

# COVID-19 and Labour Force Gender Disparities

Subjects: Womens Studies

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Historically, the participation of women in the labour force has been lower than that of men. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has widened this labour force participation gap.

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, the participation of women in the labour force has been lower than that of men. Despite all the successes achieved over the years, the gender gap remains high. As of 2019, the UN gender snapshot of the sustainable Development Goals indicates that 55% of women aged 25 to 54 years participate in the labour force while 94% of men of the same age group participate in the labour force<sup>[1]</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating impacts on labour markets globally, resulting in outcomes such as reduction/loss of working hours, reduction in wages/pay cuts, outright layoffs and loss of income sources<sup>[2][3]</sup>. While these outcomes have social consequences for all individuals experiencing them, studies have shown heterogeneity in the experience of these outcomes for different groups.

## 2. Women's participation in the labour force prior to COVID-19

*The participation rate of women in the labour force globally prior to the pandemic was generally lower than that of men.*

There is generally low labour market force participation rates of women in all the continents and regions of the world, with areas such as Northern Africa, Arab States and Southern Asia showing the lowest rates. As of 2018, 71.9% of men in Northern Africa participated in the labour force as against 21.9% of women. For the Arab States, 77.2% of men participated in the labour market while 18.9% of women participated in the labour force. Southern Asia also had a low rate of women's participation in the labour force (79% of men; 27.6% of women)<sup>[4]</sup>.

## 3. The general impact of COVID-19 on labour force

*The COVID-19 pandemic affected the labor markets mainly through three indicators, namely loss/reduction of working hours, reduced wages and loss of employment. The effect of loss or reduction of working hours and wages was experienced by a majority of people as compared to the entire loss of employment.*

In Ghana, a majority of workers experienced reduced wages. Data from the Ghana Statistical Service Business Tracker shows that 46% of workers employed experienced reduced wages in May/June 2020. This figure was reduced to 10% in August/September 2020. Job losses were minimal as 1.4% of workers experienced job losses in May/June. This also reduced to 0.4% in August/September 2020.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 4. Differential impact of COVID-19 on men and women in the labour force

*Women and informal sector workers, who are mainly women, were severely affected by the pandemic.*

The Ghana Socioeconomic Panel Survey-COVID Panel data shows that 25.4% of female workers in Ghana maintained their jobs from February throughout April 2020 whilst 41.7% of male workers in maintaining their jobs from February throughout April 2020. 77% of all informal workers stopped work as of April 2020. The data also show that 63.7% of informal sector workers were women. In Nigeria, women who lost their jobs were less likely to join the labour force when labour market conditions improved. Several women who maintained jobs had a transition from business activities to farming activities<sup>[6][7]</sup>. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal, loss of earnings was severe among informal sector workers. An average of 70% of workers in the informal sector experienced a loss of earnings as against 40% of workers in the formal

sector. In South Africa, 47.9% of women working full hours in February 2020 had a reduction in hours worked by April 2020, while 4.3% of men had a reduction in working hours. A majority of men (47.9% of men working) reported no change in the hours worked per week as against 4.5% of women<sup>[8][9]</sup>.

*In situations where there were losses of jobs in the population, a greater percentage of women experienced job losses than men.*

In India, over 37% of women lost their jobs while 30% of male employees experienced job losses and women who lost their jobs were more likely not to return to their jobs than men<sup>[10][11]</sup>. This suggests that more men maintained their jobs than women.

*The increased burden of unpaid and care work saw the increased participation of men in this space. However, this was reduced when lockdown conditions were over. Overall, women spent more hours on unpaid and care work than men.*

In India, during the lockdown in April 2020, men increased their participation in housework from 2 hours in December 2019 to 3 hours. This reduced to 2 hours and even lesser hours post lockdown. Women spent fairly the same hours before and during the pandemic, but had to increase the number of hours post lockdown when the hours for men reduced<sup>[12]</sup>.

*There were shifts in employment types during the COVID-19 first wave lockdown period* In Nigeria, women were more likely to enter into farming business than men, after the first wave of lockdown.

While the above findings present areas for further research, they also offer lessons for the organisation of work in the future.

## **5. Lessons for the future of work**

The findings show the ease of reduction of working hours and loss of jobs of women during covariate shocks. However, the extent to which men lost their jobs and had a reduction of working hours was minimal. This indicates the risk and insecurity of women in the labour force. This serves as a lesson for women to gain specialised skills that are in high demand in the labour market. This will increase retention in the labour force in the case of any shocks in the labour market.

The increased burden of unpaid work and childcare presents a case of tension between social reproductive activities and economic activities. The burden of social reproduction has a tendency to reduce participation in the labour market. While this provides a lesson to build systems to enable effective childcare during shocks, it also offers a window for policy to encourage arrangements that will enable women to play both social reproductive activities and economic activities through flexible work arrangements and remote working.

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