, with their abilities judged based on their physical condition rather than their skills. This ableist perception leads to underpayment and limited opportunities, with one creative reporting:

"People see me...seated on a wheelchair, so they try to associate what I can do on [the] wheelchair... So, they don't see me first ... as a person with the talent... They first start thinking, will she be able to do it?" (Female IDI 6 Vihiga County).

Despite progress in representation, the dominant perception that people with disabilities cannot be artists continues to limit access and opportunity. Some organizers see payment as a “favor” rather than an earned right. This respondent explained how she herself came to understand the potential of people with disabilities to create quality art:

“There is this perception that people living with disability cannot do art. But on TikTok, I see people doing challenges... I was surprised by a deaf spoken word artist who was being interpreted—you could still connect with the message.” (Female FGD 6 Kilifi County).

For women with disabilities, the intersection of gender and disability compounds marginalization, particularly when balancing family responsibilities. As one participant explained:

“Maybe she’s a singer. Maybe she’s an artist. They’re not considered a lot. They’re not considered at all. Especially if she is abled differently and she has a family. We don’t see aspect of including them in our things, in our creative spaces...” (Female IDI 6 Nakuru County).

This reality highlights the urgent need for systemic change, starting with educating society to dismantle negative attitudes and embrace the full potential of artists with disabilities.

4.3.6 Insecurity in the Workspace

Insecurity is a pervasive and gendered challenge in Kenya's creative sector, acting as a significant barrier to career progression for women. Safety concerns are not just psychological, but they also carry a financial burden because women creatives must often shoulder additional costs for transportation, accommodation, or companions just to feel secure. One respondent captured this dilemma succinctly, asking **"Why should it cost more to make me feel safer?" (Female FGD 5 Kilifi County)** while referencing the higher costs of women-only ride-sharing services.

This expectation that individuals, especially women, must personally pay to ensure their own safety highlights systemic gaps in workplace protections. This issue is a significant barrier to career progression, directly limiting access to opportunities that require travel, networking, or working after dark.

Quantitative data also show that 59.52% of women have been prevented from applying or bidding for a creative job due to late working hours (Table 7). This high percentage clearly demonstrates how a lack of safety directly hinders career growth and limits women's access to professional opportunities they are qualified for. The burden of personal safety becomes a non-negotiable cost that many are unwilling to expend, forcing them to miss out on jobs and stifling their professional development.

Table 7: Insecurity as a barrier to opportunities

Late working hours as a reason for not applying, bidding or working on a creative job.		
	Frequency	Percentage
No	168	40.48
Yes	247	59.52

4.3.7 Coping Mechanisms

Young women creatives in Kenya have developed diverse strategies to cope with the gendered and structural barriers they face. A key approach involves collective resistance and solidarity, particularly in confronting sexual exploitation. Participants emphasized the power of unity in refusing coercive conditions, with one creative noting that if all models refuse sexual advances, they can collectively check sexual exploitation:

"If they approach all these models for sex and they all say, look, there is no event without these models... we just take our ground and stand" (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

In addition to collective action, women employ a range of personal and professional coping strategies. Many used assertive communication to set boundaries. One FGD respondent said perpetrators can be confronted by asking, **“Why are you doing this to your wife? Why are you doing this to your kids?”** (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

Others have learned to withdraw from toxic environments altogether to protect their integrity and mental well-being, as reported by a participant who explained, “I tend to leave that job then I start from zero again” (Female FGD 4 Kisii County). These principled choices reflect a commitment to long-term self-worth over short-term gain.

Some women also create structural safeguards, such as using contracts, rate cards, and legal advisors to protect themselves. This proactive approach allows them to set their value without compromising their dignity. One participant emphasized,

“Trying to understand how to navigate these spaces by protecting yourself using contracts... also having even a legal advisor is important” (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County).

Digital platforms and social media have also become crucial tools for coping. Participants discussed using social media to expose perpetrators of sexual exploitation, warn others, and demand accountability. Leveraging free platforms like TikTok is seen as a way to gain visibility and bypass gatekeepers, as it is a “free platform” where “everybody will come and see.” As one respondent noted,

“I can decide to expose you. There is the power of social media... We can talk, we can voice these things out... let other women come and support me” (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

Beyond external strategies, women rely on emotional resilience and self-care. Many practice self-acceptance, others use solitude, reflection, or simple activities like eating and sleeping to decompress and manage stress. One creative stated, **“Me, the first way I cope with it is I accept myself the way I am”** (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

The importance of therapy and finding a support group was also highlighted to remain grounded and process challenges, in addition to creating safe and supportive networks. Some artists build teams of trusted allies, while others emphasize the importance of cultivating a strong community. As one woman expressed, **“Personally, what I did was... find a therapist and find support... a group that supports me while I’m going through all those challenges” (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County).**

Adaptability and principle-driven choices form a backbone for perseverance, with many believing that by having strong principles they can't be defeated. These diverse coping mechanisms demonstrate how young women navigate the creative sector with agency, resilience, and a clear-eyed understanding of their worth and values.

4.4 Gender Pay Gap

Low and unequal pay is a persistent challenge in Kenya's creative sector, deeply affecting artists' livelihoods and mental well-being. Creatives frequently reported being underpaid, having their wages arbitrarily slashed, or not being paid at all, even after delivering satisfactory work. Women were particularly vulnerable to these injustices. A significant majority of survey respondents confirmed this, with 63.98% stating that men and women who do the same job are not paid equally (Table 8). Furthermore, 66.9% believed that men and women do not have equal opportunities for a wage increase (Table 8).

Table 8: Pay Disparities

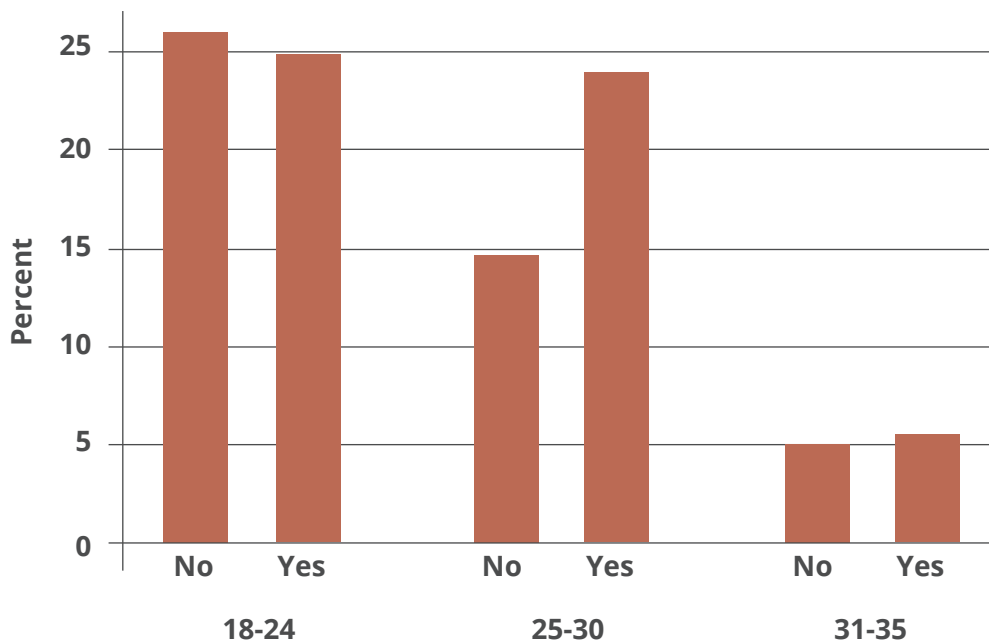
Men and women, doing same job are paid equally	Frequency	Percentage
No	238	63.98
Yes	134	36.02
Men and women have equal opportunities for a wage increase		
No	281	66.9
Yes	139	33.1
Have been underpaid for my creativity because of my gender		
No	180	45.69
Yes	214	54.31

A participant who was the lead in three different productions was shocked to learn that she was paid a quarter of what her male counterparts with fewer appearances earned. This underpayment is so normalized that women are expected to accept lower earnings regardless of their performance or experience. As one woman stated,

"I became friends with the guys... they told me the amount of money they're being paid and I'm like okay I'm the main character in all the three set books... only to sit down with the owner of the group... and he tells me a quarter of what the rest are paid" (Female FGD 4 Kilifi County).

Overall, more than half of all respondents, 54.31%, reported being underpaid for their creativity because of their gender. Looking at pay disparity across different age groups, we see that lower age groups of 18–24 and 25–30 experience the most impact. This problem was particularly pronounced among creatives between the ages of 25 and 30, who were most susceptible to being underpaid (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Pay disparities across age groups



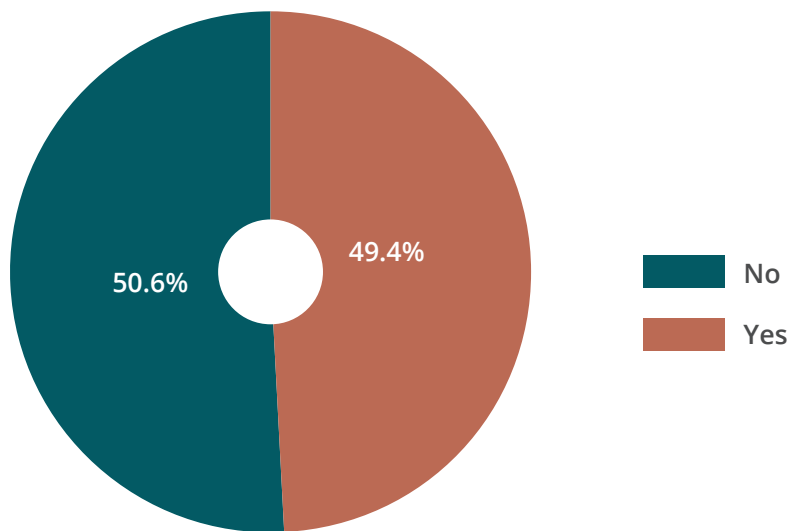
4.5 Career Expectations of Young Women in the Creative Sector

Young women in Kenya's creative sector described the field as expanding and transforming, marked by significant growth alongside persistent challenges. Many acknowledged that despite ongoing issues of inequality and underpayment, the creative industry is becoming a more viable source of income and self-expression. One participant emphasized:

“It has been a source of income because when I go perform and do all that, at the end of the day, there is something in my pocket. So, creative work can be a serious source of income if everybody also leverages on it” (Female IDI 2 Kisii County).

Creative women’s mixed feeling are reflected in the nearly equal division of satisfaction (49.4%) and non-satisfaction (50.6%) with career progression, (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Creative Work Satisfaction



Progress in the sector is tied to the rise of digital platforms, which offer financial benefits and increased visibility and recognition. At the grassroots level, targeted programs have enabled young women to participate in leadership, publicly showcase their talents, and support their families. One creative noted, **“...She supports buying food... paying school fees... So, they have peace in their families” (Female IDI 2 Kisumu County).**

Despite this optimism, significant barriers remain, particularly for women pursuing independent careers. Ageism, rigid body image standards, and social stigma still hinder full participation. One aspiring model shared, **“As a model above 30 you cannot be taken to any modeling agency... But for male models, they even model at the age of 40” (Female FGD 6 Kisumu County).**

The data show that satisfaction with career progression is associated with a respondent's education level. While 100% of respondents with a primary education and 52.07% of those with a secondary education reported satisfaction, this dropped to 40.17% for those with a bachelor's degree (Table 9). This suggests that higher education levels may lead to higher career expectations that are not being met within the current industry structure. (See also 4.2.5.)

Table 9: Creative career satisfaction across educational levels

	Satisfaction with career progression and opportunities		P-value
	No	Yes	
Education Level			0.021
Primary	0(0.9)	8(100)	
Secondary	58(47.93)	63(52.07)	
Certificate/Diploma	81(48.21)	87(51.79)	
Bachelor's Degree	70(59.83)	47(40.17)	
Postgraduate	2(50.00)	2(50.00)	

Young women also face systemic discrimination and an entrenched gatekeeping culture where advancement is contingent not on merit but on prior visibility and personal networks. Auditions are often seen as performative, with roles preselected for individuals regardless of talent. As one participant lamented, **"I think the acting industry has just been left for those people who are already on the line in it"** (*Female FGD 3 Kisumu County*).

Living outside of urban areas also limits opportunities, with one woman noting that **"Most of the big opportunities, the auditions... are specifically in the capital city"** (*Female FGD 3 Kisumu County*).

Despite these drawbacks, the collective sentiment among participants suggests optimism. They believe that with continued advocacy and policy change, women will secure stronger positions. As one participant put it, **"We've started to be heard"** (*Female IDI 2 Kisumu County*).

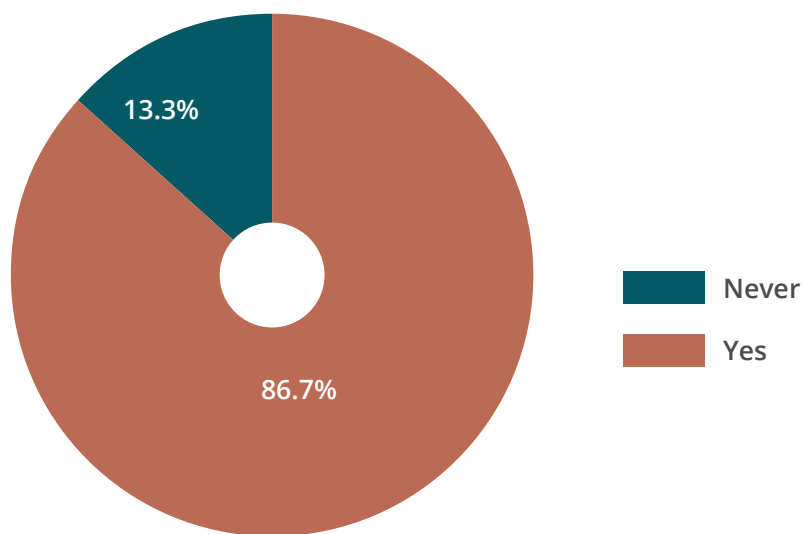
This is supported by key informants who noted that women are learning to assert their value more confidently, shifting the focus toward performance and delivery rather than gender, negotiating **"not as female, but as people that are able to deliver"** (*KII 4 Kisumu County*).

The creative industries are therefore increasingly seen as central to national development and youth employment, a shift from which young women are beginning to benefit as targeted opportunities emerge.

4.6 Experiences of Workplace Harassment.

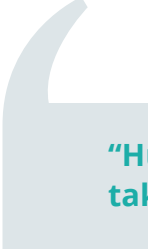
In the creative sector, women frequently encounter unwelcome and objectifying comments that diminish their professionalism and reduce their value to their physical appearance. This is a persistent issue, with 86.7% of respondents reporting that they had received negative comments about their appearance (Figure 8). A further analysis showed that out of all respondents who had experienced negative comments at some point, a staggering 92.13% had experienced this in the past year, highlighting the ongoing nature of this problem (Table 10).

Figure 8: Negative comments on the creatives' appearance



Beyond inappropriate comments, women face pervasive body shaming and public commentary on their appearance, both in-person and online. Creatives reported being reduced to their physical attributes even while performing on stage, reflecting the persistent emphasis on physique over skill. This is further compounded by online harassment, where women are targeted with vitriolic comments about their bodies, which can have a profound effect on their mental health. One woman recounted being bluntly told, **“They chose you because of the ass”** (*Female FGD 6 Kisii County*).

The harassment takes a more sinister turn with verbal sexual harassment, which can include rape jokes and unsolicited sexual propositions. As one participant described, she read a comment where a woman was attacked online with a chilling remark:



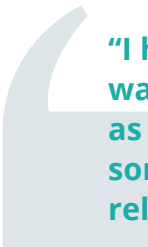
“Huyu anafaa ashikwe adinywe” (This one should be taken and be raped) (Female IDI 6 Mombasa County).

Furthermore, women are often confined to support roles, such as cooking and cleaning on a film set, even if it is not in their contract, simply because of their gender. In these environments, women must not only do their jobs but also constantly defend their legitimacy as professionals against deeply entrenched gender bias. When they resist, they are met with dismissive comments like,



“You’re the girl here so how can I wash utensils and you are here?” (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County).

Many participants shared stories of others, especially women, who have faced exclusion or unfair treatment due to gender, religion, or family status. A striking example involved religious discrimination:



“I had a friend who had gone for recruitment... she was told that she must not cover her head. You know as Muslims we must cover our head... I think that is somehow sexual harassment because it is against our religion” (Female FGD 4 Kisii County).

4.7 Dignified and Fulfilling Work

Dignified and fulfilling work are two distinct yet interconnected concepts. Dignity is shaped by how individuals are treated by others, through respect, fairness, and recognition, while fulfillment stems from personal satisfaction, purpose, and growth. Both concepts are informed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on decent work and inclusive growth. For this study, participants shared their views in terms of their perception of dignified work, perception of fulfilling work, and personal experiences of each.

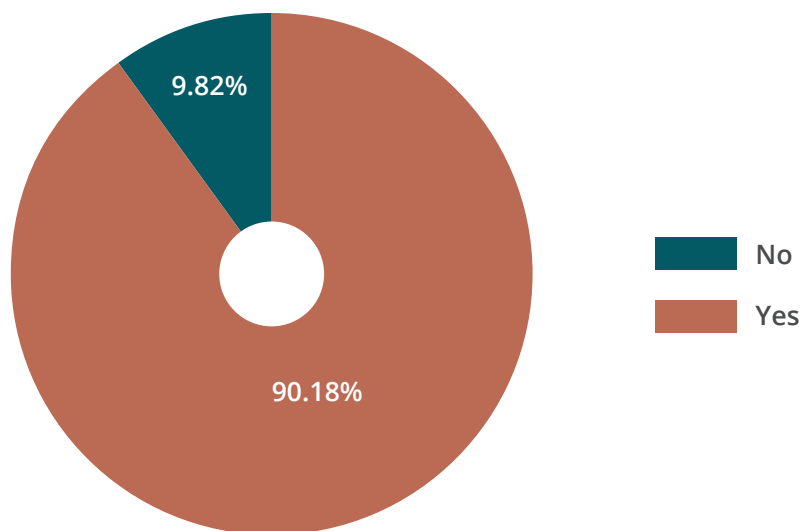
4.7.1 Perceptions and Experiences of Dignified Work

Participants emphasized that dignity comes from being seen as a professional, not just a creative. One key informant stated that **“Dignified work is one which you are respected, accepted, and where there is good pay”** (*KII 1 Kilifi County*).

Fair pay is central to this idea, as one dancer passionately asserted: **“I need to be paid according to the sweat I give you on that stage”** (*Female FGD 3 Kisumu County*).

In the quantitative data, most respondents (90.18%) identified their creative profession as dignifying.

Figure 9: Perception that creative work is dignifying



Additionally, workplace discrimination, such as being given isolated or poorly ventilated workspaces while male colleagues are given “a clean place, well ventilated,” undermines their dignity. However, women actively defend their dignity by refusing inappropriate requests, asserting that **“if you accept you have broken your respect”** (*Female FGD 1 Kilifi County*).

4.7.2 Perceptions and Experiences of Fulfilling Work

The majority (93%) of the survey respondents consider their creative work fulfilling. This high number highlights that for many creatives, their profession is a passion that provides a sense of purpose beyond financial gain.

Table 10: Perception that Creative Work is Fulfilling

Consider my work as a creative fulfilling	Frequency	Percent
No	28	6.91
Yes	377	93.09

Women in this study indicated that fulfillment comes from seeing a positive impact and receiving appreciation. One respondent shared that her work is fulfilling because she is satisfied with the product she has created:

“Fulfilling work to me, it’s something, I’m satisfied with the product. I used my sweat, yes, produced it, yes, edited it, yes. And I am excited about how it came up” (Female IDI 3 Kisii County).

Others find deep fulfillment in serving their communities and helping other artists. As one creative noted, **“I help underground artists by bringing them to the limelight... when they reach out to me when they are happy, I’m usually satisfied” (Female FGD 6 Kisii County).**

However, a key tension exists between personal and financial fulfillment. As one participant explained, her work is “fulfilling because it allows you to express your feelings but at the same time it is unfulfilling because you can’t manage to pay all your bills with the amount of money that you get from it”(Female FGD 3 Kilifi County). This highlights the ongoing struggle to align passion with economic reality in the creative sector.

4.8 Emerging Issues

4.8.1 Mental Health

Mental health issues are an urgent and widespread problem across the creative sector. Creatives are battling depression, anxiety, stress, and even suicidal thoughts, often as a direct result of their demanding environment. A major reason for mental health struggles in creative fields is the constant need to be seen and the often-harsh criticism that comes with being so prominently in the public eye. With social media, anyone can be critical, and artists are always being judged. As one woman explained:

"I expect that that video will go viral. But when you go to the notification bar, you find so many comments... when you read the comments, they are so bad, that can affect someone's mental health" (Female FGD 6 Kisumu County).

Another culprit driving mental health problems is the constant pressure to look perfect. Strict rules about physical appearance in modeling in particular cause a lot of stress. One woman shared:

"They disqualify just based on physical appearance; most female models, they are struggling with mental issues. They have mental health issues, eating disorders. You find they are trying not to eat so that they can maintain that weight" (Female FGD 6 Kisumu County).

The pressure to always appear happy and energetic, regardless of internal struggles, is profoundly draining. Interviewees highlighted pressure to **"fake it, you have to give that smile, you have to give that energy. But deep down, you have some mental issues, maybe because of the work pressure, the expectation"** (Female FGD 6 Kisumu County).

This hidden struggle can have tragic results, as one person noted about a model:

"She was found dead, she just decided to kill herself because people neglected that. And a day before she killed herself, she was in a magazine smiling. You couldn't even notice she's struggling with something" (Female FGD 6 Kisumu County).

Financial instability is another major driver of mental distress. Many creatives struggle to earn enough money, leading to constant worry. Expectations they face outside of work compound their stress, as one creative highlighted:

“My own instance with depression came from pressure... people expecting that I have money and... responsibilities that a parent delegates... I don’t want people to know I have debt. I don’t want people to know that I’m struggling in life and all those things were giving me pressure until I got into depression (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County).

Despite these intense pressures, there is a clear lack of accessible mental health support. Many “just hold it back,” leading to mounting stress and frustration. To start addressing this, one respondent suggested, **“if there can be a way of organizing mental health seminars, summits for artists, specifically for artists. We bring therapists” (Female IDI 3 Kisii County).**

4.8.2 Care Responsibilities

From the analyzed data, one major yet often unacknowledged challenge highlighted is the overwhelming care responsibility, disproportionately borne by women in the creative sector. This isn’t just about childcare, but also household duties and the expectation to prioritize family over career.

Many female creatives face immense pressure to balance their artistic pursuits with demanding family roles. The pressure to choose between their passion and their family is real, with some being told to quit their careers when they get pregnant.

“It is difficult to undertake my creative work fully because of the responsibilities of taking care of the child. I cannot go to studio, I cannot write songs... It’s not easy” (Female FGD 6 Kisii County).

The creative industry itself is unwelcoming to mothers. Employers often don't understand or support the need for childcare.

"I was supposed to quit acting not because I want to, but because I'm pregnant. There was a huge quarrel, them saying I have to quit" (Female FGD 6 Kisumu County).

Cultural beliefs about women's roles as caretakers put a heavy load on them. Young female creatives are constantly juggling many demanding roles, often without help or recognition, making it incredibly hard to focus on their art. The expectation is clear:

"If I have a child... I have to step down a little bit and take care of the child until they get to a certain age" (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County).

4.8.3 Work-Life Balance

Young female creatives struggle with the demands of their artistic careers alongside societal expectations, family responsibilities, and personal well-being. They face immense pressure and judgment from partners and society regarding their commitment to their art, especially when it conflicts with traditional domestic roles. Late-night performances, public appearances, and interactions with male colleagues often lead to conflict at home. As one creative stated, her partner would **"Imagine that whenever I went out to perform that I was going to flirt with other men" (Female FGD 4 Kisii County).**

These competing demands result in the exclusion of women from high-stake roles or assignments that require full-time availability. One participant recounted how after having a child, she was told, "We can't work with you, you'll tell us you're going to see your child, we want someone who is free" (Female FGD 2 Kilifi County). This highlights the harsh reality that women are often expected to choose between their family and their career. Furthermore, creatives often juggle other commitments like studies, which adds to stress and burnout, forcing them to choose among money, family, and their education.

4.8.4 Patriarchy

Patriarchal norms undermine the professional credibility and leadership of female creatives, leading to them being doubted or given fewer opportunities than men. This is driven by a cultural mindset that assumes a man will “deliver faster, practice and then perform, while a woman’s abilities are met with skepticism” (KII 4 Kisumu County). A creative shared a common experience of being dismissed by older men unable to conceive the notion that a woman could be in a leadership role. She recounts the following typical exchange: **“We are looking for the owner. Where is he? I’m like, it’s me. ‘No, no, no, we want a man’”** (Female IDI 2 Mombasa County).

Cultural values also lead to judgment from family and the wider community, especially regarding how female creatives present themselves or balance their personal lives. Young women face widespread societal stigma in roles considered culturally inappropriate or overly visible. For example, female models in swimsuit categories face public disapproval and are often associated with promiscuity, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. One model stated a commonly held assumption, that **“models [are] easy or whores”** (Female FGD 3 Kisumu County).

The expectation for women to prioritize marriage and family over career is another strong cultural pressure that makes it hard for them to fully pursue their dreams. This pressure to follow traditional life paths also comes from family, who often remind young women of cultural expectations about getting married and having children. One creative recalled, **“The biggest concern of people back at home is when I will be married, when I will have kids, when I will create a home”** (KII 4 Kisii County).



5.0 Discussion



This study's findings illuminate the multifaceted challenges and opportunities shaping the journeys of young women creatives in Kenya. The demographic data, showing a high concentration of young adults in their early to mid-20s, aligns with the literature on Africa's young people's zeal and the creative sector's potential as a primary employer for this demographic (Henry & Pomeroy, 2018; Vickery, 2015). This finding underscores the urgency of addressing gender inequities now to ensure a future where this large, talented cohort can thrive.

A critical finding is the pervasive capacity and information gap. While nearly half of the survey respondents had some form of professional training, qualitative interviews repeatedly highlighted a profound lack of knowledge regarding business fundamentals. This deficiency is a key component of the gendered inequities hampering female creatives, as it exposes them to exploitation and prevents them from leveraging their talents into sustainable livelihoods. This is consistent with broader studies by African Union (2020) on informal economies and entrepreneurship in Africa, which note that a lack of formal business and financial literacy disproportionately affects women, hindering their ability to scale operations and secure market access.

The burden of care responsibilities emerged as a significant, yet often overlooked, barrier. Survey data show that over a quarter of young female creatives have children, and qualitative narratives reveal the intense logistical and societal pressures this creates. The finding that most rely on “other” caregiving options or school, rather than formal support, highlights a lack of infrastructure that could enable their professional participation. This aligns with global findings from organizations like the International Labour Organization, which emphasize that the unequal distribution of unpaid care work is a major factor in limiting women’s labor force participation and career progression (ILO, 2018). The societal judgment faced by women who try to balance their creative work with motherhood is a clear manifestation of the gender norms and power dynamics the study sought to investigate. This burden limits their time, restricts their mobility, and reinforces traditional expectations, severely undermining their ability to compete in an industry characterized by irregular, demanding hours.

The use of social media presents a powerful paradox. As a dynamic digital space, social media is an enabler of creative entrepreneurship, as evidenced by the high usage of platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram. It provides a means to bypass traditional gatekeepers and fosters a sense of empowerment. However, this freedom comes at a cost. The qualitative data on cyberbullying and women ***“bashed by fellow women,”*** as was expressed by one study respondent (***Female FGD 3 Kisumu County***), underscores a significant emotional and psychological toll. This finding highlights that while digital platforms have democratized access, they have also created new, unregulated spaces for harassment, which can undermine the safety and dignity for creatives, which UNCTAD (2022) identifies as crucial for a thriving creative economy. This experience is mirrored in literature on digital safety, which often finds that women face higher rates of online abuse, leading to self-censorship and withdrawal from digital spaces that are vital for their livelihoods (Gillwald & Partridge, 2022).

The study therefore confirms that young female creatives in Kenya operate within a dual reality: they are at the forefront of a booming economic sector, yet they are systematically marginalized by a lack of professional knowledge, a heavy and unacknowledged care burden, and a digital landscape that is both empowering and perilous. The findings underscore that effective strategies must move beyond promoting creativity to actively dismantling the structural and cultural barriers that limit women’s success and security in the industry.

6.0 Conclusion



The primary data from the “Behind the Scenes” project confirms that young female creatives are a vital and energetic force within Kenya’s creative sector. They are well-represented across a diverse range of sub-sectors, from performing arts to new media, and are actively leveraging digital platforms to build their careers and voices.

However, the study also finds that their immense potential is being hampered by several deeply entrenched and interconnected challenges. Their lack of knowledge and formal training in business and legal aspects of their work leaves them financially vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation. This is compounded by their significant and often unsupported burden of caregiving responsibilities, which limits their time and career growth while subjecting them to social judgment. Furthermore, while social media provides a powerful platform for professional development and expression, it also exposes them to a toxic environment of cyberbullying and harassment.

These findings collectively demonstrate that the barriers to success for young female creatives in Kenya are not a matter of talent or passion, but are more broadly rooted in systemic gender inequities. Addressing these challenges is paramount to ensuring that Kenya’s creative economy can reach its full potential, providing a more equitable, dignified, and empowering environment for all its participants.

7.0 Recommendations

Based on the evidence and insights gathered from this study, the following recommendations are proposed to key stakeholders to help address gender inequities and better support young female creatives in Kenya:

- The Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry should develop, implement, and enforce policies that strengthen intellectual property protection and promote fair contracting practices.
- The Ministry of Education should ensure that tertiary institutions and creative guilds integrate training on business management, financial literacy, and digital safety into creative arts curricula.
- The Ministry of Youth and Creative Affairs should collaborate with financial institutions to create tailored grants, loans, and investment opportunities that are accessible to young women and enable them to scale their creative enterprises.
- Parliament should enact legislation requiring creative-sector leaders and employers to uphold industry-wide standards on contracts, pricing, and fair wages—reducing exploitation and ensuring young women receive equitable compensation for their work.
- The Government, through the Ministry of Gender, should establish clear anti-harassment policies and foster safe, inclusive work environments both online and offline. These policies should also include flexible work arrangements and remote-work options to support women creatives who balance professional and caregiving responsibilities. This matters even more given a recent review showing that nearly half of Kenya's major creative-sector policies now address gender issues — a sign that gender-sensitive policymaking is gaining ground in the country (see Appendix 1)
- Donors to consider funding programs that provide hands-on training for young women on business skills, intellectual property law, and digital marketing, with a focus on practical application.
- Gender equality organizations to launch public campaigns and educational initiatives that challenge stereotypes of traditional gender roles and celebrate the professional success of female creatives.
- Donors to also support the creation and sustainability of community platforms and networks where young female creatives can share experiences, offer support, and advocate for change.

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Appendix 1:

Some Key Creative Sector Policy Documents in Kenya

Legal/Policy Document	Core objectives	Gender considerations
National Museums and Heritage Act. (2006)	- Support national repositories and museums for the purposes of scientific, research, cultural, technological, and human interest. - Promote the identification, protection, and conservation of cultural and natural heritage . - Promote the use of cultural resources for socio-economic development.	No gender considerations
The Trademarks Act (2007)	- Provide a legal framework for registering, using, and enforcing trademarks in Kenya. - Promote fair competition, prevent the unauthorized use of trademarks, and safeguard the rights of brand owners.	No gender considerations
Youth Enterprise and Development Fund Order, 2007	Provide financial and business support to young people for job creation.	No gender considerations
Micro and Small Enterprise Act, 2012	Promote and develop micro, small, and medium enterprises.	Includes specific provisions for women- and youth-led enterprises to enhance participation and economic empowerment.
Technical and Vocational Education and Training Act, (2013)	Regulate and ensure the provision of quality vocational and technical education.	Emphasizes the importance of access to TVET programs for women and youth, aiming to increase gender parity in technical fields.

Kenya Music Policy (2015)	Promote the growth of the local music industry.	Recognizes the need to expand women's participation in the music industry as well as the importance of equitable access to career development opportunities and resources for women.
Women Enterprise Development Fund Order (Strategic Plan) (2017)	Provide affordable credit and capacity-building to women entrepreneurs.	Specifically targets women to ensure that rural and marginalized groups benefit equally.
National Youth Service Act (2018)	Facilitate youth training in discipline, national service, and vocational skills.	Includes a focus on gender inclusiveness in recruitment and training.
Information, Communication & Technology Policy (2019)	- Create the infrastructure and conditions needed for quality internet access across the country. - Grow an internet ecosystem that supports local manufacturing and creativity. - Grow the digital and traditional economy, including the gig economy.	No gender considerations
National Culture and Heritage Policy (2020)	- Mainstream culture into social and economic development processes. - Protect and promote cultural expression and diversity. - Promote and facilitate investment in creative industries.	Acknowledges the arts as key to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

National Film Policy (2021)	- Facilitate investment in physical infrastructure for the film industry's growth and development. - Regulate film production, classification, and distribution. - Strengthen human resources for an education-to-professional life vision in the creative industry. - Foster local talent, protect intellectual property, and promote Kenya as a film destination. - Establish financial and non-financial incentives for growth of the film industry (e.g., the National Film Fund)	Includes a focus on spurring opportunities for women(among others) in the film sector.
The Copyright (Amendment) Act, 2022	- Protect intellectual property and help creatives secure rights over their work. - Encourage originality by ensuring creators benefit financially from their work.	No gender considerations
Draft Creative Industries Bill (2023)	- Facilitate the development of creative industries. - Recognize, leverage, and elevate creative industries as a key contributor to development. - Facilitate investment and partnerships for the growth and global positioning of the creative sector.	No gender considerations

Kenya Creative Economy Development Policy, 2024	• Harness the potential of the creative sector to drive economic development and generate employment opportunities. • Provide clear legal frameworks to support and regulate creative industry activities. • Improve access to financial resources for creative professionals and organizations.	Highlights the inclusion of women and the need to create an enabling environment where all individuals—regardless of gender or disability—have equitable access to opportunities within the creative industry.
The Creative Economy Support Bill, 2024.	• Establish mechanisms to support individuals and organizations within the creative industry. • Promote the development of entrepreneurial skills linked to the creative economy through educational programs in higher institutions. • Facilitate investments in infrastructure to support the creative industry's growth and accessibility. • Facilitate access to financial resources for creative artists and organizations to stimulate industry growth.	Emphasizes the participation of underrepresented groups, including women, youth, and persons living with disabilities.
Kenya National Library Service Board Act Cap 225	• Establish the Kenya National Library Service Board and provide for its functions. • Promote, establish, equip, manage, maintain, and develop libraries in Kenya. • Provide library and information services to the public, schools, institutions of higher learning, and other entities.	No gender considerations



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