

INFORMAL ECONOMY AND GENDER

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INTRODUCTION

Why gender is a matter of concern regarding the informal economy? By nature the informal economy is underestimated because it is difficult to measure directly. And within this fuzzy set of activities, women's economic activities (at least a part of them) are particularly blurred or invisible. This is why progress in the understanding and handling of the informal economy pass through a better capture of women working in the informal economy. Since 1997 the international network WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) made of women the central concern of its reflexions on the informal economy. For all that it does not result that women constitute the bulk of the informal economy, but rather that the informal economy constitutes the bulk of women's employment. The question however is not so simple.

THE REASON FOR THE LESSER ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

In almost all countries in the world, females' labour force participation rates are lower than males'. In 2017 the global labour force participation rate was 49% for women, but 75% for men. Worldwide in 2017, only 46% of working-age women were employed, compared with 72% men. The main reason is maternity, a period before, during and after which many women withdraw from the labour market for a longer or shorter period, or even sometimes permanently. But more generally women bear the bulk of the burden of unpaid care work in all societies across the world and this widespread patriarchal distribution of labour prevent them from dedicating as much time as men to paid work, provided that there are no more than 24 hours in a day. This constrained (limited) access to the labour market is a cause of women's greater poverty compared with men, due to greater 'time poverty'. Their relatively easier insertion into the informal labour market (less rewarding) being another cause. Until now these unpaid care activities are not counted as part of the productive work. Invisible in the GDP, the unpaid care work takes up most of the women's workday. Analysis of total hours worked from 74 time-use surveys (representing 67.7% of the world population), shows that women contribute 52.9% of total work compared to men (47.1%) but they contribute to 76.4% of unpaid care work (23.6% for men) (UNDP, 2015; Charmes, 2015 and 2017).

WHY WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES ARE MORE INVISIBLE THAN MEN'S?

The first reason for invisibility is therefore that the core of women's activities (the household's chores) is not counted in the statistics of production and labour force.

A second reason is that when their activities are considered as productive, these activities are often mixed or confounded with their unproductive (in fact "reproductive") activities. Because of the patriarchal background that permeates our societies, in many developing countries, home is generally the first place where and from where women operate their market activities, which are often the same that their home activities, for instance preparing meals for their household and selling meals or other food products on the pavement in front of their homes or in other places. Home is also the most obvious place for the initial workshop when starting an activity of seamstress, and the kitchen is best suited when starting an activity

of pastry. And in rural areas, the home is the farm where most women's activities remain unpaid, even when productive: they work on the farm as unpaid family workers and the processing of agricultural products or food products is often considered as unpaid care work, such as the pounding of grains or bread making for instance, not even mentioning care of the poultry, milking the cow or water or wood fetching.

Algeria for example is a country where the female participation rate is among the lowest in the world. It is also the country where women spend the most time in unpaid care work and within unpaid care work the most time to cooking. Many women prepare cakes and pastries that they give, barter or sell to the neighbourhood, or at the occasion of weddings, or even to bakeries or pastries shops as sub-contractors: but such activities remain undeclared and invisible in the surveys.

FEMALE PARTICIPATION TO THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

According to the most recent estimates (Charmes 2017), women predominate in the informal economy in sub-Saharan Africa only (51.1%). But the informal economy provides up to 60.9% of female jobs in sub-Saharan Africa and 54.3% in Latin America. In all other regions men outnumber women in the informal economy.

	Share of informal economy in non-agricultural employment	Share of women in informal economy	Share of informal economy in female non-agricultural employment
Sub-Saharan Africa	74.6	51.1	60.9
Asia	66.6	35.8	44.8
Latin America	57.7	46.5	54.3
Middle East North Africa	48.0	16.4	30.5
Transition countries	20.5	33.2	10.8

Source: Charmes (2017)

Finally it should be recalled that women constitute the bulk of a particularly vulnerable category: domestic workers.

GENDERED POLICIES ADDRESSING THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

Many poverty alleviating policies or micro-credit institutions and projects that implement them, consist in the financing of the so-called "income-generating activities", in supporting these home-based activities and their coaching towards reaching sustainability. It is commonly observed that programmes on micro-credit as well as on income-generating activities focus on women highlighting and aggravating at the same time their concentration in the lower tiers of the informal economy and putting them at risk of being maintained in such less-rewarding activities.

In fact many obstacles contribute to maintain women in their precarious status. In many countries, by law and/or by custom (World Bank, 2015), they have no access to ownership of land or any other means of production, no right or few rights to access inheritance and consequently they cannot rely on collaterals for mobilising credit (other than micro-credit) so that micro-finance may be seen as maintaining them in income-generating activities on tight and already congested markets rather than opening them the doors of micro-businesses on more vibrant markets. Also, alleviating the burden of care for children and incapacitated adults is rarely an objective of policies addressing the informal economy whereas it is the main cause that restrict their mobility.

CONCLUSIONS

If women are not globally the majority of informal workers, they constitute the greatest number in sub-Saharan Africa and the informal economy is also the only perspective open to them in Latin America. In most parts of the world however, their contribution to the informal economy remains invisible or insufficiently captured because of a too-restrictive definition of productive work that ignores the burden of unpaid reproductive work. The recent revision of the concepts of labour force and employment (ILO, 2013) is a step towards this recognition.

Policies addressing the informal economy in view of supporting its smooth transition to the formal economy, following ILO recommendation 204, should ensure that women are treated equitably and in particular are not confined to economic activities that cannot overcome the barriers limiting their productivity and dynamism.

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IESF TEAM SUGGESTED RESOURCES

www.wiego.org

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