

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



*Lessons from Rigorous Evidence from Low- and Middle-Income Countries*



PHOTO: SHEIKH RAJIPUL ISLAM

Women have borne the brunt of the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Globally, roughly 70 percent of men were employed before the pandemic, compared to 44 percent of women.<sup>2</sup> The pandemic has deepened this divide. Sectors of the economy where women often 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.<sup>3</sup> According to an estimate by McKinsey & Company, women's jobs have been 1.8 times more likely to be cut during the pandemic-induced economic crisis.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Before the pandemic, women were also more likely than men to leave their jobs or reduce hours due to care work obligations.<sup>9</sup> Many key components of global COVID-19 response and mitigation measures—such as out-of-school periods, stay-at-home orders, and protections in response to heightened health risks for the elderly—increased the time and intensity of care work. Surveying 38 countries, UN Women found that 60 percent of women had increased their unpaid care work, despite a higher baseline rate, while 54 percent of men had done the same.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.

## Key Lessons on Supporting Women's Participation in the Labor Force\*



Access to free or affordable child care services is crucial to enable and increase women's participation in the workforce. Interventions such as vouchers for subsidized care, free public preschool programs, and free after-school programs have been shown to increase women's employment and labor force participation.



Programs that train job-seeking women on job application best practices or provide financial incentives to apply for jobs may increase women's abilities to get job interviews and employment opportunities.



Soft skills training programs and other programs that build women's self-confidence show promise in increasing women's abilities to participate in economic activities outside the house. Reducing or redistributing unpaid household labor and complementary interventions like safe transportation may be necessary to maintain program impacts or address barriers women face in participating in such programs.



Gender equality legislation that grants women more equal legal rights—through creating greater inheritance and property rights and removing legal restrictions to work—has been shown to increase women's labor supply.



Cash transfers generally have not had an impact on the likelihood of adult women working, though there are exceptions. Findings from existing research suggest cash transfers can add to the unpaid labor women perform, which suggests that cash transfer program design should consider the demands on women's time to meet program requirements.



Interventions that aim to directly change norms held by partners and older members of the family regarding women's participation in paid work are complicated to design. The evidence is mixed on whether sharing information and addressing concerns on misperceived norms can have positive impacts on women's work, especially in the long run.



Intra-household economic dynamics matter for women's work and entrepreneurship. Program design features that give women more control and agency over their resources could increase the performance of businesses that they run.

**\* Important note:** While all interventions mentioned here have undergone rigorous testing and evaluation, solutions that work in one context may not work as well in another. In addition, while some of these interventions were tested at scale, others were implemented in trial settings and in non-crisis situations, so it is important to keep in mind that delivery at scale and in the current COVID-19 response and recovery situation may pose higher challenges. Careful monitoring and evaluation as these programs are adapted will help stakeholders understand whether programs produce the intended results.





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Child care has been a longstanding barrier to women's participation in the labor force. Prior to the pandemic, women cited child care as a major reason for not seeking employment.<sup>12</sup> COVID-19 containment and response measures have increased the already high amounts of unpaid labor women perform. The increase in unpaid labor such as child care has often resulted in women reducing their participation in the labor force or shifting into informal work.<sup>13</sup> This has underscored the need for longer-term solutions to enable women's full participation in the workforce.

**Access to free or affordable child care services is crucial to enable and increase women's participation in the workforce. Interventions such as vouchers for subsidized care, free public preschool programs, and free after-school programs have been shown to increase women's employment and labor force participation.** Programs and policies that make child care more affordable and available may have positive impacts on women's labor force participation as countries recover from the pandemic and in future non-crisis and response periods.

In Kenya, researchers conducting a randomized evaluation offered vouchers for subsidized early childhood care to mothers of young children living in an informal settlement in Nairobi and evaluated the vouchers' impact on mothers' employment.<sup>14</sup> Women who were offered vouchers for child care were 8.5 percentage points more likely to be employed than women in the comparison group. The vouchers had a particularly strong impact on married mothers—receiving a voucher increased employment in this population by ten percentage points.

The intervention did not significantly improve employment for single mothers, who were more likely to already be

employed when compared to married women when the study began. However, single mothers who received vouchers were able to significantly reduce the number of hours they worked without reducing their earnings by switching to types of jobs with more regular or fixed hours.

In Chile, researchers assessed the impact of daily free after-school child care in 21 municipalities for children aged 6-13 on women's employment outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Women were randomly assigned to either receive access to three hours of after-school child care focused on schoolwork and other extracurricular activities, or to a comparison group. The program was implemented by Chile's government. Access to after-school care for children increased women's employment by 5 percent and labor force participation by 7 percent. The program also had a positive impact on women's use of free child care services for their younger children.

In Brazil, researchers found that Rio de Janeiro's public day care program for children aged 0-3 significantly increased women's employment.<sup>16</sup> The program provided full-time day care and other interventions such as food, health services, and toys for children in Rio de Janeiro's low-income neighborhoods. Having access to public day care increased mother's employment from 36 to 46 percent and nearly doubled employment among women who were not working before.

In another study in Indonesia, researchers constructed a panel of mothers from a longitudinal study to determine the impacts of preschool access across various regions on maternal employment.<sup>17</sup> Researchers tracked the panel for an average of 22 years and found that the introduction of an additional public preschool per 1,000 children increased the workforce participation of mothers of preschool-age children by roughly 7 percentage points. Private preschools increased the likelihood of mothers holding a second job but did not increase workforce participation. Additional preschools did not have an impact on mothers' earnings or hours worked.



As a result of the increase in women's unemployment during the pandemic, the recovery from COVID-19 will need to include a focus on equipping women with the training and skills needed to reenter the workforce. **Programs that train job-seeking women on job application best practices or provide financial incentives to apply for jobs may increase women's abilities to get job interviews and employment opportunities.**

In South Africa, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to study the impact of including standardized reference letters with the job applications of women aged 18-34. They found that women with these letters were more successful at obtaining both job interviews and offers. Letters were effective because they provided accurate information about workers' skills that firms used to select applicants of higher ability.<sup>18</sup>

In Ethiopia, researchers evaluated the impact of a program for youth aged 18-29 offering either a transport subsidy or a two-day job application workshop focused on effective strategies for composing curricula vitae and cover letters and approaching job interviews. The program targeted youth who had completed high school and did not have a permanent job, and also certified their general skills using a mix of standardized personnel selection tests. The transport subsidy and job application workshop both increased participants' probabilities of finding stable formal jobs, and increased earnings and employment rates among the most disadvantaged job seekers, including women.<sup>19</sup>

In another study in Ethiopia, researchers evaluated a program in which employers offered a small monetary payment to all job applicants calibrated to reimburse them for transport costs and the time spent applying for the job. They found that the incentive improved the quality of the applicant pool, whose average age was 26. This improvement was driven by women and by job seekers who were unemployed and less experienced, and thus stood to benefit the most from the job.<sup>20</sup>



To support women returning to the workforce or increasing their labor force participation, **decision-makers may want to consider incorporating or strengthening soft skills training programs and other programs that build women's self-confidence in their response measures.** These programs show promise in increasing women's ability to participate in economic activities outside the house. Evidence from South Asia indicates that **reducing or redistributing unpaid household labor and complementary interventions like safe transportation may be necessary to maintain program impacts or address barriers women face in participating in such programs.**

In India, a researcher investigated the impact of two interventions intended to reduce husbands' opposition to women's employment.<sup>21</sup> Participants in a program aimed at teaching women to recognize their abilities and how they can help in achieving their goals were able to gain the confidence to advocate for themselves and convince family members of the value of taking on a job opportunity outside the house. The intervention increased women's employment in the short run, but the positive effects did not continue in the longer term. The same study found that showing husbands and parents-in-law a video promoting women's work raised family support for women's work and increase women's employment in the short term. However, the video intervention decreased women's interest in work, and its results on women's employment also did not last in the long run. These results suggest that unpaid work in the house was a major constraint in maintaining positive employment outcomes over the long run. Survey data indicated that having too many household chores was the most common reason women provided for dropping out of the program.

Also in India, researchers found that an intensive workplace-based soft skills training program for female garment workers increased their soft skills and productivity on the job, with positive impacts persisting eight months after the program ended.<sup>22</sup> Women who were offered the program were more likely to request and participate in further technical training. However, the program did not produce a significant increase in participants' wages, indicating that the skills developed through the program are harder to demonstrate during the hiring process and thus for participants to monetize.

In Bangladesh, researchers found that women garment factory operators who participated in a supervisor training program outperformed male trainees in a post-training management simulation exercise.<sup>23</sup> Women who received the program had the same retention rates as men, but female trainees were less likely to be promoted. Female trainees who did become supervisors received resistance from men. These results suggest that the garment industry needs to communicate career advancement opportunities more clearly to reassure workers.

Research from Pakistan indicates that the distance that women have to travel to attend job skills training programs can deter women from enrolling in such programs.<sup>24</sup> Offering safe group transport to program participants could be one solution to address non-economic barriers related to travel-related safety concerns and community-level attitudes.



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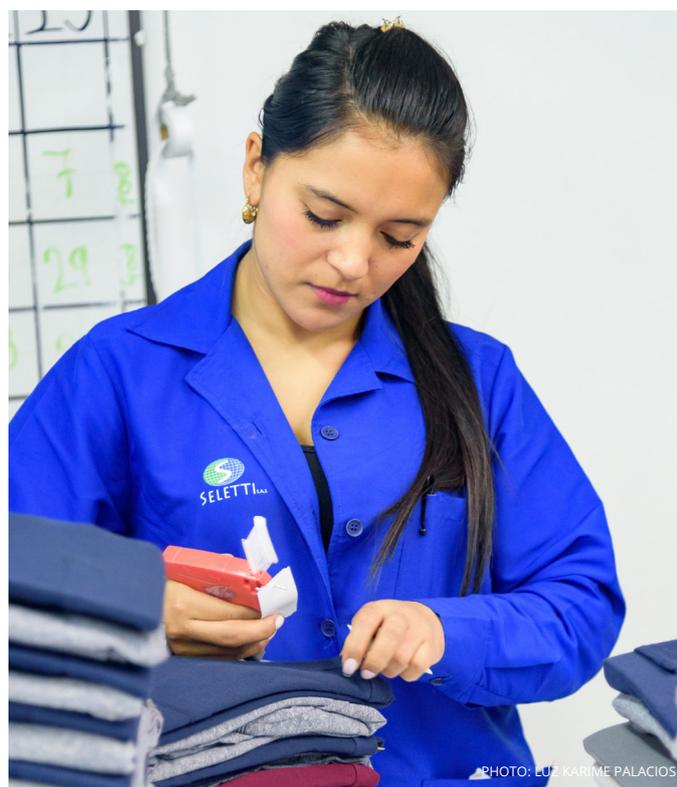
COVID-19 exposed pre-existing gender inequalities, and the disproportionate socioeconomic impact of the

pandemic threatens to widen these inequalities. As governments establish policies to facilitate women's participation in the workforce, gender equality legislation may be one way to improve women's work outcomes. **Gender equality legislation that grants women more equal legal rights—through creating greater inheritance and property rights and removing legal restrictions to work—has been shown to increase women's labor supply.**

Phased rollouts of gender equality legislation in India and Ethiopia have allowed researchers to deploy difference-in-difference estimation to assess the relationship between the legislation and women's work outcomes.

The Hindu Succession Act in India, which changed inheritance laws to allow women to have equal shares as men in inheriting ancestral property, increased women's labor supply, particularly in high-paying jobs.<sup>25</sup> Women's probability of working increased by between 3.8 and 6.1 percentage points. Additional research found that women who were initially covered by the Act had more average months of employment and years of education.<sup>26</sup> The effects on employment and schooling were also passed on to their daughters.

In Ethiopia, a change in family law that removed restrictions to women's work outside of the home and expanded women's access to marital property was associated with a positive impact on women's labor force participation and employment.<sup>27</sup> As a result of exposure to the roll out of the law, women were more likely to work in paid and full-time jobs, occupations outside of the home, and in occupations that employed workers with higher levels of education.



In response to the pandemic, governments throughout the world are using social protection measures

such as cash transfers to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis on individuals and households. However, there has been little gender-disaggregated tracking of the many social protection programs implemented since the pandemic. A World Bank review tracked thousands of social protection measures implemented in 222 countries since March 2020, but gender data are not available for many.<sup>28</sup> Relief programs are frequently aimed at women who are pregnant or raising children under the age of two, who may be less likely to be in the labor force in the first place given their child care responsibilities. **Research shows that cash transfers generally have not had an impact on the likelihood of adult women working, though there are exceptions.** Findings from Egypt, Ethiopia, and Tanzania suggest **cash transfers often add to the unpaid labor women perform, which suggests that cash transfer program design should consider the demands on women's time to meet program requirements.**

Researchers analyzed and pooled data from seven randomized control trials in Honduras, Nicaragua, Indonesia, Morocco, Mexico, and the Philippines involving conditional and unconditional cash transfers and found that cash transfers did not have an impact on employment or hours worked in paid positions for men or women. In many developing countries, there is a suspicion that cash transfers could discourage work; this evaluation does not find this suspicion to be backed by evidence.<sup>29</sup>

Researchers in Egypt assessed the relationship between a national cash transfer program targeted to poor households with children under 18 and women's labor supply. The cash transfer program's primary beneficiaries were mothers or primary caregivers of children. Results indicate that the transfer reduced women's labor force participation and reinforced their traditional identities as mothers and caregivers.<sup>30</sup>

In Ethiopia, researchers assessed the impact of a conditional cash transfer component of a public works program on time use.<sup>31</sup> The program aimed to direct the transfer to food-insecure households on the condition that they could contribute their labor to public works activities. Women in male-headed households who received the conditional cash transfer were less satisfied with their time for leisure activities than those who did not receive the transfer. This negative impact on leisure was not found among those who lived in women-headed households.

A study found that a public works program in Tanzania with cash benefits technically increased women's labor force participation, but did not decrease any of their other household responsibilities, leading to an overall increase in the amount of labor they performed and less time for sleep or leisure.<sup>32</sup>



Prior to COVID-19, social and cultural norms related to women's roles in societies and economies were barriers to participation in the workforce. For women who intend to rejoin or increase their participation in the labor force during the recovery from the pandemic, these social and cultural barriers may still exist. **Interventions that aim to directly change norms held by partners and older members of the family regarding women's paid work are complicated to design. The evidence is mixed on whether sharing information and addressing concerns on misperceived norms can have positive impacts on women's work, especially in the long run.**

In Saudi Arabia, researchers found that many young men privately believed women should be allowed to work outside the home, but underestimated other men's support for women's paid work. Researchers randomly assigned men to receive accurate information regarding other men's private support for women's paid work outside of the home and found that sharing this information corrected misperceived social norms about such work.<sup>33</sup> Three to five months after the intervention, women married to men in the group receiving the information were more likely to have applied for and interviewed for a job outside of their home than women married to men in the comparison group.

A small pilot evaluation in India suggests that a low-cost, employer-led intervention that shared informational videos highlighting the non-monetary benefits of employment and addressing potential concerns (mostly around safety), along with a facilitated conversation between a working woman and her family, had no effects on women's employment status or their family members' support for working outside the home.<sup>34</sup>

As highlighted in lesson 3 above, a study in India found that showing husbands and parents-in-law a video promoting women's participation in the workforce raised family support for women's work and increase women's employment in the short term.<sup>35</sup> However, these effects did not persist in the long term. The promotion video also reduced women's interest in working.



Intra-household economic dynamics and social norms related to gender can influence women's participation in the workforce and their businesses.

**Program design features like bank or mobile money accounts that give women more control and agency over their resources could increase the performance of businesses that they run.<sup>36</sup>**

In India, researchers found that paying wages directly into female-owned bank accounts—when accompanied by an intervention informing women about the utility of bank accounts—increased women's labor market participation

especially for those whose husbands disapproved of their working.<sup>37</sup>

Researchers analyzed data from randomized control trials in India, Sri Lanka and Ghana and found that in households where multiple members have businesses, women's financial resources were often redirected to their husbands' businesses.<sup>38</sup>

In Uganda, women who received microfinance loan disbursements in their mobile money account were able to control how the loan was used and had higher profits and levels of business capital compared to those who received their loan in cash.<sup>39</sup>

In Kenya, researchers evaluated the impact of offering non-interest-bearing bank accounts with high withdrawal fees on savings, investments, and expenditures to informal small business owners in rural areas. The study found that a large proportion of women used the accounts, compared to very few men. Women-led businesses increased savings, productive investment, and expenditures, while men-led businesses did not.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

As low- and middle-income countries begin to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, they will need to contend with the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women's job losses, labor force participation, and challenges related to child care and other unpaid work. The evidence-based approaches outlined in this synthesis suggest programs, policies, and reforms that may be considered to support women's labor force participation in the recovery from the pandemic. A review of these programs to inform policy ought to be coupled with a review of emerging evidence on the impact of interventions during the COVID-19 crisis period.



PHOTO: LUZ KARIME PALACIOS



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