



## Unequal legal and social norms block women from decent work

Preliminary findings on Improving Women's Access to Decent Work in low-middle-income countries

Decent work for women reduces gender disparities while also promoting development and growth. However, **women in low-middle-income countries (LMIC) face multiple constraints to accessing high quality, well-paid, secure jobs with adequate social protection.** Improving access to decent work for women requires addressing these constraints as well as the barriers to female labour force participation (FLFP) more broadly.

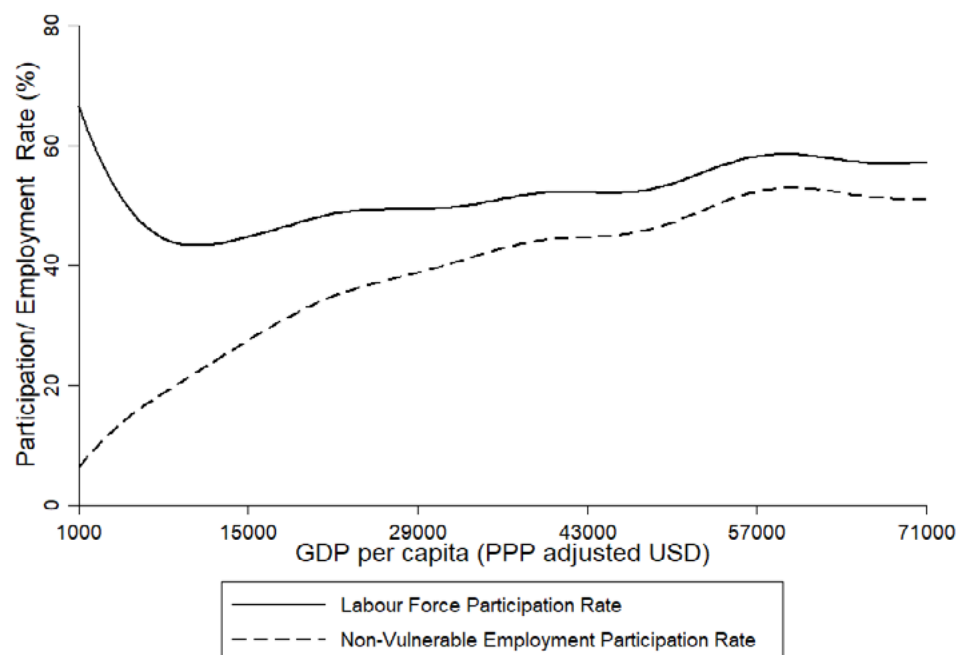
The gap between the FLFP rates and female non-vulnerable employment participation rates is largest for low-income and low-middle-income countries (see Figure, below). In these countries, only a small share of female workers are in non-vulnerable employment. **The many women with low and variable income and little social security are thus vulnerable to falling into poverty during adverse shocks, which exacerbates gender inequalities.**

### Objectives

Local PEP researchers undertook six country-level analyses (Peru, Brazil, Senegal, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines) and one cross-country analysis to:

- Examine how social, legal, and economic factors influence women's access to decent work in low-middle-income countries.
- Identify the actions needed to improve women's access to decent work.

**Figure:**  
Female labour force participation vs female decent work participation



Source: Author's compilation based on World Bank Development Indicators, 2022, Retrieved August 8, 2022, from <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>  
Note: Graph uses data from 208 countries for 2015-2020. The calculations are for the female working-age population (i.e., population aged 15 and over).



### Methods

This study used mixed methods. The cross-country analysis used annual data from 208 countries over six years (2015–2020) obtained from ILOSTAT, World Bank and UNDP. The country-level analyses used secondary labour market data and qualitative data collected for this study through key informant interviews, focus group discussions and surveys.

## Preliminary findings

### Legislation

Evidence from the cross-country, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Senegal, and Peru analyses.

Women's access to decent work is hampered by a **lack of legislation, poorly drafted legislation, and poor implementation** of legislation relating to gender equity.

- Some legislation aiming to improve women's social protection instead impedes women's access to decent work. This includes legislation concerning sexual harassment and the length of maternity leave.
  - In **Sri Lanka** and **Peru**, employers are responsible for the costs of providing paid maternity leave, which increases the cost of hiring female workers.
  - This policy creates a deterrent to hiring young female workers and to providing longer maternity leave.
- Countries with gender equity and anti-discrimination laws may not have the institutional capacity and resources for proper implementation.
  - The institutional setup in **Peru** does not facilitate an effective means of grievance resolution when women's rights are violated.
    - This is the case despite the government signing several international agreements<sup>1</sup> to promote women's right to work and passing laws to uphold principles of non-discrimination and the protection of labour rights.
  - In **Kenya**, low capacity and resources, combined with corruption, prevent institutions from effectively implementing existing laws<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, a lack of awareness of these laws limits complaints of violations.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Peru signed the Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Employment Act of 2007

### Care Responsibilities

Evidence from Sri Lanka, Peru, Brazil, Kenya, the Philippines.

Women face a **higher burden of care responsibilities** than men, which prevents them from accessing decent work.

- The lack of access to quality, affordable childcare exacerbates this problem.
- This challenge also impacts women's career advancements and active participation in unions.

### Transportation Access

Evidence from Sri Lanka, Brazil, Kenya, Senegal.

**Reliable, safe, and affordable transport is often unavailable to women**, presenting another significant impediment for them in obtaining decent work.

- Being able to access and safely use transport helps women to balance work and household responsibilities.
  - Transportation contributes to better time management by reducing travel time and facilitates taking children to school and childcare centres.

### Unequal Social Norms

Evidence from all analyses.

As well as assigning higher care responsibilities to females, gender norms also give women **less access to productive resources** and **restrict female mobility**. As such, gender norms that assign different roles to males and females are key barriers to women's access to decent work.

- In **Senegal**, many women are not free to choose any profession.
  - Some jobs—such as soldier and engineer—are seen as exclusively for men.
  - Some husbands only allow their wives to work in lower-paid jobs.
- In some **Kenyan** communities, women are given in marriage before they complete their studies, which reduces their chances of employability later in life.

This brief summarises the key findings from a series of studies (one cross-country study and six country-specific studies) 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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## Conclusions

A better understanding of existing legislation relating to women's social protection and how it is implemented is needed to gain, in turn, a more nuanced understanding of the effects of such legislation on decent work. This understanding of the effects can then **inform new or revised legislation for the equal treatment of women**.

Meanwhile, support for access to **safe and affordable transport**, and to **quality and affordable childcare** facilities, as well as policies that truly support the equal treatment of males and females, are likely to help improve women's access to decent work.