

Young and female: A double “strike” for women entering the workforce

An ILO/MasterCard Foundation study sheds new light on the challenges facing young women’s participation in the world of work.

Comment | 09 February 2016

By Azita Berar Awad, Director, ILO Employment Policy Department and Ann Miles, Director, Youth Livelihoods and Financial Inclusion, The MasterCard Foundation



Azita Berar Awad and Ann Miles

For decades promoting gender equality and empowering women has been on the development agenda. We know that empowering women, and particularly young women, to make their own choices for an active participation in the economy makes a difference on so many fronts. The research shows an abundance of positive links. And yet it’s clear that another generation of young women remains outside the reach of what should be their full economic and self-empowerment potential.

A new ILO report based on an analysis of school-to-work transition surveys (SWTS) in more than 30 developing countries concludes that being young and female continues to pose a double challenge for the current generation of young women looking to find decent jobs. The surveys were conducted thanks to a partnership between the ILO and [The MasterCard Foundation](#).

Survey results reveal that young people face far greater challenges to entering the labour market than published unemployment figures suggest. And young women in particular still face discrimination in their access to labour markets. Far too many, regardless of their education level, remain excluded from the potential to earn an income.

Alarming statistics

The report, [Young and female - A double strike? Gender analysis of school-to-work transition surveys in 32 developing countries](#), studied youth populations aged 15–29 in 32 developing countries. The statistics show that 76 per cent of inactive (i.e. not working or looking for work), out of school youth are female. The share of female youth neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) is 30 per cent, double that of young males.



© Li Wenyong / World Bank For those

young women in the labour market, clear disadvantage is shown in many of the report's key statistics: higher unemployment rates (in 2014, 13.6 per cent vs. 12.6 per cent globally), persistent wage gaps (young males earned between 1 and 36 per cent more within all sectors and occupations), higher shares in informal employment (75 per cent of female workers aged 15–29 compared to 73.6 per cent of male workers in the same age band) and longer school-to-work transitions.

Moreover, when there are not enough higher skilled jobs created by economies to provide for all job seekers, it is young women who are most disadvantaged. In the low-income countries surveyed, the gender gap (female-to-male) in the youth unemployment rate among university graduates was 12 percentage points compared to just 3 percentage points for youth with primary education.

Causes and solutions

So, what is behind these disturbing results? Lack of access to resources, early marriages and pregnancies and unrecognized unpaid work are some of the culprits. According to the report, globally 21 per cent of young women attribute their economic inactivity to family responsibility and housework. The equivalent figure for men is 4 per cent. 72 per cent of young women remaining outside of the labour market express a desire to work in the future. However, the report finds that most young women who dropped out of the labour market for family reasons (to have children or look after the household) continued outside the workforce at the time of the survey. Young men were much more likely to re-enter the workforce.

Looking at these figures we must conclude that while some progress has been made over time toward gender equality, in particular in access to education, the struggle for true equality in the world of work is still an uphill battle. It is time to rethink, find the approaches that work and then move to scale them up.

Change can happen

We should also remember that the news is not all bad when it comes to improving opportunities for young women.

Countless storylines of what an empowered young woman can do to lift not only her household but entire communities out of the poverty cycle give us many sources of inspiration. Currently a wide array of programs are being implemented at the ground level and scaled up to help more and more young women help themselves. Such initiatives are increasingly benefiting from research on “what works”. These approaches require tailored action to overcome the often unique circumstances young women face. They provide the comprehensive social support, like day care, women need to participate in education or training opportunities and set themselves on a path toward productive employment.

The report canvases ideas on overcoming some of the female-specific constraints in youth employment programming, from addressing the unequal distribution of household responsibilities to overcoming discrimination in recruitment and conditions of work and occupational segregation.

Scaling up interventions geared toward setting young women on the path to a better future is the shared responsibility of all parties, the public and private sectors, local development actors and families.

As the world, through the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development, aims for decent work and productive employment for all young people, the report reminds us that the world needs a more concerted effort to set young women on the right path to economic empowerment. For all our sakes we must finally destroy the barriers that keep them from realizing their full potential and their rights for equal opportunity and treatment.