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# WORLD EMPLOYMENT SOCIAL OUTLOOK

A stylized world map composed of small blue dots, serving as a background for the word 'WOMEN'.

# WOMEN

TRENDS  
FOR WOMEN  
2018

GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

# WORLD EMPLOYMENT SOCIAL OUTLOOK

TRENDS FOR WOMEN **2018**  
Global snapshot

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### **More information on the ILO's work on gender equality is available on the ILO website**

The WESO Data Finder, available at [ilo.org/wesodata](https://ilo.org/wesodata), features the data used to produce this snapshot. It allows the creation of charts comparing countries, regions and indicators, and the download of the data.

The online appendices A – Country groupings by region and income level, and B – Labour market estimates and projections, can be found at: [bit.ly/WES0tw18](https://bit.ly/WES0tw18)

## Introduction

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The past 20 years have witnessed some progress for women in the world of work and in terms of gender equality in society. Today, more women than ever before are both educated and participating in the labour market, and there is greater awareness that gender equality is of paramount importance in efforts to reduce poverty and boost economic development. The adoption of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development and the resolve of world leaders “to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value” (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, target 8.5.) and “to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (SDG 5) by 2030 are proof of that awareness. Yet, despite the progress made thus far and the global commitments to secure further improvement, women’s prospects in the world of work are far from being equal to men’s.

This “global snapshot” looks at the progress (or lack thereof) made during the past decade and assesses women’s labour market prospects by examining the gaps between men and women according to a selection of ILO statistical indicators, namely labour force participation, unemployment, informal employment and working poverty. It shows that not only are women less likely than men to participate in the labour force, but when they do participate, they are also more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be in jobs that fall outside the scope of labour legislation, social security regulations and relevant collective agreements. These findings complement ILO’s recent work on women’s labour market conditions and wages<sup>1</sup> by providing an up-to-date quantitative assessment of the extent and depth of women’s disadvantages and how these are likely to evolve globally in the near future.

Gender disparities in the selected labour market indicators presented here capture only partially the complexity of both the labour market challenges faced by women and the improvements that women have achieved thanks to conducive conditions in the specific economic and institutional context. In its wider approach to understanding the issues surrounding women and work, the ILO routinely identifies many structural and cultural factors, ranging from occupational and sectoral sex segregation to workplace discrimination and gender stereotyping. Such a wide-ranging approach is essential for providing a more comprehensive picture of gender inequalities in the labour market, including variation in gender disadvantage by region, socio-economic class, ethnicity and age, among other factors. The brief appraisal offered in this global snapshot is designed to focus on key patterns of progress and regression. Where challenges and obstacles to women’s equal participation persist, societies will be less able to develop pathways for economic growth combined with social development. Closing gender gaps in the world of work thus remains one of the most pressing labour market and social challenges facing the global community today.

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1. See ILO (2016a, 2016b and 2017a) for a more comprehensive picture of the labour market challenges facing women.

## Gender gaps in labour force participation remain wide

Globally, the labour force participation rate for men and women aged 15 and over continues its long-term decline; it stands at 61.8 per cent in 2018, down by 1.4 percentage points over the past decade. The decline in women's participation rate has been slower than that of men, resulting in a slight narrowing of the gender gap.<sup>2</sup> These trends reflect different patterns across the life cycle, resulting from changes in both education participation among youth and, at the other end of the scale, older workers' retirement choices. The headline finding, however, is that, on average around the world, women remain much less likely to participate in the labour market than men. At 48.5 per cent in 2018, women's global labour force participation rate is 26.5 percentage points below that of men (table 1). Since 1990, this gap has narrowed by 2 percentage points, with the bulk of the reduction occurring in the years up to 2009. The rate of improvement, which has been slowing since 2009, is expected to grind to a halt during 2018–21, and possibly even reverse, potentially negating the relatively minor improvements in gender equality in access to the labour market achieved over the past decade.

Underlying this global trend, there are considerable differences in women's access to the labour market across countries at different stages of development. The gap in participation rates between men and women is narrowing in developing and developed countries but continues to widen in emerging countries, where it stands at 30.5 percentage points in 2018, up by 0.5 percentage points since 2009. This trend is projected to continue into 2021, as women's participation rates will decline at a faster pace than men's. While the widening gender gap in participation rates shows that women in emerging countries are still a long way from catching up with men in terms of labour market opportunities, it also reflects the fact that a growing number of young women in these countries are enrolled in formal education, which delays their entry into the labour market. In fact, since the early 1990s, gender gaps in participation rates among youth aged 15 to 24 in emerging countries have been widening, whereas gender gaps in educational attainment have shrunk considerably. Gender gaps in labour market participation are especially wide in the Arab States, Northern Africa and Southern Asia, and are expected to remain wide in the near future, mainly due to the extremely low participation rates of women in the labour market in these regions. Underlying this trend, there is concern that owing to restrictive gender and cultural norms women in these countries are more constrained in terms of their options to seek paid employment (ILO, 2017a).

Conversely, women's participation rates are gradually approaching those of men in many developed countries. At 15.6 percentage points in 2018 (nearly half of the figure observed among emerging countries), the gender gap in participation rates in this group of countries is the lowest recorded since 1990; although it remains wide in a number of countries, especially in Southern Europe, it is projected to narrow further by 2021. Much of the progress achieved over the past couple of decades in developed countries can be attributed to the fact that women and men in these countries have near equal educational achievements and women face less restrictive social norms regarding paid work (ILO, 2017a). Public policies also play an important role. For instance, family support policies, which aim to improve work–life balance, rights to paid leave and return to equivalent work, as well as affordable childcare services for working parents, are known to have made a substantial contribution to lifting the participation rates of women, and especially those of mothers, in these countries (ILO, 2016b; Thévenon, 2013; Vuri, 2016). Having said that, evidence of persistent gender pay gaps in many developed countries highlights ongoing problems of gender gaps in job quality despite women's increasing labour market presence. Because women have significantly improved levels of human capital (e.g. education and experience), which have even overtaken those of men in several developed countries, new research is pointing to other factors that can explain the enduring wage penalty faced by women, such as employers' discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, for example (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015).

Meanwhile, developing countries show the smallest gender gap in participation rates (11.8 percentage points in 2018), which is expected to remain stable throughout the period 2018–21. Women in this country group have one of the highest rates of participation (69.3 per cent), which often reflects the economic necessity to seek employment, driven by the prevailing poverty and a lack of access to social protection, as discussed below.

2. For further information on long-term trends in labour force participation rates and related gender gaps, see the brief *ILO Labour Force Estimates and Projections (LFEP) 2017: Key trends*, available at: <http://www.ilo.org/ilostat-files/Documents/LFEPbrief.pdf>.

Table 1

## Level and trends in rates of labour force participation and unemployment by sex, 2009–21

Country/region	Labour force participation rate (percentages) and gender gap (percentage points)					Unemployment rate (percentages) and female-to-male unemployment rate ratio				
	Men	Women	Gap (Men – Women)			Men	Women	Ratio (Female rate/Male rate)		
	2018	2018	2009–18	2018	2018–21	2018	2018	2009–18	2018	2018–21
<b>World</b>	<b>75.0</b>	<b>48.5</b>	▼	<b>26.5</b>	▲	<b>5.2</b>	<b>6.0</b>	▲	<b>1.2</b>	▲
Developing countries	81.1	69.3	▼	11.8	▶	4.6	6.1	▼	1.3	▲
Emerging countries	76.1	45.6	▲	30.5	▲	5.2	6.1	▲	1.2	▲
Developed countries	68.0	52.4	▼	15.6	▼	5.3	5.6	▶	1.1	▶
Northern Africa	71.9	21.9	▼	50.0	▼	9.1	19.5	▼	2.2	▲
Sub-Saharan Africa	74.0	64.7	▼	9.3	▼	6.4	8.2	▼	1.3	▲
Latin America and the Caribbean	77.1	51.5	▼	25.6	▼	6.8	9.5	▼	1.4	▲
Northern America	67.9	55.8	▶	12.1	▼	4.6	4.4	▲	1.0	▼
Arab States	77.2	18.9	▲	58.3	▼	6.8	16.3	▲	2.4	▼
Eastern Asia	74.7	59.1	▲	15.6	▲	4.8	4.2	▲	0.9	▲
South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific	79.4	56.5	▼	22.8	▼	3.5	3.3	▼	0.9	▶
Southern Asia	79.0	27.6	▼	51.4	▲	3.7	5.2	▲	1.4	▼
Northern, Southern and Western Europe	63.4	51.6	▼	11.9	▼	7.9	8.2	▲	1.0	▶
Eastern Europe	67.0	51.8	▲	15.2	▼	5.6	4.9	▶	0.9	▶
Central and Western Asia	73.5	45.1	▼	28.4	▼	8.0	9.4	▲	1.2	▼

Note: Throughout this report, figures for 2018 and beyond are projections. Developments for the periods 2009–18 and 2018–21 are marked with a red upward arrow if the gap in labour force participation (unemployment rate ratio) is projected to widen by more than 0.1 (0.01) percentage points, a green downward arrow if it is projected to narrow by more than 0.1 (0.01) percentage points, and a blue horizontal arrow for projections between those values. Numbers in the “Gap” column refer to the percentage point difference between the male and female labour force participation rates but may not correspond precisely due to rounding. For a detailed list of regional and country income groupings, see online Appendix A.

Source: ILO’s Trends Econometric Models, November 2017 (see online Appendix B for details) and Labour Force Estimates and Projections (LFEP) database, available at: [www.ilo.org/ILOSTAT](http://www.ilo.org/ILOSTAT).

## Women are more likely than men to be unemployed in large parts of the world

Not only are women less likely than men to participate in the labour force, but those who do are also less likely to find employment. As of 2018, the global unemployment rate of women, at 6 per cent, is approximately 0.8 percentage points higher than that of men. This translates into a ratio of female-to-male unemployment rates of 1.2 in 2018. By 2021, this ratio is projected to remain stable in developed countries and to increase in both developing and emerging countries, mirroring the deterioration in the relative position of women in terms of global unemployment observed over the past decade.

Developing countries show the highest ratio of female-to-male unemployment rates across income groups, at 1.3 in 2018. This largely reflects the fact that unemployment rates among men in these countries are low by international standards, while the rates among women are only slightly above the global average. Such a relatively low unemployment rate, however, is far from being an indication of a healthy labour market, either for men or for women. Indeed, the rate of unemployment is not considered a robust test of labour market performance in developing (and, to some extent, developed) countries. This reflects the complexities of informal employment and the limited access to social protection systems, both of which pressure women and men to take up any employment opportunity, regardless of the working conditions. At the same time, entrenched gender roles and labour market discrimination continue to hamper women’s access to decent jobs (ILO, 2016b and 2017a). In fact, the female unemployment rate is expected to increase further in this group of countries (while the rate among men is expected to remain stable), thus increasing the ratio of female-to-male unemployment rates by 2021.

In emerging countries, the female-to-male unemployment rate ratio is in line with the global average, at 1.2 in 2018. This ratio is, however, expected to increase by 2021, which risks discouraging further the already low labour market participation of women in these countries. This is especially the case in the Arab States and Northern Africa, where, in addition to low participation rates, women face unemployment rates that are more than twice as high as men's. Gender differences are even starker among young cohorts, which does not bode well for women's labour market integration prospects in these regions, where the unemployment rates range between 16.3 and 19.5 per cent in 2018. Recent reports by the ILO show that, despite women's expressed preferences for paid jobs, socio-economic factors and prevailing social norms continue to obstruct their participation in paid employment, particularly in these regions (ILO, 2017a; Gallup and ILO, 2017). The constraints are often directly linked to the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and household responsibilities that women have to assume, which restricts both the educational and employment opportunities they can access and their ability to participate in the labour market.

In contrast, women in developed countries are closer to parity with men in terms of unemployment rates, with a ratio of female to male unemployment rates of 1.1 in 2018, and with no significant changes expected in the near future. In certain regions, such as Eastern Europe and Northern America, women even register lower unemployment rates than men. While this reflects the substantial efforts to achieve gender parity in educational attainment and skill qualifications, the success in attaining unemployment rate parity is also attributable to the long-lasting negative effects of the 2008 economic crisis, which have impacted some male-dominated sectors, such as construction, more strongly than the rest of the economy.

## Vulnerable employment is more severe for women in developing countries

Globally, over 42 per cent of workers are either own-account<sup>3</sup> or contributing family workers<sup>4</sup> (categories defined as "vulnerable employment") (ILO, 2018a). This translates into over 1.4 billion workers who are more likely than those in other categories of employment to be in informal employment and living in poverty, and to have limited or no access to social protection systems. In developing and emerging countries, progress in reducing vulnerable employment is stalling, as the number of own-account and contributing family workers has been rising in line with the increasing labour force. As a result, the share of workers in these categories of employment in developing and emerging countries is particularly high, reaching 76.4 per cent of total employment in developing countries and 46.2 per cent in emerging countries in 2018.

There are important gender disparities in terms of the relative composition of own-account and contributing family work. While for men both categories experienced a slight decline over the past decade, women's share as contributing family workers has dropped by 4.6 percentage points and their share

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