

Gender segregation in occupations



Key points

- Gender segregation in occupations persists both horizontally (across occupational groups) and vertically (within the same occupational group).
- Globally in 2020, women continue to constitute the majority of clerical support workers (57%) and men the majority of plant and machine operators and assemblers (80%).
- While the percentage of women among people employed has stayed constant at 39% since 1995, their representation in managerial level positions increased by only 3%, to 28%, as of 2020, and their representation in higher decision-making positions among managers was even lower.
- Gender roles and stereotypes contribute to the segregation of women and men in occupations: in general, more women work in occupations categorized as being home-based or caring, whereas men tend to work in areas such as information and communications technology (ICT), science and engineering.
- Since 2000, the transition from low-skilled to high-skilled jobs has taken place at a faster rate among women than men in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand.

Gender segregation persists in various occupations

Globally in 2020, women and men were largely employed in different occupations (horizontal segregation) and in different positions within the same occupation or occupational group (vertical segregation). Relative to their share in overall employment (39%), women had a higher representation among clerical support workers (57%), service and sales workers (50%), professionals (49%) and technicians and associate professionals (45%). Men were more commonly employed as plant and machine operators and assemblers (80%), craft and related trades workers (76 %) and managers (72%). In the last category, women constituted only 28% of the total number of **managerial personnel**.

Over the past 25 years, while their share in total employment has remained constant, the proportion of women employed as clerical support workers, the most common occupation for women in 1995, has fallen by 3 percentage points while the proportion of women employed as managers has risen by the same percentage point level (see figure I), revealing a minor but important increase in women's representation in managerial positions.

Figure I: Distribution of employed persons by occupation and sex: 1995 and 2020



Source: Calculated by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, based on data retrieved from the International Labour Organization (ILO) Department of Statistics (ILOSTAT); ILO modelled estimates (last accessed 2 April 2020).

Note: 2020 figures are projections.

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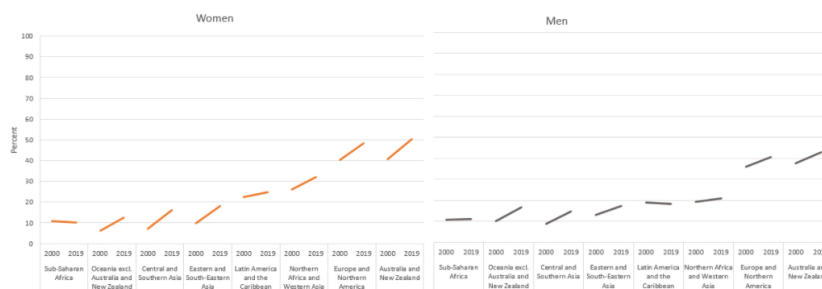
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Transition to high-skilled jobs has taken place at a higher rate among women than men in most regions

The nine major occupational groups classified by ISCO-08 are also associated with three broad skill levels: level 1 (low); level 2 (middle); and levels 3 and 4 (high). While occupations at skill level 1 include simple and routine physical or manual assignments, occupations at skill levels 3 and 4 typically require problem-solving, decision-making and creativity, including complex technical and practical assignments in a specialized field. As employment has transitioned over the past 25 years between **economic sectors**, mostly from the agriculture to the services sector, certain lower-skilled jobs have been replaced with high-skilled ones calling for the skills of managers, professionals and technicians.

In all regions except sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), the proportion of high-skilled women workers has increased at a higher rate since 2000, surpassing, in 2019, the proportion of high-skilled men workers (see figure II); in Europe and Northern America, 48% of women work in high-skilled jobs (in contrast to 41% for men); as well as 50% of women in Australia and New Zealand (as opposed to 43% for men).

Figure II: Distribution of occupations at skill levels 3 and 4 (high), by sex and region: 2000 and 2019



Source: Calculated by UNDESA, Statistics Division, based on data for regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals received from ILOSTAT: ILO modelled estimates (correspondence with ILO on 5 May 2020).

Note: Occupations at skill levels 3 and 4 (high) correspond to ISCO-08 categories 1 (managers), 2 (professionals) and 3 (technicians and associate professionals).

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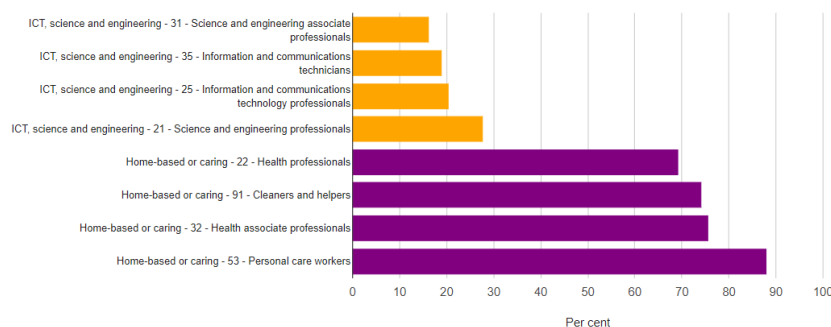
Gender segregation in occupations is closely linked to stereotypical gender roles

The segregation of women and men in different occupations is also associated with stereotypes about women, for example that they are more caring or more focused on activities based in the home. Across the 121 countries examined by ILO as of 2019 using the latest available data, the occupations most commonly held by women comprised personal care workers,¹ 88% of whom were women compared to 12% of men, and health professionals,² including general medical doctors and nurses, a broad category, within which women represented 69% of the total workers. In certain areas, gender-based occupational segregation reflects the difference between women and men in terms of their paths in education and vocational training, including in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). High-skilled occupations in ICT, science and engineering were mostly occupied by men and women's representation remained minimal. As of 2019, only one in five ICT professionals were women and they represented only 28% of science and engineering professionals (see figure III).

Analysis of the data at detailed levels for different occupations reveals that there is vertical segregation, with women more concentrated in certain subcategories within the various occupations. Furthermore, in 2020, while women's representation in managerial positions only reached 28% globally, their level of access to higher decision-making positions in management remained at an even lower level. In 50 out of 78 countries with available data for the years from 2015 to 2019, the proportion of women holding senior and middle management positions, including as chief executive officers, senior officials and legislators, was lower than their overall share among managers.³ The highest representation by women in managerial positions was reported in the Seychelles in 2015, at a time when women made up nearly half of all senior and middle managers (49%) while also holding almost half of overall managerial positions (48%).

Differences in the average earnings of women and men are partially the result of explained factors that combine gender inequalities in many areas, including across and within occupational groups. Gender segregation in occupations contributes to the gender pay gap, especially when there is a difference in the employment of women and men between low- and high-paying occupations.

Figure III: Women's share in employment by selected occupations (ISCO-08): 2019



Source: ILOSTAT Blog, "These occupations are dominated by women"; computed by ILO using weighted average for 121 countries using the most recent annual data available.

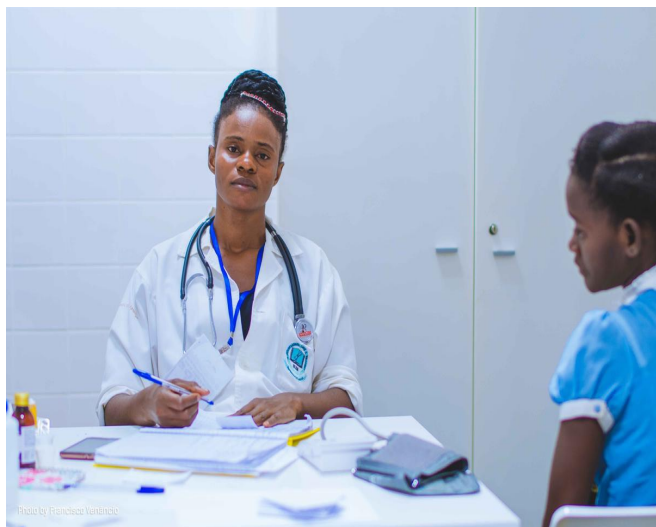
Note: Based on latest available data as of 2019 for 121 countries, representing 63% of global employment; data for China and India were not available and the ILO weighted average is not a global figure.

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Covid-19

Women have been more negatively affected than men during the recession brought about by COVID-19 since many women work in economic sectors and occupations that have suffered severely from the pandemic. Specifically, the unemployment rate has been higher in occupations that could not be carried out remotely, through teleworking, and in the case of "social jobs" requiring human interaction, which have been rendered less secure because of pandemic-related restrictions.⁴

Most notably, women are on the front lines in the battle against the pandemic as they make up over 70% of workers in the health sector,⁵ who face higher infection risks than men in the workplace.⁶



About the data

Definitions

- Proportion of women in occupational groups: **Provides information on employment across different occupations, with a breakdown by sex. Occupations are classified into nine major groups by the International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08) based on skill levels and skill specialization requirements for specific jobs.**

Coverage

Employed women and men aged 15 and above.

Availability

187 United Nations Member States and territories (2020).

Limitations

The armed forces constitute a separate, tenth, major group under ISCO-08, although employed persons in this category are sometimes included in other ISCO-08 major groups in national data.

Employment estimates may vary with frequency of data collection across countries. Given that data collection may be conducted annually or monthly, seasonality could have an impact on employment figures and international comparisons.



Footnotes

1. Categorized under ISCO-08 major category 5, Service and sales workers and defined as those who provide care, supervision and assistance for children, patients and elderly, convalescent or disabled persons in institutional and residential settings.
2. Categorized under ISCO-08 major category 2, Professionals.
3. Data on Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.5.2 do not provide specific information on the proportion of women employed exclusively in senior positions (excluding junior and middle management).
4. Source: [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\) Blog, 23 July 2020, "Unemployment in Today's Recession Compared to the Global Financial Crisis"](#) (last accessed on 3 August 2020).
5. Corresponding to the category Q. Human health and social work activities by the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC rev. 4).
6. Source: UNDESA, 2020, World Economic Situation and Prospects: June 2020 Briefing, No. 138: proportion calculated by the United Nations Statistics Division based on data retrieved from ILOSTAT: ILO modelled estimates (last accessed on 3 August 2020).

