



SPOTLIGHT ON GOAL 8

THE IMPACT OF MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN ON LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION



International
Labour
Organization



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INTRODUCTION

In communities around the world, active engagement in the labour force is the key means through which women and men earn a living. It is one of the main ways that working-age individuals can have an independent source of income, and it is an essential means through which women and men ensure decent living conditions for themselves and their families. Moreover, for women, the extent to which they have control over assets and an independent source of income has a significant bearing on their position within their families and communities and on the well-being of their dependents, especially children.¹

Paid work provides a path towards economic independence, overall well-being, human dignity, personal development and self-actualization. However, for all this to be true, employment must be decent – providing adequate earnings, sufficient working time, and safe and secure work environments. Decent employment opportunities must also be available to everyone. Women and men both rely on these opportunities to care for and sustain their families.

Equal opportunity and equal treatment in the labour market are key aspects of decent work, and of sustainable development. But does everyone in society have the same access to decent work? Do women and men have the same opportunities? What is the impact of discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes on women's labour force participation? To what extent is the participation of women and men linked to their family situation?

Until recently, reliable and consistent global data needed to explore the links between gender gaps in labour force participation, marital status and the presence of children were lacking. In response, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Women have partnered on a joint effort to produce a global dataset with new indicators that allows for the analysis of labour market outcomes from a gender and family perspective. The analysis, based on data from 84 countries, focuses on the ways in which

the labour market participation of women aged 25 to 54 varies by marital status, household type and the presence and age of children. It also looks at the gender gap in labour force participation across these different categories and sub-categories.

The findings point to persistent gender gaps in labour force participation globally and across regions. When the data are disaggregated by marital status and the presence of children, they show that marriage and childbearing often dampen women's labour force participation, while having the opposite effect for men. The specific vulnerability faced by women is driven by discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes that reinforce their role as caregivers, while simultaneously promoting men's role as breadwinners.

BACKGROUND

Women have various identities within households: They are daughters, wives, mothers (co-parenting or alone), mothers-in-law and grandmothers, among others. These identities are intertwined with ideas about the particular role women have in the household, and what societies and families expect of them. These preconceived ideas, combined with the increased difficulties women face in labour markets, are major determinants of whether or not a woman will participate in the labour force. For many women, having a job can be a crucial step towards empowerment, allowing them to earn their own income. Employment also allows women to develop skills and competencies and fosters greater social integration, including through outward engagement and participation in the economic life of their communities.

This paper introduces a new set of labour market and demographic indicators derived from household-level variables now available in the ILO's Harmonized Microdata collection; it uses them to cast light on the link between household composition and women's labour force participation. The new indicators offer a powerful complement to traditional

labour market statistics at the country level. The analysis derived from these new indicators provides insights into discriminatory social norms and the gender progressiveness of government policy, the welfare state and other institutions.

The main outcome indicator analysed is the labour force participation rate and, in particular, the participation gap between women and men overall and by marital status, household composition and the presence of children. This gap provides an indication of gender inequality in labour market participation and the effect of various household characteristics on economic and social outcomes for women.

An important limitation of this analysis is its inability to assess the extent or quality of work that women are engaged in. For example, being in the labour force does not necessarily mean a woman is earning a decent income: She may be unemployed (seeking and available for employment), underemployed, working part-time or working as an unpaid labourer in a family enterprise or farm. Additionally, women in the labour force may work few hours, for low wages, often under poor conditions. The measure also does not take into account other sources of income that women may have, including transfers from the state or other sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The inverse relationship between women's traditional role as primary caregiver in the household and their labour force participation has been widely studied.² At one end of the spectrum are countries such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, where gendered divisions of labour are less entrenched, childcare services are more widely available, and where men assume greater responsibility for household tasks. In these countries, women are more likely to participate in paid work.³ Labour force participation rates are also high for both women and men in sub-Saharan Africa, where extreme poverty rates are high and subsistence-related work and distress sale of labour are common.⁴ At the

other end of the spectrum are countries and regions where women's labour force participation rates are very low and where traditional gender roles are entrenched. For example, in Pakistan, women's participation in the labour force overall is low – 26.2 per cent among those aged 25 to 54 – and women perform the bulk of unpaid care work in the home.⁵ Research on the determinants of participation for women in Pakistan shows a strong association with child-rearing. Using fertility rates as a proxy for increased childcare demands, Novaira et al. (2019) show that a 1 per cent rise in the female fertility rate in Pakistan is associated with a 2.6 per cent decrease in their workforce participation.

In other cases, women's participation rates are lower than men's but rising, as women take on more paid work; however, women's share of unpaid care work remains unchanged. This leads to long hours spent on paid and unpaid work. The resulting time squeeze has a detrimental effect on women's physical and mental well-being.⁶ The cost is also borne through a greater vulnerability to insecure forms of work and less access to career advancement opportunities.⁷ Recent studies find that mothers of young children aged 0 to 5 years are penalized in the labour market, not only in terms of participation but also in terms of pay and in accessing managerial and leadership positions.⁸ A study on the principal barriers to paid work shows that women are much more likely than men to report unpaid care responsibilities as the main reason for inactivity in the labour force – 41.6 per cent of women compared to 5.8 per cent of men.⁹

The type of household in which women live and the accessibility and availability of care and support networks also show a significant association with women's labour force participation and access to professional development. Whether women live alone, as part of a couple with children, or in extended-family households has a bearing on their participation rates.¹⁰ Studies from Brazil, China and Peru show that women living in extended-family households rely on other adult family members (often female relatives, including a grandmother or aunt) to provide extra help with household

duties and childcare, thereby enabling them to participate in the labour force.¹¹ A similar trend is observed in many other low-income countries.¹² However, research on the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China and on Viet Nam shows that additional family members, especially older adults, increase the care responsibilities placed on women, further dampening women's labour force participation.¹³

KEY FINDINGS

Diverse regional patterns are found in women's labour force participation

The labour force participation rate for women varies widely across regions. Indeed, in Europe and Northern America and in sub-Saharan Africa, women's labour force participation rates are the highest (77.5 per cent and 77.1 per cent, respectively), whereas in Central and Southern Asia and in Northern Africa and Western Asia, they are the lowest (29.4 per cent and 29.2 per cent respectively).¹⁴ The gender gap in labour force

participation is smallest in Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand (3.8 percentage points) and the largest in Central and Southern Asia (67.4 percentage points).

These findings reflect a confluence of factors, including norms governing the perceived responsibilities of women, countries' level of development, associated state support for families and children (including access to child allowances and to affordable childcare), the number and type of labour market opportunities, as well as economic pressures to work. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty rates are high and family and child benefits are often lacking, women's labour force participation is higher than the global average.¹⁵

In spite of strong regional differences in women's labour force participation, a number of striking commonalities are found, especially in how such participation varies across household types. Figure 1 compares the average labour force participation rates of prime-working-age women and men (25 to 54 years old) living in different types of households. The main global and regional patterns observed are presented in the sections that follow.

FIGURE 1

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES OF WOMEN AND MEN (AGED 25 TO 54), BY REGION AND HOUSEHOLD TYPE (PERCENTAGE)



Source: ILO and UN Women calculations from ILOSTAT database.

Note: Oceania excludes Australia and New Zealand. For the SDG region of Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, data are shown only for the subregion of South-Eastern Asia due to insufficient country coverage.

Overall labour force participation rate, by sex

Labour force participation rates, by sex and type of household

Lone-person household

Couple-only household

Couple household with child under 6

Extended-family household with child under 6

Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand

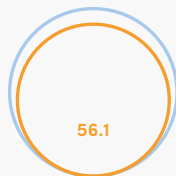
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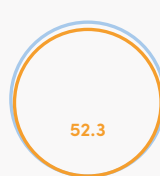
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68.2



57.6

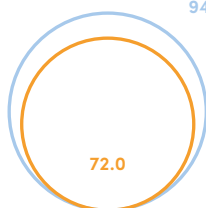


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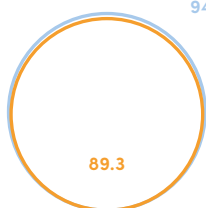


South-Eastern Asia

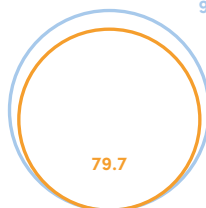
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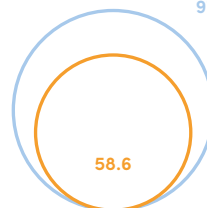
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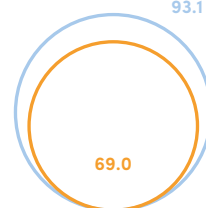
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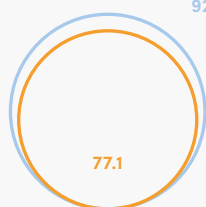


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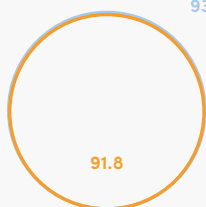


Sub-Saharan Africa

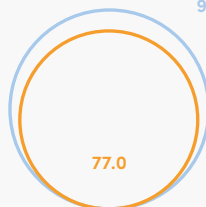
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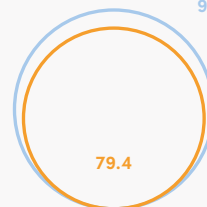
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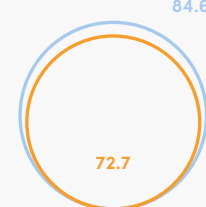
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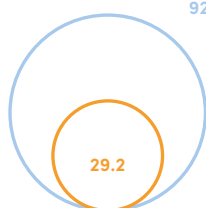


84.6

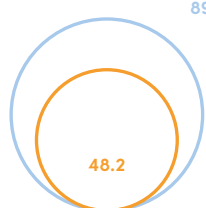


Northern Africa and Western Asia

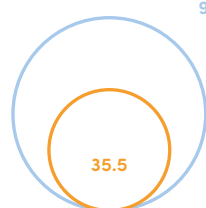
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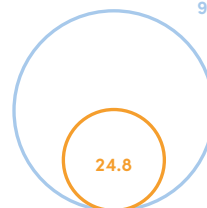
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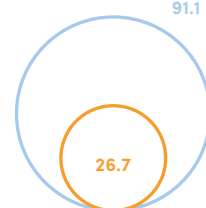
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97.0



91.1



Male Female

Women's labour force participation varies more than men's across different household types

Men tend to have high labour force participation rates regardless of the type of household they live in. Thus, there is little variation in their participation rates (higher than 92 per cent across all regions, except Oceania). For women, on the other hand, labour force participation rates vary significantly, depending on the household type.

Generally, women in lone-person households have much higher participation rates than women in other types of households. The presence of children reduces women's labour force participation and increases men's, by similar proportions in percentage-point terms. This is an indication that women's realities are different than men's, based on the type of household they live in. Women give up their economic independence (mothers in families) or take on more economic responsibility (lone mothers) as household needs dictate.

The data show that, globally, lone mothers with at least one child under 6 are more likely to be in the labour force than mothers living with a partner and young child (65.8 per cent versus 48.7 per cent, respectively), presumably because they must provide for their household alone. Lone-father households are rare, so unfortunately there are insufficient sampled data to produce reliable estimates on them.

maximum observed regional gap between male and female labour force participation rates among individuals living alone is 10 percentage points. This is low when compared to the average gap of 20.4 percentage points between men and women across all household types.

In Central and Southern Asia and in Northern Africa and Western Asia, where the female labour force participation rate is very low (at about 29 per cent on average), the estimated participation rate of women living alone is 67.0 per cent and 48.2 per cent, respectively. In these regions, the labour force participation rates of men and women living alone remain highly skewed, but less so than in any other type of household. Contributing to this more equal participation is the fact that men living alone have lower-than-average labour force participation rates in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania. One explanation for this could be social norms that support men's role as the 'provider' when they marry and have children, a stimulus to labour force participation that is not imposed on single men.

Being part of a couple, especially with young children, is associated with lower participation rates for women and higher rates for men

The analysis shows that women, in contrast to men, are more likely to be outside the labour force when they marry and have children, especially young children. Living together with a partner decreases

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