



To contribute to achieving gender equality, poverty eradication and the reduction of inequality within and among countries, economic growth must be inclusive and compatible with the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. How the benefits and costs of growth are distributed is critical, and employment is a key mechanism through which this distribution takes place. Gender equality in employment and women's access to decent work are hence at the centre of inclusive growth.

Facts and figures

- The global labour force participation rate (LFPR) among prime working-age women (aged 25–54) stands at 63 per cent, compared to 94 per cent among men, with large regional variations and nominal progress in the last 20 years except for Latin American and the Caribbean.¹
- Having a child under the age of six reduces women's LFPR by 5.9 percentage points, globally, while increasing men's LFPR by 3.4 points – a striking 'motherhood employment penalty'.²
- The gender pay gap stands at 23 per cent, globally, for those women aged 25-54.³
- Young women are more than twice as likely as young men to not be in education or training and be unemployed or out of the labour force.⁴
- Across the world, 606 million working-age women (21.7 per cent) perform unpaid care work on a full-time basis, compared to 41 million men (1.5 per cent).⁵

Policy messages

1. Women's work remains undervalued everywhere, as key work-related gender gaps persist without tangible improvement for over 20 years.⁶

The gap between women's employment expectations and actual outcomes is large: while almost 70 per cent of women globally would prefer to have a paid job, only 45.3 per cent had a job in 2018.⁷ Progress has been slow, with gender gaps in employment rates down by less than two percentage points since 1992, despite women's rising educational achievements. Globally, women earn 77 per cent of what men earn.⁸ While this gap is slowly decreasing, at current trends, equal pay will not be achieved before the year 2086 without targeted action. Occupational segregation is a key driver of the gender pay gap. It has seen a slight decline over the last two decades, with more women moving into already mixed-gender sectors; but male dominated sectors still offer few opportunities to women, while sectors with lower status and pay are increasingly feminized.⁹ Overall, women have considerably less access to independent income than men.¹⁰ Large lifetime income gaps result from rigid social norms and cultural expectations about societal roles, combined with differences in employment opportunities, as well as lower access to social protection.

2. Women are more likely to be concentrated in employment that is informal, insecure, unprotected or under-protected, low-skilled and poorly remunerated.¹¹

Currently, 740 million women make their living in the informal economy. In low-income countries, 92 per cent of women are employed informally compared to 87.5 per cent of men.¹² Within the informal economy, women often occupy the least secure and lowest-paying jobs, for example, as domestic workers or contributing family workers who are employed without direct pay in family businesses or farms. Globally, 28 per cent of women in informal employment are contributing family workers compared to less than 9 per cent of men. In Sub-Saharan Africa, close to 70 per cent of all contributing family workers are women who receive no direct pay or remuneration.¹³ Informal employment impacts adequacy of earnings, occupational safety, health and working conditions¹⁴ and increases vulnerability and exposure to shocks. Characteristics that intersect with gender, such as migration status, ethnicity, disability and HIV status, exacerbate women's likelihood of facing unfavourable working conditions.¹⁵ Investments in gender-responsive social protection, public services and infrastructure are critical to improve working conditions of women in informal employment and enable their transition to the formal economy.¹⁶

3. Despite the critical contribution of unpaid care and domestic work to human well-being and economic development, women's disproportionate responsibility for this work dampens their incomes and opportunities through decent work deficits and 'motherhood penalties'.

Gender inequalities in paid employment will persist until unpaid care and domestic work is adequately recognized, reduced and redistributed. Policy coherence across SDG 8 and SDG 5, and Target 5.4 in particular, is therefore critical. Women spend on average 4 hours and 25 minutes per day doing unpaid care and domestic work, while men do one hour and 23 minutes. One in five women perform this work full-time compared to 1.5 in 100 men.¹⁷ The social construction of care and domestic work as women's primary responsibility, especially when married/in a union and living with young children, and the inadequacy of public support for working families contribute to women's lower labour force participation and often confine them to part-time and more precarious types of work.¹⁸ Despite the fact that unpaid care and domestic work sustains economies and societies, it remains unaccounted for in economic statistics, including GDP.

4. Gender-responsive legal frameworks are critical for protecting women's right to work and rights at work.

Robust legal frameworks are needed to ensure that women's right to work and rights at work are respected and enforced. Over the last ten years, 35 countries across every region banned sexual harassment at work, nine established laws mandating non-discrimination in employment based on gender, and 13 introduced laws mandating equal remuneration for work of equal value.¹⁹ Yet, in 45 per cent of countries, laws which constrain women's decision to join and remain in the labour force remained on the statute, including 30 per cent of countries that did not have legislation on sexual harassment in employment.²⁰ Complementing a comprehensive set of ILO standards, the recent adoption of the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment and its corresponding Recommendation bodes well for further progress on this front.

5. To achieve substantive equality, labour laws and policies must work in tandem with social protection, care and macroeconomic policies.

Decent work alone cannot lift women out of poverty, especially when old age, illness or disability affect one's ability to take on paid work, or at points in the life course when intensive care responsibilities take precedence. Universal gender-responsive social protection systems are an integral part of an agenda for decent work and must cater to women in all forms of work, paid and unpaid. Public services and infrastructure are needed to strengthen women's ability to participate in paid work and enhance the productivity of their labour. To prevent physical, mental and emotional depletion,²¹ investments in basic infrastructure, such as water, electricity and transport, and public care services, including quality and affordable childcare and long-term care are urgently needed.²²

¹ UN Women, 2018. *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York.

² UN Women, 2019. *Progress of the World's Women*. New York.

³ UN Women, 2018.

⁴ United Nations, 2019, *Report of the Secretary-General: Special edition of the Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report*.

⁵ ILO (International Labour Office), 2019. *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All*. Geneva.

⁶ ILO, 2019.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UN Women, 2018.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ UN Women, 2019.

¹¹ ILO 2019.

¹² ILO, 2018. *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*. Geneva.

¹³ UN Women, 2019.

¹⁴ UN, 2019.

¹⁵ ILO, 2019.

¹⁶ United Nations, Economic and Social Council, *Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls: report of the Secretary-General*, E/CN.6/2019/3 (20 December 2018), available from undocs.org/en/E/CN.6/2019/3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ UN Women, 2019.

¹⁹ The World Bank. 2019. *Women, Business and the Law 2019: A Decade of Reform*. Washington, DC.

²⁰ The World Bank. Women, Business and the Law database (accessed 28 June 2019).

²¹ Rai, Shirin M. et al., 2019. "SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth – A gendered analysis," *World Development*, Elsevier, vol. 113(C).

²² E/CN.6/2019/3