

# GENDER DIMENSION OF LABOUR MARKET TRANSITIONS

*Implications for activation and skills  
development policies of the EU  
neighbouring countries*

*Summary of forthcoming ETF report*

Barcelona (Spain), 15-16 November 2023



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## Introduction

**Reducing gender inequalities and promoting the economic empowerment of women raises social justice questions. Promoting female employment and improving labour market transition benefits women, societies and the economy.** The economic gain of reducing gender inequalities has been acknowledged in the European Union and promotion of gender equality is a key pillar of EU's external actions.

**The European Training Foundation (ETF) initiated research on the gender dimension of labour market transitions.** Inequalities based on gender are major challenges to address. It **looks at the gender sensitiveness, gender-responsiveness and the gender transformative approaches<sup>1</sup> of ALMPs and career guidance**, national initiatives and donor programmes to enhance gender equality in labour market transitions, in particular the participation of women in the labour market, and to address root causes of the inequalities, in a context of post-COVID-19 recovery, green and digital transitions and strategies to address emerging socio-economic risks and uncertainties, as well as significant security threats worldwide. The report is based on reviewing available literature and data. Work was underpinned by a survey on active labour market programmes, involving mainly Public Employment Services of several ETF Partner Countries<sup>2</sup>.

**This background paper presents key findings on the gender dimension in labour market transitions, provides an overview of main causes for gender inequalities in EU neighbouring countries and gives an overview of policy approaches.** Main results and recommendations as a basis for further discussion and exchange of experiences at the peer learning seminar organised by the ETF on 15-16 November 2023 in Barcelona.

## Gender dimension of labour market transition in ETF Partner Countries

### Large but narrowing gender gaps in employment and labour market participation

**In most EU neighbouring countries, the activity rate and the employment rate of men is higher than that for women.** The activity gap is highest in most Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, as well as in Türkiye and Kosovo\*. Activity gaps are comparatively low (and below EU-27 average) in Israel, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

**The very high gender employment gaps are correlated with very low employment rates of women, mainly in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries.** This points to a double challenge for policymakers linked with increasing employment rates while reducing gender employment gap. Conversely, those countries with the smallest employment gender gaps are also those with the highest female employment rate (mainly Central Asian countries, few Eastern Partnership countries and Israel). In some countries, employment rates are low for both men and women. Several Western Balkan countries and Eastern Partnership countries fall into this category.

**Gender gaps in labour force participation and gender employment gaps have narrowed in a number of countries over the past decade (and earlier). However, in some countries, progress has been slow, or have even been reversed.** The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected women's employment for different reasons: working conditions in the highly feminised health sector

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary

<sup>2</sup> ETF Partner Countries include: for Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan; for Eastern Partnership: Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine; for Western Balkans and Türkiye: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, Serbia, Türkiye; for Southern and Eastern Mediterranean: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia.

\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

worsened, discriminatory dismissal practices were observed, some jobs were less protected, and there was increased need for women to fully involve in childcare activities due to kindergarten and school closures.

### Quality of jobs for women

**Women are at higher risk than men to be in vulnerable employment.** Therefore, **in addition to the level of activity, the quality of female employment and thus working conditions and pay are important.** In particular contributing family members, who are not receiving an own income and social protection, are typically women. Their share in total employment is significant in a number of countries. In contrast to helping family members, own-account workers are more often men than women in all EU neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, the share of female own account workers among all female employed is sizeable in several of them. For example, in Central Asia, the agricultural sector is the main employer in rural areas, and women make up more than half of this workforce. In addition, informal employment renders women particularly vulnerable. Women are also poorly represented among entrepreneurs and as owners/leaders/managers of medium-sized and large companies.

**The gender pay gap is generally high.** One reason in all EU neighbouring countries is that women tend to be more often employed in occupations and sectors where pay is relatively lower for a given level of education and skills. Another reason is that they are weakly represented in managerial positions.

### Gender segregation in education

**While educational levels of women are raising, gender segregation in education remains a concern. In most EU neighbouring countries, the enrolment rate of women in secondary and tertiary education is well above that of men.** However, in all countries experience gender segregation in the graduation by a field of studies.

**A general issue across all countries is a significantly lower participation of girls in technical study fields** within vocational education and training as compared to boys, and in particular in the technical study fields (as in EU countries). Gender segregation in vocational education and training (VET) tends to be higher than for tertiary education.

**However, in the ICT sector, gender differences among students are small, in particular in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region.** This contrasts with the EU, where gender disparities among ICT graduates are much larger, and with a low share of female students.

### High labour market barriers

**In most the EU neighbouring countries, women have greater difficulties than men to access the labour market.** This takes place despite the fact that they are often better educated. The reason is that women continue to face discrimination at the labour market, in addition to skills mismatch issues. Notwithstanding, having a high education level generally increases the probability for women to find an employment.

**The gender unemployment gap tends to be larger in those countries where unemployment rates are at a high level for both men and women.** The high and prolonged unemployment may discourage some women from searching for a job. In contrast, in the Central Asian countries, some Eastern Partnership countries and Israel, the unemployment rate of women is comparatively low, ranging between 2% and 10%, and is close to or even below that for men.

**Young people not in employment, education and training (NEET) represent a major challenge in many countries.** The share of young women being NEETs is higher than men in all EU neighbouring

countries. A closer look at the NEET group shows that young men tend to be more often unemployed, while young women are more often inactive (and thus not looking for work and/or not being available for work). Gender stereotypes and caring duties can explain this pattern.

**Current and future challenges are also related to the digital and green transitions**, as women may be less well equipped with relevant skills, and as women may face higher barriers than men in accessing STEM-related jobs and retaining their employment in these jobs.

**Migration is affecting the labour market position of women. Often female migrants have lower participation rates**, due to different motivation of migration, even more so in the past (family reunification), gender stereotypes and social norms. Another issue is overqualification of migrants, difficulties in getting qualifications recognised and certified, which applies to both male and female migrants. For women, overqualification is also more often a problem within their home country labour markets.

**Female refugees are particularly vulnerable.** Evidence indicates that women refugees encounter high obstacles if they wish to enter the host country labour market (for example female refugees from Syria in Egypt and Jordan). Integration of female refugees from Ukraine in EU countries (e.g. Germany) shows better results, but lacks behind of the integration rates of male refugees in the long run. Another issue related to migration is potentially lower activity rates of women whose men have migrated.

## Root causes of gender inequalities

**A critical driving force for gender inequalities are gender stereotypes and social norms.** They have a great impact on the female labour market participation rate, the guidance and choice of VET and tertiary education study fields, gender distribution of unpaid care work. They also influence men's beliefs and attitudes. Social norms also influence employers' behaviours in their recruitment choices, generate and foster prejudices on women's abilities and competences, and influence employers' human resources management approaches to career progression.

**However, there are large differences with respect to the strictness of social norms**, the patriarchal models and breadwinner models between urban and rural areas (with rural areas having stricter social patriarchal norms), between education levels (with more conservative views on women's and men's role among the low educated), between the four regions as well as between specific PCs. Progress in policies and reforms to the legal and institutional frameworks to eradicate discrimination has been also happening at a different pace.

**There is evidence that more restricted access to productive and financial resources for women and discrimination in the family are highest in some SEMED countries**, as shown by the OECD. It is also striking that all SEMED countries covered in the report show a higher score for discrimination in the family than for access to productive and financial resources. Other studies indicate the prevalence of traditional norms and a high level of discrimination of women in labour market transition in Central Asia, and other countries.

**Lack of affordable and quality childcare arrangements** is one important reason for women for not being active in the labour market or for not being able to fully exploit employment options and to progress in careers.

**An associated obstacle that women face to fully participate in the labour market and in the economy via entrepreneurial activities is a more limited access to resources compared to men.** Those mainly include limited access to land and to financial capital, weaker empowerment of women to make loan decisions and less well-developed financial literacy, as well as limited access to informal network.

## Priorities for employment policies to improve the labour market transition for women

**Overall, countries' policies prioritise reducing gender inequalities. Several of them developed comprehensive strategies** to promote gender equality and have introduced employment services targeted at women or at specific groups of women.

**One limitation however is that the budgetary allocations for ALMPs are relatively low** (e.g. as compared to the EU countries). Getting support from international donors plays therefore an important role in a number of EU neighbouring countries, which allows for developing and testing new approaches, but may also adversely affect long-term sustainability of the adopted measures and activities.

## PES capacity

**Countries have made progress in developing PES capacities and ALMPs, although capacities still need to be enhanced and ALMP budgets increased.** Responses to the ETF Survey conducted for this study have shown that a number of PES and Labour Ministries developed specific programmes for or include specific groups of women into the mainstream ALMPs. Such targeted programmes focus especially on women with caring responsibilities, some are targeted at women returning to the labour market and at single parents. **Comprehensive approaches include also the needs profiling** of both, unemployed and inactive women, and reaching out to inactive women and targeting services and ALMPs accordingly.

**In most countries for which data is available, more women than men tend to be registered with the PES.** A number of them have target ALMPs and job-search services to women with specific employment barriers, in addition to ALMPs that are equally available for men and women.

## Active labour market policies (ALMPs) to improve labour market transition of women and to reduce gender inequalities

**In most PCs for which data is available, women tend to participate in ALMPs and use job search services more often than men. However, there are significant differences in the share of female participants when it comes to different types of ALMPs.**

**Main target groups among women in mainstream ALMPs or in female-dedicated ALMPs, are women with caring responsibilities** (in particular for employment incentives), single parents, women returning to the labour market after a child-rearing break, **and women in rural areas** (with a focus on job search services and start-up incentives). Female university graduates are among the target groups; however, the focus remains on the other groups.

**In a number of countries, employment incentive programmes** include women or specific groups of women among target groups. There is some evidence from other countries that mainstream employment incentive programmes may have a **higher employment impact on women as compared on men.** However, this would need to be confirmed by evaluation evidence from a greater number of countries in order to draw definite conclusions.

**Nearly half of the countries that responded to the ETF survey paid specific attention to women in start-up measures. Those include dedicated programmes, mainly for women in rural areas and for single mothers. Despite progress made, women seem to be less represented among participants in entrepreneurship measures.** In addition to ALMPs organized by PES, a variety of other actors are implementing programmes to promote female entrepreneurship. Measures involve a wide range of activities: increasing the share of women with bank accounts, entrepreneurship training and mentoring, as well as granting financial support or supporting cooperatives. Evaluation evidence on the impact of entrepreneurship support is scarce and the little available evidence points to the

existence of multiple barriers for women to become entrepreneurs and to grow their businesses. Social norms and behaviour add to other, institutional or structural barriers.

**Given the multiple employment barriers women face in rural areas, several countries have targeted programmes to promote labour market activity and improve the quality of employment in rural areas.** While that is highly relevant, little evidence has been documented on whether the adopted approaches have been effective so far. Given the persisting large differences in female employment rates and job quality between urban and rural/remote areas, there may be a need to scale up initiatives and focus on their effectiveness. Comprehensive strategies that also consider issues like childcare availability, transportation, access to training opportunities, local economic development, combined with actions mitigating gender stereotypes, are essential to address gender inequalities, particularly in rural areas, and requires a close cooperation among various actors on the ground.

**The expansion of childcare facilities in quantity, increase in quality, implementation of voucher systems, and awareness raising activities have played a role in the EU neighbouring countries.** However, there are only a few cases where the impact of these activities was assessed. The link between the availability of childcare and women employment varies significantly across countries, as underlying social norms play a significant role. Furthermore, improving the quality of childcare, transforming social norms and mitigating gender stereotypes are decisive. Thus, gender-responsive strategies need to be supplemented by gender transforming approaches. In view of this, activities to increase fathers' involvement in childcare through changing laws and conditions for taking paternal leave have started to be implemented in an increasing number of countries.

**Programmes for female migrants, in particular refugees (including women displaced from Ukraine and Syria) have been implemented in EU countries, Türkiye, Jordan and Egypt.** Providing language training is a very prominent measure, important for both men and women. Approaches in all countries have also included gender-responsive activities related to childcare. In addition, in Türkiye, female Syrian refugees have received gender-responsive protection support, as well as digital and financial skills trainings.

**Most countries have implemented gender-sensitive and gender-responsive approaches to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.** Nevertheless, women may have eventually benefited less from support to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, given that they have often been in a more fragile situation, with precarious employment conditions, stressful working conditions and greater difficulties in combining work and family lives.

**Effects of measures and initiatives are enhanced when a variety of actors are involved,** including several Ministries and agencies, NGOs and the private sector. Implementing comprehensive strategies is challenging, but it is likely to increase impact in the long-term.

**However, the strictness of social norms and the entrenched gender stereotypes are limiting the success of ALMPs, in particular those directed towards more conservative target groups in rural areas.** Experience across countries shows that increasing female labour force participation rates takes decades. Inequalities are being reduced in many countries over time, and implementation of ALMPs, improved availability of childcare, have certainly contributed. However, inequalities and gender segregation persist. Awareness raising activities and gender transformative activities are needed to change social norms.

### Career guidance, upskilling and reskilling measures to reduce gender inequalities

**Several EU neighbouring countries have implemented gender transformative actions in vocational career guidance. Some countries have implemented those type of measures to encourage women to take up training in male-dominated professions.** Examples include **initiatives to break gender stereotypes at an early stage.** The initiatives are transformative in the sense that they seek to raise and strengthen interest of girls and young women in STEM, in particular

technology, engineering, and ICT. Strategies and initiatives encompass gender-responsive elements in the sense as they do not only target girls and young women but also their social environment and parents, teachers, and school curricula.

**Specific programmes have been targeted at women with caring responsibilities.** This approach is gender-responsive and gender sensitive in addressing barriers for women to accessing training and in targeting support towards women with caring responsibilities. Examples also shows **the interest of implementing packages of measures**, including counselling, mentoring, internships in addition to the training measures.

**Support for the development of digital skills of girls and women is key for their employability.** Therefore, examples show that it is relevant to enhance digital skills, such as in the area of e-commerce, to strengthen women's potential to be more successful in their economic activities. This is particularly relevant for women in rural and remote areas as digital technologies help to overcome challenges related to remoteness. In addition, examples from ETF partner countries show the relevance of including other actors, such as IT parks and large employers, in training and hiring women as IT professionals.

**Some countries have been successful in enhancing participation of women in training measures.** Examples suggest that actions of positive discrimination and other gender transformative measures such as dedicated scholarships have the potential to be successful in attracting women towards study fields traditionally not associated with women. Successful training measures benefit from activities that support the education to work transition through internship programmes, dialogue with employers and awareness raising activities.

**Evaluations conducted around the world show a positive impact of training measures on women.** Looking at EU experience, an evaluation that has been carried out for the Austrian programme to support women to take up VET training in technical occupations, show positive results. Escudora et al. (2017) have conducted metadata analysis of evaluation results of active labour market programmes in Latin American countries. They find that training programmes are (slightly) more effective than other types of ALMPs, in particular relative to direct job creation programmes. In terms of targeting, they find that ALMPs in the region seem to work better for women than for men and also for youth compared to prime-age workers. In particular, the impact of training programmes appears overall higher among women than men.

## Conclusions

**Overcoming gender stereotypes and changing social norms is essential to pursue gender sensitive and gender transformative activities.** This needs to start at a young age and needs to be pursued during the whole education system. Activities, for example, include gender-sensitive revisions of textbooks. Moreover, comprehensive approaches need to be taken with a view to reducing the levels of leaving school early and to reduce the number of young NEETs, as underlying reasons for inequalities are strongly linked to traditions and norms.

**There is evidence for some countries that women participate over-proportionally in job-search guidance and employment incentive measures. This is relevant because they usually face higher employment barriers.** Many PES from paid specific attention to women in their measures targeting start-ups and entrepreneurship, implementing dedicated programmes, mainly for women in rural areas and single parents. Several countries have developed programmes to promote employment of women in rural areas, as they are perceived as being vulnerable groups. This is relevant, given the higher employment barriers faced by women in these areas.

**However, entrepreneurship programmes implemented by the PES were found to be small-scale.** More efforts need to be put into the promotion of female entrepreneurship across the ETF PCs.

**In addition, in some cases, the measures implemented during the COVID-19 were gender-blind and fostered gender stereotypes.** There is still a need in some countries to mitigate the negative employment impact of the pandemic on women. Current crisis situation (linked to the war in Ukraine and energy crisis, for example) that has had impact on the post-pandemic recovery, may impact women disproportionately.

**Career guidance frameworks seem to adopt a gender sensitive approach only in a minority of ETF PCs.** Nevertheless, specific activities to attract women into training of male-dominated occupations are implemented in many countries, but there are very few activities both in the EU and the ETF PCs to attract men to female-dominated occupations.

### Key issues for consideration

Low level of ALMPs budgets, affecting the capacity to make a significant difference, and potentially low sustainability of a range of projects, in particular when they are donor-funded;

Difficulties in coordinating various actors, developing and implementing strategies;

Very few activities are targeted at men's perceptions and private sector employers;

ALMPs cannot address a variety of reasons leading to gender inequalities, as they are not affecting the overall legal and institutional framework or early childhood and school education, during which gender stereotypes may be established.

Overcoming gender stereotypes and changing social norms represent major challenges and limitations for rapid success and therefore a comprehensive cross-sectoral transformative approach would be needed.

Collection of gender-disaggregated data on participation in ALMPs is not systematically done Gender-based monitoring. Evaluation studies on the impact of ALMPs and vocational guidance and counselling is scarce.

## The way ahead

It is important to ensure that women can equally benefit from job opportunities linked to the post-Covid recovery and digital and green transitions. This will require efforts for upskilling and reskilling, vocational guidance and support to labour market transition into relevant professions. Based on the findings of the report and taking into account the challenging context and overlapping crises and labour market disruptions, several key policy actions can be identified as most suitable and feasible to address gender inequalities in the labour market:

### Improving the information base

- (Continue to) conduct studies on gender patterns in employment and labour market transitions.
- Include a gender dimension in reporting/monitoring and evaluating of PES activities.
- Review activities of PES and other relevant actors and identify whether they effectively implement gender mainstreaming.
- Systematic stocktaking of all activities implemented by different actors to promote women's economic empowerment in the country (national and regional/local agencies, private sector, social partners, NGOs, international donors).
- Conduct evaluations on the effectiveness of measures targeting women; evaluation effectiveness of non-targeted ALMPs through a gender lens.

### Designing comprehensive approaches

- Take multitude of employment barriers women face into account when designing measures to promote economic empowerment of women.
- Consider taking actions to change men's attitudes and perceptions.
- Conduct awareness raising activities targeted at different actors: women, men, training institutions, PES staff, financial institutions, other government institutions, NGOs, employers.
- Design measures in a comprehensive way and link training measures to workplace activities, internships and placement. Link placement into training and jobs to the access to childcare services and to the performance of childcare activities.
- Consider the importance of the quality of childcare for women's decision to actively participate in the labour market.

### Working in partnerships

- Form strategic partnerships to promote economic empowerment of women, include other state agencies, the private sector and NGOs.
- Reinforce inter-agency cooperation for promoting women's economic empowerment.

### Balancing a gender mainstreaming and dedicated gender-sensitive and gender transformative approaches

- Implement a gender mainstreaming approach within PES activities.
- Ensure PES staff is trained on gender sensitivity/responsiveness.
- Introduce gender-sensitive approaches in career guidance, by providing men and women with full information on career prospects and salaries in occupations, as well as by overcoming gender stereotypes.

- At the same time, design specific activities and measures to support women, for instance, through positive discrimination, financial support, attracting actively women in male-dominated professions and men in female-dominated professions.

### **Investing in removing barriers to women's economic empowerment**

- Leverage investments in specific measures targeted at women or a specific group of women, in particular through job-search support, targeted employment incentives, entrepreneurship support, training activities to close the digital gender divide and to promote training in non-traditional fields, as well as assess their effectiveness.
- Invest in financial literacy skills, particularly of most vulnerable groups of women in rural areas, migrants, refugees, etc.
- Continue measures and activities co-financed by international donors, to render successful or promising activities sustainable.

## Glossary of gender equality terms

Affirmative (positive) action	Involves special temporary measures to redress the effects of past or continuing discrimination with a view to establishing equality of opportunity and treatment in practice.
Gender	Refers to the social differences and relations between men and women that are learned, vary widely within and between cultures, and change over time.
Gender blind	Describes measures and actions that neither recognize nor ignore possible differences between the position, needs, constraints, opportunities and interests of women and men.
Gender equality	Refers to the enjoyment of equal rights, opportunities and treatment by men and women of all ages in all spheres of life and work.
Gender equity	This is about equality of outcomes and results. It is a means to ensure that women and men have an equal chance not only at the starting point but also when reaching the finish line.
Gender gap	This is the difference in any area between women and men in terms of their levels of participation, access to resources, rights, power and influence, remuneration and benefits.
Gender mainstreaming	A means of integrating equality concerns across the board into all policy objectives and all activities in order to promote equality of all workers, irrespective of sex
Gender neutral	Gender-neutral policies and approaches are not aimed specifically at women or men and are assumed to affect women and men equally. However, because they operate from an assumption that there is no distinction between the sexes, gender-neutral approaches incorporate biases in favour of existing gender relations and so tend to disadvantage women.
Gender responsive	Gender-responsive means addressing the different situations, roles, needs, and interests of women, men, girls, and boys in the design and implementation of activities, policies, and programs. It means addressing gender-based barriers, respects gender differences, enables structures, systems, and methodologies to be sensitive to gender, ensures gender parity is a wider strategy to advance gender equality, and evolves to close gaps and eradicate gender-based discrimination.
Gender-sensitive	Refers to measures and actions that address the different situations, roles, needs and interests of women and men.
Gender stereotypes	The ideas that people have on what men and women are capable of doing, for example that women are better housekeepers and men are better leaders
Gender values and norms	The ideas that people have on what men and women should be like, for example the beliefs that women should be good housewives and men should be leaders of their family and community.
Occupational segregation	Occurs when women and men are concentrated in different types and at different levels of activity and employment. Women tend to be confined to a different range of occupations than men (horizontal segregation) and to lower job grades (vertical segregation).
Transformative change interventions	They seek to target the structural causes, as well as the symptoms of gender inequality, leading to lasting changes in the power and choices women (and men) have over their own lives, rather than just a temporary increase in opportunities.

Source: ILO (2011), Gender Mainstreaming in the Public Employment Services in the Public Employment Service in Ukraine. User's guide. Written by Valli Corbanese; Kiev.; and INEE (2019), INEE Guidance Note on Gender, [https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/INEE\\_GN\\_Gender\\_2019\\_0.pdf](https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/INEE_GN_Gender_2019_0.pdf)  
<https://policytoolbox.iiep.unesco.org/glossary/gender-responsive/>