

# Social Sanctions & Sexual Harassment

## Why Women may Choose not to Work Outside the Home

### FINDINGS FROM ZIMBABWE

## 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?

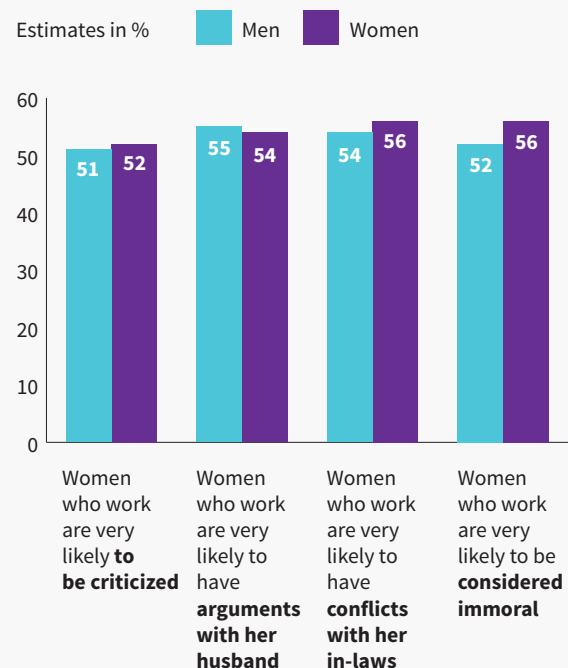
Globally, the progress on achieving gender equality with regards to paid work has been slow.<sup>1</sup> In most nations, women continue to be paid significantly lower than men, are under-represented in leadership positions, face discrimination based on their gender, and are overrepresented in labour-intensive sectors.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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 Zimbabwe

In line with global trends, female labor force participation in Zimbabwe is significantly lower than the rate of participation for men (60.7% vs 71.9%),<sup>4</sup> with a large share of workers, both men and women, relying on the informal sector (88.2%).<sup>1</sup> Around 29% of employed women in Zimbabwe live below the poverty line, while 70% experience food insecurity in their households.<sup>5</sup>

In 2020, the World Values Survey (WVS), a population-based survey on social attitudes and norms conducted across over 120 countries,<sup>6</sup> 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,

**Figure 1 | Social sanctions for women who work**



as potential norms that may affect women’s labour force participation. Utilizing a nationally representative sample of N=1215 adults (600 men and 615 women), these are the first estimates of the indicators for Zimbabwe.

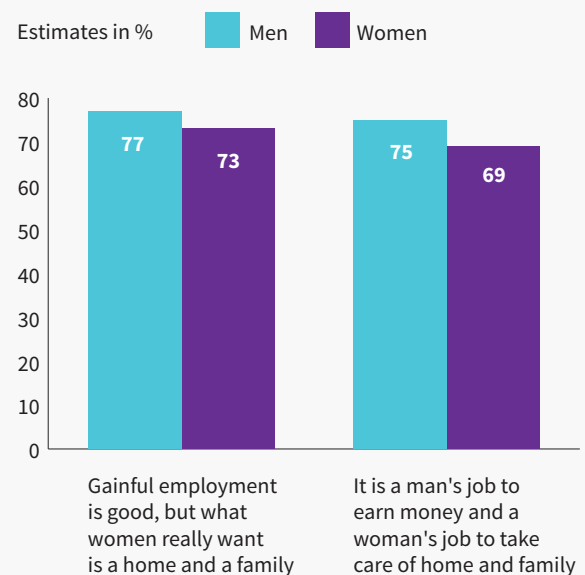
### Social Sanctions Persist Against Women in the Workplace

Around half of the surveyed adults, 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

Around three-quarters of the adults believe that while gainful employment is good, what women really want is a home and a family, and that it is a man’s job to earn money and a woman’s job to take care of home and family (Figure 2).

Figure 2 | Beliefs regarding traditional gender roles



### Sexual Harassment of Women in Public Spaces is Common

Half of the respondents, regardless of sex, 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=524; 370 men and 154 women), around 24% (23% men and 27% women) report that women at their workplace experience sexual harassment either daily or frequently.

## What do These Findings Mean for Zimbabwe?

We recommend the following efforts to improve gender parity in labour force participation in Zimbabwe:

- **Tackle entrenched social norms that make it acceptable for women to seek employment or work outside their homes.** Our results underline the need for addressing social norms related to sexual morality sanctions for women who work. These norms reinforce women’s role as being limited to within their homes as primary care providers for their family, while asserting men’s role as the breadwinner. There is also a need for increased research efforts to understand how these sanctions impact women’s work, in particular after the COVID-19 pandemic where significantly more low-income women lost their jobs.<sup>7</sup> Under the “Spotlight initiative”, which is a global initiative of the United Nations to address violence against women, the Zimbabwean government has taken several important steps recently to address sexual harassment in the workplace, including development of the “*Strategy for the Elimination of Sexual Harassment and Gender-based Violence (GBV) in the Workplace in Zimbabwe 2021-2025*”.<sup>8</sup> But, tackling entrenched social norms will require continued efforts at community levels along with implementation of such strategies.

- **Prevent sexual harassment of women in public spaces and workplace.** Enforcement of existing laws against sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination, and education and training programs are important for raising awareness against gender-based violence. Spotlight initiative’s work to raise awareness of gender-based violence among peer educators is a great first step in the right direction.<sup>9</sup> Along with legal equality, female leaders and role models who promote favorable gender norms will be necessary to reduce cases of sexual harassment of women.
- **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 support for those who cannot work. This will also require looking beyond labor 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.<sup>2</sup>
- **Leverage the momentum created by the Spotlight initiative in Zimbabwe.** Zimbabwe is one of the eight countries in Africa implementing the Spotlight initiative.<sup>10</sup> It has already resulted in the following: development and recent launch of the “*Public Service Sexual Harassment Policy 2022*”; model sexual harassment and GBV policies in 11 private sector companies; and the first legal provisions in Zimbabwe on online violence against women, girls, and children in the 2022 Data Protection Act. While these initiatives create the legal framework, change of deeply rooted social norms will require continued effort and enforcement of these laws by the Zimbabwean government.

## References

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