Education, childcare, and formal sector opportunities are key to promoting decent work for women in Kenya

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Key messages

- Lack of higher education, lack of quality and affordable childcare, and a high share of informal sector work are the three main barriers to women's participation in decent work in Kenya
- Government policies are needed to address these three key barriers, for example:
  - Scale up the higher education loans program to encourage more tertiary education
  - Provide public childcare and regulate and subsidize private childcare services
  - Support businesses created through government programs to remain formal

Women participate in the labor force but are concentrated in low-quality jobs

Kenya has made good progress in promoting women's participation in the labor market. The female labor force participation rate rose to 75.6% in 2015-16, up three percentage points from the late 1990s. However, the impressive female labor force participation rate does not reveal much about the type of employment opportunities available to women upon joining the labor force.

In 2022, only 39.3% of working women were employed in the modern wage sector compared to 60.7% of working men. Equally, women were more likely than men to be engaged in vulnerable employment. Approximately 59% of women were employed either in agriculture or in domestic service, compared to 46% of men (KNBS et al., 2015).

Furthermore, recent initiatives that have promoted employment, particularly through micro-enterprises, have mostly created opportunities in the informal sector. Indeed, 81.4% of all new jobs created (since 2021) outside small-scale agriculture and pastoralist activities are informal.

A team of local PEP researchers sought to understand the barriers preventing Kenyan women from participating in decent work. This brief summarizes their findings and related implications for policy.

Definitions

Decent work
According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), “decent work” involves:

- Productive work that delivers a fair income,
- Security in the workplace and social protection for all,
- Better prospects for personal development and social integration,
- Freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives,
- Equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

Based on the ILO definition, in this study, decent work was measured using the presence of the following indicators:

1. Earning minimum wage,
2. Decent working time,
3. Paid annual leave,
4. Employer contribution to social security,
5. Employer contribution to health insurance,
6. Trade union membership,
7. Written employment contract.

Modern wage sector
The entire public sector as well as private enterprises and institutions that are formal in terms of registration, taxation and official recording.
Women are less likely than men to be engaged in decent work (see figure, below)

- The majority of women (57%) and almost half of men (48%) hold jobs that do not meet ANY of the seven “decent work indicators”.
- Only 1% of women and 2% of men hold jobs that meet ALL of the 7 “decent work indicators”.
- Men are more likely to hold jobs that meet some (between 2 and 6) of the indicators than women.

The research team’s analysis allowed them to identify reasons why women are less likely to be engaged in decent work (key barriers) as well as some factors that can increase women’s access to decent work.
Barriers to decent work

Having young children constrains women’s participation in decent work

• Women with young children (0-5 years) are 3% less likely to participate in decent work activities.
• Social norms that place much of the caring responsibility on women, especially in rural areas, limit women’s participation in decent work.
  ‣ However, these norms are changing with women increasingly taking on the role of breadwinner within the household, which may help increase the quality of their labor market participation.
• Women in Kenya generally do not have access to quality and affordable childcare services that would allow them to seek and hold decent jobs.
• Women with children who had to work at home during the Covid-19 pandemic were particularly disadvantaged as they saw their performance decline.

Limited implementation/enforcement of anti-discrimination laws

• Despite sufficient laws to protect women against workplace discrimination, their implementation and enforcement remain limited.
  ‣ Contrary to the Employment Act of 2007, employers continue to show a preference for male employees and companies do not accord paid maternity leave to female employees.
• Factors affecting implementation and enforcement include a lack of government resources, an inadequate inspection process, corruption and lack of political will, and the high implementation cost for companies.
• Additionally, workers are often not aware of their labor rights and when they are aware, the costs of obtaining redress for discrimination are often prohibitive.

Opportunities to increase decent work

Education increases access to decent work

• University and college education significantly increase the likelihood of women accessing decent work (by 88% and 58%, respectively).
• Secondary education increases women’s likelihood of participating in decent work by 14%.
• Men also benefit from post-secondary education, with university and college education increasing their likelihood of decent work by 95% and 57%, respectively.

Demand-side labor market factors are important determinants of access to decent work

• Formal sector work is strongly associated with decent work.
  ‣ When a higher share of a community’s women hold formal sector employment, women in that community have a much greater likelihood (82%) of participating in decent work.
Policy options

Based on the evidence generated through their study, the authors have identified the following policy options that could be implemented by the government to increase women’s participation in decent work:

- **Encourage post-secondary education by scaling up the existing program providing higher education loans to students joining technical and vocational education and training (TVET) centers, and universities.**
  
  Road map:
  - This would be managed by the Ministry of Education, through the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) state agency.
  - The government would need to set aside a larger budget for student loans.
  - The program should be limited to students who would not otherwise be able to join tertiary education due to low funds.
  - To increase the probability of repayment, this initiative should be combined with the next policy option.

- **Create more opportunities for decent work by supporting new businesses to remain formal**
  
  Road map:
  - This would be managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.
  - The government would need to provide support to businesses created as a result of government programs (such as UWEZO Funds and Women Enterprise Funds) to encourage them to remain formal. Support would include mentorship, training, and subsidies towards the costs induced by formalization.
  - The government would need to create an enabling environment to support the growth of cottage industries. Support could include providing loans dedicated to such businesses, and/or tax relief to enable TVET program graduates to pursue self-employment.

- **Ensure women have access to safe, secure, and affordable childcare services**
  
  Road map:
  - This would be managed by the Ministry of Education, through the State Department of Basic Education, as well as county governments.
  - The government would need to provide childcare services (for instance, by installing daycare facilities in each public school) and/or regulate and subsidize privately provided childcare services to ensure they are safe, secure, and affordable.

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of PEP.

References
