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The gender gap in employment: What's holding women back?

Around the world, finding a job is much tougher for women than it is for men. When women are employed, they tend to work in low-quality jobs in vulnerable conditions, and there is little improvement forecast in the near future.

Explore this InfoStory to get the data behind the trends and learn more about the different barriers holding women back from decent work.



A global gap

When someone is employed or actively looking for employment, they are said to be participating in the labour force.

The current global labour force participation rate for women is just under 47%. For men, it's 72%. That's a difference of 25 percentage points, with some regions facing a gap of more than 50 percentage points.

 Explore the gender gap by country

Unemployed or vulnerable

Women who want to work have a harder time finding a job than men. This problem is particularly marked in Northern Africa and the Arab States, where unemployment rates for women exceed 20%.

While vulnerable employment is widespread for both women and men, women tend to be overrepresented in certain types of vulnerable jobs: men are more likely to be working in own-account employment while women are more likely to be helping out in their households or in their relatives' businesses.

 Explore the unemployment gap by country

 What does vulnerable employment look like?



Why does the gender gap matter?

The freedom to work – by choice, in conditions of dignity, safety and fairness – is integral to human welfare. Guaranteeing that women have access to this right is an important end in itself.

From an economic perspective, reducing gender gaps in labour force participation could substantially boost global GDP^[1]. The regions with the largest gender gaps would see huge growth benefits. Many developed countries would also see their average annual GDP growth increase, which is significant during times of near-zero economic growth.

What women want

In 2016, ILO and Gallup teamed up to ask women across the globe if they preferred to work in paid jobs, care for their families, or do both. The data showed that a staggering 70% of women – regardless of their employment status – prefer to work in paid jobs.

 How do people feel about women and work?

 What do people think in your country?



The power of women's preference

In countries at all levels of economic development, a woman's personal preference is the key factor in determining whether she will seek out and engage in paid work. However, this preference is heavily influenced by socio-economic constraints and pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.

 Preferences and constraints

 The methodology explained

Persistent challenges

- Gender roles
- Work-family balance
- Lack of transport
- Lack of affordable care

Gender roles

Gender roles and the pressures to conform to these roles for women vary across regions, religions and households. One way the pressure to conform manifests itself is through marital status. For instance, in developed and emerging economies, women who have a spouse or a partner are less likely to be employed in a paid job or be actively looking for one.

This can often arise from the economic stability of a partner's income that can reinforce the "male breadwinner" bias in some marital arrangements.

In developing countries the reverse is true: the economic necessity in the region gives all women little choice but to work despite their marital status.

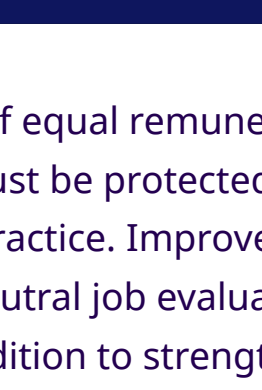
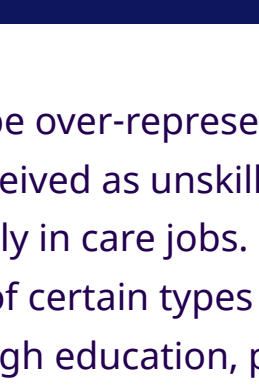
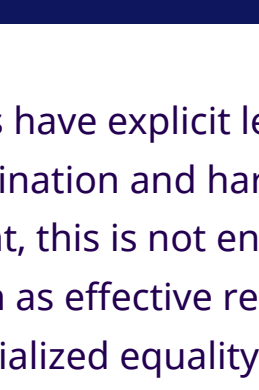
Pressure to conform

The ILO-Gallup survey from 2016 revealed that there are still many people who believe it is unacceptable for a woman to have a paid job outside the home: 20% of men and 14% of women globally, to be exact. Many women reported that their immediate family disapproved of their decisions to work outside the home.

 Breaking barriers: the story of a Palestinian businesswoman



Bridging the gap

| Achieve equal pay | Tackle occupational segregation | Eliminate discrimination |
|---|--|--|
|  |  |  |
| The principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value must be protected in law and promoted in practice. Improved wage transparency and gender-neutral job evaluation can help achieve this end, in addition to strengthening existing systems such as minimum wages and collective bargaining. | Women tend to be over-represented in occupations perceived as unskilled and "low-value", particularly in care jobs. Preconceptions about the value of certain types of work can be challenged through education, public outreach and job evaluation systems. | Many countries have explicit legislation against gender discrimination and harassment at work. While important, this is not enough. Additional measures, such as effective remedies, dissuasive sanctions, specialized equality bodies and public awareness campaigns are key to eliminating discrimination. |

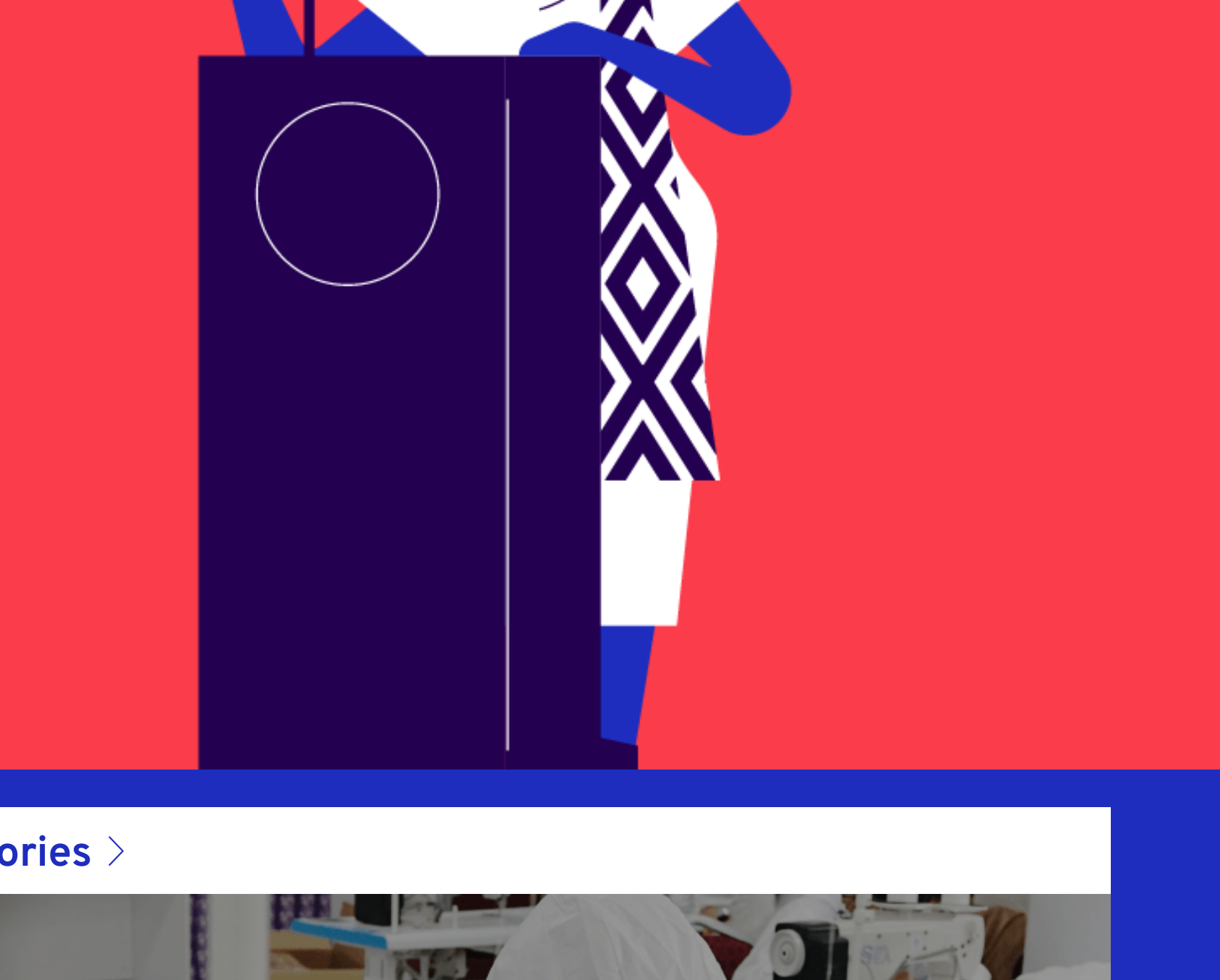
Smarter solutions

The data is clear: women want to be in paid employment, but a persistent set of socio-economic barriers keep them out of the workforce. Identifying and quantifying these barriers allows us to develop smarter policy responses for eliminating them.

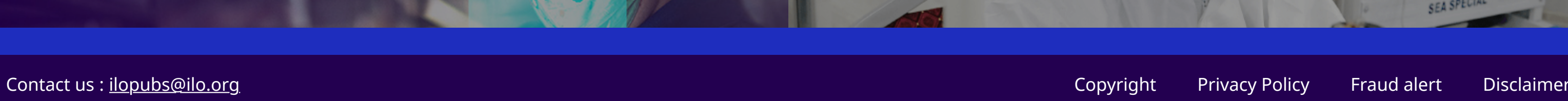
Ultimately, closing gender gaps in the labour force is not just good for women and their households, but for the global economy as a whole.

 Read the full report on trends for women

 Read the full report on global perceptions about women at work



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