



## The quantity and quality of women's work

Over the past three decades, there has been notable progress on certain key dimensions of gender equality. Almost universally the gender gap in education has been narrowed and commitments to secure equal access to employment have advanced. However, the rate of progress towards gender equality in employment has varied extensively both within and between regions, with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and South Asia lagging the furthest behind.

This factsheet considers trends in the quantity and quality of women's work in specific country examples from three regions: the Middle-East and North-Africa, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and South Asia. The descriptive statistics highlighted here suggest that the trends in the quantity and quality of women's work often follow very different patterns. It is often true that when countries increase women's labour force participation, women are also increasingly represented in vulnerable employment. While caution is required in the interpretation of these figures,<sup>1</sup> they do indicate that the factors which determine the quantity of women's work are not necessarily the same factors which determine the quality of the jobs women find.

In the graphs shown here, we use the proportion of female to male rates of labour force participation as a measure of the quantity of women's work and the proportion of female to male rates of vulnerable employment as a measure of the quality of women's work. The first measure indicates the size of the gender gap in terms of participation in the labour market and the second measure tells us whether or not working women are overrepresented in vulnerable types of employment, or what might be thought of as bad jobs.

In most developing countries, we observe a rising trend in vulnerable employment for both men and women, reaching 76.4 per cent of total employment in low-income countries and 46.2 per cent in middle-income countries in 2018 (ILO 2018). Behind these average values, important differences appear between men and women in the gender composition of vulnerable employment.

<sup>1</sup> As reported in the ILOSTAT documentation note, a number of factors can limit the comparability of statistics on status in employment between countries or over time. Comparisons over time and across countries can be problematic, for example, when the frequency of data collection varies widely. Moreover, the definition of vulnerable employment can vary itself across countries in those countries who group together some of the ICSE categories (merging, for example, own account workers with employers).

**VULNERABLE EMPLOYMENT**  
Jobs which place the worker in a disadvantaged position relative to global standards of decent work are classified as vulnerable employment. These jobs are usually informal and combine poor working conditions with inadequate social security. Moreover, they generally feature inadequate earnings, low productivity, and situations that undermine workers' fundamental rights. This concept has been proposed by the International Labour Organization (ILO).

### The SDGs

UNU-WIDER supports the global Sustainable Development Goals and its work assists in achieving them on time, by 2030. For more information, visit [unu.edu/explore](http://unu.edu/explore).

### SDG 5: Gender equality

Achieving gender equality demands urgent action to end harmful practices and violence against women and girls, and overcome the economic, social, political, educational, and health barriers that deny them equal rights and opportunities. We generate knowledge to support development policies that eliminate barriers for women and girls in health, education, employment, and resource access.

### About us

UNU-WIDER is unique blend of think tank, policy institute, and UN agency. Our work focuses on creating, sharing, and exchanging knowledge for development.

### Follow us

Subscribe to the WIDERAngle newsletter, published regularly and featuring expert commentary and updates on UNU-WIDER research, activities, and opportunities. Visit [www.wider.unu.edu](http://www.wider.unu.edu) and click Join the Network or scan the QR code

Follow us on social media. We are @UNUWIDER on Twitter and Facebook



[wider.unu.edu](http://wider.unu.edu)



### UNU-WIDER

United Nations University  
World Institute for Development  
Economics Research

Katajanokanlaituri 6 B  
FI-00160 Helsinki  
Finland

Tel: +358-(0)9-615 9911  
Fax: +358-(0)9-615 99333  
Email: [wider@wider.unu.edu](mailto:wider@wider.unu.edu)

FACTSHEET



UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY  
UNU-WIDER

quantity and quality of  
**WOMEN'S  
WORK**



**5** GENDER  
EQUALITY



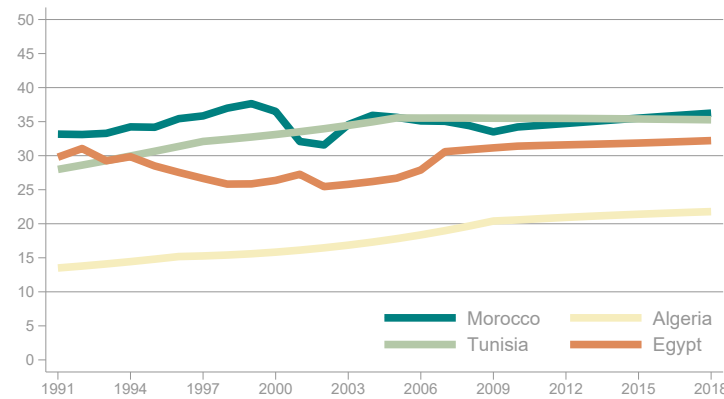




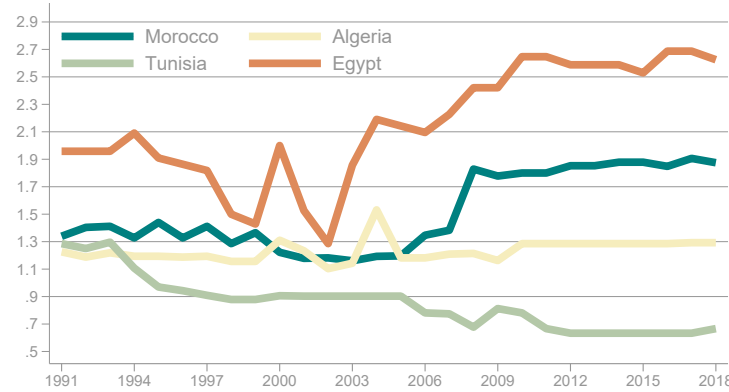
## The Middle East and North Africa

In MENA, countries such as Egypt and Morocco are underperforming in both dimensions. Very few women are working in Egypt and Morocco, with rates of participation similar to those in India, and the women who do work are increasingly over-represented in vulnerable employment. In Egypt, women are overrepresented in vulnerable employment by more than two to one (2:1) relative to men. This is very different from other countries in the region, such as Tunisia and Algeria, where progress for women in the quantity dimension was also matched by progress in the quality dimension.

Labour force participation rate: female to male ratio (%)



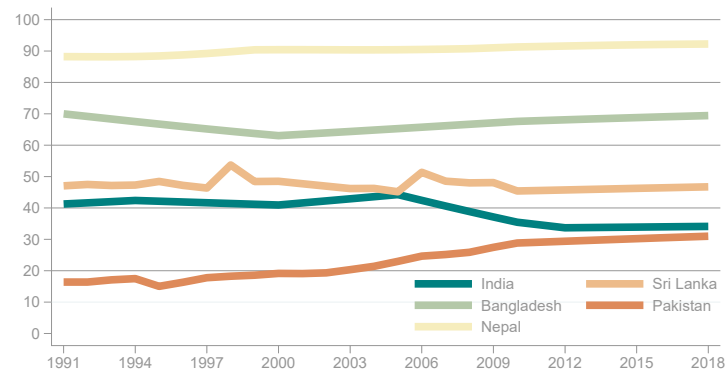
Vulnerable employment (share in total empl.) female to male ratio



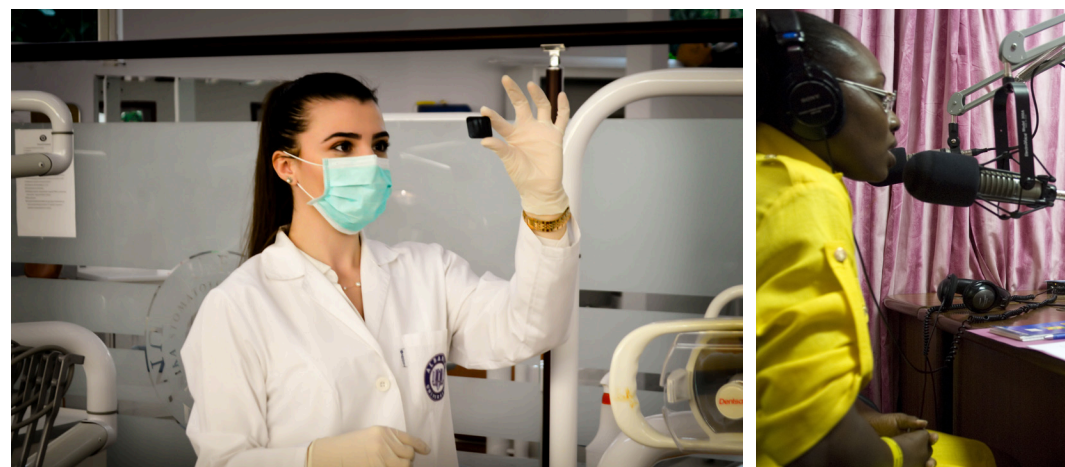
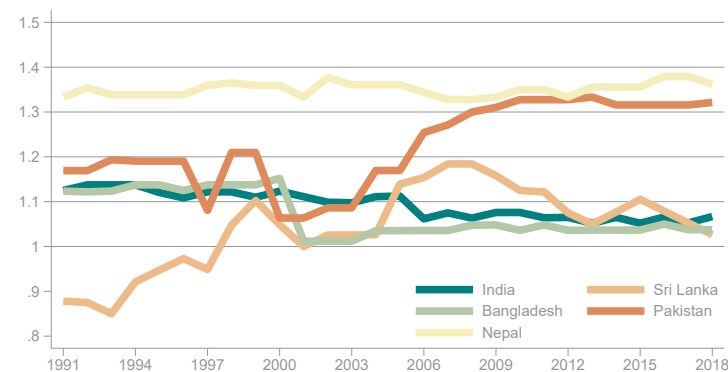
## South-Asia

In South Asia, as elsewhere, more women work in conditions of vulnerable employment than do men. Nepal and Pakistan have the highest shares of vulnerable employment for women, with the quality of work in Pakistan having deteriorated the most for women. In terms of the quantity dimension, though, Nepal has the greatest equality in labour force participation in the region and even though Pakistan has the least equality in this dimension, it has seen the biggest improvement over the period. In contrast, India and Sri Lanka have seen women's labour force participation stagnate, but in these countries, women are also not overrepresented in vulnerable employment.

Labour force participation rate: female to male ratio (%)



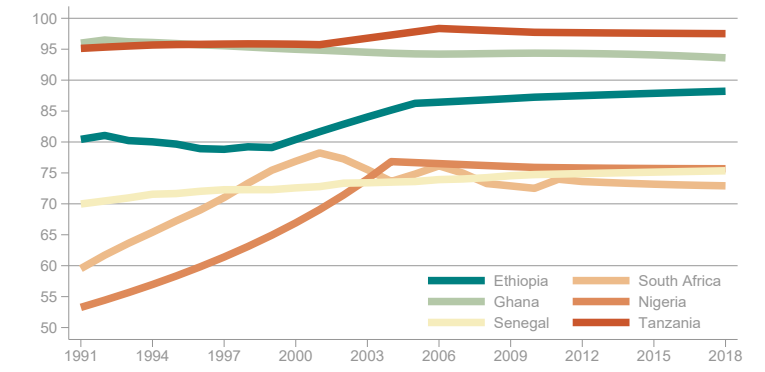
Vulnerable employment (share in total empl.) female to male ratio



## Sub-Saharan Africa

As the figures suggest, SSA countries have a more gender equal pattern of workers in vulnerable employment categories. This can be observed particularly in Ethiopia and Tanzania where high rates of female labour force participation are also exhibited. In Nigeria and South Africa, the share of women in vulnerable employment has increased. Both these countries also recorded improvements, followed by stagnation from the mid-2000s, in the female labour force participation rates. Lastly, we observe that in Ghana – which exhibited in the 1990s the smallest gender gap in the labour force participation of the region but the largest gap in vulnerable employment – progress has been made recently in the quality dimension of women's work and the gap in vulnerable employment has almost been closed.

Labour force participation rate: female to male ratio (%)



Vulnerable employment (share in total empl.) female to male ratio

