



Transformative Social Policy and the Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Markets in Mauritius, South Africa and Zambia

Policy Brief No. 4

September 2025

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women, exposing and deepening gender inequalities in labour markets worldwide. In Mauritius, South Africa and Zambia, these effects have been especially stark, with clear disparities in employment and welfare outcomes between men and women. These outcomes reflect long-standing structural inequalities and the impact of gendered social policies, which differ across countries.

This policy brief reviews women's position in the labour markets of Mauritius, South Africa, and Zambia at the onset of the pandemic and offers recommendations for gender-transformative policies that promote equity and resilience in the world of work. It draws on research conducted under the Gender Equitable and Transformative Post-COVID-19 Social Policy in Africa project, which assessed women's labour market participation during the early stages of the pandemic. We focused on three key labour market variables across the three countries: the gender employment gap, the gender wage gap, and gender-based occupational segregation and stratification, including in the informal sector.

Data collection combined desk reviews with qualitative methods. Our findings revealed widespread labour market discrimination, with women and men of similar qualifications and experience being hired and rewarded differently. The principle of "equal pay for work of equal value" was rarely applied to women. Women also continue to face major barriers to participation, often leaving employment to assume caregiving and household roles. Patriarchal norms and cultural expectations remain deeply entrenched, reinforcing labour market inequities; in South Africa, these are further compounded by racial occupational segregation. Based on these findings, we call for policies that address not only gender pay and employment gaps but also disparities linked to class, race, and ethnicity. We recommend strengthening gender-responsive employment policies, building institutional capacity, investing in the care economy, and eliminating labour market discrimination.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled governments worldwide to adopt stringent measures to curb the rapid spread of the deadly virus. In Mauritius, South Africa and Zambia, these included lockdowns, travel bans, social distancing, and "stay-at-home" policies – measures that, while saving lives, also disrupted jobs, livelihoods, and incomes.

As governments worked to contain the health crisis, they were simultaneously called upon to address an emerging livelihoods crisis. The speed and effectiveness of these responses largely depended on the strength, inclusivity, and adaptability of social policies already in place.

The pandemic also provided a critical moment to reflect on the dominant economic and social policy frameworks of recent decades, particularly those that left many countries ill-prepared for a crisis of such magnitude. Crucially, systems that neglected gender disparities before the pandemic failed to address them during the crisis, disproportionately harming women.

Ideology has long shaped the direction of social policy. From the entrenched racism of the colonial period to the socialist-democratic ideals that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, different ideological foundations have produced markedly different welfare outcomes. Yet across these varying contexts, gender has rarely been treated as a central concern. For social policy to be genuinely transformative, it must place social relations and institutions, including gender relations, at the heart of its objectives, ensuring equality and equity are not afterthoughts but primary goals.

This policy brief examines the status of women in the labour markets of Mauritius, South Africa, and Zambia. Drawing on research that views the labour market as a critical driver of gender economic equality, it explores how employment opportunities can improve the welfare of African women.

Methodological Approach

A combination of desk reviews and key informant interviews were used in data collection and analysis. Data were drawn from South Africa, Zambia and Mauritius on the status of women in the labour market in the three countries tracing three labour market variables—the gender employment gap, gender wage gap and gender occupational segregation and stratification (including in the informal sector).

Results

Labour Force Participation

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2018 only about 45% of Mauritian women of working age participated in the labour force, compared to 69% of men. Similarly, in South Africa, the Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP) rate stood just below 49%, reflecting a narrowing gender employment gap. By contrast, Zambia recorded an FLFP rate as low as 28.6%, underscoring deep-rooted gender barriers.

Key Concepts

- **Labour force participation rate:** The ratio of an economically active population to working age population expressed as a percent.
- **Gender employment gap (GEG):** When distribution of females and males deviates from their ratio in the population.
- **Female Labour Force participation (FLFP):** Male to female differentials in employment.
- **Gender Pay Gap (GPG):** The difference between average hourly pay of men and women at the same occupational level.
- **Gender occupational segregation:** When one demographic group (males or females) is over or underrepresented in different types of work or jobs.
- **Horizontal segregation:** Where the industry or sector is made up of a particular gender, social, or other demographic group.
- **Vertical occupational segregation:** Disparities in positions with different statuses, all of which are key drivers of the Gender Pay Gap.
- **Informal employment:** Employment characterised by the lack of an entitlement to annual paid leave and absence of social security entitlement.

Table 1: Analysis of Female Labour Market Positions in South Africa, Zambia and Mauritius

Labour Market Variable	South Africa	Zambia	Mauritius
% of women in the total population	50.6	50.5	50.6
% of women within the EAP	45.4	47.8	40.9
Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP)	57.4	28.6	68
Gender Employment Gap (GEG)	14.5	42.8	22
Gender Wage Gap (GWG)	25	>30.0	29.7
Gender Occupational Segregation/Stratification	75.5/ 24.4	*81.8%/ 18.2%	64.1%/ 81.9%
% of women employed in the Informal Economy	33.8	91	13

In Mauritius, an intersectional analysis revealed that FLFP also varies significantly by marital status. In 2018 a significant number of single women (78.3%) participated in the labour force nearly equal to men, while married women had a much lower participation rate of 52.6%. A closer analysis reveals that this gap begins early in the life cycle, peaks around age 25, and narrows after age 55, coinciding with eligibility for retirement benefits. These trends highlight the influence of marriage, pregnancy, and childcare, fueled by prevailing social norms that assign caregiving roles primarily to women with implications on not only women's career progression but also but also gendered welfare (pensions) outcomes in old age.

Working Conditions and Gendered Barriers

In South Africa, the relatively high FLFP has not translated into gender equity. The labour market remains patriarchal and insensitive to women's reproductive needs. For example, maternity leave is often mishandled or viewed as an inconvenience by employers. Across all three countries, women are forced to exit the labour market to assume caregiving and domestic responsibilities. Even in Mauritius, where there is a more developed welfare system, gender equality has not been achieved.

Gender Pay Gap and Occupational Segregation

The Gender Pay Gap (GPG)—the difference in average pay between men and women at the same occupational level—is a key measure of labour market equity. As Table 1 shows:

- In Mauritius, the GPG was almost 30% in 2019, with average monthly incomes of Rs 19,100 for women and Rs 25,100 for men.
- In Zambia, the GPG exceeded 30%, with most women employed in the informal sector earning below the minimum wage.
- South Africa saw a reduction in its GPG from 40% in 1993 to 25% in 2019, but wage gaps persist, especially at top income levels where the disparity reaches 39%.

The South African labour market also exhibits a "sticky floor" effect that keeps predominantly Black African women in low-paying, low-skill positions. Furthermore, racial and deep patriarchal norms undervalue women's work and systematically favour men in pay and promotion.

Leadership and Representation

In South Africa, only 5.4% of African women occupy top management positions, compared to 52.4% of white men, who make up just 4.9% of the total labour force. Similarly, Mauritian women are underrepresented in political and business leadership. As of August 2022, only 20% of parliamentary seats in Mauritius were held by women and only three out of 24 ministers were women. None of the country's five municipalities had female mayors in 2020. In general, only 11.9% of working women were heads of businesses versus 18.6% of men, while in the civil service, women held only 39.7% of senior roles. Clearly therefore despite legal equality, gender inequity persists across all three countries, entrenched in social norms, institutional practices, and policy gaps.

Recommendations

Drawing lessons from Mauritius, South Africa, and Zambia, there is an urgent need for transformative gender policies that close wage gaps and address inequalities based on gender, class, race, and ethnicity. We therefore recommend the following actions for governments:

1. Eliminate labour market discrimination and enforce equal pay

- Strengthen the enforcement of equal pay legislation, especially in countries like South Africa, where such policies already exist.
- In Zambia, where 91% of women work in the informal sector, raise the minimum wage and ensure employer compliance.

2. Enhance gender-responsive employment policies

- Go beyond FLFP by addressing occupational segregation and ensuring access to quality, high-return employment.
- Employment policies should recognise women's reproductive roles and facilitate equitable labour market entry.

3. Invest in the care economy

- Public investment in childcare facilities (e.g., crèches and nurseries) can support women's workforce participation.
- Expand access to care leave (maternity, paternity, parental) and promote flexible work arrangements to balance paid work with caregiving.

4. Strengthen institutional frameworks

- Build robust institutions, such as South Africa's Commission for Employment Equity and the Commission for Gender Equality, to help transform labour markets and promote gender equality.
- Empower these bodies to monitor, evaluate, and enforce gender equity in the labour market.

5. Develop a Bargaining Agenda for Gender (BAG)

- Promote a gender-sensitive bargaining agenda that includes:
 - Enhanced menstrual and maternity leave,
 - publicly funded daycare services,
 - breastfeeding facilities,
 - incentives for men to participate in caregiving, and
 - provisions that go beyond existing legal minimums.

References

Bosch, A. (2020). *The gender pay gap: a guide for the already converted*. University of Stellenbosch Business School, South Africa.

Commission for Employment Equity. (2020). *20th Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report 2019/20*. South African Department of Labour. Pretoria, South Africa.

Gradin, C. (2019). Occupational segregation by race after apartheid. *Review of Development Economics*, 23(2), 553-576.

South Africa-Towards Inclusive Economic Development. (2019). *The gender wage gap in post-apartheid South Africa*. SA-TIED Research Brief 2/19.

Statistics Mauritius. (2021). *Gender Statistics 2020*. Port Louis: Statistics Mauritius. https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/Documents/Statistics/ESI/2021/EI1599/Gender_StatsYr20_190721.pdf.

Wilson, V. (2021). Black women face a persistent pay gap, including in essential occupations during a pandemic. *Working Economics Blog*. Economic Policy Institute.

Author Information:

Ramola Ramtohul

Department of Sociology and Gender Studies
University of Mauritius

Newman Tekwa

Post-doctoral research fellow
South African Research Chair in Social Policy
University of South Africa

Nalwimba Nkumbu

School of Postgraduate Studies
University of Lusaka, Zambia

Readers may reproduce the contents of this policy brief for their own use but are requested to grant due acknowledgement to the Gender Equitable and Transformative Social Policy for Africa project (GETSPA). The views contained in this brief are attributable to the author/s and do not represent the institutional views of GETSPA or its partners. Any mistake or omission in this study is the sole responsibility of the author/s. For comments on this publication, please contact the publisher.

Published by:



The Gender Equitable and Transformative Social Policy for Africa, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

Website: www.getspa.ug.edu.gh

Email address: getspa.ias@ug.edu.gh

