



## ► Policy Brief

July 2021

# Building Forward Fairer: Women's rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery

Over a year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic, gender equality in the world of work has worsened. Women have suffered disproportionate job and income losses, including because of their over representation in the hardest-hit sectors, and many continue to work on the front line, sustaining care systems, economies and societies, while often also doing the majority of unpaid care work. All these factors underscore the need for a gender-responsive recovery to respond to the commitment of “building forward fairer”.

This policy brief provides an outlook of where women stand in the labour market after more than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic. It confirms that women's employment has been negatively impacted in terms of both quantity and quality, although with substantial regional variations. It provides a snapshot of new and continuing measures that governments have adopted to mitigate the employment and income effects of the pandemic, while warning that they are already leaving women behind. Finally, it calls for gender-responsive policies, in order to make women's right to work and their labour rights a central feature of the COVID-19 recovery.

## ► Part I: Women's work in times of COVID-19

### The COVID-19 gendered impacts on global labour markets

**Globally, women have been disproportionately hit in terms of job-losses: 4.2 per cent of women's employment was destroyed as a result of the pandemic compared to 3 per cent of men's employment**

The economic crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented job losses for women and men. Figure 1 shows that the decrease in employment between

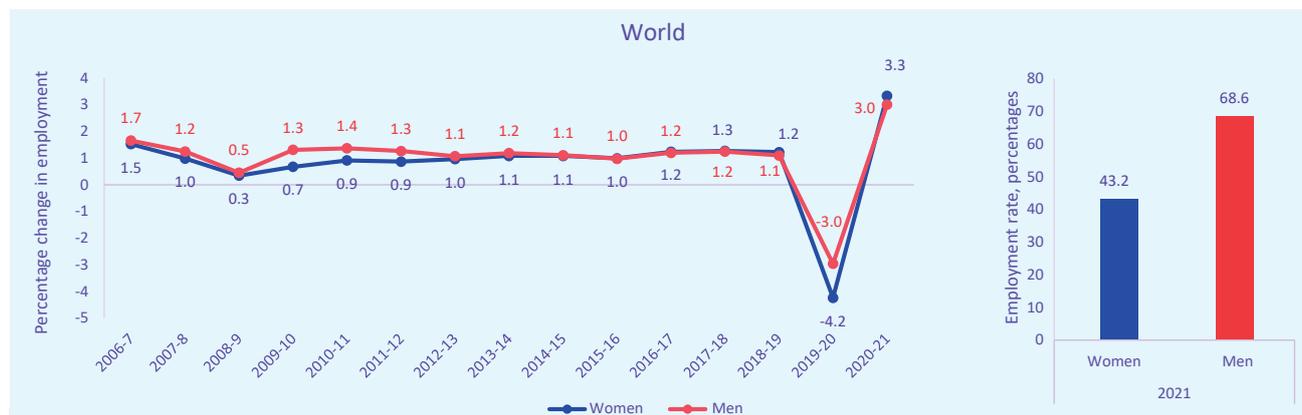
2019 and 2020 was more pronounced than during the Great Recession<sup>1</sup> for both women and men. This is largely due to the impact of lockdowns that affected sectors, including manufacturing and services where women are overrepresented and where they are often working with informal working arrangements. Enduring gender gaps in time spent in unpaid care work, limited access to social protection and an upsurge in violence and harassment have also made it difficult for women to keep their jobs, compared to men.<sup>2</sup> Globally, between 2019 and 2020, women's employment declined by 4.2 per cent, representing a drop of 54 million jobs, while men's employment declined by 3 per cent, or 60 million jobs.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Great Recession of 2008-2009.

<sup>2</sup> ILO. 2020. 'The COVID-19 Response: Getting Gender Equality Right for a Better Future for Women at Work' (Geneva); ILO. 2018. 'Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work' (Geneva).

<sup>3</sup> The section *The COVID-19 gendered impacts on global labour markets* presents the new ILO sex-disaggregated employment projections for 2021.

Figure 1. Percentage change in employment by sex, 2006-2021 and employment rate, 2021



Source: ILO calculations based on ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates.

**...and in 2021, there will still be 13 million fewer women in employment compared to 2019, while men's employment will have recovered to 2019 levels**

ILO forecasts show that, globally, in 2021 women's employment is expected to rise by 3.3 per cent compared to 2020 levels, or 41 million, while men's employment is expected to grow by 3 per cent, or 59 million. Even though the projected employment growth rate in 2021 for women exceeds that of men, it will, nonetheless, be insufficient to bring women back to pre-pandemic employment levels, because of deeper employment losses experienced by women in 2020 (-4.2 per cent). Globally, in 2021, the number of employed women is projected to be 13 million less than in 2019, while the number of men in employment is projected to be about the same as in 2019. Women's employment in 2021 is projected to be 1,270 million, while men's is forecasted to reach 2,019 million. Only 43.2 per cent of the world's working-age women will be employed in 2021, compared to 68.6 per cent of working-age men. In other words, in 2021 women will be still 25.4 percentage points less likely to be in employment than men.

**Regional employment trends**

**In the Americas, women's employment declined by 9.4 per cent as a result of the pandemic, representing the largest decline across all regions**

As highlighted in figure 2, the Americas was the region that experienced the greatest reduction in women's employment as a result of the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2020, women's employment declined by 9.4 per cent compared to a 7.0 per cent decline for men. The drop in women's employment disrupted the progress observed over the past 15 years, which was the result of better educational opportunities for women, greater availability of formal jobs in the services sector, migration from rural to urban areas, and lower fertility

rates.<sup>4</sup> The ILO estimates that the regional employment-to-population ratio for women will stand at only 46.8 per cent in 2021, while men's will reach 66.2 per cent. These figures portray bleak prospects for women in the region, highlighting that employment growth lacks the intensity needed to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

**In the Arab States, despite favourable prospects for women's employment in 2021, women continue to be five times less likely to be in employment than men**

The second highest drop in the number of employed women was observed in the Arab States. Between 2019 and 2020, women's employment declined by 4.1 per cent and men's by 1.8 per cent (figure 2). However, recovery prospects appear to be more favourable for women than for men, as women's employment in 2021 is expected to increase by 5.6 per cent and men's employment by 3.7 per cent, reflecting more targeted policy actions to promote women's participation in employment.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, there remain substantial gender inequalities at work in the region. The ILO projects that in 2021 the employment-to-population ratio for women will stand at only 14.3 per cent compared to 70.8 per cent for men. Over the past 15 years, the region's employment-to-population ratio has hardly fluctuated. This low female employment rate is the result of the limited quantity and quality of jobs generated, traditional expectations of women's role in society and recurrent political instability.<sup>6</sup>

**In 2021, in Asia and the Pacific men's employment is projected to surpass its pre-crisis level, while women's is likely to remain below its 2019 level**

In Asia and the Pacific, the shock of the pandemic led women's employment to decrease by 3.8 per cent compared to a decline of 2.9 per cent for men (figure 2). The number of men in employment is expected to rise by 3 per cent by the end of 2021, which would more than offset the job losses that occurred in 2020. By contrast, women's employment losses would not be

4 ILO. 2019. 'A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All' (Geneva).

5 Ibid; ILO-OECD. Forthcoming. 'Women at Work in G20 countries: Policy action since 2019' (Geneva and Paris); ILO-OECD. 2020. 'Women at Work in G20 countries: Policy action since 2019' (Geneva and Paris).

6 ILO. 2019. 'A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All' (Geneva).

compensated by the forecasted 3.2 per cent rise in 2021. This would further accelerate the decrease in women's employment rates observed in the region over the past 15 years, leading to only 41.2 per cent of women being in employment in 2021, compared to 71.4 per cent of men. The main factors behind the longstanding decline in women's employment rates include the rapid transition from agriculture to manufacturing with lower than expected job formalization rates, and the lack of care services and infrastructure that enable women to combine work with family responsibilities.<sup>7</sup>

**In Europe and Central Asia, women have lost 2.5 per cent of their jobs due to the pandemic and are expected to recover just 0.6 per cent of them in 2021**

In Europe and Central Asia, it is the second time over the past 15 years that employment has been severely hit by a crisis. The Great Recession, between 2008 and 2009, dramatically reduced men's employment ( 2.3 per cent), while women's jobs were affected to a much lesser extent (-0.5 per cent) (figure 2). By contrast, the COVID-19 crisis has curtailed women's employment considerably more than men's, leading to a 2.5 per cent and a 1.9 per cent decrease, respectively. The ILO forecast for 2021 is not encouraging, as the number of women in employment is expected to rise by a dim 0.6 per cent and that of men by 0.4 per cent. In Europe and Central Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic has halted the positive trend of increasing women's employment rates of the past years, triggered by higher female educational achievement, rising social protection coverage coupled with investments in the care economy and the increase in part-time employment opportunities.<sup>8</sup> In 2021, the employment rate for women is projected to stand at 46.0 per cent, compared to 60.8 per cent for men.

**In Africa, women's employment growth in 2021 is expected to more than offset the job losses resulting from COVID-19. However, job quality and dependence on the informal economy remain major concerns**

Despite substantial decent work deficits,<sup>9</sup> in Africa, men's employment experienced the smallest decline across all geographic regions with just a 0.1 per cent drop between 2019 and 2020, while women's employment decreased by 1.9 per cent (figure 2). Recovery prospects are particularly positive for women, whose employment is expected to rise by 4.7 per cent between 2020 and 2021, more than offsetting pandemic-related job losses. As a result, in 2021 the employment rate for women in Africa is projected to reach 48.7 per cent, which would be the highest across regions, and men's employment rate is projected to stand at 66.2 per cent. However, a

North-South divide in subregional dynamics persists. In northern Africa, only 16.0 per cent of working-age women are projected to be employed in 2021. The combination of ascribed gender roles, limited expansion of the services and manufacturing sectors, and lack of care services have contributed to women leaving paid work around the age of 25, which coincides with marriage.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, in sub-Saharan Africa, the employment-to-population ratio for women is projected to remain among the highest in the world in 2021, at 57.1 per cent. The gender gap in employment rates, at 10.4 percentage points, is low when compared to many other regions. However, women's higher employment in the region often comes at the expense of the quality of their work, given their disproportionately high participation in the informal economy, especially in agriculture, a sector where paid work is often combined with unpaid care responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> In Africa, the pandemic has exacerbated the poor working conditions of informal economy workers, who have continued to work during the COVID-19 outbreak, putting themselves and their families at risk. In this context, when gender intersects with other personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality, age, disability or HIV status, there is a risk that gender disparities will widen further.<sup>12</sup>

**Gender gaps in job quality persist**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the large gender gaps in the quality of employment, especially for the many women working in feminized sectors and occupations, and in the informal economy. Even before the pandemic, jobs with a high concentration of women were characterized by low wages, long working hours, limited opportunities for career advancement and exposure to occupational health and safety risks as well as violence and harassment. When the pandemic hit, these trends put women workers at greater risk of being laid off, seeing a significant contraction of their working hours and/or experiencing a further deterioration in their working conditions. Migrant workers, ethnic and racial minorities, older persons and those with disabilities and living with HIV and AIDS have also seen the quality of their jobs dampened.<sup>13</sup>

During the pandemic, women have continued to provide essential work in the health and social work sector as well as in others essential occupations, often putting their own lives at risk and facing a double burden: longer shifts at work and additional care work at home<sup>14</sup>. For the majority of women and men, COVID-19 has increased care demands within households on an unprecedented scale. However, new evidence shows that women

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 ILO. 2021. 'World Employment and Social Outlook Trends' (Geneva).

10 ILO. 2019. 'A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All' (Geneva).

11 Ibid; ILO. 2018. 'Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture. Third edition' (Geneva).

12 ILO. 2020. 'The COVID-19 Response: Getting Gender Equality Right for a Better Future for Women at Work' (Geneva); U. Cattaneo et al. 2019. 'The impact of HIV on care work and the care workforce' (Geneva, ILO).

13 ILO. 2020. 'The COVID-19 Response: Getting Gender Equality Right for a Better Future for Women at Work' (Geneva); ILO. 2020. 'COVID-19 and the World of Work: A Focus on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' (Geneva); ILO. 2020. 'A Policy Framework for Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis' (Geneva); ILO. 2020. 'COVID-19 and the World of Work: Ensuring the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities at All Stages of the Response' (Geneva); ILO. 2020. 'COVID-19 and the World of Work: A Focus on People Living with HIV' (Geneva).

14 Cattaneo, U. and Pozzan, E. 2020. 'Women health workers: Working relentlessly in hospitals and at home' (Geneva, ILO).

Figure 2. Percentage change in employment 2006-2021 and employment rate, 2021, by sex and region



Source: ILO calculations based on ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates.

continue to bear the brunt of unpaid care work.<sup>15</sup> This has led women who remained in employment to cut down on paid working hours or to extend their total working hours (paid and unpaid) to unsustainable levels. Across the world, women continue to earn 20 per cent less than men<sup>16</sup> and women experience further pay penalties when they belong to ethnic minorities,<sup>17</sup> are migrants,<sup>18</sup> or persons with disabilities.<sup>19</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has hit those at the bottom of the wage scale harder than those at the top and, particularly, women who are disproportionately represented in low-paid jobs. Estimates based on a sample of 28 European countries found that, without wage subsidies, women would have lost 8.1 per cent of their wages in the second quarter of 2020, compared to 5.4 per cent for men.<sup>20</sup>

COVID-19 has disrupted the livelihoods of women working in the informal economy, as many informal businesses were forced to close temporarily or permanently, leading to severe loss of income and an increased risk of falling into poverty. As a result, many children have faced a higher risk of child labour and lower rates of school enrolment, especially young girls.<sup>21</sup> Domestic workers, many of whom work informally, are exposed to significant decent work deficits in respect of working time, wages, social security, occupational safety and health, including violence and harassment. Globally, they earn 56.4 per cent of the average monthly wages of other employees. Live-in domestic workers and migrant domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to poor working conditions. During the pandemic, many domestic workers have lost their jobs or seen a dramatic reduction in working hours and correspondingly lower wages.<sup>22</sup>

With the pandemic, it has also become clear that while many higher wage jobs could shift to full-time telework, this has not been the case for the many women in low-wage jobs, such as retail, sales and hospitality that require physical interaction with clients, customers or patients. The ILO estimates that during the pandemic, the number of workers who could work from home was 557 million, accounting for only 17.4 per cent of the world's employment.<sup>23</sup> While sex-disaggregated data on the number of persons working from home is not yet available, some evidence suggests that women's working conditions have worsened, as the combination of COVID-19-related anxiety, unchanged expectations from employers and an increase in care responsibilities can have severe repercussions on women's physical and mental health. In some instances, telework has also led to increased work

intensity, with potential risks of exhaustion, higher levels of stress and, at times, a sense of loneliness.<sup>24</sup>

However, studies conducted prior to the pandemic already showed that telework can offer workers greater autonomy in the organization of work and time, and that when well-designed, teleworking arrangements can be instrumental in promoting women's participation in managerial and leadership positions, which remains low.<sup>25</sup> Globally, in 2020, only 28.3 per cent of managers and leaders are women, a figure that has changed very little over the past 27 years.<sup>26</sup> The pandemic has also cast light once again on the little space given to women in decision-making. Globally, women made up just 24 per cent of COVID-19 task force members, confirming that the glass ceiling remains firmly in place in economies and in politics.<sup>27</sup>

## ► Part II: Gender-responsive policies

The policy measures implemented during the pandemic have been of unprecedented scale, particularly in developed countries. However, few measures have been gender-responsive, aimed at addressing the emergency by supporting women's attachment to the labour market and improving their working conditions, including the quality of women's earnings and their security in the labour market.

### Policy responses to prevent women from disproportionately losing jobs and incomes during the emergency

During the pandemic, women fared considerably better in countries that took measures to prevent them from losing their jobs. Among the emergency measures put in place to prevent job losses are employment retention benefits, which prevent unemployment by compensating wage losses due to the temporary reduction in working hours or the suspension of work. These benefits avoid

15 EIGE. 2021. 'Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic'; ILO. 2020. 'A gender-responsive employment recovery: Building back fairer' (Geneva).

16 ILO. 2018. 'Global Wage Report 2018/19: What lies behind gender pay gaps' (Geneva).

17 ILO. 2020. 'Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future' (Geneva).

18 ILO. 2021. 'ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers' (Geneva); ILO. 2020. 'The migrant pay gap: Understanding wage differences between migrants and nationals' (Geneva).

19 CSJ Disability Commission. 2021. 'Now Is the Time'.

20 ILO. 2020. 'Global Wage Report 2020-2021: Wages and minimum wages in the time of COVID-19' (Geneva).

21 ILO. 2021. 'Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward' (Geneva).

22 ILO. 2021. 'Making decent work a reality for domestic workers' (Geneva).

23 ILO. 2021. 'Policy Brief: From potential to practice: Preliminary findings on the numbers of workers working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic' (Geneva).

24 EIGE. 2021. 'Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic'.

25 ILO. 2021. 'Women in business and management: the business case for change' (Geneva); International Organization of Employers (IOE). 2020. 'IOE Position Paper: Recommendations to foster female talent in top management levels' (Geneva).

26 ILOSTAT.

27 UNDP. 2020. COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker.

the break in the employment relationship, maintain workers in their jobs and safeguard their skills, while supporting a fast recovery. Particularly widespread in Europe, they have also been implemented in other regions. In Argentina and Botswana, for example, governments provided wage subsidies in return for a guarantee to avoid dismissals during a set period. In Australia and New Zealand, the benefits were extended to cover also casual workers, among whom women are overrepresented.<sup>28</sup> Some countries focused their support on self-employed women, such as Czechia. Measures have also aimed at maintaining workers' attachment to the labour force: in Chile and Malaysia, access to unemployment insurance was allowed while maintaining the employment relationship.<sup>29</sup>

When workers lose their jobs, it is of crucial importance to establish mechanisms for their re-entry into employment as early as possible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in some countries specific measures were established to support women. In Colombia and Chile, for example, wage subsidies were applied to new hires, with greater subsidy rates for women. Colombia and Senegal, among others, have created or strengthened support for women entrepreneurs. Moreover, both developed and developing countries have established or expanded public employment programmes, which directly create employment.<sup>30</sup> In many cases, like in Mexico or in Kenya, quotas were established to guarantee that women benefit from these programmes.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside the pre-COVID-19 employment-centred measures, governments recognized the need to support women's livelihoods throughout the emergency, particularly in the informal economy, given their difficulties in gaining access to employment. Countries including Brazil, Indonesia and Mozambique expanded their existing Conditional Cash Transfer (CTT) Programmes to reach more beneficiaries; Ghana and Pakistan launched new CCT programmes; and India increased the level of an existing cash transfer. Other countries, such as Colombia and South Africa, implemented new and temporary subsidies for informal workers who were not beneficiaries of existing CCTs. In the case of Argentina, a new income support measure (Emergency Family Income or IFE) compatible with existing CCTs, whose beneficiaries are children, was introduced, effectively delinking emergency income support measures directed to workers from universal and permanent child benefits.<sup>32</sup>

## Gender-responsive, job-rich recovery policies

A gender-responsive, inclusive, and job-rich recovery

needs to explicitly counterbalance the gender-specific effects of the COVID-19 crisis and create conditions that support the creation of decent work for women. Unprecedented macroeconomic policies, both fiscal and monetary, have been put in place to cushion the impacts of the pandemic and ensure a speedy recovery, particularly in 2020. Fiscal stimulus packages have been greater than in the 2008-2009 crisis, but relatively few of these resources have been channelled to gender-responsive measures: out of the 580 fiscal and economic measures to help businesses weather the crisis in 132 countries and territories, only 12 per cent of the measures (70) aim to strengthen women's economic security by channelling resources to female-dominated sectors.<sup>33</sup>

Both at the macro and sectoral levels, prioritizing expenditures that support gender-egalitarian outcomes and avoiding premature fiscal consolidation, triggered by either mounting debt burdens or the fear of inflationary pressures, are preconditions to sustain recovery and avoid inflicting further damage on women's employment prospects. Investments in the care economy, in particular, have the potential of becoming part-and-parcel of any gender-responsive and job-rich recovery strategy, given their positive impacts on generating decent jobs, particularly for women (and indirectly for men as well). Countries like Argentina and the United States have positioned investments in care services at the core of their recovery efforts. In Argentina, budgeted investments in care amount to 6.6 per cent of total public investment. The proposed United States American Jobs Plan has a strong focus in investments in health care and childcare.<sup>34</sup> In developing countries where large gaps in health care coverage persist, the ILO estimates that the universalization cost is at US\$1,436.6 billion, which represents 4.6 per cent of the GDP of the 131 developing countries included in the study.<sup>35</sup>

## Policy responses to improve the quality of jobs

Countries have also continued to take initiatives to improve the quality of women's work. As previously mentioned, a major area of attention has been the care economy, not only for its potential to create jobs, but also to promote a better balance between work and family responsibilities at home and to improve working conditions of care workers. Some countries have provided employment services for mothers, increased the availability of childcare facilities for unemployed parents and low-income families (e.g. Australia, the Republic of Korea, the United States, and Suriname); reformed paternity leave legislation to increase the length of leave (e.g. France, Italy, Netherlands) or aligned it to maternity

28 Parliament of Australia. 2020. 'Australia's Jobkeepers Act'; Employment New Zealand. 2021. 'New Zealand's Wage Subsidy Scheme'.

29 ILO. 2020. 'Unemployment protection in the COVID-19 crisis. Country responses and policy considerations' (Geneva).

30 ILO. 2021. 'PEP Global Inventory of Infrastructure Stimulus, Public Employment Programs (PEP) Public Works programs and related responses to the effects of COVID-19 pandemic' (Geneva).

31 UNDP. 2021. 'COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker'.

32 ILO. 2020. 'A gender-responsive employment recovery: Building back fairer' ILO Policy Brief (Geneva).

33 UNDP. 2021. 'COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker'.

34 The White House, 2021. 'FACT SHEET: The American Jobs Plan'.

35 Durán-Valverde, F. et al. 2020. 'Financing gaps in social protection: Global estimates and strategies for developing countries in light of the COVID-19 crisis and beyond'. Working Paper 14 (Geneva, ILO).

leave such as Spain. Other countries have established ad hoc programmes to ensure that children and parents from marginalized communities receive support to access home-schooling platforms (e.g. Trinidad and Tobago.)<sup>36</sup>

Of utmost importance is the need to improve the quality of women's earnings not only to recognize the value of their work but also to fight poverty. For example, during the pandemic, many governments have increased the compensation of health care workers through allowances and additional remuneration, either on a permanent (e.g. France) or temporary basis (e.g. Argentina, Canada, Italy, Japan, Russian Federation and South Africa). Other countries, such as China and Singapore, are taking action to increase women's participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which offer better paid employment opportunities, while others are working towards implementing pay transparency policies and wage reporting, such as France and Spain. Moreover, some countries introduced upward adjustments to minimum wages, such as Germany, Japan and Mexico, which contribute to reducing the gender pay gap at the bottom of the wage distribution given women's overrepresentation in the lower half of the wage scale.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, many countries have put in place policies and measures to address the upsurge in domestic violence, which can negatively affect women's participation in employment, labour productivity and occupational safety and health. This has translated into more services for victims of violence. For example, in China, India and Lebanon, national authorities have set up or upgraded dedicated domestic violence hotline services and supported awareness-raising campaigns through social media. Other countries have put in place prevention, awareness-raising campaigns to combat the increase in domestic violence (e.g. Bangladesh and Nigeria).<sup>38</sup>

Countries have also taken action to support informal economy workers who have been severely affected by the pandemic. Measures that have been implemented have taken the form of unconditional cash transfers, more inclusive legislation, and support funds (e.g. Brazil, Burkina Faso, and Togo).<sup>39</sup> Such measures need to have a long-term vision to facilitate the transition of workers from the informal to the formal economy. For this to happen, the promotion of universal access to comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection systems, which are adapted to the developments in the world of work, needs to be prioritized in the overall emergency and recovery COVID-19 policies.<sup>40</sup> This is essential in order to support workers in vulnerable situations and enable women to enter, stay and progress in the labour market and enjoy decent work on a par with men.

## ► Part III: Building forward fairer

As a greater proportion of women's employment has been lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, extraordinary policy efforts are needed to ensure that women return to the labour market with decent work opportunities. If priority is not given to this goal, there is a risk that women will be left behind in the recovery efforts, further exacerbating existing gender inequalities in terms of access to and quality of employment. Gender equality considerations need to be an intrinsic component of the design, development, implementation and results of all programmes and strategies, policies, laws and regulations implemented as a response to and recovery from COVID-19.

Building forward fairer means bringing gender equality to the core of the recovery effort in line with the *ILO Resolution concerning a global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient*.<sup>41</sup> Efforts should be directed towards putting in place gender-responsive strategies aiming at full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all, with a focus on the needs of the most vulnerable and hardest hit by the pandemic. An equitable and job-rich recovery, non-discriminatory labour markets, and care-inclusive economies are the only pathway to build resilience to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>42</sup>

### Urgent policy measures

**Promoting gender-responsive employment policies for an inclusive and job-rich recovery.** Employment policies need to counterbalance the gender-specific effects of the COVID-19 crisis and create the conditions to support the creation of decent employment for women. Gender-responsive national employment policies<sup>43</sup> can do this along multiple fronts. First, macroeconomic stimulus packages, comprising both monetary and fiscal policies, need to continue boosting aggregate demand in ways that support employment retention and creation, with a specific focus on women's employment and incomes.<sup>44</sup> Sectoral policies need to continue supporting sectors affected by lockdown measures, trade disruptions and the general contraction in consumption and investment, particularly those whose employment is female dominated.<sup>45</sup> Maintaining income support to increase consumption would be important at the initial recovery phase. Active labour market

36 ILO-OECD. Forthcoming. 'Women at Work in G20 countries: Policy action since 2020' (Geneva and Paris).

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 UNDP. 2021. 'COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker'.

40 ILO. 2021. 'ILC.109/Record of proceedings No. 7A'; ILO 2021. 'ILC.109/Record of proceedings No. 5A'.

41 ILO. 2021. 'Resolution concerning a global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient' (Geneva).

42 Ibid.

43 ILO. 2020. 'Promoting a job-rich recovery from the COVID-19 crisis through national employment policies' (Geneva).

44 UN Women-ILO. 2021. 'How to assess fiscal stimulus packages from a gender equality perspective', UN Women-ILO Joint Programme: Promoting Decent Employment for Women through Inclusive Growth Strategies and Investments in Care (Geneva).

45 UN Women-ILO. 2021. 'Assessing the gendered employment impacts of COVID-19 and supporting a gender-responsive recovery', UN Women-ILO Joint Programme: Promoting Decent Employment for Women through Inclusive Growth Strategies and Investments in Care (Geneva).

policies need to continue to play their role in supporting women's reintegration into productive employment. For example, Public Employment Services that take an explicit gender approach in their plans and operations are more likely to produce gender-equitable outcomes.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, special consideration should be given to gender responsive upskilling and reskilling policies that would enable many women to find new decent work opportunities, while contributing to close the gender skills gap. Adequate financing for these policies will need to be secured as a matter of priority.

**Investing in the care economy.** Health, social work and education sectors are important generators of jobs, especially for women; contribute to the resilience of economies and societies; and enable workers with family responsibilities to work outside (or even from) home. Investments in the care economy have the potential to become a central part of inclusive, job-rich recovery strategies, generating decent jobs for care workers – most of whom are women; boosting demand and alleviating supply-side constraints; and contributing to women's integration into labour markets. Investing in the care economy also means investing in care leave policies (e.g. maternity, paternity and parental leave) and flexible working arrangements which, when well designed, can help working parents to combine paid work and family responsibilities, while encouraging a more even division of work at home. Expanding the coverage of care policies to all women and men is crucial for the promotion of equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation, thus ensuring a gender transformative recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

**Working towards universal access to comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection for all to reduce the current gender gap in social protection coverage.** Achieving universal access would entail combining well-designed tax-financed benefits with social insurance with a view to promoting the transition from the informal to formal economy, and thereby ensure that girls and boys, women and men, enjoy adequate social protection throughout their lives.<sup>47</sup>

**Promoting equal pay for work of equal value.** This crisis has brought to the fore the undervaluation of work performed by women, in particular in the care economy, and the need to redress it. Addressing this issue through a combination of measures, such as inclusive legislation with wage transparency and close interactions with social partners would help improve the quality of work performed by women. With women representing 40 per cent of total wage employment globally but 47 per cent of those earning at or below the minimum wage level, adequate minimum wages would also have a huge impact on women's economic autonomy. Considering the "lighthouse" effect that minimum wages have on wage formation in the informal economy, informal women workers would also benefit from it.<sup>48</sup> Joining the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) would be a concrete step forward in this area.

**Preventing, addressing and eliminating violence and harassment.** Domestic violence and work-related gender-based violence and harassment have worsened with the pandemic, further undermining women's ability to engage in paid employment.<sup>49</sup> The ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), which entered into force last June 25, 2021, provides a clear and useful framework to tackle violence and harassment in the world of work that ranges from prevention to protection, enforcement and remedies, training and awareness-raising.

**Promoting more women in decision-making positions.** Promoting women's participation and gender equality in leadership roles requires proactive measures that increase the participation and representation of different groups of women in decision-making bodies, social dialogue and social partner institutions.



46 ILO. Forthcoming. 'Employment services and labour market policy responses'. Policy brief COVID-19 (Geneva).

47 ILO. 2021. 'ILC.109/Record of proceedings No. 7A'.

48 ILO. 2021. 'Global Wage Report 2020–21: Wages and Minimum Wages in the Time of COVID-19' (Geneva).

49 ILO. 2020. 'The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work' (Geneva).

## ► Methodological Appendix

The gender breakdown projections for 2021 are produced from two different algorithms. One focusing on the labour force participation rate and the other on the unemployment rate (referred henceforth as GEND-LF and GEND-UR models). From these two variables, the employment, unemployment, labour force and inactivity figures can be derived arithmetically. The ILO modelled estimates database produced for the WESO Trends 2021 projected the variables of interest only at the aggregate level. Hence, the objective of the GEND-LF and GEND-UR models is to decompose the aggregate into separate time series for men and women.

The GEND-LF model produces the breakdown as follows. First, quarterly labour force survey (LFS) data (which include a gender breakdown) is used. The panel spans up to 2021Q1, unevenly. In a first step, the aggregate employment projections at the quarterly level are used in a regression setup to produce the expected path for each gender (the regression fully interacts gender, aggregate employment, and a principal component index of GDP and demographic structure). This produces a quarterly time series for each gender, which is aggregated at the annual level. These annual data are used to compute the growth rates of the target variable during 2021, and, using as a basis the 2020 modelled estimates, we apply the growth rates to produce 2021 level estimates.

The GEND-UR model works in a very similar way to GEND-LF. The only difference is that in the regression step the results from the GEND-LF model, interacted with the principal component index of GDP and demographic structure, is used as an additional explanatory variable.

### Reliability and future revisions

The projections are subject to a substantial amount of uncertainty. The unprecedented labour market shock created by the COVID 19 pandemic is difficult to assess by benchmarking against historical data. This difficulty is particularly stark in forecasting a recovery or a lack of recovery following a pandemic-induced recession.

Furthermore, at the time of estimation, consistent time series of readily available and timely high-frequency indicators, including labour force survey data, remained scarce (the latest data from LFS sources covers 2021Q1 for 8 countries). It is worth noting the impact of India, which has a notable influence in global and regional sex-disaggregated estimates. The estimates are obtained using CMIE data<sup>50</sup>, because this is the only timely source at present for the target indicators. This data source has methodological differences with respect to the official Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). These methodological differences result in markedly different labour statistics, in particular for women. Because the current models only use CMIE data to capture the change in trends, and not the levels itself, the data were included, as the gain of using survey-based data rather than a full modelling approach was considered to outweigh the methodological limitations. Nonetheless, there is a high likelihood that the estimates will be revised once the official PLFS data are released. Moreover, the current public health situation in India makes the forecasting exercise particularly difficult. Hence, aside from these methodological issues, the situation on the ground calls for greater caution when interpreting the estimates.

All these circumstances result in a high degree of uncertainty concerning the projections. For these reasons, the estimates will be regularly updated and revised by the ILO.

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