



Higher education and lower unemployment rates linked to improved access to decent work for women

Preliminary findings from a cross-country study on Improving Women's Access to Decent Work in low-middle-income countries.

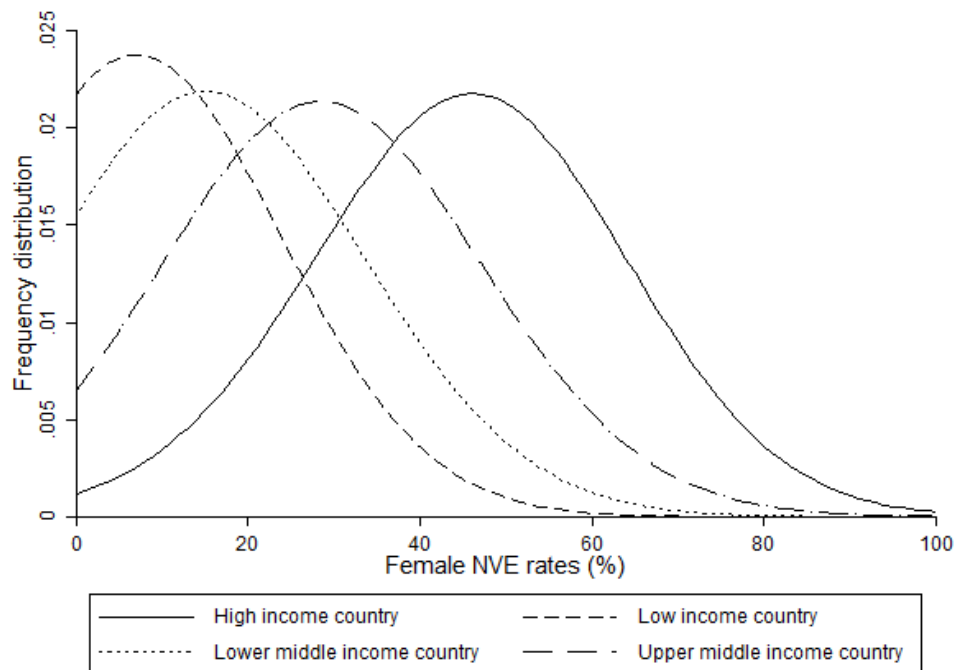
It is now well-recognized that removing the gendered imbalances in the labour market is important for improving development and growth. Yet, **the gap between male and female labour force participation (LFP) rates remains persistently large**. Further, **when women are employed, they are in poor-quality jobs**.

There is increasing evidence that legal and socio-cultural factors as well as economic factors influence women's access to decent work (proxied in this brief by non-vulnerable employment (NVE)). **A recent study by the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP) contributes to this literature by using country-level data to examine the context-specific barriers that prevent women's access to decent work in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).**

In our study sample of 208 countries over 6 years, the average labour force participation rate of women remained at 51% (compared to 71% for men). Further, only 27% of employed women were in non-vulnerable employment, compared with 42.3% of employed men. Workers who are not self-employed or in unpaid family work are considered to be non-vulnerable workers by International Labour Organization (ILO). The share of women in NVE decreases as per-capita income levels go down (see graph below).



Figure: Distribution of women's participation in different types of employment by economic regions



Source: Author's compilation based on ILOSTAT, World Bank and UNDP data from 208 countries for 2015-2020.

Note: "NVE rate" is the share of employed females in non-vulnerable employment

Methods

This study used annual data from 208 countries (developed and developing) for six years (2015–2020) obtained from ILOSTAT, World Bank and UNDP. In the absence of exact data for assessing the prevalence of decent work, the study uses the full-time employment rate and the non-vulnerable employment rate to proxy decent work.

Preliminary findings

Countries with higher female upper-secondary completion rates have better NVE rates.

- The female NVE rate increases linearly as the female upper-secondary completion rate increases.

A country's labour market conditions influence women's access to decent work.

- Women in countries with lower overall un-employment rates, and a lower agricultural share of GDP have better access to decent work.

Unexpectedly, in some countries with legislation that aims to empower women, access to decent work remains restricted.

- Poorly designed legislation that puts the burden of compliance on the employer may be a factor.
 - In Sri Lanka and Peru, employers must incur the costs of providing maternity leave. This increases the costs of hiring women, lowering the demand for female workers.
- In some countries, despite laws protecting women from sexual harassment in the workplace, the institutions responsible for implementing those laws are not properly equipped to receive complaints from women and provide redress.
 - In Sri Lanka, sexual harassment is a criminal offence, which increases the burden of proof on the victim. Many victims are unable to incur the costs involved with providing such proof, reducing the effectiveness of the legislation.

Reducing gender inequality (as measured by the UNDP gender inequality index¹) increases women's access to decent work.

- This is expected, as more equal societies reduce the restrictions imposed on women for improving their employability as well as accessing decent work.
 - For example, the cultural primacy of marriage over work in Senegal prevents girls from participating in the labour market.
- Social gender norms that impose a higher burden of care responsibilities on women in all countries limit women's employment choices and career progression.

Countries with lower fertility rates have better NVE rates.

- The lower care burden experienced by women in countries with lower fertility rates may be a factor.
- Fertility rates are lower in more developed countries where there are fewer barriers to decent work.

Conclusions

Access to decent work for women is influenced by a variety of economic, legal, and social factors. Improving women's access to decent work involves not only improving labour market conditions but also reducing the socio-legal barriers to decent work that women face.

The study highlights the need to improve the implementation of existing laws, and the careful design of new laws to ensure the legal environment is conducive for improving women's access to decent work.

The country-level studies provide insights into the policy gaps preventing improved access to decent work for women. The policies aiming to improve access to decent work are at different stages of development in different low-middle-income countries. The challenge of defying social norms for improving women's access to decent work also varies by country and culture. Hence, any redress will need to consider the particular country's context.

This brief summarises the findings from a cross-country study on "Addressing context-specific barriers to female labour force participation in decent work". This work was carried out with financial and scientific support from the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP) through funding provided by Co-Impact.

Find out more at
[www.pep-net.org/
programs/
women-decent-work](http://www.pep-net.org/programs/women-decent-work)

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¹ <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>