

Employment of women and men by economic sector



Key points

- In 2020, employment in the agriculture sector continued to decline for both women and men, while their employment in the services sector kept on growing, engaging 59% of employed women and 45% of employed men, and resulting in a gender gap of 14 percentage points, a significant increase since 1995.
- During the period 1995–2020, women's employment in the industry sector has decreased slightly, to 16%, and increased to 28% for men, widening the gender gap in this sector to 12 percentage points.
- In 2019, the majority of women and men worked in the services sector. In four regions, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 80% of employed women worked in the services sector in 2019.
- In three regions, agriculture remained the largest sector for women's employment (over 50%) in 2019: Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).
- With the movement of more women into jobs in the services sector, their share in that sector (45%) has surpassed their share in total employment (39%). Women's employment is concentrated in four services subsectors: human health and social work; education; private households¹ (usually referred to as paid domestic workers); and accommodation and food service activities.
- Globally in 2019, 79% of paid domestic workers were women, a slight reduction from 83% in 2015.
- Even before the onset of the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic in the first quarter of 2020, women made up over 70% of workers in the health sector and are now on the front lines in the battle against the pandemic, facing a higher risk of infection than men in the workplace.

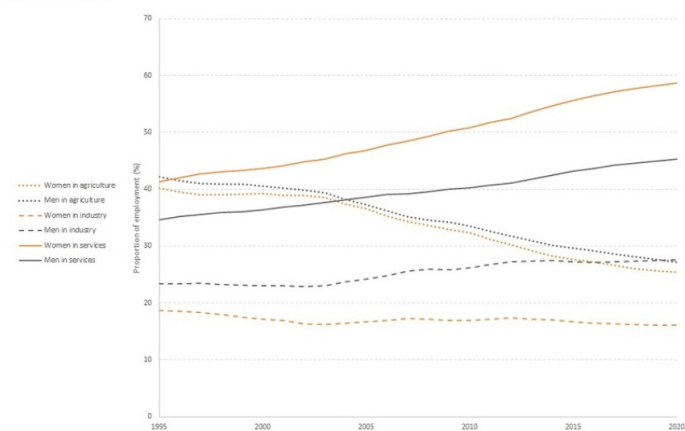
Current situation

In 2020, worldwide, while the distribution of women and men employed across the three sectors of economic activity, agriculture, industry, and services, was not equal, the services sector was the largest source of employment for both, particularly for women: 59% of women and 45% of men were employed in the services sector, resulting in a gender gap of 14 percentage points, a significant increase since 1995.

Over the past 25 years, the agriculture sector has declined in prominence as source of employment. In 1995, 40% of women and 42% of men worked in the sector; by 2020, it employed only 25% of women and 27% of men. Despite the decline in terms of overall employment, the gender gap in the agriculture sector has remained unchanged at around two percentage points over the past 25 years. In the industry sector, in contrast, over the period 1995–2020, women's employment has slightly decreased to 16% and men's employment has increased to 28%, resulting in a widened gender gap of 12 percentage points (see figure I).

For both women and men, employment in agriculture continues to decline while employment in the services sector keeps growing

Figure I: Distribution of employed persons by economic sector of employment by sex: 1995–2020 (Percentage)



Source: International Labour Organization (ILO), Department of Statistics (ILOSTAT), ILO modelled estimates, 2020 (data accessed on 2 April 2020) (<https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/>).

Note: 2019 and 2020 figures are projections.

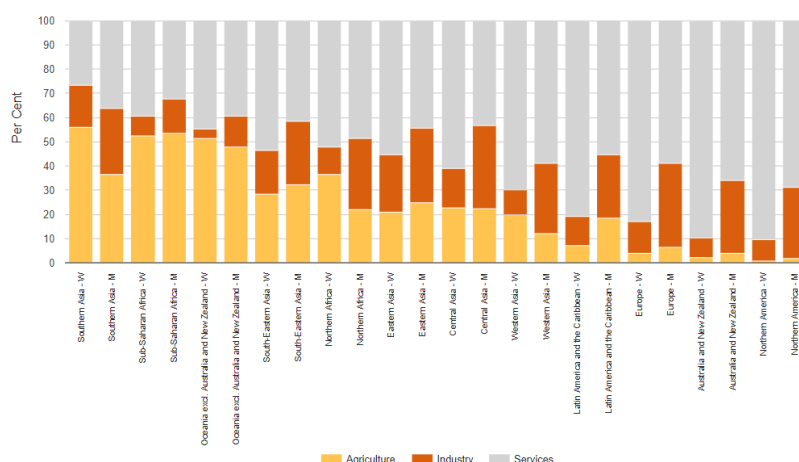
As of 2019, women worked predominantly in the services sector, while increasingly men were employed in the industry sector

In four regions, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 80% of women were employed in the services sector in 2019. In those regions, the proportion of men employed in the services sector, while relatively high compared to the proportion of men working in agriculture and industry, was at least 20 percentage points lower than that of women (see figure II).

In 2019, agriculture remained the largest sector for women's employment (over 50%) in three regions, Southern Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). In the following two regions, women were also more likely than men to be working in agriculture: there was a gender gap of 15 percentage points in Northern Africa and 8 percentage points in Western Asia.²

In 2019, in all regions, men were more likely to work in the industry sector than women, with a gender difference ranging from six percentage points in sub-Saharan Africa to 22 percentage points in Australia and New Zealand and Europe. The industry sector absorbed between 25% and 35% of men's employment in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa (14%) and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) (13%). The proportion of women employed in the industry sector was below 20% in all regions except Eastern Asia (24%).

Figure II: Distribution of employed persons by economic sector of employment by sex and region: 2019 (Percentage)



Source: Calculated by UNDESA, Statistics Division, based on data received from ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates, 2020 (data accessed on 5 May 2020) (<https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/>) (correspondence with ILO on 5 May 2020).

Women's work was concentrated in four services subsectors: human health and social work; education; private households; and accommodation and food service activities

Over the past 25 years, more women have moved into jobs in the services sector, and by 2020 the proportion of women in that sector had surpassed their proportion in total employment. In 2020, the proportion of women among the total of people employed was 39% globally and 45% among those employed in the services sector, a minor increase from 42% in 1995.³ Within the sector, women's work was concentrated in specific subcategories. Globally, women represented more than 50% of the work force in the following four services subsectors in 2020, in order of importance: human health and social work (70%), education (62%), private households⁴ (57%) and accommodation and food service activities (54%).

In all countries, men tended to dominate work in other services subsectors, including: (a) 86% in transport, storage and communications; (b) 69% in public administration and defence; compulsory social security; and (c) 62% in real estate; and business and administrative activities.

Women were more likely than men to work in the most vulnerable jobs, with low pay, long hours and no social protections.⁵ These unfavourable employment conditions are particularly prevalent for the women working in the private households subsector, who are most often paid domestic workers in informal employment. In 2019, worldwide, 4% of women and 1% of men were employed in this subsector, with the highest proportion of women reported at 18% in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). Globally, 79% of employed persons in this subsector in 2019 were women,⁶ slightly down from 83% in 2015.⁷

Discrimination, namely through legal frameworks, social norms and/or institutional structures, can restrict women's access to paid work in specific sectors, leading to gender segregation in employment. As of 2020, in 74 countries and territories with available data, aside from limitations imposed on pregnant, nursing and postpartum women, women were also broadly restricted from working in industry subsectors such as mining and quarrying; manufacturing; and construction.⁸

COVID-19

Even before the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, women were employed in subsectors that are on the front lines in the

battle against the pandemic: women make up over 70% of workers in the health sector, facing higher infection risks than men in the workplace.

Moreover, women aged 15 and above accounted for more than their overall share in employment in two out of the four subsectors hardest hit by the pandemic: wholesale and retail trade (44%); and accommodation and food service activities (54%).⁹

About the data

Definitions

- **Percentage distribution of employed population by economic sector of employment by sex:** Provides information on women's and men's employment distributed across three broad sectors of economic activity: agriculture; industry; and services. Economic activities classified by the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC –Rev.4)¹⁰ denote the characteristics of the economic unit in which a person works not the specific duties or functions of the person's job.¹¹

Coverage

Employed women and men aged 15 and above.

Availability

188 United Nations Member States and territories.

Footnotes

1. Includes activities of households as employers, activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies, arts entertainment and recreation and other service activities, with activities of households as employers taking up the largest share. ([back to text](#))
2. .
3. [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(UNDESA\), The World's Women 2015: Trends and Statistics, New York, 2015 \(United Nations publication, Sales No.E.15.XVII.8\).](#)
4. Includes activities of households as employers, activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies, arts entertainment and recreation and other service activities, with activities of households as employers taking up the largest share.
5. [ILO, Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture, third edition, Geneva, 2018.](#)
6. Calculated by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, using data on employment distribution by economic activity and sex (correspondence with ILO on 18 June 2020) and data from ILOSTAT on employment by sex and economic activity (accessed on 18 August 2020).
7. [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(UNDESA\), The World's Women 2015: Trends and Statistics, New York, 2015 \(United Nations publication, Sales No.E.15.XVII.8\).](#)
8. [World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2020, Washington, D.C., 2020.](#)
9. [ILO, COVID-19 and the World of Work](#) (last accessed on 18 August 2020). The proportions are calculated by UNDESA, Statistics Division, based on data retrieved from ILOSTAT, [ILO modelled estimates](#) (last accessed on 3 August 2020).
10. [International Standard Classification of All Economic Activities \(ISIC\), Revision 4 \(ISIC-Rev.4\).](#)
11. [International Labour Organization \(ILO\), Key Indicators of the Labour Market, ninth edition, Geneva 2016.](#)