

Social Sanctions & Sexual Harassment

Why Women may Choose not to Work Outside the Home

FINDINGS FROM ETHIOPIA

Women’s Labour Force Participation Is Declining Globally: What Role does Social Sanctions and Sexual Harassment at Workplace Play in Women’s Decision to Work?

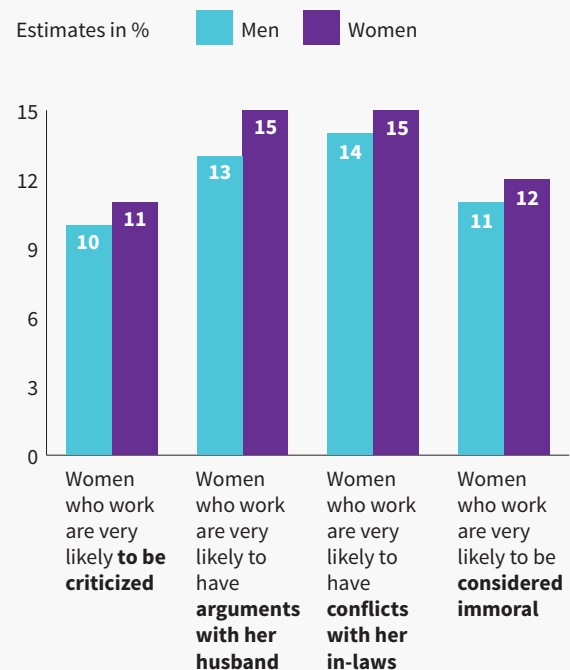
Globally, gender parity in labor force participation has been on the decline in the past two decades, especially in North Africa, Middle East, and South Asia, along with the COVID-19 pandemic’s broader disruptions to the labor market further worsening this gender gap.^{1,2} While most efforts to improve women’s economic participation have focused on skill building, financial inclusion, and family leave and care policies such as paid parental leave,³ there is limited understanding of the role played by social sanctions against women’s paid work — e.g., disapproval from family or community, family conflict, and sexual harassment, in women’s ability to join the workforce.

The Situation in Ethiopia

Similar to global trends, in Ethiopia, female labor force participation is significantly lower than the rate of participation for men (74.3% vs 88.4%).⁴ Moreover, women who are employed are more likely to hold jobs of low quality, work long hours for low wages, engage in dangerous and unsafe work, and/or have informal employment arrangements.⁵

In 2020, the World Values Survey (WVS), a population-based survey on social attitudes and norms conducted across over 120 countries,⁶ collaborated with the Evidence-based Measures of Empowerment for Research on Gender Equality (EMERGE) gender measurement project to collect data on social sanctions against women’s paid work and sexual harassment of women at public spaces or workplaces. The rationale for including these measures was that social sanctions and norms may affect women’s

Figure 1 | Social sanctions for women who work



labour force participation. Utilizing a nationally representative sample of N=1230 adults (622 men and 608 women), these are the first estimates of the indicators for Ethiopia.

Social Sanctions Persist Against

Women in the Workplace

Around one in every ten adults in Ethiopia (10%–15%), regardless of sex, report that a woman working outside of her home for money would be very likely to be criticized, to have arguments with her husband, to have conflicts with her in-laws, and to be considered immoral in the community (See Figure 1).

Most Adults Assert Traditional Gender Roles

Over half of Ethiopians (59%), regardless of sex, believe that while gainful employment is good, what women really want is a home and a family; 39% respondents report that it is a man's job to earn money, and a woman's job is to take care of home and family (See Figure 2).

Sexual Harassment of Women in Public Spaces is Prevalent

Around 22–25% of respondents report seeing sexual harassment of women on the streets (men and boys making unwanted sexual comments and gestures towards women and girls) in their neighborhoods.

Women Experience Sexual Harassment at Work

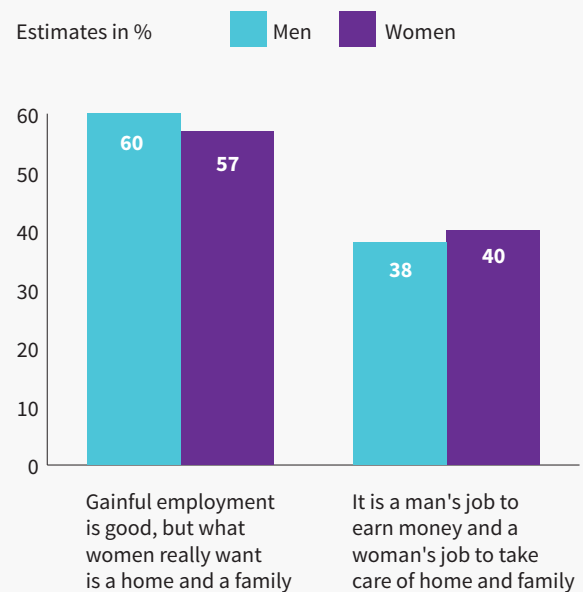
For the subsample of those working outside the home (n=749; 469 men and 280 women), we found that 6% respondents, regardless of sex, believe that women at their workplace experience sexual harassment daily or frequently.

What do these findings mean for Ethiopia?

Overall, social sanctions against women who work outside of the home are less common in Ethiopia than e.g., in Zimbabwe and Kenya (based on analysis of data from similar WVS survey in Zimbabwe and Kenya). Still, challenges remain and efforts to improve gender parity in labour force participation in Ethiopia should:

- **Shift social norms that place sanctions against women's work outside their homes.** Social sanctions prohibit women from full social and economic participation, sexualizing and threatening those who are non-adherent to traditional gender roles.⁷ Intervention efforts should include facilitation of an environment where community members are able to identify the harms of social sanctions, question existing norms, and become aware of their own rights.⁸ There is a need for increased research efforts to understand the relationship between these sanctions and women's decision to work. Intimate partner violence and domestic violence is also likely to be more prevalent in households where women try to change their traditional roles as housekeepers and

Figure 2 | Beliefs regarding traditional gender roles



take up employment outside their homes,⁹ and should be a part of the research agenda while assessing social sanctions against women's work.

- **Prevent sexual harassment of women in public spaces and the workplace.** Sexual harassment at work is prohibited by law in Ethiopia, but we find it is still prevalent in the country. Ensuring strong implementation of existing legal policies against harassment, adequate female representation in workplaces, and education and training programs could contribute to preventing sexual harassment at workplaces. Provisions of institutionalized support and care to victims in organizations are also important.
- **Focus on women's choice regarding gender roles and the right to work,** while supporting policies to secure this right with equal protections for employment under the law, and economic and welfare supports for those who cannot work. This will also require looking beyond labour force participation rates. For instance, in many contexts globally, the increase in female participation rates has been noted to be partly due to lack of educational opportunities for women, persistent poverty, and absence of alternative sources of income, compelling women to work in jobs they do not desire and may be over-qualified for.¹⁰

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