

Helpdesk Research Report: Key messages from research on women and work in low income countries

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Query: What are the key messages arising from recent research on women and work in low-income countries, and what are the gaps in current evidence?

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1. Overview

Women continue to face significant barriers to obtaining paid work, and when employed suffer worse pay and working conditions than men. Although in the 1980s and 1990s women's participation in labour markets in developing countries grew substantially, over the past ten years, the tendency toward increased participation has slowed down (Fontana 2007). In some regions the difference between male and female employment is stark. In South Asia for instance, only 37.6 per cent of adult women in South Asia were employed in 2008, compared to 86.2 per cent of men (ILO 2009). In other regions with higher rates of female employment, for instance sub-Saharan Africa (63 per cent), over 60 per cent are employed in low productivity agriculture (Banerji 2011).

According to the 2011 State of Food and Agriculture report, women comprise an average of 43 per cent of the agricultural labor force of developing countries.

Women are disproportionately represented in vulnerable employment (ILO 2009) and informal employment, which is often low-wage and insecure (Grown 2011). Women remain vastly underrepresented in administrative and management roles – below 15 per cent in both South Asia and North Africa (Fontana 2007). Women also still face discrimination in paid work, in terms of equal pay, promotion opportunities and benefits.

Unpaid work in the home and community also continue to go unrecorded in official statistics. In developed countries the value of this work is estimated to be 10 per cent of GDP and it is undoubtedly higher in developing countries (Banerji 2011). Women's role both in the home and in wider society also remains largely unconsidered.

Recent research continues to push for changes in these aspects, and alerts us to the gaps in research resulting from recent trends, such as the implications of globalisation, the increasing informalisation of labour, and the impacts of crises – including the world financial crisis and health crises (such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic in parts of Africa).

Gaps in current knowledge about women and work include:

- a lack of statistical data, especially time-series data and cross-country comparisons
- how to effectively monitor labour laws and standards
- mechanisms for overcoming persistent wage gaps in women and men's employment – and explanations as to why narrowing the education gap has not narrowed the employment gap
- the implications of women moving into new sectors of work, such as the remote services sector
- the challenges of incorporating the intersections of macroeconomics, labour markets and gender with alternative growth models to achieve better outcomes for women workers.
- The impact of the double (home/work) labour burden on women and the interaction of these roles

2. Gender inequality

Despite a reduction in the gap between male and female labour force participation, gender equality in the labour market has not increased. The labour force participation rate does not indicate anything about the likelihood of being employed, or of having decent work. In almost all regions, the female unemployment rate is higher than the male rates, occupations remain sex-segregated and gender gaps persist in earnings (Elson, forthcoming).

The social norms and values that govern the gendered division of labour in production and reproduction in different regions of the world tend to assign primary responsibility for the reproduction and care of the family to women and overall decision-making authority to senior males. This often means that women face greater difficulties in translating their labour into paid work. They also face greater difficulties in translating their paid work into higher incomes, a reflection of gender inequalities in the resources that men and women bring to the labour market. Gender norms and practices tend to exacerbate the effects of scarcity so that poor women enter the labour market with lower levels of health, nutrition, education and skills than poor men and with fewer productive assets (Kabeer 2008). As a result, in most countries around the world, females continue to face inferior employment opportunities relative to males; are largely clustered in low-paying, female-dominated job sectors (Grown 2011); and engage in more precarious forms of paid work (Heintz 2008).

Women's wages still remain on average about 70 per cent of men's wages everywhere (Fontana 2007). However, it is not enough to try and eliminate pay discrimination. According to researchers (Fontana 2007; Elson forthcoming) other factors, such as occupational gender segregation and gender discrimination are more serious obstacles to improving women's relative wages and their access to jobs.

While inequality in educational opportunities has long been blamed for wage differentials, Seguino (2004), in a study of Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, finds that women's higher unemployment rates cannot be explained in terms of women being less educated than men, since women have a higher unemployment rate than men with the same education. For instance, in Trinidad and Tobago, women with a secondary education had a higher rate of unemployment than men with any level of education, including those with no education. Nor was it simply a matter of women being concentrated in sectors or occupations experiencing slower rates of growth, since the probability of women being unemployed was higher than that of men being unemployed in every sector and occupational group in the countries studied. Women's share of administrative and managerial positions is also considerably lower than their share of the total labour force (Elson forthcoming).

While gender differentials in pay and working conditions partly do reflect gender differentials in capital and capabilities, unfounded beliefs about women's aptitudes, skills and dispositions, assumptions that all women have mothering responsibilities and widespread adherence to the ideology of the male breadwinner on the part of employers, state officials and trade unions, all serve to assign women to less well paid jobs or to lower pay than men. The consequences of such behaviour shows up in findings that gender differentials in wages cannot be explained away by differentials in education, skills, experience or location in the labour market. There is an unexplained residual which reflects gender discrimination (Kabeer 2008).

Moreover, employment opportunities are unequally distributed, with women concentrated in lower quality, more precarious forms of paid work. Taken together, these factors have enormous implications for the vulnerability of households, the risk of poverty and achieving sustainable human development (Heintz 2008). While women's employment income often makes a critical difference in the poverty status of their households, this does not necessarily mean that the individual situation of the woman concerned improves at the same time. She may have to endure exploitative conditions in the work place and/or enjoy limited access to family resources, as what is allocated to her may not reflect the full extent of her contribution.

Besides being unfair, gender inequality is also problematic as it represents an untapped source for stimulating economic growth and promoting social development. Paid work by women reduces overall poverty and inequality. This is particularly true in the developing world, where women are often systematically deprived from having equal access to social services as well as to physical and social capital. Hence, empowering women by enabling them to actively participate in the social and economic life of a country may well be the key for long-term sustainable development (Costa and Silva 2008). Therefore, the analysis must incorporate a gender perspective when interpreting how policy changes impact employment and poverty (Heintz 2008).

3. Double work burden

Related to issues of gender inequality is the burden that employment outside the home puts on women in the home. Beneria (2010) argues that the increase in women's participation in paid work in many countries has intensified familial and social tensions around balancing family and labour market work, particularly as women continue to be largely responsible for traditional roles in the home, regardless of their participation in employment outside it.

In low-income countries, whose economies have large agricultural sectors such as sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, women primarily work in agriculture (UN 2000: 114). Women's work in agriculture is frequently bound up with their responsibilities for feeding their families; and a large proportion of their work is undertaken as 'unpaid family workers', without direct monetary remuneration, either because they produce for family consumption or because the monetary proceeds of selling the output go to the male members of the family (Elson, Forthcoming).

Related to this is the lack of attention paid to the central role of women in social reproduction, defined as (Rai unpublished):

- biological reproduction (including reproducing labour) and the provision of the sexual, emotional and affective services that are required to maintain family and intimate relationships
- unpaid production in the home of both goods and services, including different forms of care, as well as social provisioning and voluntary work directed at meeting needs in and of the community
- the reproduction of culture and ideology which stabilises (and sometimes challenges) dominant social relations.

Researchers argue that the increase in women's participation in paid work in many countries has made more manifest the tensions around balancing family, social reproduction functions, and labour market work, hence making more obvious the need to solve the problems of care facing many families (Beneria 2010). Policy options include the provision of services and labour-saving technologies and infrastructure through the state or other actors; the provision of reliable and affordable support for care responsibilities; and support to civil society initiatives that promote behavioural change around gender roles and encourage a fairer distribution of care work between men and women (Fontana, unpublished).

4. Social development and policy

Therefore, one area that needs to be active in overcoming the constraints highlighted in the two sections above is that of social development policies. Gender equality advocates have pressed for a number of policy recommendations for many years. Among them are: increasing girls' education – especially ensuring secondary school completion and providing meaningful vocational and technical training, considered critical to reducing barriers to labor market entry; and providing or subsidising care services – for children and other dependents – which enables women to take permanent, full-time jobs rather than seasonal, part-time, or temporary work (Grown 2011).

But for formal work, having education and even skills may not be enough (Banerji 2011). The difference between the domestic responsibilities of male and female workers is often invoked to justify a preference for male workers, which can be reduced by appropriate public policies. For instance, some forms of unpaid and domestic work, such as collecting water and gathering fuel, deplete people's energy. The time that women and girls spend on routine tasks could be reduced dramatically if appropriate infrastructure were in place: efficient sources of energy (especially new and clean forms of fuel for cooking and heating), safe and accessible transport systems, and water and sanitation systems. The design of infrastructure projects needs to consider opportunities for women's entrepreneurship and employment along with designs appropriate to meeting basic household needs.

Other socially necessary forms of unpaid work done largely by women – caring labor – can be depleting if it involves the long-term care of someone who is ill or disabled. Publicly provided care services can provide employment and income and a respite for unpaid caregivers. While research shows that as the level of women’s employment increases in a country, men tend to contribute more to unpaid work duties, public policy has a role to play (Grown 2011).

For countries with large informal workforces, providing social protection is a high priority. Increasingly, non-governmental and community-based organisations are providing social protection to informally employed workers to fill gaps in public provision of health insurance, child care, and disability but these need to be brought to scale (ibid).

5. Macroeconomic policy

Related to social policy is a country’s macroeconomic policy. However, while growing employment was once a central goal of macroeconomic policy, governments’ focus today tends towards financial variables, such as low inflation rates, and reducing the fiscal deficit and debt-to-GDP ratios. These goals have been pursued at huge sacrifice to public investment, economic growth and the creation of decent jobs (Elson, forthcoming). Yet, employment-enhancing economic growth is a prerequisite for low-income countries, coupled with social policy that eliminates discriminatory employment barriers. It is easier to improve wages and working conditions in a growing economy (Grown 2011).

For poor women, especially in rural areas, public employment guarantees can provide an important source of work and income. To maintain productivity and growth, an economy would need to generate appropriate skills, to ensure that labour markets work well enough to match the skills that workers have with those employers demand (Banerji 2011).

Furthermore, particular macroeconomic policies can influence women’s participation in the labour market. These include: welfare policies, taxation, measures to support education, active labour market policies and labour legislation. Labour markets form one of the crucial points of intersection of the market economy and the household economy. Any measure aiming at gender equality must acknowledge that women do most of the work of caring for their children and their families. Thus policies need to be formulated in ways that do not disadvantage them because of their combined productive and reproductive roles (Fontana 2007).

6. Labour policy: standards and regulations

The disadvantages faced by women in the labour market have negative economic consequences for the society as a whole. The elimination of the various barriers they face would result in an increase in their earnings and consequently an increase in the income of the households (Costa and Silva 2008). Beyond social and macroeconomic policy, specific labour regulation has a significant role to play.

Labour standards and regulations need to play a larger role in allowing women access to fair waged employment. It is not enough to end wage discrimination: eliminating barriers to participation would have a much stronger effect on poverty than ending wage discrimination. If women faced no barriers to enter the labour market, the incidence of poverty would be reduced (Cost and Silva 2008). Smith et al (2004) have identified a number of codes that should be standardised to facilitate women's involvement in the formal economy in low-income countries. Their findings related to research among men and women employed in African horticultural markets. These include issues related to:

- **Security of employment:** this is of particular concern to non-permanent workers. Given that women were generally more likely to be in non-permanent work insecurity is also a gender issue.
- **Overtime:** For women regular, often compulsory, overtime can make it difficult to balance productive and reproductive roles. Arranging childcare when overtime is required at short notice is particularly problematic. Personal safety can also be an issue if transport is not provided after late shifts. For these reasons, working hours restrictions often limit the range of jobs women have access to.
- **Wages and childcare:** While low wages impact on both men and women, women with sole responsibility for children are particularly affected as they cannot afford to pay for childcare while they are at work. Children may therefore be left unsupervised and out of school, or separated from their mothers.
- **Pregnancy and maternity leave:** Pregnant women are discriminated against when decisions are made about recruitment and redundancy. Lack of access to maternity leave creates anxiety about income security and can lead women to seek abortions and/or hide their pregnancies, both of which have health implications as well as undermining their reproductive rights.
- **Opportunities for promotion:** The gendered allocation of jobs, rooted in socio-cultural perceptions and norms, leaves women with little opportunity for career progression or improvements in income.
- **Sexual harassment and verbal abuse:** Sexual harassment was reported by some workers in all countries and sectors, mainly affecting women workers. Many men complained of being verbally abused, though this was also reported by women.

The fact that women are often in non-permanent work increases the likelihood that they will face a number of these problems in the workplace, as non-permanent workers are less likely to have access to the fringe benefits of employment, are rarely represented in workers' organisations, have few channels for communicating their grievances, and are reluctant to lodge complaints for fear of not being rehired. To compound matters, they are sometimes offered little protection by national law (Smith 2004).

Labour laws and codes that attempt to address the issues above are likely to be more effective when implemented as a package of reforms, rather than in isolation, and labour legislation must be combined with other policies such as fiscal and welfare policies. Further, formal labour laws will be limited as instruments of reducing gender inequality in the many low-income countries, with large agricultural and informal sectors, where women are primarily employed (Fontana 2007).

7. The informal sector

Many of the women engaged in work today are in the informal sector – compounding problems of protection under labour codes and standards. Cross-sectional evidence since 2000 indicates that informal employment – which does not usually provide job security, social insurance, benefits, representation or adequate income – continues to represent a larger share of women's employment than men's (Grown 2011). Throughout the developing world, informal employment is generally a larger source of employment for women than formal employment and generally a larger source of employment for women than for men. Excluding Africa 60 per cent or more of women workers in the developing world are in informal employment (outside agriculture). In sub-Saharan Africa, 84 per cent of women non-agricultural workers are informally employed compared to 63 per cent of men (Chen et al 2005).

This is not all negative. Many women are self-employed: women own three of five micro and small enterprises in developing countries (Banerji 2011). However, the informal sector largely refers to employment and production that takes place in small and/or unregistered enterprises, including certain types of informal wage employment outside informal enterprises, which refers to employees without formal contracts, worker benefits or social protection, employed by formal or informal enterprises or as paid domestic workers by households.

Certain types of waged work are more likely than others to be informal, including employees of informal enterprises; casual or day labourers; temporary or part-time workers; paid domestic workers; unregistered or undeclared workers; and industrial outworkers (also called homeworkers). Informal work is particularly important in developing countries, where it comprises one half to three quarters of non-agricultural employment: specifically, 48 per cent in Northern Africa; 51

per cent in Latin America; 65 per cent in Asia; and 72 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. If informal employment in agriculture is included, the proportion of informal employment greatly increases, for example, from 83 per cent of non-agricultural employment to 93 per cent of total employment in India (Chen et al 2005).

The conditions of informal employment perpetuate the financial dependency of women wage earners on male relatives and partners, as informal employment is much more likely to yield poverty wages than formal employment, and a high proportion of informally employed people are part of the working poor – employed, but living in households whose income is below the poverty line.

Added to this complex mix of challenges impinging on poor women's ability to improve their working conditions are their frequently isolated working arrangements; their double day of paid and unpaid work; the multiple disadvantages women face by reason of their gender, race, religion, caste and class; the wider political, economic, social and legal factors that restrict the rights of informal workers in general, and informal women workers in particular, as well as their comparative lack of education and resources, as well as their inability to move about freely in some regions, which limits their ability to organise (ibid).

Policies to address the constraints of informal employment include: renewed focus on expanding formal employment by putting employment creation and decent work at the centre of macroeconomic policy; increased efforts to formalise informal enterprises and informal jobs by creating incentives and simplifying procedures for entrepreneurs to register and by persuading employers to provide more benefits and protections to their workers; and interventions to help those who work in the informal economy get higher returns to their labour – by increasing their assets and competitiveness and by assuring better terms.

Finally, women in the informal economy must be supported in their efforts to gain voice and build capacity so they have the skills to negotiate and influence policy. Organisations such as trade unions, NGOs and multilateral agencies can provide financial and technical support to help women build and sustain member-based organisations at the local, national, regional and international levels. They can provide ways through which these organisations can increase their numbers, scale up their initiatives, and network to increase visibility and power (Chen et al 2005).

8. Gaps in the research

Some gaps in the current evidence on women and work have been intimated above. For instance, research shows that the gender educational gap in many developing countries has been significantly reduced, and even reversed in some Latin American and south-east Asian countries but this has not translated into a closing of the gender wage gap or reduced occupational vertical segregation.

Yet, available evidence suggests that despite this, gender income and wage gaps continue to be wide. Why is this so and what are the policy solutions?

Also, there has been a lot of discussion about the 'feminisation' of labour: in many developing countries, women's incorporation in labour markets has been increasing. Globalisation and production for exports in newly industrialised countries has transformed gender norms with respect to women's paid work, even in countries where traditional gender norms have restricted women to the private sphere of the household and away from the public sphere (Elson forthcoming). We know quite a bit about the relationship between gender and the manufacturing sector. But we know little about the implications for gender equality of women's employment in emerging service sectors (such as international call centres), or even in agriculture. And we know even less about the quality of work. How such globalising trends will influence and shape opportunities for women in paid work is a further area of research. There is also some evidence that as economies move up the industrial ladder, there is defeminisation – that is, women's share of manufacturing jobs declines. One view of this therefore is that all that women have gained is access to dead-end low paid insecure jobs; why this continues to be the case needs continued exploration.

While much progress has been made in improving labour laws and standards, the enforcement of laws remains a very serious problem with a strong gender dimension. The standard ways of monitoring and inspection that are used to ensure compliance by, for example, the ILO do not work for some typically 'female jobs', especially when these are home-based or in agricultural settings. We need to understand better what type of mechanisms and initiatives for promoting full respect of female workers' rights are most promising and effective in these contexts.

There is still a limited understanding of what constitutes the full range of women's work (including both paid and unpaid work), and there needs to be greater emphasis not only on women securing work but on securing decent work. We also need to try to understand more deeply the impact on women's overall labour burden of taking on paid work and the implications for women's well-being. (Seguino, email communication). More studies are needed to document and fully map out how women's unpaid household responsibilities interact with their opportunities for decent paid employment, and how care provisioning (or the lack of it) affects the productivity of the current and future labour force (Fontana, email communication). First, we know that women have been an attractive source of cheap labour in export oriented developing economies that produce light manufactures. What is less well understood is whether women's economic position in those jobs improves over time.

A large constraining factor in research on women and work is the lack of data, particularly for cross-country comparison. Time series evidence on the female

share of informal employment does not exist for most countries. Data limitations prevent tracking progress toward reducing sex segregation, both across and within occupations, which is related to women's low wages and women's reliance on informal employment, but it remains extensive. Investments in sex and age-disaggregated data, including time use information, are necessary for monitoring improvements in women's economic and labour market status and tracking the results of policy efforts (Grown 2011).

Much of the research and policy development on gender equality in employment has been focused on measures to enable women to compete with men on an equal basis. These measures include both measures to improve women's access to education and training, credit, land and other assets; and measures to reform the governance of markets to create a 'level playing field' but while these measures are important they are not sufficient. To the extent that they are successful, they will simply redistribute some jobs from men to women. To truly realise gender equality, an expansion of the number of decent jobs (as defined by ILO), as well as an improvement of women's access to them is required (Elson, email communication). Questions need to be answered about how decent jobs can be created that pay living wages and support women in combining paid and unpaid work.

Another gap is how to effectively combat employer bias: traditionally the male is accepted as the breadwinner and the female as the carer. The resulting bias means that male workers are the first to be hired in upturns, even in the female intensive service sector. Therefore, policies to create more jobs by stimulating economic growth will not, by themselves, be enough to reduce the gender gap in unemployment. Insufficient attention has also been paid to the social institutions that impact on gender equality, such as informal family laws, cultural traditions and social norms. Information on restrictive social institutions and their impact on women's social and economic development is vital to understand (Chen et al 2005).

Finally, the depth of the relationship between women's work conditions and outcomes in poor countries and the impact this has on women's work conditions in middle- and high- income countries remains unexplored but highly relevant in the context of increasing globalisation. Is there an inverse relationship? Insofar as globalisation has helped women in developing countries get jobs (albeit poorly paid, insecure jobs), has this come at the expense of women in more developed economies, and in particular, ethnic minorities and possibly immigrants? Also, a disaggregated understanding of working women in developing countries, in terms of their race, ethnicity, caste and so on would support the development of better approaches and policies.

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6. Additional information

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Selected websites visited

Pathways of Women's Empowerment:
http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/resources_pathways.html#Work

UNRISD Gender and Development:
[http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BB128/\(httpProgrammeAreas\)/BAC527EAC4F1F59C8025718B003C2B65?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BB128/(httpProgrammeAreas)/BAC527EAC4F1F59C8025718B003C2B65?OpenDocument)

Time Use Studies and Unpaid Care Work, Related Information Section:
[http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpPublications\)/414BA4D59E6D9AB1C125775B00480FD7?OpenDocument&panel=relatedinformation](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpPublications)/414BA4D59E6D9AB1C125775B00480FD7?OpenDocument&panel=relatedinformation)

Conference Page: Unpaid work and the economy: gender, poverty and the MDGs: http://www.levyinstitute.org/undp-levy-conference/program_documents.php

ILO Bureau for Gender Equality: <http://www.ilo.org/gender/>

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO):
<http://www.wiego.org/>

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