

Staff

Rebecca Smith
Policy Manager

Elizabeth Koshy
Senior Program Manager



Women have borne the brunt of the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Globally, roughly 70 percent of men were employed before the pandemic, compared to 66 percent of women.² The pandemic has deepened this divide. Sectors of the economy where women do their work—such as accommodation and food services, real estate, business and administrative activities, manufacturing, and wholesale/retail trade—have been disproportionately affected by pandemic closures, response measures, and job losses.³ According to an estimate by McKinsey & Co, nearly 60 million jobs have been 1.8 times more likely to be cut during the pandemic-related economic crisis.⁴ Between 2019 and 2020, the International Labor Organization estimates that women's employment in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) fell 4.7 percent, compared to a smaller decline of 3.3 percent among men.⁵

COVID-19 has also had a dramatic impact on unpaid work such as child and elder care, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic responsibilities. Prior to the pandemic, women performed a disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic and care work. Globally, women were spending roughly three times as many hours as men on such activities.⁶ This burden is not shared evenly across the world. Women in low- and middle-income countries spend more time on unpaid domestic and care work than their counterparts in higher-income countries.⁷ The time and burden of unpaid labor shouldered by women is related to their lower levels of labor force participation and overrepresentation in

informal work.⁸ Before the pandemic, women were also more likely than men to leave their jobs or reduce hours due to care work obligations.⁹ Many key components of global COVID-19 response and mitigation measures—such as out-of-school periods, stay-at-home orders, and protection in response to heightened health risks for the elderly—increased the time and intensity of care work. Surveying 38 countries, UN Women found that 80 percent of women had increased their unpaid care work, despite a higher baseline rate, while 54 percent of men had done the same.¹⁰

As low- and middle-income countries continue to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 crisis, decision-makers will need to contend with women's job losses, declines in labor force participation, and challenges related to unpaid work. In this brief, Innovations for Poverty Action has compiled evidence-based insights from randomized evaluations and quasi-experimental studies from non-crisis periods on how to support women's return to the labor force and/or increase their participation in the workforce in low- and middle-income countries.¹¹ We particularly focus on insights that may be applicable in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. While the findings from the research we highlight may be used to inform COVID-19 response measures, interventions that work in a non-crisis period may not have the same impacts in response to a protracted crisis such as COVID-19.

Supporting Women's Participation in the Labor Force in the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond

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