



► Policy Brief

October 2021

An uneven and gender-unequal COVID-19 recovery: Update on gender and employment trends 2021

Key messages

- ▶ **The COVID-19 crisis caused unprecedented job losses, hitting women the hardest.** Moreover, the ILO projects that women's employment will still remain below pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2021.
- ▶ **Women's employment-to-population ratios declined proportionally more than men's for all country income level groups, particularly in middle-income countries.** Therefore, gender gaps in employment-to-population ratios have increased in 2020. **Neither women's nor men's employment-to-population ratios are expected to have fully recovered by the end of 2021.** Gender gaps will remain slightly above their 2019 levels.
- ▶ **Women's over-representation in hard-hit sectors explains their relatively greater employment losses as compared to men's.**
- ▶ Evidence from selected countries also indicates that **the greater the employment losses experienced by a country, the more than proportionally women were affected.**
- ▶ **Young women are shouldering the worst of the employment crisis.** Roughly two times as many young women lost their jobs as did young men, employment for young women fell by 11.8 per cent in 2020 in high-income countries and by 15.8 per cent in middle-income ones.
- ▶ **Loss of employment has mostly resulted in economic inactivity,** for young women in particular.
- ▶ Emerging evidence suggests **new care responsibilities constrained women's labour force participation during the pandemic and forced many to quit paid employment altogether.**
- ▶ **Women's job losses were relatively lower in countries where policies like job retention schemes were put in place to minimize the loss of employment.**
- ▶ **The *Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient* calls for gender-responsive employment policies,** particularly macroeconomic, sectoral and active labour market policies **that address effectively the gender-specific effects of the COVID-19 crisis and support the creation of full and productive employment for women and men, including in the care sector.**

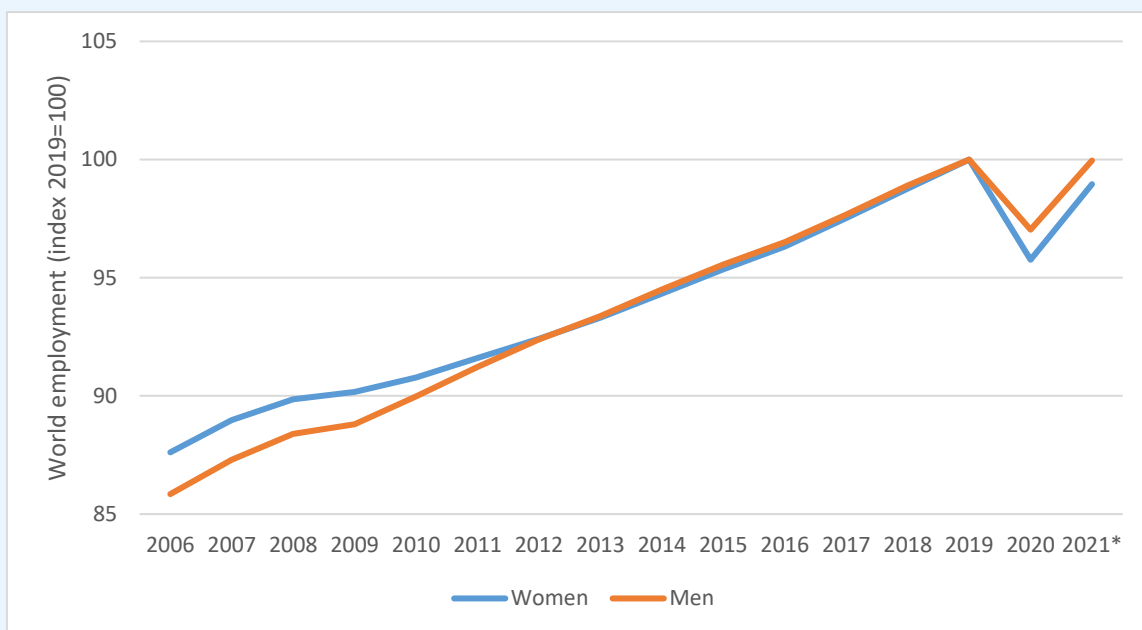
1. Uneven losses, uneven recovery: The COVID-19 employment crisis from a gender perspective

Unprecedented job losses have hit women hardest

The pandemic caused catastrophic losses in employment for women in 2020. In absolute numbers, globally, women lost 54 million jobs whereas men lost 60 million. However, in percentage terms, jobs losses were larger for women, at 4.2 per cent compared to 3.0 per cent for men. Figure 1.1 puts these losses into a long-term perspective. The current crisis is in a contrast with the global financial crisis of 2008–

09, in which men were hit harder than women, with a smaller magnitude of overall job losses. Women’s employment, however, took longer than men’s to recover. Moving forward, the ILO’s latest projection shows that employment for both women and men is likely to recover in 2021, but, once again, at a slower speed for women. While men’s employment is projected to return to its pre-pandemic 2019 level, that for women is likely to remain roughly at its 2018 level. This means that total jobs for women would be 13 million fewer in 2021 than in 2019.

► **Figure 1.1. Trend in global employment levels, 2006–2021*, by sex**



Note: * ILO projection for 2021.¹

Given the continuing growth in the global population, the employment-to-population ratios for both women and men are projected to stay below their pre-pandemic level by the end of 2021. The employment-to-population ratio for women declined in 2020 to 42.3 per cent, down from 44.8 per cent in 2019. This represents an unprecedented year-

on-year decline. The ratio is projected to recover only partially to 43.2 per cent by the end of 2021. Similarly, the employment-to-population ratio for men declined from 70.4 per cent in 2019 to 67.5 per cent in 2020, and is projected to increase to 68.6 per cent in 2021.

¹ See the methodological appendix in ILO 2021. “[Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery](#)”. ILO Policy Brief. Geneva: ILO.

Women’s employment-to-population ratios have declined proportionally more than men’s, particularly in middle-income countries

Table 1.1 shows that the decline in the global employment-to-population ratios has affected all countries across different income levels but in different ways. Employment-to-population ratios have declined between 2020 and 2019 by 1.8 percentage points in lower-middle-income countries, 2.0 percentage points in high-income countries, and 2.3 percentage points in low-income countries. Proportionally, these losses are greater in lower-middle-income countries (-6.1 per cent) and in upper-middle income countries (-4.1 per cent). In high-income countries and low-income countries, the employment losses measured by the employment-to-population ratios have been less drastic (-3.5 per cent and -3.4 per cent respectively).

Similarly, deriving relative employment-to-population losses for women and men requires analysing proportional changes, going beyond percentage points differences. For example, as measured by the employment-to-population ratio, women’s employment in high-income countries declined by 1.9 percentage points during the crisis while for men it fell by 2.2 percentage points. However, proportional losses have been greater for women: the employment-to-population ratio for women was 3.8 per cent lower in 2020 compared to 2019, whereas for men it fell by 3.3 per cent.

More broadly, figure 1.2 shows that for all country income groups, women have lost more jobs than men in proportional terms as measured by their employment-to-population ratios. This also means that gender gaps in employment-to-population ratios increased in 2020, in particular in low-income countries. As was the case for total employment-to-population ratios, women’s greater declines were observed in lower-middle-income countries (-7.2 per cent) and in upper-middle income countries (-4.9 per cent).

► **Figure 1.2. Changes in employment-to-population ratios across country income groups, 2019–21*, by sex**



Note: * ILO projections for the year 2021.¹

► **Table 1.1. Employment-to-population ratios across countries grouped by income level, by sex**

		Women	Men	Total
High-income	2019	50.7	65.4	58.0
	2020	48.8	63.2	56.0
	2021*	49.6	64.1	56.8
Upper-middle income	2019	51.4	71.0	61.2
	2020	48.9	68.5	58.6
	2021	49.4	68.9	59.1
Lower-middle income	2019	31.8	71.8	52.1
	2020	29.5	67.7	48.9
	2021	30.9	70.0	50.7
Low income	2019	54.9	72.5	63.6
	2020	52.3	70.8	61.4
	2021	53.5	71.2	62.2

Note: * ILO projections for the year 2021.¹

Women are already being left behind by an uneven recovery

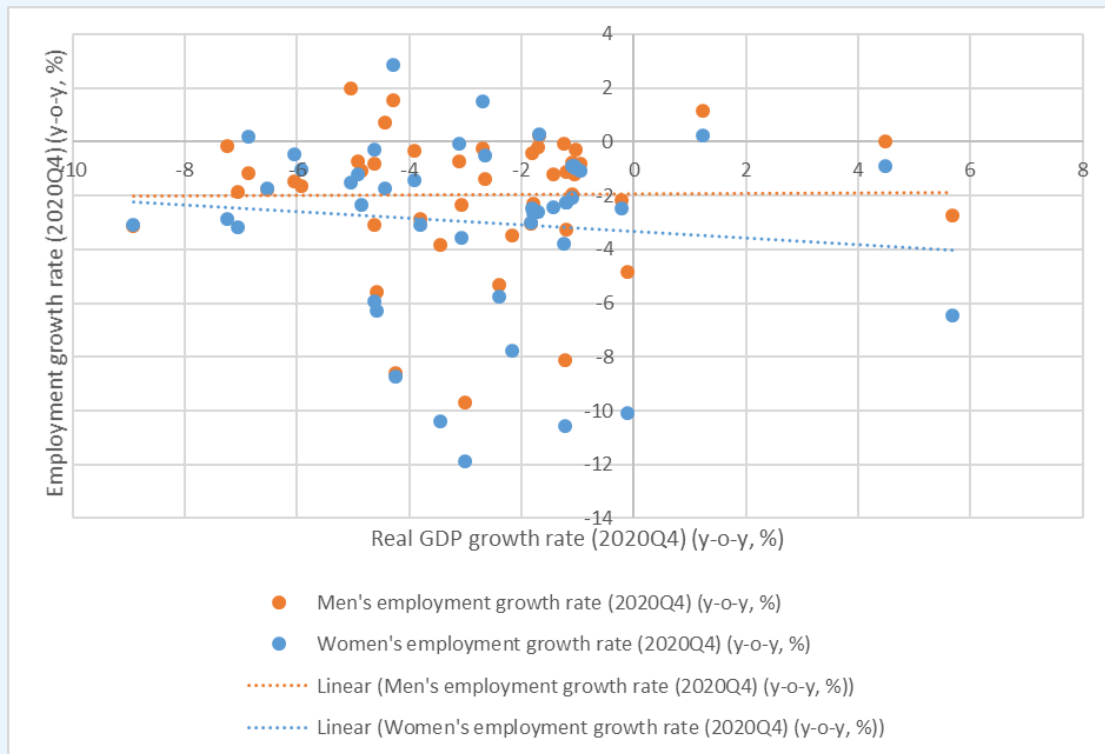
The ILO predicts that the employment recovery will be uneven, with discrepancies not only between countries but also between women and men. Table 1.1 shows that

employment-to-population ratios are not projected to recover to pre-pandemic levels for any income-level country grouping in 2021. As figure 1.2 makes clear, projected increases in women’s and men’s employment-to-population ratios between 2020 and 2021 will not be enough to compensate for the previous year employment losses. Moreover, gender gaps in employment-to-population ratios will remain slightly greater than their pre-pandemic levels.

Preliminary evidence suggests that the recovery is not benefiting women and men equally. Figure 1.3 points to an absence of correlation between year-on-year variations in real GDP and men’s employment growth. The picture for women is different. They have lost relatively more jobs than men for each percentage point change in the real GDP growth rate (year-on-year) but, more importantly, women’s employment is not benefiting from the positive GDP growth rates already seen in 2020, as the correlation between year-on-year variations in real GDP and women’s employment growth is negative. If confirmed, these trends mean that GDP recovery is leaving women behind, a pattern observed in previous crises.²

² ILO. 2020. “A gender-responsive employment recovery: Building back fairer”, ILO Policy Brief. Geneva: ILO.

► **Figure 1.3. Year-on-year change in employment for women and men (%) versus change in real GDP (%) (2020Q4)**



Source: Real GDP growth rates (%): The Economist Intelligence Unit, accessed 6 July 2021; author's calculation of employment growth rates, ILOSTAT, accessed 6 July 2021.

Young women are shouldering the worst of the crisis

The differences in the impact made by the COVID-19 crisis are enormous between young (aged 15–24 years) and adult workers, and between young women and young men. Young women have been particularly hit hard by factors that have impacted women in general more strongly than men: namely, an over-representation in sectors severely affected by the crisis, such as accommodation, domestic work or labour-intensive manufacturing like garment-making (see below); and an over-representation in informal employment, where it is cheaper and easier to fire workers. In the case of young women, to these factors are added other youth-specific factors, like the fact that young people constituted a large proportion of job-seekers at a time when there were restrictions on searching for a job, and that when self-employed they often lack the resources to

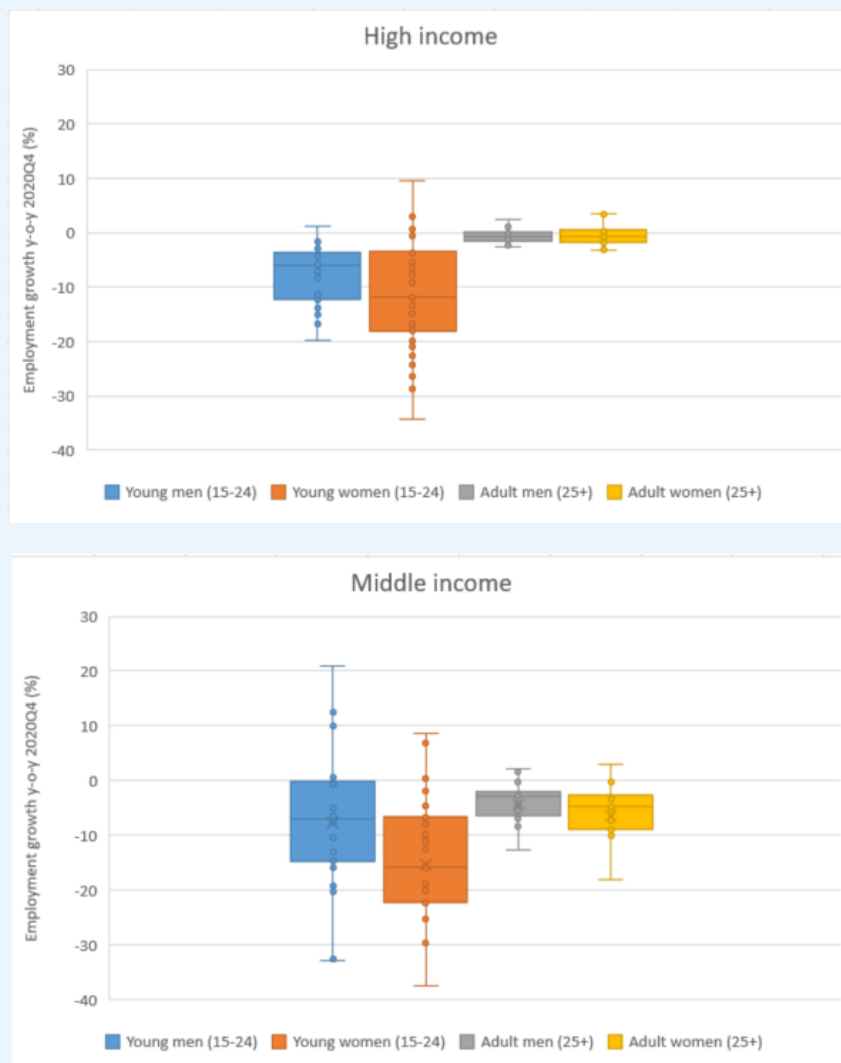
stay afloat financially. A weaker attachment to the labour market also meant young women were frequently beyond the reach of emergency policies designed to support more senior (formal) workers.³

Figure 1.4 shows that, according to a sample of 35 high-income countries, young women's employment shrank by 11.8 per cent, almost twice as much as it did for young men (–5.8 per cent, both median values). This is also far more than for adult women, who lost 0.8 per cent of employment in 2020 in median terms, while adult men lost 0.6 per cent. Given that high-income countries put in place an array of job retention measures designed to limit employment losses consequent on the pandemic, this appears to suggest they favoured prime-age workers and were not sufficient to reach young people.⁴

³ See also ILO 2020. "An update of the youth labour market impact of the COVID-19 crisis". Geneva: ILO.

⁴ O'Higgins, Niall, Sher Verick and Adam Elsheimki. 2021. "On the Nature of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth Labour Markets: A Cross-Country Analysis", presented at the "7th Conference of the Regulating for Decent Work Network", Virtual Conference, International Labour Office Geneva, Switzerland, 6–9 July.

► Figure 1.4. Change in employment for youth and adults by sex and income group, end of 2020 (year-on-year)



Source: Author's calculations based on ILOSTAT, accessed 5 July 2021. The box chart is based on a sample of countries with available data (35 high-income countries and 23 middle-income countries) and are unweighted. The graph should be read as follows: (a) the horizontal line passing through the middle of the box represents the median value (50th percentile); (b) the upper boundary of the box represents the 75th percentile; (c) the lower boundary of the box represents the 25th percentile; (d) the adjacent lines below and above the box represent the lowest and highest values, respectively.

Data from a sample of 23 middle-income countries show that approximately 1 in 6 young women (-15.8 per cent) lost their job in 2020 (figure 1.4). This is over twice as many as young men (-7 per cent), over three times as many as adult women (-4.7 per cent) and nearly six times as many as adult men (-2.7 per cent, all figures in median terms). These figures also point to the gender gap in youth employment having become more pronounced in middle-income countries during the crisis.

When individuals lose their jobs, whether in wage-earning positions or self-employed, they can either actively seek a new job (become unemployed) or withdraw from the labour market (become economically inactive). Past crises indicate that women who withdraw from the labour market find it more difficult than men to re-enter and often continue to remain outside of the labour force. Among other reasons, this is often as a consequence of unpaid care work having been redistributed in line with more traditional gender roles; something which can occur when women are out of employment for a longer period than men.

2. What are the factors behind the gendered impact of the employment crisis?

Women's over-representation in sectors severely impacted by the crisis explains their greater employment losses

The COVID-19 crisis has impacted women and men differently, depending on the sector of the economy in which they work, their access to labour and social protection, and their care responsibilities. Like in previous crises, women engaged in informal employment are at most risk of losing their sources of income. This is particularly true for women in developing countries. However, this crisis is exceptional in that it is having immediate impacts on sectors that were typically only affected at a much later stage in previous crises. In the past, sectoral segregation shielded women from the worst of the employment impacts. This was because the sectors to contract first were those where the majority of workers were men, for example, manufacturing and construction.

In this crisis, however, the sectors that have been hardest hit are the ones in which the majority of workers are women, like accommodation and food services, the wholesale and retail sectors, and domestic work; and also in some labour-intensive segments of manufacturing, such as garment-making, where, again, women are over-represented among the labour force (box 2.1).

At the beginning of 2020 it was estimated that around 40 per cent of all employed women worked in sectors at the highest risk of job losses during the crisis.⁵ This figure rises to almost half of all women workers (49.1 per cent) once some medium-high risk sectors are included.⁶ The comparative figures for men were 36.6 and 40.4 per cent, respectively – a gap of 3 to 9 percentage points. The gender gap in the proportion of informal workers within the hardest hit sectors was even wider, with 40 per cent of women working informally in those sectors at the onset of the crisis compared with 32 per cent of men.⁷

⁵ These are the “high risk sectors” in figure 2.1 below, namely, accommodation and food services; the wholesale and retail trade; real estate, business and administrative activities; and manufacturing.

⁶ They are labelled “medium high-risk sectors (1)” in figure 2.1 below, namely, arts, entertainment and recreation; domestic workers; and other service activities.

⁷ ILO. 2020. “ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Third edition. Updated estimates and analysis”. Geneva: ILO.

► **Box 2.1. COVID-19 and women in the garment sector**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis response have made a significant impact on the garment industry and its global supply chain. It is estimated that approximately 73 million jobs are at high risk within the textiles and garments supply chain, 46 per cent of which (nearly 34 million) are women's jobs.⁸ Crisis impacts have been particularly severe for women within garment manufacturing, where they make up about 80 per cent of the labour force globally.⁹

Retail and factory closures, border restrictions and business revenue losses resulted in women either temporarily or permanently losing their jobs. Once factories reopened, there were reductions in the labour force, lower incomes for workers and delays in paying salaries, with up to US\$5.8 billion lost in wages.¹⁰ In the context of limited social protection and unequal access to government and financial services, lost income compromises women's ability to meet basic needs, such as food and shelter, leaving themselves and their families at risk of poverty and hunger.¹¹ In addition, decreased or lost earnings can detrimentally affect women's bargaining power and status within the household.

Economic recovery will not automatically lead to "business as usual". It remains to be seen whether the demand for apparel (and workers) will return to its pre-crisis level. Fewer formal employment opportunities within the garments industry could lead to women resorting to informal employment, both within and outside the sector, and to other forms of work associated with lower incomes and limited labour and social protection. Moreover, those women who do return to the factory floor risk contracting COVID-19, not only at the workplace, but also during the commute or when sleeping in employer-provided dormitories. Finally, a reorganization of the supply chain and upgraded digital and automation technologies in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis may disproportionately threaten women's employment as a consequence of occupational segregation and their over-representation in lower-skilled jobs throughout the garment supply chain.

Effectively addressing these and the many other challenges faced by women when working in the garment industry requires greater representation within trade unions, employers' organizations, factory management and other labour institutions.¹² In this regard, the Call to Action "COVID-19: Action in the Global Garment Industry" – endorsed by brands, manufacturers and worker's organizations – has the potential to catalyse action from around the global garment industry in support of manufacturers and protect the income, health and employment of garment workers.

Figure 2.1 shows the impact made by the crisis on employment by economic sector grouped according to risk and by gender for a selection of countries for which microdata are available. It is no coincidence that in countries where the net loss of employment has been the greatest¹³ (most of them in The Americas), the impact has been far worse for women than men. This is in line with the aggregate analysis in section 1. Among those countries

selected, Peru, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, Mexico and the United States, and Georgia outside The Americas, are shown to have experienced dramatic declines in employment. In countries such as Viet Nam, Poland and Serbia, there men gained in employment in some sectors, but not enough to compensate for the losses in others. Women's employment shows a similar pattern to this in Austria, Greece, Poland, the Republic of Korea and Serbia.

⁸ ILO. 2020. "[COVID-19 and global supply chains: How the jobs crisis propagates across borders](#)". Geneva: ILO.

⁹ ILO. 2019. "[The Future of Work in Textiles, Clothing, Leather and Footwear](#)". Geneva: ILO.

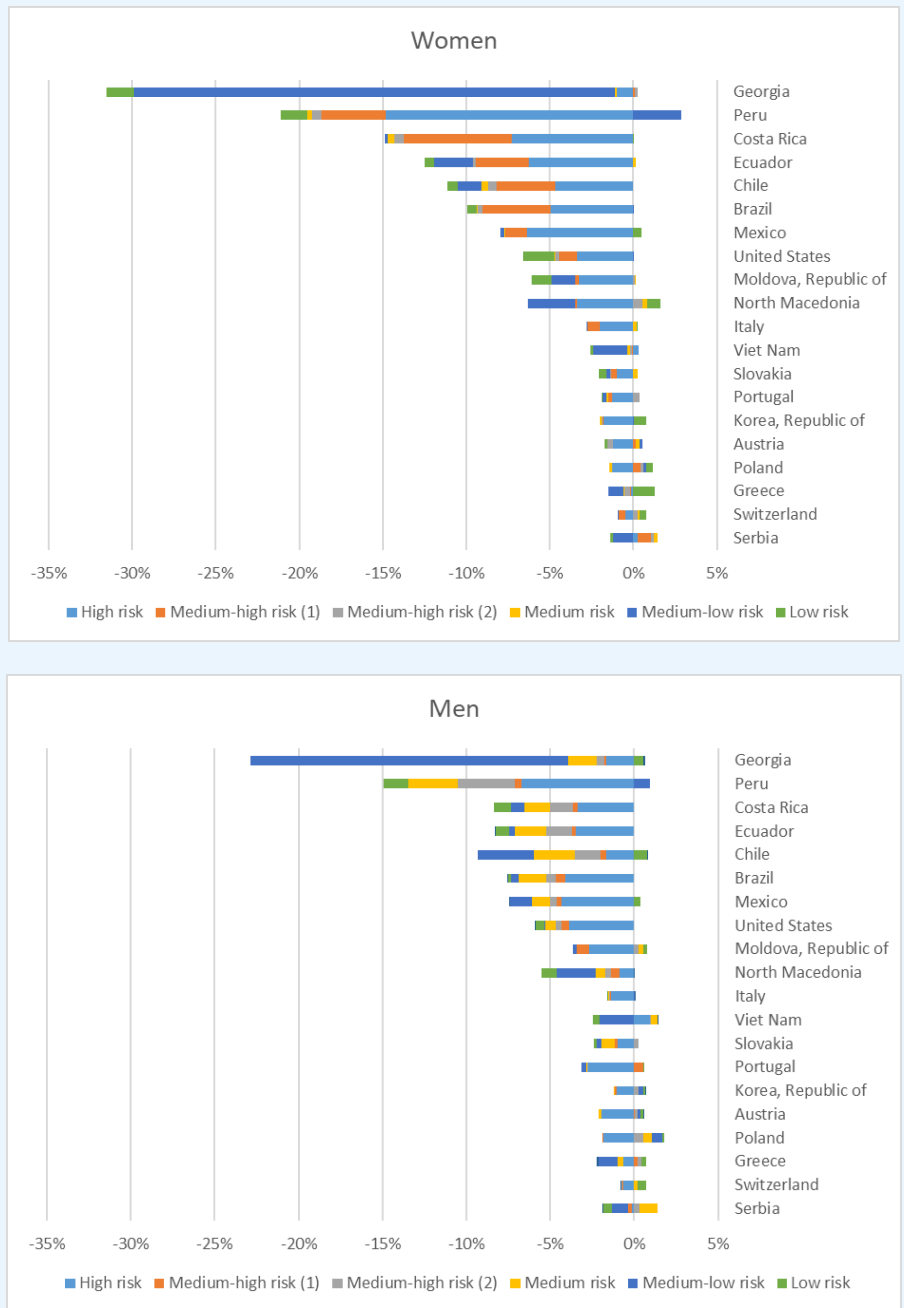
¹⁰ Abdulla, H. 2020. "Garment Workers Underpaid by up to US\$5.8bn during Pandemic." *just-style*, 10 August; ILO. 2021. "[Moving the needle: Gender equality and decent work in Asia's garment sector](#)", Bangkok: ILO; ILO, Better World and Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labour Relations. 2020. "[The supply chain ripple effect: How COVID-19 is affecting garment workers and factories in Asia and the Pacific](#)". Bangkok: ILO

¹¹ ILO. 2020. "[Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the garment sector](#)". Geneva: ILO

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In figure 2.1, employment losses are evident when a sector has lost employment (bars to the left of 0%), as is the case for all sectors in Costa Rica, and employment gains are evident when a sector has increased employment (bars to the right of 0%); for example, the medium-low risk sector for women in Peru. There are no countries among those selected where either women or men made net gains in employment (bars to the right being greater in magnitude than bars to the left of 0%).

► **Figure 2.1. Share of employment losses and gains by sector grouped according to risk of being impacted by the crisis, end of 2020, women and men**



Note: *High risk* sectors are: manufacturing (C); wholesale and retail trade; motor vehicle and motorcycle repair (G); accommodation and food services (I); real estate activities (L); professional, scientific and technical activities (M); and administrative and support services (N). *Medium-high risk (1)* sectors are: the arts, entertainment and recreation (R); other service activities (S); domestic activities for household employers; undifferentiated goods and services activities undertaken by households for own use (T). *Medium-high risk (2)* sectors are: transportation and storage (H) and information and communication (J). *Medium risk* sectors are: construction (F); financial and insurance activities (K); and mining and quarrying (B). *Medium-low risk* sectors are: agriculture; and forestry and fishing (A). *Low risk* sectors are: electricity; and gas, steam and air-conditioning supply (D); water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (E); public administration and defence; compulsory social security (O); education (P); and human health and social work activities (Q).

In corroboration of ILO estimates, figure 2.1 shows women lost most jobs in high-risk sectors, especially in accommodation and food, and retail, where they are over-represented among the labour force. The employment losses in high-risk sectors were proportionally greater than for men, and this goes a long way towards explaining why the overall employment lost by women was relatively high. In Italy, Mexico, Peru and Portugal, jobs losses in these sectors accounted for 80 per cent or more of women's employment losses overall, while in Brazil, Ecuador, Moldova, North Macedonia and the United States, they accounted for one-half or more. These sectors are followed by medium-high risk (1) sectors, namely, arts and entertainment, domestic work and other service workers, which accounted for one-third or more of the employment lost by women in Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica. Women also experienced significant employment losses in Ecuador, Chile, Georgia, North Macedonia and Viet Nam within agriculture – a medium-low risk sector – when produce was mainly for export. In contrast, in Peru, employment actually grew in agriculture, thereby providing a refuge when all other sectors were contracting. With regards to those few countries where women's employment showed some positive signs, this can be explained by its expansion in low-risk sectors, possibly due to a net recruitment of workers within the care economy (health and education).

The major job losses experienced by men were likewise concentrated in high-risk sectors, due to an over-representation in manufacturing industries; however, the losses in these sectors are proportionally lower than for women working in other high-risk sectors, the exceptions to this pattern being Poland, Portugal and the United States. There were also employment losses for men in medium-risk sectors, where they are over-represented in construction, and medium-high risk (2) sectors, namely, transportation and information and communications, again sectors where men are over-represented.

In summary, analysis confirms that the main factor determining the negative employment impacts during the COVID-19 crisis is the sectoral composition of women's and men's employment. This is associated with long-standing

patterns of sectoral segregation, which put women's employment at the centre of the COVID-19 fallout.

Lastly, data from figure 2.1 underscores the fact, this time at a country level, that for women and men alike the job retention policies put in place by certain countries, notably in Europe, mitigated the negative net impact on employment caused by the crisis, meaning comparatively fewer jobs lost overall than in countries with no such policies.

Care responsibilities constrained women's labour force participation and compelled many to leave paid employment altogether

The massive increases in women's economic inactivity resulted from at least two distinctive characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis. First, this demand-and-supply crisis not only restricted job opportunities but also the ability to search for a job, in the absence of which workers could not be among those classed as unemployed, even when available for work. Second, the closure of schools and other care services, restrictions to mobility and, in many cases, the caring for those infected by the virus but suffering only mild symptoms, created an unprecedented demand for care within the home. Available evidence shows that most of this demand fell to women to fulfil, who even prior to what became termed the "lockdown" were already doing most of the unpaid care work. For example, in Turkey, a time-use survey conducted during that country's lockdown, and comparable to one conducted in 2018, shows that, while men's participation in unpaid work increased substantially, particularly for those who switched to teleworking or worked fewer hours, the increase for women was greater still and further widened the gender gap in unpaid work.¹⁴ Interestingly, this survey also found a narrowing of the gender gap in paid work due to the disruption in employment having been relatively less for the women among the respondents.

¹⁴ Ilkcaracan, Ipek and Emel Memis. 2021. "Transformation in the Gender Gaps in Paid and Unpaid Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from Turkey", *Feminist Economics* 27(1-2): 288-309.

In Australia¹⁵ and in the UK,¹⁶ however, there is evidence to the contrary showing that time spent on childcare increased more for men than it did for women in relative terms. That said, although the respective average gender gaps narrowed, in both these countries women continued to shoulder the larger share of the childcare – evidence perhaps of how relatively little childcare men provided prior to the COVID-19 crisis. As in Turkey, the amount of additional childcare provided by men in the United Kingdom was very attuned to their employment situation: that is, time spent on childcare became more gender-equal in households where men worked from home, were furloughed or lost their job. According to the Australian data, there was greater overall dissatisfaction with care arrangements during lockdown compared to the ones in place pre-lockdown; a signal that the redistribution of care work between women and men might not last once circumstances return closer to normality. For women, greater relative equity in this regard did not compensate for the extra unpaid care work generated by the pandemic.¹⁷

It is a similar picture for selected Asia-Pacific countries, where gender gaps in unpaid care work narrowed, but women continued to perform the larger share of the

work.¹⁸ Employed women, however, received less support with household tasks compared to employed men, something also noticeable in Turkey. This may have forced some women to cut their paid hours or leave employment altogether. In the Republic of Korea, for example, 5.5 per cent of women were on leave of absence during the pandemic, double the proportion of men. Evidence appears to indicate that possibly 60 per cent of the gender gap in leave of absence is attributable to women's caring responsibilities.¹⁹

What these examples serve to show is just how dependent people's working lives are on the provision of care services, something the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare for all to see. Indeed, the closing of the very care services taken for granted during "normal" times – from schools to day-care facilities to routine health services and long-term care institutions – served to underscore the fact that they are a pre-requisite for every worker who has family responsibilities to be able to carry out their ordinary duties. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of health employees and other frontline workers; indeed, in many cases, childcare services had to remain open specifically in order for them to go to work.²⁰

3. Moving towards a gender-responsive recovery

The ILO projections presented in section 1 picture an uneven recovery process which is already leaving women behind. Extraordinary policy efforts are required if this trend is to be reversed, otherwise the emerging post-COVID-19 world might be one where existing gender inequalities in terms of access and quality of employment are further exacerbated. The *Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient*²¹ adopted by

governments, workers and employers in June 2021 recognizes that: "Women have suffered disproportionate job and income losses, including because of their over-representation in the hardest-hit sectors, and many continue to work on the front line, sustaining care systems, economies and societies, while often also doing the majority of unpaid care work, which underscores the need for a gender-responsive recovery." Furthermore, it calls for strategies that have full, productive and freely chosen

¹⁵ Craig, Lyn and Brendan Churchill, 2021. "Working and Caring at Home: Gender Differences in the Effects of COVID-19 on Paid and Unpaid Labour in Australia", *Feminist Economics* 27(1-2): 310-326.

¹⁶ Sevilla, Almudena, and Sarah Smith. 2020. "[Baby Steps: The Gender Division of Childcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)". IZA DP No. 13302. Bonn: IZA.

¹⁷ Craig and Churchill 2021, op. cit.

¹⁸ Seck, Papa A., Jessamyn O. Encarnacion, Cecilia Tinonin, and Sara Duerto-Valero. 2021. "Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 in Asia and The Pacific: Early Evidence on Deepening Socioeconomic Inequalities in Paid and Unpaid Work". *Feminist Economics* 27(1-2): 117-132.

¹⁹ Ham, Sunyou. 2021. "Explaining Gender Gaps in the South Korean Labour Market During the COVID-19 Pandemic". *Feminist Economics* 27(1-2): 133-151.

²⁰ ILO. 2020. [COVID-19 and the education sector](#). ILO Sectoral Brief. Geneva: ILO.

²¹ ILO. 2021. "[Resolution concerning a global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient](#)", International Labour Conference 109th, Record No. 5A.

employment at their heart, and that are “gender-responsive, to build forward better from the crisis”. In other words, building forward better from the crisis should also mean “building forward fairer”.²²

► Box 3.1. A gender-responsive employment policy framework

The ILO’s mandate to promote “**full, productive, and freely chosen employment**”²³ through comprehensive employment policy frameworks covers **macro, meso and micro policy areas relevant to a country’s employment priorities**.²⁴ Over the decades, the ILO has supported member States in the design, implementation, revision and monitoring of national employment policies that focus on a range of policy areas, from **monetary and fiscal policies, sectoral and industrial strategies (including trade and investment policies) and skills development to employment services and active labour market programmes**.²⁵ This mandate is emphasized by the *Global call to action for a human-centred recovery*,²⁶ which calls for strategies for recovering from the pandemic that are “gender-responsive, to build forward better from the crisis”. **Gender-responsiveness means explicitly pursuing gender-equality objectives**, based on diagnoses of how policy options affect women and men differently.

Macroeconomic policies are gender-responsive when gender equality concerns are embedded within fiscal and monetary policies. Fiscal stimulus packages of the kind put in place as the crisis unfolded comprised specific measures to support women and girls in critical policy areas (livelihoods, social protection, health, food security, and public infrastructure and housing). Whether or not the packages provided new resources or only reallocated existing resources had an impact on the size of the fiscal stimulus, and therefore on the ensuing recovery. Particularly in developing countries, avoiding premature fiscal consolidation is key to prevent deepening inequalities. Monetary policies, in turn, can provide liquidity to governments, households and businesses that enables them to avoid bankruptcy and debt build-up, which would slow the recovery. Moving forward, central banks could also embrace developmental objectives that create an environment conducive to the financing of gender-equitable policies.²⁷

Sectoral employment policies are gender-responsive when they promote a just transition to a gender-equitable, job-rich and environmentally-sustainable economy. The policies that lead to a gender-equitable structural transformation vary from country to country, but what they have in common is a recognition of women as producers, wage earners and unpaid carers, channelling investment to support them in these roles. Industrial policies should enable women and men alike to benefit equally from the creation of jobs, including in new green industries and in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).²⁸

Active labour market policies are gender-responsive when they support women’s attachment to the labour market and guarantee their access to productive employment. These include, for example, employment retention measures to prevent women from losing their jobs; wage subsidies with specific gender balance requirements supportive of women’s re-entry into employment; as well as policies that support women’s employability and job-readiness, for example, through help in acquiring digital skills. Inclusive and gender-responsive approaches encourage women’s broader labour force participation and can in themselves accelerate the recovery.

²² ILO. 2021. “[Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery](#).” ILO Policy Brief. Geneva: ILO.

²³ [Employment Policy Convention, 1964, No. 122](#).

²⁴ International Labour Conference. 2014. [Recurrent discussion on the strategic objective of employment](#). See also ILO 2020. [National employment policies for an inclusive, job-rich recovery from the COVID-19 crisis](#). ILO Policy Brief. Geneva: ILO.

²⁵ D’Achon, Eléonore. 2021. [Two decades of national employment policies 2000-2020. Part I: Employment policy design: Lessons from the past, policies for the future](#). Geneva: ILO.

²⁶ ILO. 2021. “[Resolution concerning a global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient](#)”, International Labour Conference 109th, Record No. 5A.

²⁷ UN Women–ILO. 2021. [How to assess fiscal stimulus packages from a gender equality perspective](#), UN Women–ILO Joint Programme: Promoting Decent Employment for Women through Inclusive Growth Strategies and Investments in Care. Geneva: UN Women–ILO.

²⁸ UN Women–ILO. 2021. [Assessing the gendered employment impacts of COVID-19 and supporting a gender-responsive recovery](#), UN Women–ILO Joint Programme: Promoting Decent Employment for Women through Inclusive Growth Strategies and Investments in Care. Geneva: UN Women–ILO.

Strategies for a gender-responsive recovery must therefore:

Promote gender-responsive employment policies, particularly through macroeconomic, sectoral and labour market policies that address effectively the gender-specific effects of the COVID-19 crisis and support the creation of full and productive employment for women

Given the disproportionate adverse impact the crisis has had on women and girls, it is imperative that gender equality is embedded in employment policy responses. Comprehensive, gender-responsive employment policies can do this on multiple fronts (see box 3.1). For instance, macroeconomic policies could focus on boosting aggregate demand through stimulus packages, comprising both monetary and fiscal policies, in ways that support employment retention and creation, with a specific focus on women's employment and income.²⁹

Persistent patterns of sectoral gender segregation continue to seriously hinder gender equality, trapping women in low-productivity sectors, with only limited access to high-productivity, high-paying jobs, even when they have the necessary educational credentials. Moreover, as

the current crisis has proved once again, barriers to entry into high-productivity sectors become that much higher during times of crises, as exclusionary gender norms serve to ration scarce jobs.³⁰ The ILO's *Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient* calls for "appropriate public and private investment in sectors hit hardest by the crisis, such as hospitality, tourism, transport, arts and recreation and some parts of retail", most of which are predominantly employ women, and, as discussed earlier, account for most of the employment losses by women. Sectoral and industrial policies can foster equity by supporting these sectors, as well as by incentivising the entry of women into strategic, fast-recovering sectors.

Labour market policies, moreover, need to be designed with a view to supporting women's entrance into productive employment, particularly with regards to young women (see box 3.2). For example, Public Employment Services (PES) that explicitly adopt a gender approach during planning and when in operation are more likely to produce gender equitable outcomes.³¹ In turn, public employment programmes that directly create employment can choose to establish quotas guaranteeing women share in the benefit.³² Closing the gender skills gap is also made possible by gender-responsive upskilling and reskilling policies that enable women to take full advantage of the decent job opportunities on offer.

²⁹ UN Women–ILO. 2021. *How to assess fiscal stimulus packages from a gender equality perspective*, UN Women–ILO Joint Programme: Promoting Decent Employment for Women through Inclusive Growth Strategies and Investments in Care. Geneva: UN Women–ILO.

³⁰ ILO. 2019. *Gender Impacts of Structural Transformation*. ILO/SIDA Partnership on Employment. Technical Brief No. 2. Geneva: ILO.

³¹ ILO. 2020. "COVID-19: Public employment services and labour market policy responses". ILO Policy brief. Geneva: ILO.

³² United Nations Development Programme, *COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*.

► **Box 3.2. Employment policies need to be sensitive to young people, particularly young women**

A majority of COVID-19 employment and labour market policy responses attended to the wider challenges of the pandemic, but were often not attuned to the specific pandemic-induced challenges faced by young people. It is the case that young people come within the ambit of policy responses simply by being part of the general population. The difficulty with this is that young people face distinct challenges that disadvantage them in comparison to older adults. These include having less work experience and financial capital, weaker social networks and being prone to higher levels of informality and in-work poverty. For instance, lockdown measures allowing teleworking helped those already in work, but not young people actively seeking work or having just left school or university. Moreover, youth are often ineligible for unemployment benefits, having not yet worked for the period required to qualify for welfare.³³

Active labour market policies need to serve youth better – young women, in particular – if the emergence of a “lockdown generation” is to be prevented. Young people were the ones to find themselves most at risk of unemployment and discouragement during the crisis. To help in their search for a first job, public employment services and active labour market policies could now actively support them through key transitions from school-to-work and between jobs. Inclusive, gender-responsive active labour market policies (ALMPs) should be given priority in order to ensure that youth, in particular young women, do not fall further behind in employment.

Promote appropriate public and private investment in the care sector, which has the strong potential not only to expand decent work opportunities – especially for women – but also strengthen the resilience of economies and societies and enable workers with family responsibilities to engage in employment

The crisis has exposed weaknesses in health systems and the investment required in order to keep schools functioning and students connected throughout a crisis and beyond. The ILO's *Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient* calls for “appropriate public and private investment in sectors (...) with strong potential to expand decent work opportunities, such as the care economy, education and infrastructure development”. Investments in health that include long-term care, and in education that include early childhood care and education,

have the potential of becoming integral to any gender-responsive and job-rich recovery strategy, given their positive affect on generating decent work opportunities, for women in particular, but also for men. Investment in care services contributes to the integration of women into the labour market by redistributing care work. Care services are also welfare-enhancing and build resilience.³⁴

Care workers have been and remain essential to overcoming the pandemic. Investment in care services needs to be made alongside improvements in working conditions, to include wages, working time, safety and health at work, as well as proper representation and collective bargaining for care workers. Better working conditions for care workers improve the quality of care provided. This is to the benefit of care recipients and unpaid carers, who are mostly women. Given the high percentage of women within the care labour force (including domestic workers), and the significant numbers of youth it employs around the world (about 12 per cent prior to the pandemic), an improvement in working conditions in the care sector would be an important and much needed benefit to women and young workers.

³³ Barford, Anna, Adam Coutts and Garima Sahai. 2021. *Youth Employment in Times of COVID. A global review of COVID-19 policy responses to tackle (un)employment and disadvantage among young people*. Geneva: ILO.

³⁴ UN Women–ILO. 2021. *A guide to public investments in the care economy*, UN Women–ILO Joint Programme: Promoting Decent Employment for Women through Inclusive Growth Strategies and Investments in Care. Geneva: UN Women–ILO.

Contact details

International Labour Organization

Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Employment, Labour Markets and Youth
Branch
E: emplab@ilo.org