

THE BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR MARKET IN MYANMAR



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- In Myanmar, the total female labor force participation rate is a mere 47% (even though women make up 50% of the population) compared to 82% for men.
- Women's participation in the labor force declines significantly after the age of 25.
- Women are generally expected to stay home to do reproductive and household work for the family.
- Respondents prefer working in the informal sector (family or own business) because of the flexibility it allows them to accommodate their family care responsibilities.
- There would be more women in the formal labor market if employers offered better family-friendly social protection programs such as flexible working hours, child care, safe transportation, etc.
- Employers in the formal sector do discriminate on the basis of gender, age and education levels. Most employers prefer hiring young unmarried women.

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Women, employment and equality: Myanmar's low female labor force participation rate

The female labor force participation rate is influenced by a wide variety of social and economic factors such as economic growth, social and cultural norms and attitudes, level of education, job opportunities, and access to productive assets. The gender gap in labor force participation in developing countries in Asia is greater compared to other countries. According to Asian Development Bank data (2015), the female la-

bor force participation rate in Asian countries fell from 56 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in 2013.

In Myanmar, women make up more than 50 percent of the population and yet the total labor force participation rate of women is a mere 47 percent compared to 82 percent for men. Also, the labor force participation rate for men in all age groups is higher than that of women. Men participate in the labor force even when they are above 80 years of age, while women's participation in the labor force declines significantly after 20-24 years. There is no study to explain why women in Myanmar drop out of the labor market once they reach the age of 25 and above despite the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census data indicating this trend.

What are the barriers to women's participation in the labor market in Myanmar?

Female labor force participation is one of the major driving forces of economic growth of a country. Lower female labor force participation hinders the process of empowering women, increasing gender inequality and poverty while decreasing the economic development of the country. It is, therefore, important to know why women are not able to participate in the labor force or, more specifically, to know which factors act as barriers to women's participation in the labor market.

This study examines the internal and external factors that play a role in limiting women's participation in the labor market in Myanmar. Using semi-structured interviews covering 20 women across three sites in Yangon—South Okkalapa, North Dagon and Dabein—the study identifies a range of factors that affect women's ability to work outside the home. These include, among others, how women prioritize and allocate their time between household responsibilities and work outside the home; women's access to education and productive resources; employers' attitudes toward hiring women; the work culture within organizations in Myanmar which is not family-friendly and does not allow women to balance work and family responsibilities; and, employers' attitudes to gender and age.

Internal factors

Social and cultural norms and attitudes

“I couldn't spend time with my family and my husband didn't want me to do that job.”

(The respondent quit her job even though

Methodology

- Data were collected using semi-structured interviews (open-ended questionnaire) covering 20 respondents from June to July 2019.
- Secondary data were collected from relevant ministries and departments, research documents and publications.

Respondents' profile

- Respondents are between the ages of 22 and 44 years.
- Respondents between 22 and 30 years represent about 65% of the total respondents. The next 25% are between 31 and 40 years of age.
- Only 10% of the sample comprises respondents over 40 years of age.
- Seven of the 20 respondents have never worked outside the home.
- Three respondents are not currently employed.
- Two respondents are currently studying towards a career change.

she earned a high salary because her husband felt she was neglecting her family responsibilities because of her job.)

“I have two daughters. We don't have many adult family members. Near my house there is no kindergarten.”

(The respondent is a university graduate. However, she cannot work in the formal labor market as she has to take care of her children.)

In Myanmar, traditional culture remains dominant and the main responsibilities of women

include household chores and caring for the elderly and children. Among the respondents who worked outside the home, eight quit their jobs because of household and family care responsibilities.

Married women with young children often find themselves unable to work in the formal sector as they have (a) no access to child care at home or (b) no access to child care centers near the home. In some cases, even with family members at home who can look after a child, a woman will not be allowed to work outside the home. As one respondent said: “My parents don’t allow me to work outside. They wish me to take care of my child and do chores.”

Of the 20 respondents, three quit their jobs to take care of ailing parents. One respondent said:

“If my brother and sister-in-law can live with us, then I can work outside [the home].” So, the absence of elderly care at home and elderly care facilities in the neighborhood impact a woman’s decision to join the formal workplace.

Flexible work hours: Working in the family business or own business

“I can look after my children closely and fully if I work in my own business.”

(The respondent is a university graduate who worked in a private company. Her husband made her quit her job as it was time consuming. Since her family has their own business, the respondent can now work from home.)

We discovered that not all respondents want to go out and work. Depending on their willingness and readiness, some respondents preferred work-

ing in either the family or own business as this allowed them greater flexibility to balance home responsibilities and work. We also found that women with career skills but low education preferred to work outside the formal labor market. Myanmar has an excess supply of unskilled labor and, as a result, many employees earn less than minimum wage. One respondent felt they could earn more by working from home despite the risk of fluctuation in demand for their products.

External factors

Strict working hours and long commute time

“It was a high paying job but I needed to work full time and [also] extra hours occasionally.”

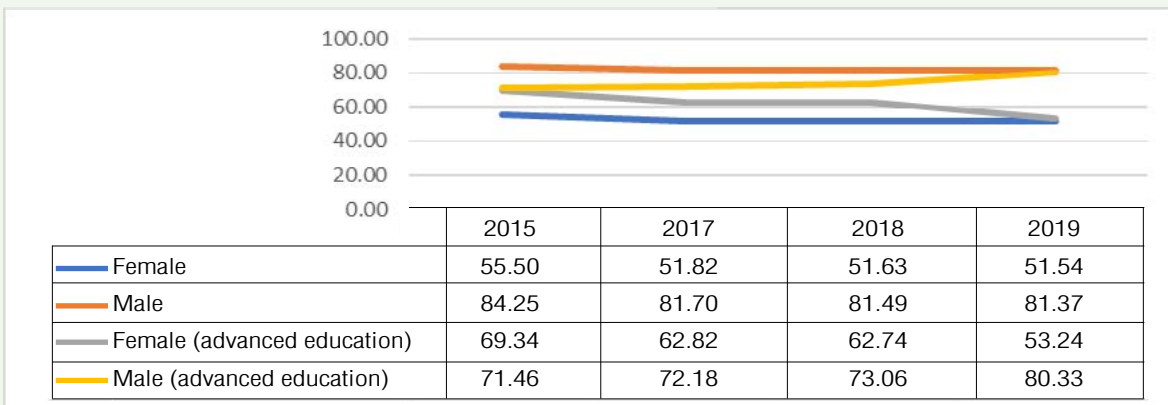
(The respondent is a university graduate who went on to quit her job because of the rigid working hours.)

Three respondents, all university graduates, quit their jobs because they couldn’t balance their family care responsibilities with the strict working hours of the formal sector. In addition, they also found it difficult to take leave from work whenever they needed to. Combined with a long commute time (they lived in the country and most of the jobs in the formal sector are located in downtown and semi-downtown urban areas), this





Labor Force Participation Rate in Myanmar



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved September 20, 2020.

meant less time for family. Respondents who live in Dabein township, which is 35 miles from the downtown area, said that the distance between their home and the workplace was a major factor affecting their decision to work outside. As one respondent says: “Yes, I consider distance because I would be so tired if I work outside which is far from my home.”

Women who live close to the downtown area also find managing their home and work commitments challenging because of severe traffic congestion. Motorization has increased almost threefold in the Yangon Region from 2010 to 2017. Traffic congestion has emerged as an ur-

gent challenge undermining productivity and quality of life in the city. So, despite the potential to earn a high salary, women in Myanmar choose not to work outside the home if working hours and commuting time encroach on family time and commitments.

Work experience, skills and jobs mismatches, and education level

“Whenever I try to apply, most of the companies ask for work experience.”

(A respondent who applied for a job in the formal sector but didn’t get it for lack of work experience.)

In Myanmar, most companies or businesses prefer hiring employees with work experience as most employers want to avoid the monetary and non-monetary costs involved in training new employees. For most employers, unskilled and untrained employees imply poor efficiency. Also, there is always the associated risk of newly-trained employees moving on to better paying jobs once they are trained. Two of the 20 respondents said they were not chosen although they applied for jobs in the formal sector because of the mismatch between skills and jobs. One respondent who had quit working in a government office because she didn't want a transfer to another location couldn't find a job with a private company since her skills do not match the job requirement. Most companies prefer and choose new workers based on their degrees, certificates, and work experience.

Four respondents said that they will earn a low salary if they work outside in the formal sector because of their low levels of education. According to Todaro and Smith (2015), young females receive less education than young males in most low-income developing countries. The educational gender gap is especially great in the least developed countries.

A situation analysis on Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar conducted by ADB, UNDP, UNFPA, and UN Women (ADB, 2016) states that the bulk share of female workers in Myanmar are concentrated in the informal sector as "own-account" workers. Women in rural areas are more likely to work on their own than urban women. They can generate income through the sale of goods produced directly related to agricultural products (prepared meals, snacks, woven items from agricultural by-products, etc.) or on services required by other community members (tailoring, petty retail trading, mechanical repairs, etc.).

Age and marital status

"As I am now over 40, it is difficult to get a job outside although I want to work."

(The respondent quit her job to take care of her ailing father. Once her father passed away, she tried re-entering the formal workforce but finds employers hesitant to hire someone her age.)

Two respondents stated that most employers prefer hiring women who are not married. There is a general perception among employers that married women are inefficient and liable to take off from work often to take care of children and manage family responsibilities.

Opportunities to increase female labor force participation

Many empirical studies have found that encouraging women to participate equally in the labor market can improve not only gender equality but also the economic growth of a country. In developing countries, providing better chances for women to work outside leads to comprehensive





economic development within the country (Jensen, 2017; Verick, 2014). Providing opportunities for paid employment to women also helps confront economic hardships faced by the family and this tends to lower the income generating burden of men (Verick, 2014).

Many of the reasons for women to not enter the labor force have to do with social expectations regarding household chores and caring, which clash with paid work requirements. In addition, work conditions in the formal sector are not convenient

for most women in Myanmar, making working from home a better alternative. So far employers do not seem to recognize these problems for women workers and few have family-friendly social protection programs. The national social protection system is also weak. Therefore, to encourage greater participation of women in the formal sector, both government and employers should try to:

- Provide more flexibility in the workplace;
- Promote family-friendly social protection programs designed with women in mind;
- Provide a secure and safe public transportation system for women to work outside the home without fearing for their safety;
- Support and set up affordable child-care centers for children under 5 years and day-care centers for aging people in suburban areas.

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