

BRIEF | December 2023

Women's Economic Participation in the Global South

A Comparative Analysis

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Introduction

Women's work has been pivotal in driving the economic transitions of various countries. Gender equity and greater economic participation of women have long been established as central to growth, lower income inequality, and better development outcomes.¹ This not only includes the roles they play in labour markets, but also the invisible, often overlooked, domestic and care-work that women are disproportionately tasked with. In both spheres—at home and in the labour force—their contributions are key to overall progress.

This factsheet carries a comparative analysis of countries in the Global South with an exclusive focus on women's employment outcomes. The objective of this exercise is to highlight the trends and patterns that characterise women's participation in the economy and to examine India's position in relation to other countries at similar levels of development.

The following analysis covers India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Congo Republic, Ghana, Kenya, Vietnam, Indonesia and Zambia.² The rationale underlying the choice of countries is threefold. First, the choice was limited to "lower-middle income countries" as defined by the World Bank. Second, the countries chosen needed to have similar income levels and employment and demographic structures to be comparable. For this, the threshold was set as one-third of India's per capita GDP, share of agricultural employment and median age. Going by this parameter, there was a complete overlap between India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Congo Republic and Ghana. In spite of a partial overlap, Vietnam, Indonesia and Zambia were included in the analysis as their per capita incomes made them interesting outliers relative to India.

While more than half the women workers in India, Bangladesh and Zambia are employed in agriculture, Ghana, Kenya, Indonesia, Vietnam and Kenya see a greater prevalence of female employment in service sectors.

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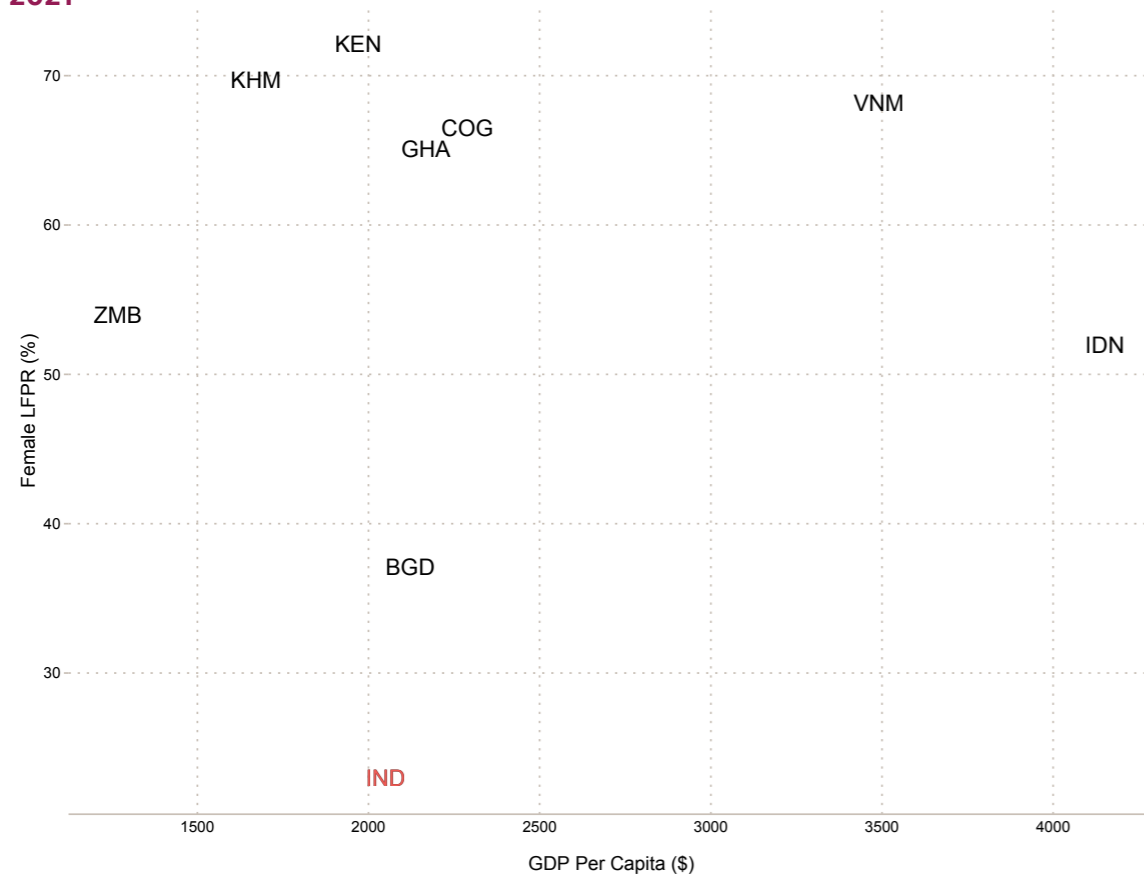
Patterns in Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR)

A key indicator that captures economic participation of women is the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR). It measures the share of women either working or looking for work among those in the working-age population, defined as those between the ages of 15 and 64.

Figure 1 shows the scatter plot of FLFPR (Percent) and GDP per capita (\$). India and Bangladesh have significantly lower labour force participation rates for women compared to countries like Ghana, Congo Republic and Kenya, which have similar per capita GDP levels.³ Further, Figure 2

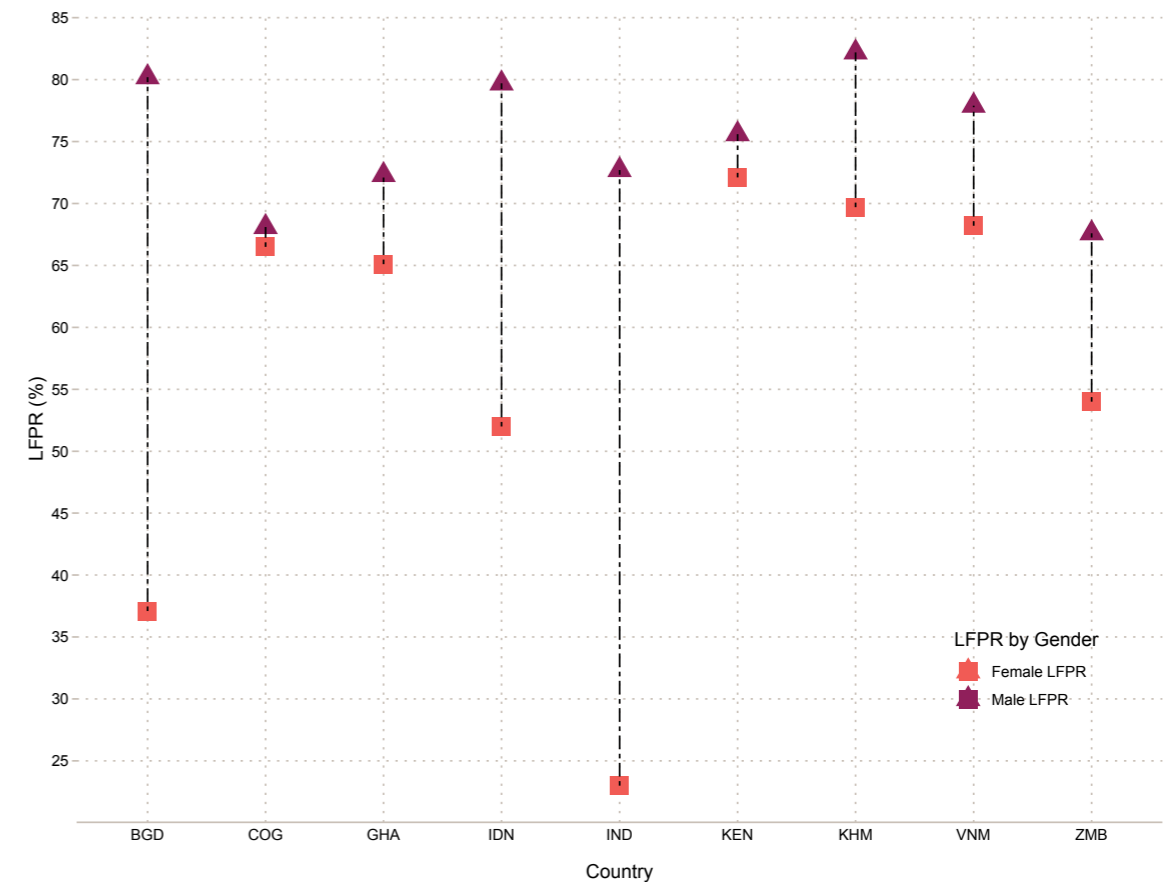
shows that the gap between the labour force participation rate for men and women is highest in India, followed by Bangladesh. While the labour force participation rates for men are relatively similar across countries, the gender gap in participation is lowest in three African countries – Ghana, Congo Republic and Kenya. For instance, although Zambia’s per capita GDP is merely three-fifths of India’s, its FLFPR is twice as high. What is driving this disparity in participation rates among women in African countries and South Asian countries in the sample?

Figure 1
Female Labour Force Participation Rate (Percent) by per Capita GDP (\$), 2021



Source: Gender Data Portal, World Bank, 2021

Figure 2
Gap between Female LFPR and Male LFPR (Percent), 2021



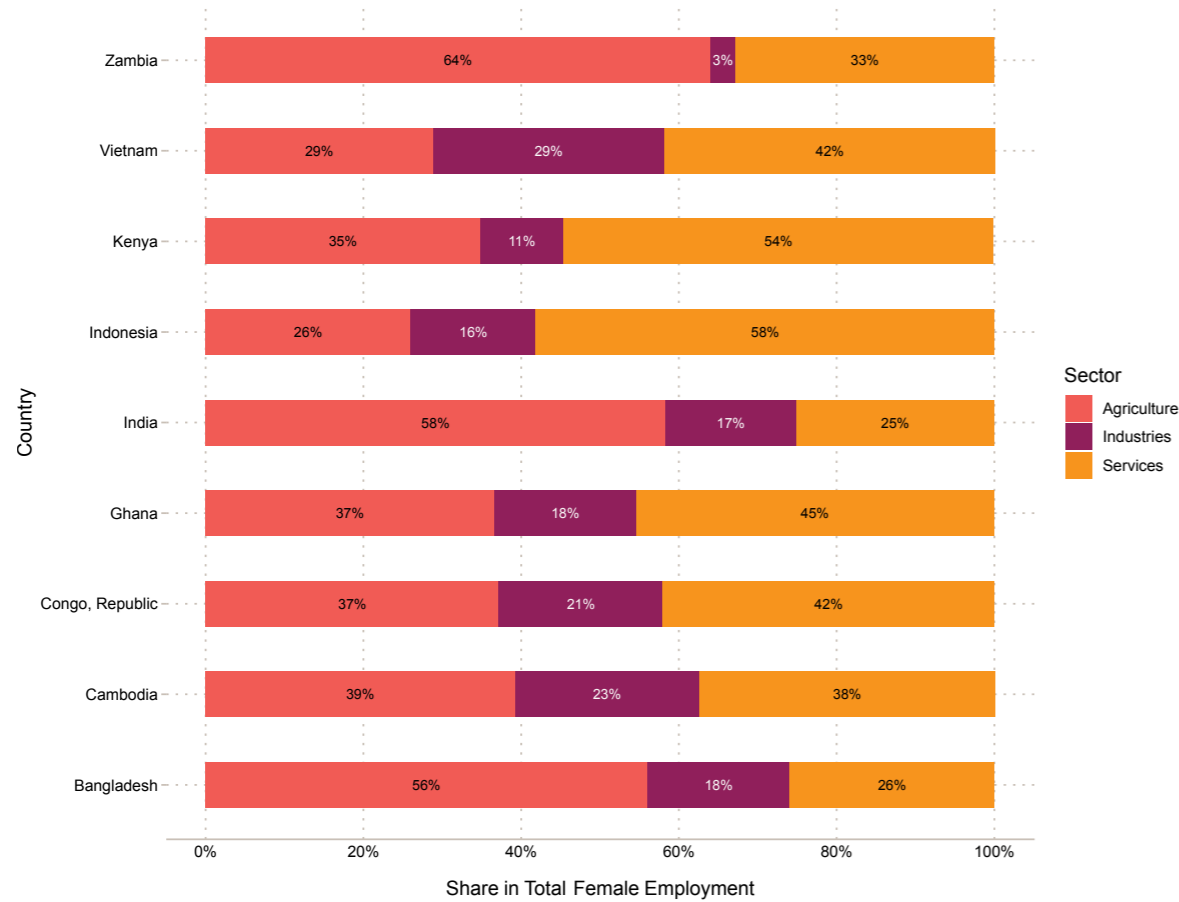
Source: Gender Data Portal, World Bank, 2021

The sectoral distribution of women’s employment depicted in Figure 3 reveals a polarisation towards either agriculture or services. While more than half the women workers in India, Bangladesh and Zambia are employed in agriculture, Ghana, Kenya, Indonesia, Vietnam and Kenya see a greater prevalence of female employment in service sectors. It is important to note that Vietnam is the only country in this list in which the industrial sector has a sizeable share of women workers. The lower shares of industrial employment among women in most

countries is a reflection of the gendered nature of the segregation of labour markets, discrimination at work, and the failure to integrate gender perspectives into industrial policies.

Multiple estimates suggest that women’s labour participation is pivotal to economic progress: closing the gender gap could add up to \$28 trillion to global GDP,⁴ while bridging the gender divide in entrepreneurship and workforce participation in India could increase the country’s GDP by 27 percent.⁵

Figure 3
Sectoral Shares in Total Female Employment (Percent), 2021



Source: Gender Data Portal, World Bank, 2021

Barriers to Women’s Participation in Labour Markets

The challenges to women’s participation in the economy operate at two levels. First, women must overcome the constraints of oppressive social norms, patriarchal impositions, and limited mobility to participate in the labour market. Second, the economy must create employment conditions and opportunities conducive for their work.

Figure 4 clearly demonstrates that the incidence of informal work is very high for women

employed in non-agricultural sectors in many of the countries chosen for this analysis, including India and Bangladesh. The experience of the Global North suggests that growth of the non-agricultural sector brings about a greater degree of formality in labour markets, with improved social protection and security. However, the high representation of workers in informal non-agricultural employment, particularly women, is a salient characteristic of the contemporary Global South. This is significant in Indonesia, where

Figure 4
Share of Women Employed in Non-Agricultural Informal Work (%) vs GDP per capita (\$) in 2021



Source: Gender Data Portal, World Bank, 2021

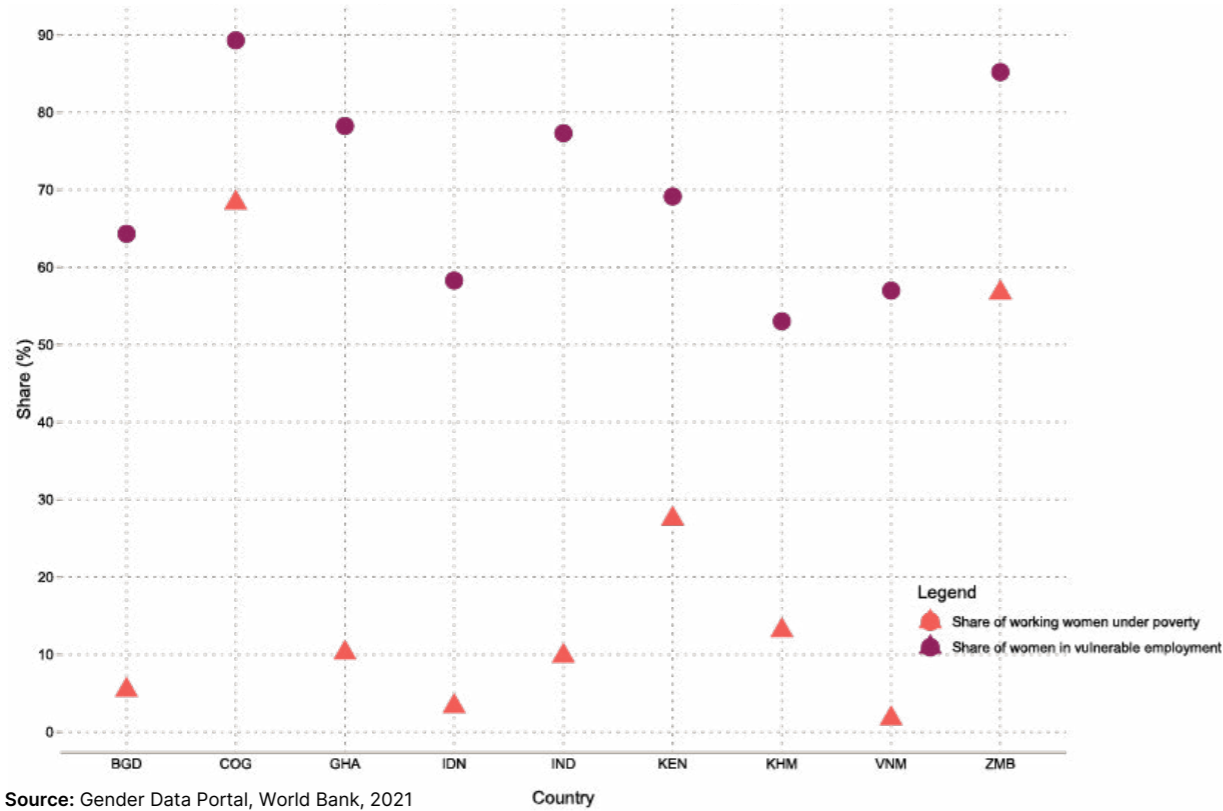
informality is high despite higher per capita GDP levels. Given the coexistence of informality with economic growth, a higher share of employment for women in the service sector in countries like Kenya, Indonesia and Cambodia (Figure 3) may not automatically translate into better development outcomes.

Importantly, these figures also show that informal and unsecure employment can exist even when parts of the economy are growing at very high rates. This is evidenced by the fact that over half of the women workers in these countries participate in the economy either as own-account workers or by contributing to the family via care work and domestic work. These types of employment are classified as “vulnerable”—where work is characterised by instability, a lack

of regulation, and inadequate social protection (Figure 5).

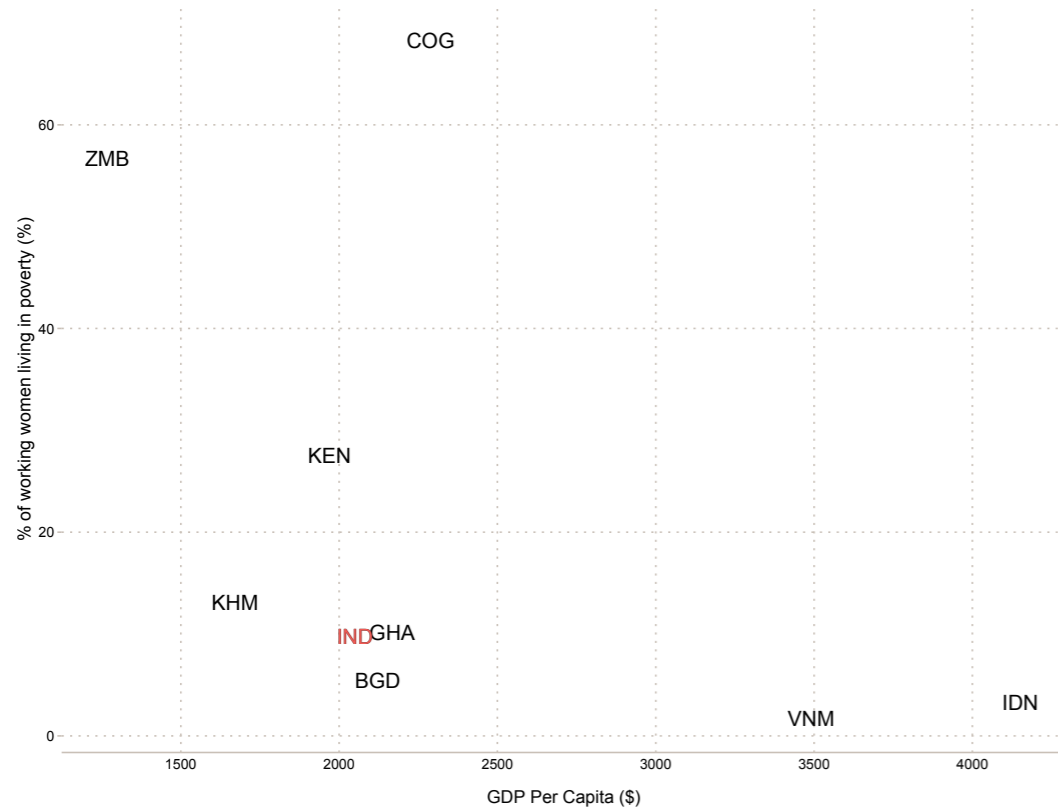
Figure 5 also plots the working poverty rate for the chosen countries. This indicates the share of women, who despite being employed, continue to live in poverty. In Congo Republic and Zambia, this figure stands at about 70 per cent and 60 per cent respectively, indicating that a significant section of women in these two countries lead impoverished lives despite having found work. Figure 6 shows that the working poverty rate for Bangladesh and India is much lower than in the Congo Republic, even though the countries share a similar per capita GDP level. Working poverty rates are the lowest in Indonesia and Vietnam, whose per capita GDP is the highest of the countries in the sample.

Figure 5
Share of working women living in poverty and in vulnerable forms of employment (Percent), 2021



Source: Gender Data Portal, World Bank, 2021

Figure 6
Working Poverty Rate (%) vs GDP per capita (\$) in 2021



Source: Gender Data Portal, World Bank, 2021

Conclusion

Lower levels of poor workers notwithstanding, vulnerability and precarity continue to characterise women's work in India and in other countries. Women in most countries are more likely to be employed in agricultural work or in low-productivity services. This concentration of women in insecure work arrangements has the potential to further disincentivise their participation in paid work.

However, it is important to note that while raising labour force participation rates is critical to improving women's welfare outcomes, a higher participation rate does not automatically translate to better outcomes, as in the case of Congo Republic and Zambia, where a large share of women workers earn extremely low per capita incomes. The above comparative analysis underscores similarities and disparities that typify women's work in the Global South. The various challenges posed to women's work highlight the need for comprehensive frameworks to evaluate the impact of different policy instruments on women's participation and gender equality.

Notes

- 1 International Monetary Fund, Pursuing Women's Economic Empowerment, Washington DC, 2018.
- 2 Per capita GDP levels, share of agriculture in the total employment, and median age of the population were considered to arrive at this list of comparable countries.
- 3 The per-capita GDP in the analysis is for the year 2019 to control for the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4 Bigio, J. and R.B. Vogelstein, "New Interactive Reports on Women's Economic Empowerment," Council on Foreign Relations, October 15, 2018.
- 5 Cuberes, D. and Marc, T., "Aggregate effects of gender gaps in the labour market: A quantitative estimate," Journal of Human Capital 10, no. 1 (2016): 1-32.

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International Monetary Fund. Pursuing Women's Economic Empowerment. Washington DC, 2018.

About the Centre for Gender Analysis

The Centre for Gender Analysis (CGA) is a pioneering initiative by the JustJobs Network aimed at conducting systematic and comprehensive assessments of instruments of public governance—systems, policies, regulations, budgets and more — towards improving women's economic empowerment.

Built upon a systematic methodology that utilises measurable indicators, CGA seeks to instigate structural, systemic, and, over time, behavioural change. Our mission is clear: to revolutionise decision-making processes, reshape budget allocations, and influence policies, regulations, and schemes toward improving the quality and quantity of women's economic participation and their outcomes.

Our unwavering commitment lies in catalysing systemic change and fostering an environment that empowers women economically.

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JustJobs convenes a global network of diverse stakeholders—including policy shapers, academics, and grassroots leaders—to deepen the practical implications of our research endeavours and amplify their impact. Through the combination of cutting-edge research and global knowledge sharing, we aim to forge a fresh, dynamic channel for policy dialogue on employment at national, regional and international levels. Our team members are based in New Delhi and Washington, D.C.

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