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Policy Brief

Structural Barriers to Decent Work for Young Female Creatives in Kenya: A Policy Perspective.

Executive Summary

Kenya's creative sector accounts for approximately 5.32% of GDP, generating an estimated US$6–7 billion annually. Women play a central role in this expansion, yet many young female creatives remain excluded from decent, safe, and sustainable work due to persistent structural and gender-based barriers. This brief draws on a mixed-methods study conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, involving 422 young female creatives aged 18–35 across diverse subsectors.

The findings reveal that gender inequity in Kenya's creative economy is systemic and embedded in how opportunity, income, and power are distributed. Women reported unequal pay for comparable work, restricted access to higher-earning technical and leadership roles, and exclusion from decision-making spaces shaped by male-dominated norms. Sexual harassment, coercive recruitment practices, and pervasive online abuse were widespread, often occurring in environments with weak reporting systems and limited accountability. These challenges are compounded by disproportionate care responsibilities, unsafe and informal work settings, and gaps in business skills, contract literacy, and professional support that heighten vulnerability to exploitation. These interconnected barriers undermine women's economic security and constrain the sector's long-term sustainability and competitiveness. This calls for targeted policy and programmatic efforts to address these gender-based inequities and coordinated, sector-wide reforms.

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Introduction

The creative economy is one of the fastest-growing sectors, contributing approximately 3% of global GDP, supporting nearly 29.5 million jobs, and generating over $624 billion in trade through industries such as film, music, design, and digital media. The growth is particularly evident across Africa, where cultural and creative industries account for approximately 8.2% of total employment, the highest regional share globally. Having generated an estimated two million jobs in 2022 alone, the sector stands as a vital engine for tackling youth unemployment and driving inclusive development across the continent.

In Kenya, the creative sector has evolved from an unstructured cultural area to a formal part of the country's economic strategy, contributing 5% of the national GDP and ambitious plans to double this contribution by 2025. The sector employs around 500,000 people in formal roles and over two million in informal creative activities, driven largely by youth innovation, digital transformation, and growing internet access. Women play central roles across performing arts, design, audiovisual production, and digital media, making their full and equitable participation critical to the sector's continued growth and Kenya's broader development goals.

Despite their significant presence, young female creatives face persistent structural and gender-based barriers that limit their ability to access decent work and advance their careers. Women remain concentrated in low-paying, informal jobs particularly in crafts, performance, and small-scale creative entrepreneurship while men dominate high-paying technical and leadership positions. Key barriers include unequal pay, unsafe working conditions, sexual harassment, limited access to finance and professional networks, and care-giving responsibilities that disproportionately affect women's career progression.

Purpose of this Policy Brief

This policy brief aims to inform targeted policy and programmatic efforts to address gender-based inequities in Kenya's creative sector. It is based on evidence from a recent mixed-methods study conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. The study engaged 422 young female creatives aged 18–35 from diverse creative

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subsectors across the country through a quantitative survey, complemented by 7 focus group discussions, 20 in-depth interviews, and 10 key informant interviews. By drawing on the lived experiences of young women across diverse creative fields, the brief provides an evidence-based foundation for strengthening policy responses and advancing gender equity within the creative sector.

Why Gender Equality Matters for the Creative Sector in Kenya.

Although women constitute a significant share of the Kenyan workforce, many young female creatives are unable to fully benefit from or contribute to the creative sector's expansion due to persistent structural and gender-based barriers. Unequal pay, limited access to finance, unsafe working conditions, sexual harassment, unpaid care responsibilities, exploitation and restricted leadership opportunities reduce productivity and constrain economic growth. As a result, the sector loses income, innovation, and overall economic potential. These inequities also have broader national consequences. When women are excluded from decent and sustainable work, household incomes decline, poverty reduction efforts slow, and progress toward inclusive growth is weakened. Addressing gender-based inequities is therefore not merely a matter of fairness; it is an economic and strategic necessity for strengthening productivity, expanding employment, and supporting Kenya's long-term development.

Gender Inequities in Kenya's Creative Sector: Key Patterns and Structural Barriers

Findings from the research conducted by the ICRW in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation show that young women in Kenya's creative sector face multiple, overlapping forms of gender-based inequity that limit their participation, recognition, and economic returns. These inequities are not isolated incidents, but systemic patterns embedded in how the sector operates. They manifest through sexual and online harassment, unequal pay and restricted access to higher-earning roles, exclusion from leadership and decision-making spaces, identity-based discrimination, gendered care responsibilities, unsafe and non-inclusive work environments, and gaps in professional support and infrastructure. Together, these structural barriers shape who is visible, who is valued, and who can build sustainable careers within Kenya's creative economy.

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Unequal Pay and Barriers to Higher-Earning Roles

Unequal pay remains a concern in Kenya's creative sector. The ICRW survey findings show that 63.98% of respondents reported that men and women doing the same job are not paid equally, while 66.9% indicated that they do not have equal opportunities for pay increases. More than half (54.31%) also reported having been underpaid for their work because of their gender. These disparities were reported across multiple sectors and were reflected in accounts of unequal earnings despite comparable or greater responsibility. One creative shared that although she was the lead in several productions, she was paid only a quarter of what her male counterparts earned, despite doing the same job.

Beyond differences in wages for similar roles, women also described unequal access to work that generates higher income. Women also reported that higher-paying technical and production assignments were more frequently allocated to men, while women were assigned lower-paying segments of creative work. For example, in photography and videography, men were more often assigned high-value documentary work, whereas women were assigned events such as weddings or baby showers, which attract lower compensation. These patterns were not described as a reflection of skill gaps, but as evidence of how gender shapes the distribution of work within the sector. Ultimately, unequal pay for comparable work and restricted access to higher-paying roles limit women's income growth, financial stability, and long-term career progression within the creative industry.

Gender and Identity-Based Exclusion in Leadership and Opportunities

More than half of respondents (51.33%) reported experiencing gender discrimination in Kenya's creative sector. This exclusion is particularly visible in leadership and decision-making spaces, which remain largely male-dominated and shaped by patriarchal norms that question women's authority and professional credibility. Participants described a cultural mindset that assumes men are more capable leaders, while women's competence is met with skepticism. Others described being sidelined in formal roles, as men feel entitled. These same norms also shape everyday

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workplace dynamics, where women reported being assigned domestic-type tasks on film sets, even when such duties were not part of their contracts. These findings reflect a gender hierarchy that positions men as default decision-makers and women as subordinates within the sector.

Exclusion also operates through identity-based gatekeeping that determines who is granted access to opportunity, which is frequently based not on competence, but on age, appearance, or other identity markers. Women described how advancement within the sector is shaped by these factors rather than skill alone. In modelling and performance industries, opportunities decline sharply after the age of 30, while men continue working into later years. Pregnancy also emerged as a basis for exclusion especially in roleplays. Participants also reported being evaluated on physical attributes of their body shape rather than talent. Religious identity similarly emerged as a barrier in recruitment processes, including cases where women were told they could not cover their heads during auditions or interviews. Women with disabilities likewise described being judged on physical condition rather than talent and facing inaccessible environments that limit their participation. These findings reveal that discrimination in the creative sector operates both through entrenched power hierarchies and through identity-based gatekeeping that restricts women's advancement and recognition.

Sexual Harassment, Exploitation, and Online Abuse

Sexual harassment, exploitation, and online abuse are the most pervasive challenges faced by young women in Kenya's creative sector. The ICRW study found that 68.13% of respondents had experienced some form of sexual harassment, while 86.7% reported receiving negative comments about their appearance, many within the past year. Participants described sexualized remarks, body shaming, rape threats, and unsolicited propositions as routine across digital platforms. When such abuse is reported, responses are often dismissive, due to weak accountability systems that fail to recognize online abuse as a serious form of harm, despite it being linked to emotional distress.
Beyond digital spaces, harassment was described as embedded in recruitment and opportunity structures. Women reported a transactional culture in which access to opportunities depends on sexual compliance or knowing someone rather than merit. Women who refused

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advances reported losing opportunities or being sidelined professionally. In the most severe cases, abuse escalated to violence, where women who rejected a manager's sexual advances are confined and repeatedly assaulted. Without stronger accountability mechanisms and accessible reporting pathways, such abuses will persist, leaving women's safety, dignity, and equitable participation in Kenya's creative economy unprotected.

Gendered Care Responsibilities and Work–Life Constraints

The report found that women's participation in the creative sector is constrained by gendered care responsibilities and unequal domestic expectations. Findings demonstrated that women carry the primary responsibility for childcare and household duties, which directly reduces their availability for creative work. According to survey data, 28.44% of the young women creatives had children, and among them, 10% also cared for household members with special care needs, meaning the overwhelming majority manage caregiving responsibilities alone. Respondents described being unable to attend rehearsals, accept travel-based work, or participate in late-night performances due to childcare demands. The irregular and unpredictable nature of creative work was repeatedly cited as conflicting with domestic expectations placed on women, alongside cultural pressure to prioritize family responsibilities over career progression. These constraints seem structural rather than individual, and limits women's full and sustained participation in the creative sector.

Unsafe and Gender-Insensitive Work Environments

The study identified unsafe and gender-insensitive work environments as a significant barrier to women's participation in the creative sector. Quantitative data indicated that 59.52% of respondents avoided applying for or accepting creative opportunities due to late working hours, particularly those involving late-night work or travel to unfamiliar locations. Qualitative evidence illustrates how these concerns shape women's decisions, with respondents describing fear of harassment, assault, and violence as routine risks associated with creative work, especially at night. Women further reported bearing additional financial burdens to protect themselves, such as paying for safe transport or accommodation, such as higher costs of women-only ride-sharing services. Beyond

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safety, respondents highlighted the lack of gender-responsive infrastructure in creative workspaces, including the absence of private changing rooms, inadequate sanitation facilities, and lack of menstrual hygiene support. These challenges are compounded by the absence of gender-sensitive workplace policies and the prevalence of informal, unregulated work environments with no safety standards or accountability mechanisms. The report also noted that women with disabilities face additional exclusion due to inaccessible venues and infrastructure, demonstrating that unsafe and gender-insensitive environments systematically limit women's ability to participate fully and safely in the creative sector.

Capacity Gaps and Limited Professional Development Support

The study identified capacity gaps and limited professional development support as systemic challenges affecting women's economic sustainability in the creative sector. These include low levels of awareness among respondents regarding intellectual property rights, contract management, and fair compensation practices. Respondents reported lacking structured training in business skills, financial literacy, and creative entrepreneurship, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. The report also noted the absence of standardized rates and payment systems, which compounds information asymmetries and weakens women's negotiating power. Women further reported limited access to mentorship, exposure opportunities, and institutional support for professional growth, with government and partner investment in capacity building described as insufficient and difficult to access. These weak unprofessional systems and information gaps leave women disproportionately exposed to economic exploitation and limit their long-term viability in the creative sector.

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What These Findings Mean for Kenya's Creative Sector

Young women in Kenya's creative sector operate in an environment where gender shapes access to opportunity, income, safety, and leadership. Despite their significant contribution to the industry, many are paid less than male peers, steered toward lower-earning roles, and excluded from key decision-making spaces. These economic disparities are reinforced by sexual harassment, online abuse, and weak reporting systems that often fail to provide meaningful protection or accountability. In addition, access to work and advancement is frequently influenced by factors such as age, pregnancy, disability, religion, or physical appearance, meaning that opportunity is not always determined by skill or merit alone. These experiences point to deeper structural weaknesses within the sector.

These findings therefore show that gender inequality in Kenya's creative sector is systemic. Addressing it is therefore not only a matter of fairness and economic security for women, but also essential for improving productivity, strengthening professional standards, and ensuring that the creative economy can contribute fully to Kenya's long-term development.

Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

Young women in Kenya's creative sector make meaningful contributions to the creative industry even as they navigate deeply rooted structural barriers that constrain their safety, earnings, leadership opportunities, and professional advancement. Closing these gaps requires sustained, coordinated action from government institutions, creative industry regulators, private sector actors, and development partners to address the systemic drivers of gender inequality within the sector. Critical priority areas for policy and programmatic response include:

- **Promoting equitable pay and transparent compensation systems** by developing sector-wide pay guidelines, enforcing standardized written contracts, and improving oversight to address gender-based pay disparities. Tracking the allocation of higher-paying technical and production roles is necessary to prevent gender-based exclusion and ensure women have equal access to income-generating opportunities.

- **Enhancing legal protection against sexual harassment and exploitation** by ensuring existing laws are applied consistently within the creative sector and clearly recognizing online abuse as a serious and punishable form of harm. Establishing or reinforcing governing bodies with clear mandates to receive complaints, review cases, and apply sanctions is key to improving accountability.

- **Advancing inclusive governance and leadership representation** by setting gender parity targets in decision-making bodies, carrying out regular gender audits, and revising recruitment and promotion processes to remove discrimination based on age, pregnancy, disability, religion, or other identity markers. Meaningful inclusion requires women to hold real influence, not symbolic roles.

- **Reducing work–life barriers linked to caregiving** by introducing flexible production schedules, remote collaboration options, and contract terms that take family responsibilities into account. Adjusting grant timelines and funding criteria to reflect caregiving realities will help prevent indirect exclusion and limit career interruptions among young women creatives.

- **Improving safety and respect within creative workspaces** by putting in place clear codes of conduct across sub-sectors, with defined consequences for harassment and exploitation. Creating confidential and accessible reporting channels within studios, production houses, festivals, and other creative spaces will allow women to seek redress without fear of retaliation and help shift norms that tolerate abuse.

- **Expanding professional development and career growth opportunities** by increasing access to structured training in business management, financial literacy, contract negotiation, digital skills, and entrepreneurship. Strengthening awareness and application of intellectual property rights, alongside formal mentorship, and leadership programs, will help secure women's earnings and support long-term progression into higher-value and decision-making roles.

These measures would ultimately strengthen protections, improve earnings equity, and cultivate a creative ecosystem where young female creatives in Kenya are valued, safe, and able to contribute fully to the country's cultural and economic growth.

Conclusion

Gender inequities in Kenya's creative sector remain deeply rooted in the way work, opportunity, and power are structured. Although young women are central to the sector's growth, their participation and advancement continue to be limited by unequal pay, concentration in lower-earning roles, exclusion from leadership, unsafe and informal working conditions, sexual and online harassment, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. These barriers are gender based, systemic and mutually reinforcing, restricting women's income security, professional progression, and visibility within the industry. Addressing them requires deliberate, sector-wide reform, including stronger enforcement of fair pay and contracting standards, effective accountability mechanisms for harassment, inclusive governance structures, and sustained investment in women's professional development to ensure that Kenya's creative economy develops on a foundation of equity, safety, and decent work.

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