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Promoting female employment in partner countries: Priorities for development cooperation

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Promoting Female Employment in Partner Countries

Priorities for Development Cooperation

Alexander Stöcker & Tina Zintl

Summary

Promoting female employment remains a pressing challenge in many low- and middle-income countries. Despite ongoing efforts, too few women participate in the labour force – particularly in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia – and too many remain locked out of more decent wage employment – especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Promoting women's employment is not just about fairness; it is essential for inclusive and sustainable development. Women's economic participation matters for four reasons: it fosters growth and reduces poverty by increasing household income, it enhances women's autonomy in the household, it promotes equity and cohesion in societies, and it strengthens the resilience of households to shocks by diversifying income sources. Recent research has deepened understanding of both the barriers and enablers of gender equality in labour markets, offering useful guidance for development cooperation.

Building on empirical research by IDOS, this policy brief highlights that development cooperation can take three key approaches to promote female employment:

- **Address foundational barriers:** Development cooperation can work with local partners to remove the root barriers holding women back. This includes addressing restrictive gender norms in ways that respect cultural contexts, e.g. by investing in community-based care solutions (as successfully practised in several African cases) or better access to services and mobility. Projects should not only target women individually but also address constraints within households and communities and

engage broader society. They must also challenge gendered labour market structures that limit women's paths into wage work.

- **Strengthen gender equality on the operational level:** The green and digital transitions offer new employment opportunities – but women risk being left behind. Development cooperation can help to ensure that women benefit from these shifts. In cooperation with national governments, it can embed gender targets into economic reforms, incentivise companies to adopt inclusive hiring practices and to implement flexible work time arrangements (such as in Jordan), and fund training for women to reskill and motivate them for these fields.
- **Create an enabling policy mix:** Employment-focused reforms succeed when they connect with broader policy frameworks. Aligning employment initiatives with social policies – such as childcare support or public works – can boost women's ability to work. At the same time, gender-sensitive approaches in areas like transport, finance and infrastructure can help overcome structural disadvantages that affect women at different stages of life.

In recent years, development cooperation has shifted from measures to support gender mainstreaming towards gender-transformative approaches that aim to reduce structural barriers. Recent funding cuts and public opinion that is becoming more critical of diversity and equity measures, mean that development cooperation must build on its experience to enable women to grasp economic opportunities and live a dignified life.

Introduction

Improving labour markets and creating more decent jobs remains a challenging task in most low- and middle-income countries – especially for women. They face even greater obstacles than men in finding paid employment, as seen in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia, or in achieving better-quality wage jobs, as in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Despite ongoing policy efforts to promote women's economic empowerment, female employment rates have stagnated in most countries and suffered further setbacks during the Covid-19 pandemic.

From a development perspective, increasing women's participation in the labour market is essential. It helps reduce poverty, as work is often the only asset the poor can rely on. It gives women greater autonomy by expanding their choices in life. It also strengthens social cohesion by challenging power imbalances and reducing inequality. In broader economic terms, using women's potential more effectively supports inclusive, labour-intensive economic growth. Structural shifts in the global economy – like digitalisation and the green transition – cause disruption *and* create jobs in new fields (Bandiera et al., 2022).

To ensure that women benefit from economic opportunities, policymakers need to focus on three priorities: (1) removing persistent barriers that keep women out of formal employment; (2) unlocking the gender-inclusive potential of new and emerging sectors; and (3) ensuring that policies across different sectors – such as education, transport and finance – work together rather than in isolation. This brief offers analysis and policy recommendations in each of these areas.

Our recommendations affect three interconnected levers: foundational, operational and enabling.

- Foundational levers remove barriers connected to social norms that limit female employment. These interventions require collaboration between policymakers and civil society.
- Operational levers focus on shaping gender-equitable labour demand and supply and job-

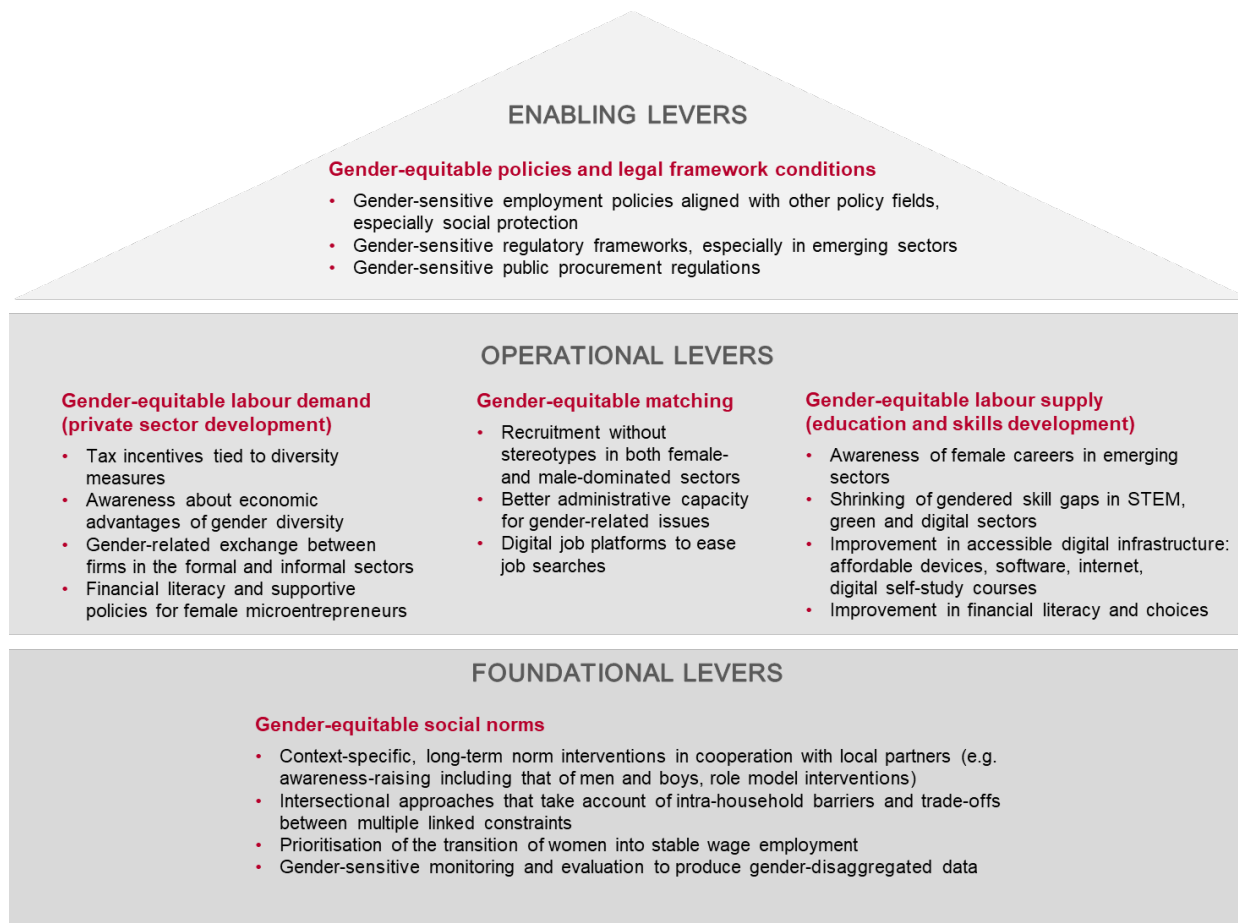
matching, especially in, but not limited to, emerging sectors. Development projects often operate at this level, involving diverse stakeholders – potential allies or blockers in transforming labour markets.

- Enabling levers, driven mainly by partner governments, create supportive legal and policy frameworks.

This policy brief, which builds on research done by IDOS in 2022 to 2025, emphasises the interplay of these levers. These are visualised in Figure 1, which has been inspired by GIZ's (2022) Employment and Labour Market Analysis (ELMA) model. It thus calls for an integrated approach to promote gender equality in employment. For example, without strong foundational and enabling conditions, operational interventions cannot deliver sustainable results.

Our empirical analysis builds on both desk research and fieldwork. We reviewed the latest literature and carried out fieldwork in Rwanda and Jordan to understand barriers and opportunities for women's work. By focusing on the SSA and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, we highlight both shared and region-specific challenges for female employment. Importantly, we recognise that women are not a homogenous group and that effective interventions must be tailored to the diverse needs, wishes and circumstances of different groups of women.

As a general recommendation, Germany's support for gender-equitable employment should build on insights from its feminist development strategy (BMZ, 2023a) and from the accompanying gender action plan (BMZ, 2023b). By focusing on intersectionality, the strategy highlights how barriers to work become more restrictive when individuals are disadvantaged by a combination of factors such as age, ethnicity and gender, or LGBTQIA* gender identity. Women's economic empowerment should thus remain a core topic of German development cooperation, to move towards dignity for all and strategic alliances among governments, civil society, the private sector and development partners.

Figure 1: Promoting female employment in an integrated labour market model

Source: Authors' visualisation, inspired by the Employment and Labour Market Analysis (ELMA) of GIZ (2022)

Reduce foundational barriers to female (wage) employment

Improving women's access to the labour market starts with identifying and addressing the underlying barriers that women face in different contexts. They often encounter structural challenges that limit their economic opportunities – ranging from social norms that represent informal rules guiding women's and men's behaviour in different social contexts (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023), to discriminatory laws and burdensome administrative procedures. While policymakers can more easily reform legal and administrative barriers, this section looks at deeper-rooted issues such as restrictive gender norms, their interplay with unequal decision-making within households, and their compound negative effect on women in changing labour markets.

These constraints help explain why broader development gains – such as rising incomes, better education and lower birth rates – have not automatically translated into stronger female employment outcomes. In fact, rising household income can even reduce women's participation in the labour force, particularly where women work mainly out of necessity, and “good jobs” remain scarce. Informal, low-quality employment often dominates in such contexts, so many women opt out of the labour market altogether. Education plays a key but complex role. While women's higher educational attainment generally improves their access to formal and stable employment, it can also lead them to reject work perceived as low-status or poorly paid. Similarly, lower fertility rates may ease women's entry into the workforce but do not guarantee better employment unless

accompanied by broader changes in the labour market and society.

In short, women can only benefit from wider employment choices if societies also shift their attitudes and expectations. Policies must therefore target not only formal barriers but also social and household-level norms that limit women's agency and opportunity.

Respect social norms in different contexts

Research confirms that social norms – such as the male breadwinner model or the expectation that women should prioritise caregiving – continue to restrict women's access to employment (Stöcker & Zintl, 2024, Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023). These norms often shape not only individual behaviour but also laws and policies, and policy-level reforms alone are not enough to change them. Promoting female employment therefore requires long-term strategies that support local reformers and amplify feminist voices to shift entrenched attitudes (Götze, Klingebiel & Khalid, 2025), especially in regions such as MENA, where gender norms remain particularly rigid. Development actors should also work closely with religious and traditional leaders, as well as civil society organisations, which often enjoy deep trust and influence within communities. These actors can help broaden the reach and credibility of gender equality efforts.

Context matters, so interventions must reflect the degree and nature of gender sensitivity in each setting (Stöcker & Zintl, 2024). For instance, MENA countries generally show more restrictive gender norms than those in SSA, though differences exist between and within countries. In restrictive settings, development cooperation should apply gender-transformative approaches by investing in local initiatives that aim for long-term social change. Norm shifts take time (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023), but tools such as awareness campaigns (including for men and boys), positive role models and early childhood education can gradually change perceptions of women's roles.

These initiatives can also reveal a gap between personal beliefs (e.g. support for women's employment) and perceived public opinion that should be addressed.

In less restrictive contexts, as in many parts of SSA, gender-sensitive policies – approaches that help women to cope with structural inequalities – can already drive measurable improvements. For example, childcare support directly increases women's ability to work. Additionally, policies that formalise care jobs and strengthen the care economy can ensure quality childcare services, create decent employment for women and counter the feminisation of poverty (Burchi & Malerba, 2023). In contexts where informality persists, community-based childcare facilities and other informal or semi-formal solutions are vital to broaden access. While the transformative, long-term goal should be a more equal division of caregiving, targeted short-term measures remain important. Expanding part-time and flexible work arrangements, especially in formal sectors where full-time work remains the norm, can help women balance paid work and caregiving. For self-employed women, access to affordable childcare is particularly important. Evidence shows that when children are present, women-run businesses generate lower profits – highlighting the economic but also mental costs of unmet care needs.

Our findings show that child-related barriers, male breadwinner norms, and household wealth affect women's employment differently across countries (Stöcker & Zintl, 2024; Stöcker, 2025). In some settings, such as parts of SSA, women's employment picks up as children grow older. In contrast, in many MENA countries, mothers face long-term difficulty re-entering the workforce. Childcare duties consistently limit access to wage employment, though patterns across contexts vary.

To design effective interventions, development actors must assess local norms carefully. Using tools such as gender analysis more systematically can ensure that projects target the right constraints and help transform the structural barriers women face.

Recognise intersections of barriers and intra-household dynamics

Understanding barriers to women's employment requires an intersectional lens. Gender and individual preferences alone do not determine outcomes – factors like parenthood, household structure, and cultural norms interact to shape distinct and often unequal experiences. These barriers do not act in isolation; they reinforce one another within specific household and societal contexts.

For example, the combined effects of motherhood and the male breadwinner norm creates a compounded disadvantage for women. In societies where men are expected to be the main earners, women with children face even greater challenges in accessing paid work (Stoecker, 2025). These overlapping expectations reinforce each other, limiting women's choices.

Household dynamics further influence the impact of policy interventions. Childcare support may help single mothers increase their participation in paid work. However, in two-parent households, the same support may primarily enable men to take on more paid work, leaving women's roles unchanged (Bjorvatn et al., 2025). Without addressing the underlying gender norms, such policies risk reinforcing existing inequalities. Paid parental leave policies can show similarly mixed results. If not paired with efforts to balance caregiving between parents or improve workplace conditions, they may unintentionally entrench gender roles.

Socioeconomic status and education add further layers. Poorer households face greater constraints from childcare duties, especially for women with intermediate education. These women often struggle to access stable employment and still have high birth rates, creating a cycle of limited opportunity.

To break these patterns, development cooperation must recognise how these barriers interact. Failing to do so can undermine interventions or increase risks – such as overburdening women

with both paid and unpaid work or pushing them into exploitative jobs.

Policymakers should design comprehensive strategies to address these linked constraints jointly. Yet, intra-household dynamics remain poorly understood. Investing in better gender-disaggregated data – especially through time-use surveys – can reveal patterns in decision-making, workloads and bargaining power. Such data would also strengthen gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation systems and systematically build on pre-intervention gender analysis and other tools.

Tackle inequalities before labour market transitions magnify them

Interventions to promote women's employment often focus heavily on labour supply – such as skills training or entrepreneurship – while overlooking the demand side of labour markets. Yet evidence shows that barriers to female employment become more pronounced during key labour market transitions. These transitions – moving from unpaid to paid work, from self-employment to wage employment, and from general to specialised occupations – depend on available labour demand and typically progress more slowly for women than for men (Bandiera et al., 2022).

Existing barriers tend to become more entrenched during these transitions. As a result, gender roles often harden over time: men increasingly specialise in earning income, while women take on a greater share of unpaid domestic and care work.

The second transition – from self-employment to wage employment – presents particular challenges. Even in regions where many women have entered paid work, as in SSA, wage employment remains limited. Meanwhile, in the MENA region, women often take up employment only when stable, formal wage jobs are available – thus they make both transitions at once or none of them. Where such jobs are scarce, women remain excluded. Compared to men, women face greater disadvantages: they have less flexibility to

compete for the few wage jobs, often lack the required educational qualifications as they left education at a younger age, and must navigate hiring practices that favour men – especially in contexts where gender norms prioritise men as primary earners.

In SSA in particular, educational gaps further disadvantage women, and wage employment opportunities remain scarce. This situation reinforces high fertility rates and entrenches women's roles as caregivers, limiting their participation in the labour market and weakening aspirations for formal employment.

To address these structural challenges, development cooperation must adopt long-term strategies that combine changing social norms with creating economic opportunities. Interventions should promote flexible and part-time work models in wage employment, and accelerate women's transitions into the formal labour market. Strengthening connections between informal and formal sectors – especially in the rapidly rising informal digital platform economy – can also help. Trade unions, cooperatives or business associations could play an active role here. While the growth of freelance and solo entrepreneurship boosts income in the short term, it rarely challenges broader labour market inequalities.

Therefore, supporting entrepreneurship alone is not enough. Many self-employment initiatives for women fail to work at scale, expose women to high risks, and do not offer a long-term alternative to wage employment – especially when interrupted by life events like childbirth or family illness. To connect women to formal job markets and help them build work experience, development actors could expand gender-sensitive public works programmes. At the same time, providing social protection and care support for informally self-employed women is essential.

Ultimately, development cooperation should prioritise facilitating women's labour market transitions – especially into wage employment. This requires less focus on microenterprises and even more emphasis on supporting private sector

development, so that small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) can grow and generate decent jobs. By doing so, development actors can strengthen pathways toward inclusive, gender-equitable and sustainable economic outcomes.

Box 1: Recommendations to reduce women's labour market barriers...

... by adapting to social norms environments

- **Plan long-term:** Structural norm change takes time.
- **Adapt to context:** Use gender-transformative design, especially where norms are restrictive.
- **Back local actors:** Fund groups and role models promoting intersectional equality.
- **Include boys/men:** Target them in campaigns and early childhood programmes.
- **Use gender tools:** Apply indices and toolkits systematically to find effective entry points.
- **Improve M&E:** Track paid/unpaid work via better time-use data.

... by considering the interplay between barriers

- **Integrate objectives:** Address linked barriers together.
- **Tailor support:** Adapt childcare/maternity measures to context.
- **Assess impacts:** Check short/long-term effects across groups (intersectional approach).
- **Minimise harms:** Anticipate trade-offs between norms to avoid side effects.

... by tackling unequal labour market transitions

- **Promote dialogue:** Foster exchanges between informal and formal sectors on gender issues.
- **Expand protection:** Extend social insurance and care to informal (female) workers.
- **Focus on stable jobs:** Prioritise women's shift to secure wage work over standalone entrepreneurship.

Operationalise gender equal labour demand, supply and matching in emerging sectors

Economic transformation increases sectoral specialisation and productivity. The challenge lies in directing this growth toward **labour-intensive**, not just **capital-intensive**, paths that create **decent**

jobs for women. Emerging sectors like the **digital** and **the green economy** offer an opportunity to shape a more gender-equal business and staffing environment from early on. To ensure that women benefit, policies must actively remove barriers to entry, promote inclusive training, and support gender-equitable hiring. While focused on digital and green sectors, these recommendations also apply to other fast-growing fields that also require more **gender-sensitive employment strategies**.

This section looks at these processes and possible entry points for gender-equal job markets in green and digital economies. First, it will look at employers' demand for female labour and, second, at gender-equal sector policies.

Identify gender implications of policies in the emerging green and digital sectors

Emerging economic sectors offer both risks and opportunities for female employment. Their rapid development pushes firms to compete globally and establish themselves quickly. This pressure often rewards early movers that prioritise growth and efficiency over inclusive hiring. As a result, gender diversity may be overlooked in the initial stages. However, the novelty of these sectors also opens space for innovation, including the adoption of more gender-responsive practices. With fewer entrenched interests and crony networks, new sectors may be more open to designing inclusive business models from the start.

These sectors operate in evolving regulatory environments. While they must follow national laws, existing regulations often fail to address their specific needs. Governments must adapt legal frameworks and create new policies, ideally embedding gender considerations from the outset. For example, most national information and communication technology policies focus on attracting high-end investors in business process and IT outsourcing. This strategy fosters excellence and competitiveness but often fails to generate accessible, lower-skilled jobs with fair opportunities for women in the long run,

irrespective of international investors. Development partners can support governments in identifying regulatory gaps (such as e-commerce laws or digital payment systems) and foster collaboration between global service exporters and local digital SMEs. These efforts can help ensure that the benefits of digital transformation reach more women.

Digital technology also serves as a general-purpose enabler for women's employment (Zintl, 2025). Remote and hybrid work increases flexibility, making it easier for women to balance paid work and care responsibilities. These roles also align with social expectations in settings with restrictive norms, as they avoid physically demanding or public-facing tasks. However, flexible work remains underused and subject to individual employers' approval, mostly in already privileged positions in the formal economy. Labour laws should expand to cover part-time, remote and hybrid arrangements to ensure decent and secure conditions across sectors and employment types.

The green economy presents a similar mix of potential and barriers (ILO, 2018). Key sectors – such as energy, construction and transport – remain male-dominated and technical. Still, our data shows growing interest among women in sustainability-driven roles, reflecting a desire for purpose and social impact (Stoecker et al., 2025).

Firms adopting green technologies often bring progressive values and openness to change (e.g. Roxas & Coetzer, 2012), which could create space to challenge traditional norms. To turn this potential into meaningful employment, targeted action is needed. This includes expanding women's access to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and green skills training, promoting inclusive hiring practices, and building workplace cultures that value diversity.

Without deliberate policy interventions, both the digital and green transitions risk entrenching existing gender gaps. But with intentional strategies they can become engines for greater gender equality – especially in contexts where fewer gendered stereotypes exist, such as among

emerging female STEM graduates in low- and middle-income countries.

Nudge green and digital employers toward gender diversity measurements

Emerging sectors create new opportunities for women, but these often fall outside formal wage employment. To counter implicit gender bias, private sector development efforts must actively integrate gender diversity measures. Examples include corporate tax waivers and the UNDP Gender Equality Seal that encourage companies to adopt and sustain gender-equitable practices.

In the digital sector, research from Jordan shows that gender stereotypes in technical fields are relatively weak, yet few employers offer remote or hybrid work options (Zintl, 2025). Flexible work arrangements remain rare, and women often must advocate for telework or invest in their own equipment. Greater government and donor support for SME digitalisation could raise awareness of remote work's productivity benefits at all stages of women's careers (e.g. also easing co-leadership or part-time management) and create targeted incentives for more inclusive practices.

Digital infrastructure should be further developed and leveraged for female employment. Women and/or rural populations need access to advanced digital tools and devices for productive remote work (e.g. computers, relevant software and affordable high-speed internet). Existing labour-matching and reskilling programmes should focus on digital *and* gender-inclusive issues at the same time. Mobile job search platforms and digital self-study courses can help young (female) labour market entrants or returning mothers to find meaningful employment.

In the green economy, firms advance both sustainability and gender equality more effectively when government policies reinforce both goals, as our research in Rwanda suggests (Stoecker et al., 2025). Embedding gender equity into green policy instruments can support this synergy. For

example, expanding green certification schemes to include gender criteria would encourage firms to adopt inclusive hiring and workplace policies.

Public procurement can also drive progress. Governments should prioritise companies that commit to both environmental and gender goals. Large-scale public initiatives – such as renewable energy or infrastructure projects – should require female workforce participation to ensure women benefit directly from the sector's growth.

Box 2: Recommendations to create gender-equal employment opportunities in emerging sectors...

... by leveraging policies in the emerging sectors for gender-equality

- **Ensure inclusion in new sectors:** Avoid replicating inequalities; link emerging sector policies with gender-sensitive measures and fast-track support for female entrepreneurs (e.g. e-commerce regulations for microenterprises).
- **Close skills gaps:** Expand women's access to STEM, green and digital training.
- **Boost digital access:** Provide tools for remote work and digitise employment services inclusively.

...by incentivising diversity measures in green and digital firms

- **Promote diversity benefits:** Raise awareness and incentivise gender-inclusive practices (e.g. tax waivers, Gender Equality Seal).
- **Modernise work models:** Shift employers' mind-sets to encourage remote/hybrid work throughout women's careers.
- **Link green and gender goals:** Embed diversity criteria in green certifications and public procurement.

Create an enabling and coherent policy mix

Because gender norms shape many aspects of women's lives, employment interventions must link across multiple policy areas. To promote real gender equity, policies must act together and national governments need to be motivated and supported to invest in coherent gender-equal policy frameworks. As this section shows, it is

particularly important to align employment policies with social policies, but also with policy fields that affect employment more indirectly. Only a coherent, cross-sectoral approach can deliver gender-transformative results. This integrated policy mix strengthens inclusive development cooperation and puts gender mainstreaming into practice by addressing the intersecting barriers women face, as outlined above.

Align gender-responsive social protection and employment policies

Social protection plays a central role in reducing poverty and protecting against economic risks. Access to social assistance, parental leave or childcare directly influences whether and how women engage in paid work – as individuals and within households. Social protection and employment policies thus closely intersect and co-shape women's labour market decisions.

For vulnerable groups – such as female household heads, women in conflict zones, migrants, rural workers and those in precarious jobs – social protection can make the difference between exclusion and meaningful labour market participation. Policymakers should expand gender-sensitive social insurance and integrate support for labour market transitions – for instance, social insurance and care could be extended to the informal economy, and existing voluntary social security schemes for informal sector workers assessed. Policymakers should also ensure that benefits are paid directly to female beneficiaries and take steps to support them in making confident spending and investment decisions (e.g. by setting up savings groups for women).

Public works schemes show how social and employment policies can be well integrated. Designed with female quotas and childcare services, they can open up entry points to formal employment (Jones, 2021) and unlock a hidden reserve of women underrepresented in the workforce.

Paid parental leave is another critical tool. To reduce employer bias, parental leave should be funded publicly rather than by employers, include

both parents regardless of gender, and guarantee return to the same or equivalent roles. Gender certification schemes – or, where norms are highly restrictive, financial incentives – can further encourage inclusive hiring practices.

Promoting gender sensitivity in other employment-relevant policy fields

Improving women's employment outcomes requires gender-sensitive approaches across a broad range of policy areas – not just in employment and social protection. Sectors like transportation, education, legal equality, finance, and digital infrastructure play a decisive role in shaping women's access to the labour market.

For example, unsafe or unaffordable public transport can restrict women's mobility, confining them to low-quality jobs near home. Some workplaces lack sanitation or nearby housing appropriate for female workers. Weak legal protections against workplace discrimination and poor enforcement of gender-equal laws further entrench inequality. Women must be able to join together in trade unions or similar groups to stand up for their rights, especially since many employers hire them because they think women are easier to control. Legal reforms must also tackle early marriage and forced labour, which continue to limit women's economic agency in many contexts. At the same time, poor digital literacy and lack of access to digital tools and high-speed internet blocks women from remote work, digital services and higher-skilled job opportunities.

Governments should invest in safe, inclusive transport that links women not only to jobs, but also to education and healthcare. They should also enable girls' education by providing school meals and female school toilets, which help keep girls in school and give them the skills they need to transition from school to work. Expanding mobile internet coverage and digital access empowers women to seek work, access services and claim entitlements. These investments should be paired with targeted efforts to build women's

financial and digital literacy, support them in opening bank accounts, understanding taxes and pursuing entrepreneurship. Encouraging women to register and update identification documents also strengthens their economic independence.

Gender-sensitive governance is essential. Hiring more women – especially from under-represented groups – as doctors, job counsellors and social insurance officers can improve how public services respond to women's needs. Staff in government, NGOs and public agencies must also receive training to better understand and address the specific barriers women face, particularly those at the intersection of multiple disadvantages.

Box 3: Recommendations to align employment policies with other policy fields...

... by bringing social protection and employment policies together

- **Align policies:** Create context-specific roadmaps linking social and employment policies; scale up and transfer successful gender-sensitive practices.
- **Close coverage gaps:** Reduce disparities between wage work and self-employment.
- **Ease (re-)entry:** Expand public works with female quotas, care services and school-to-work measures.
- **Empower women financially:** Pay benefits to women directly and build financial confidence.
- **Reduce care burden:** Provide paid maternity/parental leave and expand childcare facilities to free women's time and create jobs.

... by promoting gender sensitivity in other policy fields

- **Integrate and upgrade:** Link gender-sensitive policies across fields to upgrade them to gender-transformative policies.
- **Improve mobility:** Provide safe, reliable public transportation for women and girls.
- **Enforce gender rights:** Strengthen and uphold legal equality.
- **Boost financial skills:** Train women in financial literacy for work, entrepreneurship and tax navigation.
- **Increase representation:** Hire more women in public-facing roles and train admin staff to meet women's needs.

Conclusions

Promoting gender-equitable employment is crucial for inclusive and sustainable development. Expanding income and empowerment opportunities for the female half of the population boosts poverty reduction, economic growth and social cohesion. Development cooperation has long recognised these links. Gender equality is reflected in SDG 5 and mandatory gender analyses during project planning, but large gender gaps persist, particularly in labour markets.

This policy brief identifies three priority areas where development cooperation can more effectively support gender equality:

- **Addressing barriers to female employment**, especially restrictive social norms, is crucial but challenging. Sustainable gender-transformative change depends on tackling deep-rooted household and societal dynamics. Programmes must be locally adapted, participatory and inclusive from the outset. Acceptance by broader society is key to ensuring long-term impact.
- **Fostering inclusion in emerging sectors** is equally important. The digital and green transitions are entry points for more and better jobs for women. However, these sectors are not automatically inclusive. Women continue to face barriers, requiring gender-responsive and tailored approaches to shape inclusive digital and green ecosystems.
- **Building a coherent policy mix** is vital for sustainable gender-transformative outcomes. Successful interventions must consider multiple sectors – such as social protection, education, transport and finance – throughout project design and implementation. This helps anchor gender-inclusive best practices and lessons learnt for the long term.

We also showed the interconnectedness between these priority areas in an integrated labour market model (Figure 1 above). More gender-equal social norms provide the foundation, and gender-equal policies are the enabler for more effective female

employment measures on the operational level. In recent years, development actors and researchers have made important progress toward gender-equality, supported by strategic commitments such as BMZ's Feminist Development Strategy. Yet, shrinking development budgets and growing political and even societal resistance in some countries risk reversing these gains. Now, more than ever, development cooperation must apply

what it has learned to design inclusive, effective programmes.

By promoting gender-transformative employment policies, development actors can expand choices and opportunities for all genders. These efforts generate broad-based benefits: stronger economic growth, improved productivity, greater household resilience, and more equitable, stable societies in partner countries.

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