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# BEYOND SELF-PERCEPTION: UNPACKING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

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## KEY MESSAGES

- Socio-emotional skills (SES) – such as emotional regulation, problem-solving, and collaboration – can enhance educational attainment (Chioda et al., 2021), mental health and resilience (Ganimian et al., 2020; Bossuroy et al., 2022), and labor market performance (Prada et al., 2019; Allemand et al., 2023). Global labor trends have increased the demand for jobs that are more intensive in skills that cannot be automated, such as SES, including in low- and middle-income countries.
- The Africa Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) investigated gender differences in SES among Tanzanian youth, using both self-reported and behavioral measures. The study's findings challenge the assumption that men have inherently stronger SES than women, suggesting that perceived gender gaps may primarily be driven by self-perception biases rather than actual skill differences.
- Men consistently rate themselves higher in SES than women across nearly all self-assessed measures. However, these differences disappear when SES are more objectively assessed using behavioral measures (vignettes or tasks).
- Additional analysis suggest that men may inflate their self-reports more than women underestimate their own skills. The gap between self-reported and behavioral measures is significantly larger for men than for women – and strongly associated with men's social desirability bias and gendered beliefs about competence.
- These findings have implications for labor market policies and skills training programs. If perceived SES gender gaps are driven by men's overconfidence rather than actual skill deficits among women, then interventions could also focus on correcting misperceptions rather than exclusively targeting SES training at women. Employers and policymakers should also consider placing greater emphasis on behavioral assessments rather than self-reported measures when designing hiring, employment and training programs, to ensure a more accurate evaluation of both men and women's competencies.

## ABOUT THE AFRICA GENDER INNOVATION LAB

The World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) conducts impact evaluations of development interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, seeking to generate evidence on how to close gender gaps in earnings, productivity, assets, and agency. The GIL team is currently working on over 80 impact evaluations in more than 30 countries with the aim of building an evidence base for the region.

The impact objective of GIL is to increase take-up of effective policies by governments, development organizations, and the private sector to address the underlying causes of gender inequality in Africa, particularly in terms of women's economic and social empowerment. GIL aims to do this by producing and delivering a new body of evidence and developing a compelling narrative, geared towards policymakers, on what works and what does not work in promoting gender equality.

## CONTEXT

As policymakers increasingly acknowledge that socio-emotional skills (SES) are foundational—alongside literacy and numeracy—investing in SES has gained recognition as a strategy for fostering economic growth and improving labor market outcomes (Cunningham et al., 2022). SES—including emotional awareness, self-regulation, problem-solving, and collaboration—have been shown to enhance employability, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment. This importance extends to low- and middle-income countries, where job markets are rapidly evolving and subject to high churn. Research shows that not only do actual skill levels matter, but individuals’ perceptions of their abilities also influence their economic prospects (Reuben et al., 2017; De Martino et al., 2022).

Existing studies suggest that men tend to score higher than women on SES assessments, although these studies are largely based on self-reported data. This finding has led to the assumption that gender gaps in SES contribute to disparities in economic opportunities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge, policymakers have responded by implementing skills development programs targeted at women in an effort to close these perceived SES gaps and improve their labor market participation.

Yet, there is limited rigorous evidence on whether these observed gender gaps in SES reflect true skill differences or merely differences in self-perception. To address this gap, this study examines 4,459 youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) across three Tanzanian cities. By combining self-reported SES assessments with more objective behavioral evaluations, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of gender differences in SES and their implications for economic inclusion, helping inform more effective policy and program design.

## WHAT WE DID

The Africa Gender Innovation Lab (GIL), in collaboration with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), developed and validated [an innovative framework to assess SES](#) (ESTEEM) among youth and adults in Sub-Saharan

Africa. The study in Tanzania adapted ESTEEM to the local context and aimed to provide a more accurate and objective understanding of gender differences in SES by comparing self-reported assessments with observed behavioral measures – including vignettes and task-based exercises. Unlike most prior research that relies primarily on self-reported measures of SES, this approach was designed to minimize response bias and reveal more objective skill levels.

The study was conducted in three major cities in Tanzania – Dodoma, Dar es Salaam, and Iringa – and targeted a sample of 4,459 NEET youth aged 15-35. Participants were evenly selected by gender, ensuring a rigorous comparison of SES levels between men and women.



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## 1. SELF-REPORTED SES MEASURES

Participants were asked to rate their own SES using a standardized questionnaire (figure 1) assessing 14 key socio-emotional competencies. These skills were grouped into:

### Awareness SES (4 skills):

- Emotional awareness
- Self-awareness
- Listening
- Empathy

### Management SES (10 skills):

- Emotional regulation
- Self-control
- Perseverance
- Personal initiative
- Problem-solving & decision-making
- Expressiveness
- Interpersonal relatedness
- Influence
- Negotiation
- Collaboration

These self-reported responses captured participants' perceptions of their own abilities, a commonly used method in SES research. However, self-reports can be subject to biases, such as overconfidence, social desirability and gendered expectations.<sup>1</sup>

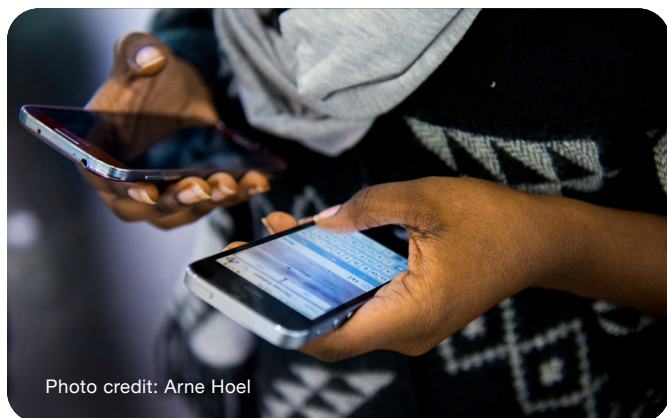


Photo credit: Arne Hoel






**Figure 1:** Example of a self-reported measure



## PERSEVERANCE

Sustaining effort despite setbacks.

### RANKING SYSTEM:

-  Strongly Disagree
-  Disagree
-  Neither Agree or Disagree
-  Agree
-  Strongly Agree

1. I finish whatever I begin.
2. Setbacks don't discourage me.
3. I am diligent.
4. When work is difficult, I keep up my effort.
5. If someone is against me, I keep working to fix the problem until I get what I want.
6. It is easy for me to put in the effort necessary to achieve my goals.
7. I am confident that I could deal appropriately with unexpected events.
8. Even when goals require years of patience, I keep working on them.

^ Items 5-7 also map to Generalized Self-Efficacy

<sup>1</sup> Marsh, Vic; Delavallade, Clara; Das, Smita; Rouanet, Léa; Koroknay-Palicz, Tricia; McDaniel, Dawn. 2025. Assessing Workplace Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Skills in Africa: The ESTEEM Framework. Policy Research Working Paper; 11128. © World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/43227> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

## 2. BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENTS OF SES

To obtain a more objective measure of SES for each of the 14 key competencies listed above, participants completed either a situational judgment test (SJT) (figure 2) or a behavioral task (figure 3). By measuring SES through observed or hypothetical behavior, these assessments provided a benchmark against which self-reported SES scores could be compared. These skills were grouped into:

### Situational Judgment Tests (SJTs) or vignettes (9 skills)

Adapted and validated from existing SES scales. These tests required participants to choose the most appropriate responses to hypothetical scenarios related to SES and designed to simulate real-world scenarios that individuals might encounter in professional and social settings.

### Task-Based Measures (5 skills)

Developed and validated by the study team based on theoretical frameworks.<sup>2</sup> These measures required participants to perform specific tasks designed to assess SES competencies in action rather than self-perception.






**Figure 2:** Example of a Situational Judgment Test (SJT) measure



## EMPATHY

Understanding and sharing another's feelings.

### RANKING SYSTEM:

-  **Strongly Disagree**
-  **Disagree**
-  **Neither Agree or Disagree**
-  **Agree**
-  **Strongly Agree**

**Situation:** You have three employees, and one named [name] has worked for you a few months. He has been hours late for work several times this week, and he has had a very bad attitude. You are very annoyed. As there are many people looking for jobs, it would be easy for you to replace [name].

### HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT YOU WILL...

1. Give them more chances.
2. Notice how [name] is feeling.
3. Ask them why they have been late.
4. Fire them.
5. Consider [name's] likelihood of finding a new job before determining your action.

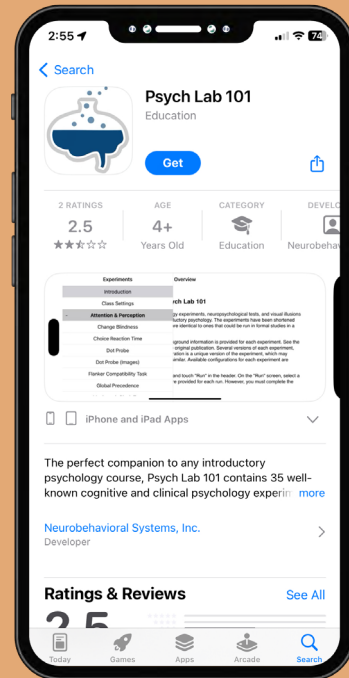
<sup>2</sup> Delavallade, Clara; Das, Smita; Rouanet, Léa; Clerkin, Aidan; Gonzalez, Chris; Jamison, Julian. 2025. *Socioemotional Skills in Sub-Saharan Africa: Validating and Comparing Behavioral and Self-Reported Measures*. Policy Research Working Paper; 11201. © World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/43678> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

Figure 3: Example of a Task-Based Measure



## SELF CONTROL Resisting impulses to act with intention and discipline.

The CPT-X game is hosted in an app - "psychLab 101" which can be downloaded from Google Play or Apple store.



Let's Play

# CPT-X

Self-control game

In this experiment, you will be shown a series of letters, one at a time. Your task is to identify whether each letter is a target or not.

In this experiment, the target letter is: X. Any time you see X, DO NOT RESPOND. If any other letter is presented, respond by touching the screen as quickly as possible.

Try to answer as quickly as possible while still being accurate. Touch the screen when you are ready to begin. You will start by doing a few examples for practice.

## WHAT WE FOUND

Men score significantly higher than women on self-reported SES measures, with an average 0.20 standard deviation advantage across assessed skills. This pattern holds across nearly all SES categories, except for self-control and respectful listening, where no gender gap is observed. These findings suggest that men perceive themselves to have stronger socio-emotional skills compared to women.

However, when using behavioral assessments, gender differences in SES largely disappear. Out of the 14 skills evaluated, only a few—active listening, emotional regulation, perseverance, problem-solving, and networking—show a small male advantage (no greater than 0.08 standard deviations). This contrast suggests that while men report having stronger SES, their actual performance does not align with these self-perceptions.

Further analysis suggests that these discrepancies are more reflective of men overestimating their abilities rather than women underestimating theirs. The discrepancy between self-reported and actual SES is particularly pronounced among men who hold traditional beliefs about male superiority in problem-solving and decision-making. This pattern is not observed among women, further supporting the hypothesis that the perceived gender gap in SES is largely driven by men's overconfidence rather than a real skills advantage.

Additionally, the gap between men's self-reported and behavioral SES is strongly linked to both social desirability and their belief that men are better problem-solvers than women, while these variables are not associated for women. This link suggests that men may be inflating their self-reports to align with social expectations and gender norms that tie problem-solving, confidence, and leadership to masculinity—reinforcing disparities in how skills are perceived rather than in the skills themselves.



FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
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## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH

Our findings reveal that self-reported SES measures consistently show men as having higher skills, most likely due to men's overestimation of their skills rather than women's underestimation of their own — while behavioral assessments show few to no gender differences.

These findings have important implications for policies aimed at reducing gender gaps in SES and improving women's employability, as well as supporting both men and women to leverage their skills for improved economic opportunity, particularly in low- and middle-income settings.

- Policymakers, employers and researchers should be cautious when interpreting gender differences in SES, particularly when relying on self-reported data. If men overestimate their SES, self-reports alone may overstate gender gaps and lead to misguided policy and hiring decisions.
- Integrating behavioral assessments alongside self-reports can provide a more holistic and hopefully more accurate representation of jobseekers' and applicants' actual SES levels — ensuring that interventions, hiring policies and trainings target real skills and real skills gaps rather than perceived ones.
- Other interventions could also seek to correct job applicants' and employers' misperceptions about their own abilities and perceived gender gaps in abilities.

Further research is needed to understand how soft skill perception biases influence hiring, wages, and career advancement in low- and middle-income countries — especially in settings where self-presentation plays a key role, e.g., interviews, promotions, loan applications. While belief-correction interventions have successfully shifted perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in other contexts, their impact on SES assessments and promoting fair and inclusive labor markets requires more testing.

To learn more about this study, access the [Policy Research Working Paper](#).