

Vulnerable Jobs for Women

Kanaga Raja

While more women are working than ever before, they are also more likely than men to get low-productivity, low-paid and vulnerable jobs, with no social protection, basic rights or voice at work, said the International Labour Office (ILO).

This worrisome trend was highlighted by the ILO in its report *Global Employment Trends for Women—March 2008*, released on the occasion of International Women's Day, which fell on 8 March. The International Labour Office is the permanent secretariat of the UN's International Labour Organisation.

The report said that while the number of employed women grew by almost 200 million over the last decade—to reach 1.2 billion in 2007 compared to 1.8 billion men—the number of unemployed women also grew from 70.2 million to 81.6 million over the same period.

It found that improvements in the status of women in labour markets throughout the world have not substantially narrowed gender gaps in the workplace. The share of women in vulnerable employment - either unpaid contributing family workers or own-account workers, rather than wage and salaried work - decreased from 56.1% to 51.7% since 1997. However, the burden of vulnerability is still greater for women than men, especially in the world's poorest regions.

If women remain stuck in low quality jobs, they will not see the rightful returns of their labour. In short, increased labour force participation of women has great potential as a contribution to economic development, but only if the jobs in which women are engaged are decent, said the report.

"The workplace and the world of work are at the centre of global solutions to address gender equality and the advancement of women in society. By promoting decent work for women, we are empowering societies and advancing the cause of economic and social development for all," said ILO Director-General Juan Somavia.

In 2007, 1.2 billion women around the world worked, almost 200 million or 18.4% more than 10 years ago. But, the number of unemployed women also grew from 70.2 to 81.6 million over the same period, and in 2007, women at the global level still had a higher likelihood of being unemployed than men. The female unemployment rate stood at 6.4% compared to the male rate of 5.7%.

As for women who do find work, they are often confined to work in the less productive sectors of economies and in status groups that carry higher economic risk and a lesser likelihood of meeting the characteristics that define decent work, including access to social protection, basic rights and a voice at work.

There are some positive trends: education levels for women around the world continue to increase and gender gaps for certain labour market indicators are decreasing in many regions.

Most regions are making progress in increasing the number of women in decent employment, but full gender equality in terms of labour market access and conditions of employment has not yet been attained, said the report.

Noting that access to labour markets and, more specifically, to decent employment is crucial in the process towards improving equality between men and women, the report said that as of now, however, the fact remains that far fewer women participate in labour markets than men. At the global level, less than 70 women (66.9) are economically active for every 100 men.

In terms of global trends, the report found that of all people employed in the world, 40% are women—this share has not changed over the last 10 years. The share of women above the working age (15 years and over in most countries) who are employed (the employment-to-population ratio) was 49.1% in 2007 compared to a male employment-to-population ratio of 74.3%.

In absolute numbers, worldwide, there were equal numbers of women and men above the age of 15 years in 2007 (2.4 billion of each), but among these, only 1.2 billion women were employed as opposed to 1.8 billion men.

Whereas 10 years ago, agriculture was still the main employer for women, the services sector now provides the majority of female jobs: out of the total number of employed women in 2007, 36.1% worked in agriculture and 46.3% in services. Male sectoral shares in comparison were 34.0% in agriculture and 40.4% in services.

The poorer the region, the greater the likelihood that women are among the ranks of contributing family workers or own-account workers. The move away from vulnerable employment into wage and salaried work can be a major step towards economic freedom and self-determination for many women, said the report.

Examining trends across various regions, the report said that despite recent signs of economic progress, sub-Saharan Africa continues to be the region with the highest poverty shares in the world. The insufficient creation of decent jobs in the region and widespread poverty continue to be heavy burdens on women.

Unlike in sub-Saharan Africa, said the report, the main difficulty facing North African women vis-a-vis labour markets is less the poor quality of employment than the lack of access to labour markets altogether. Labour market activity—either working or looking for work—is still more the exception than the rule for women in the region.

For 100 economically active men in North Africa, there are only 35 economically active women, representing the highest gender gap in the world. In addition, North Africa has the lowest employment-to-population ratio in the world. Only two out of 10 working-age women (21.9%) are employed compared to seven out of 10 men (69.1%).

The Middle East region has the second lowest labour force participation rate for women (33.3%) and the second highest gender gap in labour force participation: for every 100 men, only 39 women are economically active. But, on the positive side, the region also showed the highest increase in female labour force participation rates. Between 1997 and 2007, the rate increased by an impressive 7.7 percentage points.

The increase of female labour force participation in Latin America and the Caribbean from 47.2% to 52.9% between 1997 and 2007 was the second highest of all the regions. In 2007, 67 women were active per every 100 economically active men. The employment-to-population ratio for women in Latin America

and the Caribbean improved as well, increasing 5 percentage points from 42.1% in 1997 to 47.1% in 2007. But, the female unemployment rate in the region remains far above the rate of men (the female unemployment rate was 10.9% in 2007 compared to 6.9% for men).

The gender gap in economically active females per 100 males continues to be among the smallest in the world in East Asia. Per 100 active men, there are 79 women participating in labour markets. In addition, the female employment-to-population ratios remained the world's highest in 2007, with 65.2% of all working-age women employed. (The ratio was 78.4% for men.)

In South-East Asia and the Pacific, 59.1% of working-age women participate in the labour market compared to 82.8% of men. The resulting gender gap in economic activity is 73 active women per 100 active men, which is smaller than the world average. The overall unemployment rates in the region are comparably low and have stabilised in recent years. However, vulnerable employment for both women and men continued to be the third highest in the world after only South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Women continue to be an untapped potential in the region of South Asia. Overall, labour force participation rates within the region have traditionally been low due to the low rates for women. Compared to 100 men active in labour markets, only 42 women participate by either working or looking for work.

The low participation is also reflected in the employment-to-population ratios: in 2007, only 3.4 out of 10 women of working age actually worked (34.1%), and over the last 10 years, the female employment-to-population ratio slightly decreased. The female unemployment rate in 2007 was 5.8% compared to 4.8% for men.

The vulnerable-employment shares of both men and women remained the highest in the world. And, even though the vulnerable-employment share for women decreased by slightly more than for men (3.9 percentage points for women and 2.4 percentage points for men), women continue to carry a higher risk of finding themselves in a vulnerable employment situation: more than 8 out of 10 working women compared to more than seven out of 10 working men are vulnerable.

For the time being, said the report, South Asia still has an enormous deficit in decent work - too many people in vulnerable employment situations and 80% of all working people still living with their families in poverty on \$2 a day. In South Asia, there are 511 million women who are of working age and 540 million men, but only 174 million women have a job compared to 422 million men.

Overall, the report found that policies to enhance women's chances to participate equally in labour markets are starting to pay off, but the sluggish pace of change means that disparities are still significant. Most regions still have a long way to go in achieving full economic integration of women and realising their untapped potential for economic development.

The economic integration of women, which comes only when labour market barriers are lowered and women are given an equal chance to attain decent work, remains both a necessity for economic development and a worthy goal in its own right, said the report. □□□

—Third World Network Features

