Addressing context-specific barriers to female labor force participation in decent work in Senegal

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Key messages

- Most women lack access to decent employment opportunities in Senegal.
- New findings show that key factors hindering women’s ability to secure decent employment include: the lack of education, the lack of childcare facilities, security concerns while commuting to work, as well as prevailing social norms.
- Strategies to improve women’s labor outcomes in Senegal should therefore aim to tackle these issues.

Senegal’s initiatives to promote women’s access to decent work

The concept of “decent work” features fair income, safe and healthy working conditions, job security, as well as equal opportunities and treatment for all (ILO, 2013). Access to decent work is not just a fundamental right but also a critical factor in advancing gender equality and promoting women’s empowerment (Frey and MacNaughton, 2016).

Senegal has undertaken numerous initiatives to facilitate women’s access to decent job opportunities. The country has ratified several regional and international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol. It has also implemented the International Labor Organization’s (ILO) Decent Work Country Program (DWCP 2018-2022) that emphasizes the promotion of decent work for both men and women.

At the national level, the Constitution adopted in January 2001 marked an important step towards gender equality, providing equal rights for women and men in all areas, including civil, political, economic, and social rights. Various strategies for facilitating women’s access to decent job opportunities have also been developed in the country, the most recent being the National Strategy for the Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls (SNAEF 2020-2035) and the National Strategy for Gender Equity and Equality (SNEEG 2016-2025).

Overview of female labor market outcomes in Senegal

While Senegal is actively promoting gender equality, women still face difficulties accessing economic opportunities. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), Senegal is one of the lowest ranked countries in the Global Gender Gap Index, especially in terms of Economic Participation and Opportunity (131st out of 156 countries).

Over the past three decades, approximately seven out of ten women in the country were employed in vulnerable jobs (World Bank, 2023), indicating that the majority of women work in precarious conditions with little or no access to social security. Furthermore, the proportion of women working in informal employment has consistently exceeded 80% between 2015 and 2019 (ILO, 2023).

These figures suggest that, despite the numerous and important initiatives undertaken by the country to improve the situation, majority of women in Senegal still do not have access to decent employment opportunities.
Study and key findings

In 2022, a team of local PEP researchers set out to solve this puzzle by examining the context-specific barriers that prevent female participation in decent work in Senegal.

The study used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data; the quantitative data was derived from a national labor force survey, while the qualitative data was collected through a series of key informant interviews and focus group discussions. (See text box to the right).

Methodology

The quantitative data was drawn from a national labor force survey and covered a sample of 16,523 women.

The qualitative data was collected through a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). The authors conducted 9 FGDs with:

- unemployed women (35.7%),
- women employed in the informal sector (21.8%)
- women employed in the formal sector (8.9%),
- women employed in the e-commerce sector (33.6%).

Over 70% of the women who took part in the FGDs have at least one child under the age of five. This is an important feature of the data used to analyze the impact of childcare on women's access to decent employment opportunities.

Additionally, the authors conducted 15 KIIs with feminist associations and NGOs working on gender issues, 7 with researchers, 3 with human resources managers, and 9 with lawyers and labor inspectors.

The quantitative data reveals that women are less likely to be in decent work when they are (either):

- less educated,
- working in the agricultural sector,
- or living in a household that is headed by a man (or by a less-educated member) and comprises a high number of children and/or low number of (other) women in decent jobs.

1. A woman with primary education is 8.5% more likely to be in decent work than a woman with no education, while secondary education further increases this probability by 40% (vs primary education).

2. The analysis of the quantitative data revealed that the probability for a woman to secure a decent job was also linked to the composition of her household. In particular, it shows that this probability decreases as the number of children increases, but increases with the presence of other women working in decent jobs.

Findings from the qualitative analysis (i.e. of data collected through focus group discussions and interviews) also identifies several main obstacles that limit women's access to decent work. These include:

- the lack of formal childcare services,
- insecurity on the way to work and on public transportation, and
- prevailing social norms both in and out of the workplaces.
Policy Options

Based on the key findings of the project, the following is an analysis of policy options that could potentially contribute to addressing the barriers to women’s access to decent employment in Senegal.

**Option 1: Providing women-only public transport and adequate public lighting:** By prioritizing women’s safety and convenience, these initiatives empower women to commute to work without fear of harassment or danger, saving time and energy. This can in turn expand the range of accessible decent employment opportunities for women - i.e. covering broader or more distant areas.

**Option 2: Providing affordable childcare facilities:** It is often difficult for women with childcare responsibilities to find employment that requires long or inflexible hours. Access to affordable childcare facilities would not only enable more women to pursue a broader range of job opportunities, but also to work more hours and thus increase their income potential.

**Option 3: Enforcing laws that address prevailing social norms both inside and outside the workplace:** Enforcing laws that address social norms* is important because it allows women to compete with men for the same jobs and pay. It also helps to ensure that employers are not taking advantage of women by discriminating against them or paying them less than men for the same work. Additionally, it helps to create a more gender-equal society, which can result in more women having access to decent work.

*For example, through the enactment of Act No. 2022-03 (of 14 April 2022) amending and supplementing certain provisions of Act No. 97-17 (Labor Code, of 1 December 1997) relating to non-discrimination at work.

Act No. 2022-03 defines workplace discrimination in its various forms, specifies its manifestations, sets the obligations and responsibilities of employers in this regard, penalizes offenders of workplace discrimination, and establishes the creation of a national observatory on workplace discrimination (Republique du Sénégal, 2014)

**Option 4: Investing in female education and training:** Our study revealed that women with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed in decent jobs. As such, improving women’s access to education and training can be a key factor in enabling them to access higher-paying jobs.

As part of the qualitative component of the study, all interviewed stakeholders were asked to rank these different options using a series of policy-relevant criteria, including efficacy and equity effects, as well as (social and political) acceptability and (technical) feasibility.

The results are presented in table 1 below; rankings are based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the best (Excellent) and 1 indicating the worst (Poor) option.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Option 1 Transport</th>
<th>Option 2 Childcare</th>
<th>Option 3 Legislations</th>
<th>Option 4 Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
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<td>4,8</td>
<td>4,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptability</td>
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<td>4,9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feasibility</td>
<td>2,2</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>2,3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average ranking</td>
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<td>4,425</td>
<td>3,425</td>
<td>4,65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the provision of affordable childcare facilities (Option 2) and the investment in female education and training (Option 4) were ranked as the best policy options.

In fact, stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that investing in female education and training, as well as making childcare more affordable, were the most effective ways to improve women’s access to decent work in Senegal.

Table 1. Stakeholders’ evaluation of policy options

Source: Authors’ calculations
Policy roadmap

The findings of this project reveal that women in Senegal face a range of barriers that prevent them from obtaining and maintaining decent work, highlighting the need for more targeted policies and advocacy initiatives to be implemented at the national level.

As education stands out as not only a key barrier, but also the best potential solution according to a broad range of stakeholders, this policy reform and advocacy process may be initiated with consideration to invest in female education and training. To achieve this, the Ministry of education may work in collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups who possess the necessary expertise in promoting gender equality, and could thus provide the government with valuable inputs to inform the design and implementation of education and training programs for women.

Also, given the importance attributed by the interviewed stakeholders to the issue of childcare, the authors recommend considering the provision of affordable childcare facilities as another strategic measure to improve gender equality and women’s participation in the labor market. Such a policy intervention would require a coordinated effort from various government institutions, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor, and the Ministry of Women, Family and Child Development.

References


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To find out more about the scientific research methods and findings, read the full PEP working paper.

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