



Improving Women's Access to Quality Employment¹

- In LAC, gender gaps persist across multiple dimensions of the labor market. Women tend to be concentrated in less productive jobs and sectors and run enterprises that tend to be smaller. Women are also more likely than men to do part-time and temporary jobs with fewer avenues for advancement.
- Women are particularly concentrated in more “invisible” activities, such as employed in the informal sector in jobs that lack security and are not covered by labor laws, or as unpaid family workers (also informal and with no salary). All of these disparities made women more susceptible than men to job losses at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Improving the quality of women's employment requires tackling a wide number of underlying constraints that women face in accessing good quality jobs, including educational and occupational segregation, the burden of child and elderly care, lack in access and control of assets (which limits their ability to raise credit or to start or grow a business), among others.
- WBG operations in LAC focus on promoting women's employment in non-traditional and climate-relevant sectors; increasing female participation in leadership roles; providing specialized training and enhanced skill-building opportunities among women, while addressing women's specific needs (e.g., care work, transportation); supporting legal reforms to level their playing field in the labor market; and ensuring their safety to and from their places of work.

¹ This note was prepared by the LCR Regional Gender Coordination in the Poverty and Equity Global Practice, to guide gender mainstreaming in projects across the region. It was prepared by Daniela Maquera (Junior Professional Associate, POV) with inputs and guidance from Paola Buitrago (Economist, POV). Hugo Ñopo (Senior Economist, POV) provided valuable comments. For more information, contact LCR_Gender_Coordination@worldbankgroup.org.

THE CONTEXT

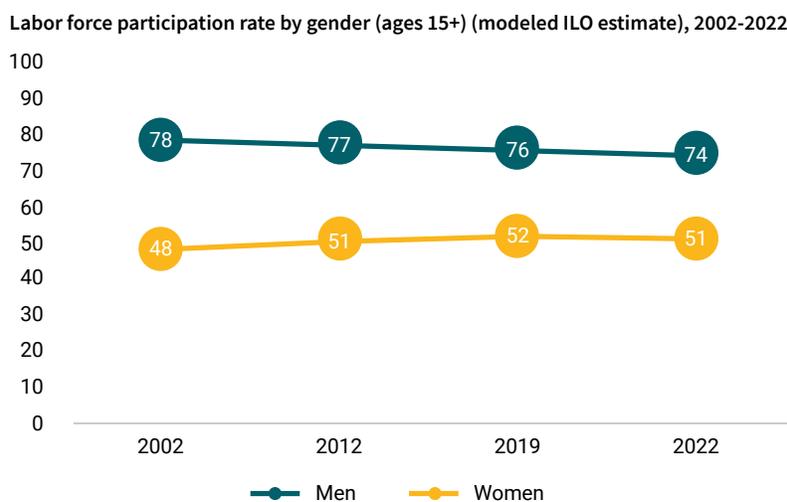
Showcasing one of the region’s greatest challenges which is job creation, men’s and women’s labor force participation have not improved much in the past 20 years. Women’s participation in the region’s labor force rose by 3 percentage points only over the last 20 years and remained stagnant in the last decade (**Figure 1**)—during this period men’s has even decreased 4 percentage points.² Nevertheless, an increase in female labor force participation and higher female labor earnings had contributed to significant reductions of poverty in LAC between 2006 and 2016 (World Bank 2018). Despite the general trend of more women entering the workforce, participation rates remain significantly below male rates in LAC as of 2022, with the largest gender gaps found in Guatemala (44 percentage points) and Nicaragua (34 percentage points) (**Figure 2**). In contrast, the smallest gaps are found in Barbados (6 percentage points) and Haiti (7 percentage points). Still, as of 2022, approximately 50.8 percent of women above the age of 15 took part in the labor market compared to 74.5 percent of men in LAC on average (World Development Indicators).

While labor force participation is high for women in LAC compared to other regions, women typically hold lower-quality jobs and are more prone to unemployment. Men are far more likely than women to participate in the formal labor market, especially in more productive, better-paying industries such as high tech, construction, and transportation (ILO 2017). Women also tend to be segregated in education and health, or to work in domestic services. These realities are particularly acute for Indigenous women, who are employed as domestic workers far more often than non-Indigenous women, according to data from Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, and Mexico (ECLAC 2014).

In fact, job quality as well as labor market segregation, has an impact on women’s desire to engage in or join the labor market altogether (World Bank 2018). Women are also much more likely than men to work part-time, often due to household and caregiving responsibilities. While part-time work and informal sector employment offer women additional flexibility, this frequently comes at the cost of labor rights, pensions, and other benefits (Chioda 2016). In terms of the wage gap, studies have estimated that men in LAC countries earn on average 17 percent more than women at any age, for each level of education, in any type of employment (self-employed, employers, and employees), and in both large and small firms (Atal, Nopo and Winder 2009).

All of these factors exacerbated the gender gap when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region. Female workers were 44 percent more likely than their male counterparts to lose their jobs at the onset of the pandemic (Cucagna and Romero, 2021). Even 15 months into the pandemic, women’s employment was 23 percent below its prep-pandemic level, an average decline equivalent to 3.2 times that for men (World Bank and UNDP, 2022). Although overall employment in the region is indeed slowly recovering, the quality of employment has deteriorated since the beginning of the pandemic, and women have been particularly affected by this phenomenon; transitions to self-employment had been higher for women than men (World Bank, 2023). The unemployment gender gap also persisted. In 2022, the female unemployment rate averaged at 8.6 percent compared to 5.8 percent for men. Among the youth this gap is wider (6 percentage points) with 18.2 percent for young women and 12.9 percent for young men (World Development Indicators).

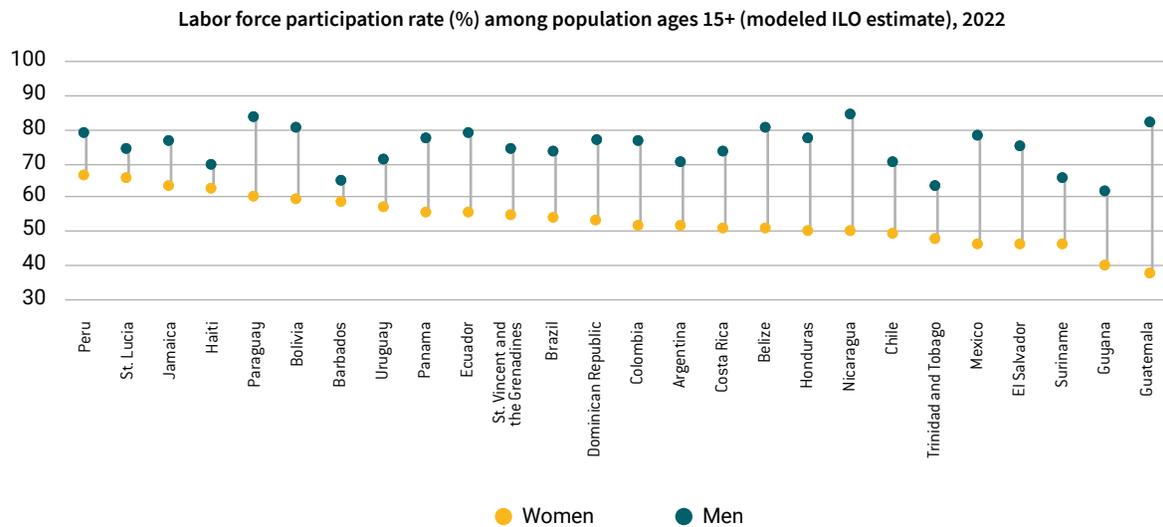
Figure 1: Female Labor Force Participation in LAC has Risen over the Last Two Decades but the Gender Gap Persists



Source: World Bank Indicators

² In contrast with a global trend of a slight decline. For instance, the change in the global share of labor force participation from 2002 to 2022 was 50 percent to 47 percent among women; 77 percent to 73 percent among men.

Figure 2. Gender Disparities Vary in Labor Force Participation



Source: World Bank Indicators

On the regulatory side, LAC countries have progressively strengthened their legal frameworks to improve the protection of women’s workplace rights. New laws now cover harassment in the workplace, discrimination in employment, and paternity/parental leave, as it is the case for countries like Costa Rica³ and Jamaica.⁴ However, legal frameworks with loopholes in their regulations continue failing to protect women comprehensively. For instance, as shown below, 9 LAC countries⁵ have legal

frameworks that do not guarantee equality between men and women in industrial jobs, creating labor market barriers (Table 1). In these countries, laws explicitly prevent women from entering certain professions. Moreover, many countries⁶ have legal frameworks that do not explicitly mandate for equal remuneration between men and women for work of equal value. Similarly, most LAC countries fail to guarantee parental leave for both mothers and fathers (Women, Business and the Law 2023).

Table 1. Workplace Legislation that Affects Women’s Decisions to Enter the Labor Market in LAC Countries 2023

(X denotes absence of legislation)

	Does the law prohibit discrimination in employment based on gender?	Is there legislation on sexual harassment in employment?	Are there criminal penalties or civil remedies for sexual harassment in employment?	Does the law mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value?	Can a woman work at night in the same way as a man?	Can a woman work in a job deemed dangerous in the same way as a man?	Can a woman work in an industrial job in the same way as a man?	Is there paid parental leave?
Antigua and Barbuda		x	x	x				x
Argentina			x			x	x	x
Bahamas, The				x				x
Barbados				x			x	x
Belize	x			x			x	x
Bolivia	x							x
Brazil				x				x
Chile			x	x				
Colombia				x			x	

3 Compared to legislation from 2021-2022, women in Costa Rica now can work both at night in the same way as men and in jobs deemed dangerous in the same way as men. The country also introduced paid paternity leave.

4 In 2021, Jamaica enacted legislation protecting women from sexual harassment in employment, including civil remedies for such conduct.

5 Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Colombia, Dominica, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Uruguay.

6 Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela.

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Costa Rica								x
Dominica	x	x	x	x			x	x
DR				x				x
Ecuador								x
El Salvador				x				x
Grenada		x	x					x
Guatemala	x	x	x	x		x		x
Guyana								x
Haiti		x	x					x
Honduras				x		x		x
Jamaica	x			x			x	x
Mexico				x				x
Nicaragua				x				x
Panama				x		x		x
Paraguay								x
Peru								x
St Kitts and Nevis	x	x	x	x			x	x
St Lucia								x
SVG	x	x	x	x			x	x
Suriname		x	x	x				x
Trinidad and Tobago		x	x	x				x
Uruguay							x	x
Venezuela				x				x

Source: Women, Business, and the Law 2023 Data: <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data>

EVIDENCE OF WHAT WORKS

In a comprehensive WBG [working paper](#), Datta and Kotikula (2017) study gender-smart job strategies to level the playing field for women's economic opportunities. According to this study and supplemental work in LAC, improving the quality of women's employment requires tackling a wide range of underlying constraints that women face in accessing good quality jobs. These constraints include:

- **Educational segregation** - women continue to be underrepresented in STEM fields of study and hence find it hard to access better paying jobs, even though the

observed gender gap in mathematics (against girls) is narrowing in many countries in the region.

- **Occupational segregation** - women tend to be more concentrated in occupations, sectors, industries, and types of firms that have lower pay, status, and prospects for career advancement. In LAC, there is also evidence of vertical segregation in the public sector, for example, where less than a quarter of women are in top-level positions despite making up more than half of the workforce (IDB, 2022).

- **Burden of unpaid domestic work, child, and elderly care work** - women spend more time on child care, household work, and elderly care all of which limit women's choice and access to certain types of jobs.
- **Limited access and control of assets** - women have less access and control over productive assets which inhibit their ability to raise credit or to start or grow a business.
- **Gender based violence** – ranging from sexual harassment at work and while traveling to work. This often prevents women from entering new jobs and expanding a business.
- **Legal and societal restrictions and limited agency** - conservative societal norms, legal restrictions, lack of women's agency to make or influence decisions can limit women's opportunities.
- **Improving occupational safety and working conditions** in firms by creating female-friendly labor conditions that facilitate, for example, family-compatible working arrangements (flexible hours, separate facilities, equipment for men and women) and access to safe transport (IFC, 2013).
- **Leveling the playing field** through legal reforms and strengthening women's collective voice. Beyond eliminating legal discrimination, affirmative-action policies, including quotas, can bolster women's economic inclusion (Women, Business and the Law 2023). Table 1 shows the need for substantive reforms in LAC in favor of gender equality.⁹
- **Proactive policies that promote women's leadership and decision-making.** For instance, the presence of more women in business leadership—including women on boards and in senior management—is connected to better environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards (IFC, 2018).

In light of these challenges, key gender-smart policy solutions to increase women's quality employment in the region include:

- **Gendered approaches to encourage girls' and young women's enrollment in STEM subjects**, specially focusing in new sectors of labor demand e.g. ICT, green-transition jobs. For more detailed and comprehensive example strategies in LAC see [here](#).
- **Focusing on young adolescent girls using a package of interventions** that may include scholarships, paid internship, and/or cash transfers.
- **Providing access to care using a mix of public and private means** such as low cost or government-subsidized⁷ childcare services, expansion of services that meet parents' needs (closeness, compatible hours) and, from the side of employers, a combination of alternatives such as workplace daycares or less resource-intensive ones such as information and referral services and back-up care benefits.⁸ For more detailed and comprehensive example strategies in LAC see [here](#).
- **Encouraging paternal and parental leave policies.** This policy, in addition to the one above, are particularly relevant as they have the potential to equalize household dynamics by incentivizing women to work and men to take on more care duties (Cucagna and Romero, 2021). In addition, complementary benefits such as policies towards flexible working arrangements.
- **Proactively addressing gender based violence**—including at home, at work, and/or during travel to work. For more detailed and comprehensive example strategies in LAC see [here](#).
- **Increasing [access to credit](#) and financial support**, for example, through the use of alternative forms of collateral or incentives for business formalization. This strategy can help recover the resilience of self-employed and less well educated female workers post-pandemic.
- **Addressing data and analysis gaps** for better diagnostics and evidence of what works. For instance, disaggregated gender data on key dimensions such as access to health care services, time spent doing household chores, potential changes in social norms and attitudes, and the greater risk of violence against women and girls (LACGIL, 2021). There is also a need for detailed analysis of the impacts of measures that ex-ante might seem gender equalizing.

7 For Latin America, Mateo Diaz and Rodriguez-Chamussy (2016) review a series of experimental and rigorous quasi-experimental evaluations of childcare interventions. Their results support the proposition that access to formal childcare improves maternal labor market outcomes. For instance, increased probability of the mother being employed if access to subsidized childcare is provided, and increased number of hours worked.

8 See IFC (2017) for a review of flagship approaches that companies across sectors and regions have taken to better meet their employees' childcare needs.

9 In some countries, employers are required by law to provide or support childcare. However, there is evidence supporting that when the requirement is specifically linked to the employment of women, this can be a disincentive for employers to hire women, or lead to lower earnings for women when they are hired (Prada, Rucci, and Urzua, 2015). Also, firms that are legally responsible for financing the cost of childcare, might shift the cost of the benefits to all workers –both females and males (Rojas et. al., 2016).

HOW ARE WBG PROJECTS ADDRESSING THIS ISSUE?

To remove restrictions to more and better employment for women, the WBG supports operations in the LAC region focusing on promoting women's employment in non-traditional and climate-relevant sectors; increasing female participation in leadership roles; providing specialized training and enhanced skill-building opportunities among women, while addressing their specific constraints (domestic work, mobility, etc.); supporting legal reforms to level their playing field; and ensuring their safety to and from their places of work.

- In **Chile**, the [Green Hydrogen Facility to Support a Green, Resilient and Inclusive Economic Development](#) project (2023 – to date) is the first loan which aims to promote green hydrogen to support climate change mitigation efforts. In Chile's renewable energy sector, women make up only 23 percent of the workforce while only 14.7 percent of Chilean companies include women as part of the boardrooms. Addressing these gender gaps, the project will encourage an increase in the share of women in the green hydrogen workforce – particularly in managerial positions, and thus contribute to increase women's representation in the energy transition. To this end, the project will support the inclusion of incentives—such as lower interest rates or longer loan tenors—among selected green hydrogen sub-projects that demonstrate participation of women in managerial positions. It is expected that the share of women employed in senior management positions in green hydrogen sub-projects will go from a baseline of zero to 30 percent.
- In **Colombia**, the [Equitable and Green Recovery DPF](#) (approved in 2022, and completed) supported Government's measures that reduce women's disproportionate household and care work so to increase their labor market outcomes. On average, women in Colombia work on non-remunerated domestic and care work for 34 hours per week versus 18 hours for men. In recent years, 29 percent of women said that family reasons prevented them from looking for a job while 13 percent of women reported experiencing unfair treatment at work due to having children. To address these issues, the DPF supported legislation that introduced two key elements to improve women's labor market outcomes and foster shared responsibility in childcare. One, the enactment of measures that prohibit discrimination against women's access to employment (e.g., employer cannot question applicants about their plans for childbearing). The other, increased length of paternity leave, shared parental leave, and allow parental leave to be taken on a part-time basis.
- In **Argentina**, the [Promoting Better Jobs through Integrated Labor and Skills Programs](#) (2022 – to date) aims to increase female formal employment through improved quality and availability of training and employment services. As one of the main beneficiaries, women ages 25-59 (with children and without tertiary education) will receive labor market orientation as well as vocational and on-the-job trainings provided by the National Directorate of Continuous Training. Monthly stipends will also be provided to address women's participation constraints due to mobility issues as well as child and elderly care responsibilities, during the entirety of the program duration. An indicator used to monitor progress is the increase in formal employment for program participants who completed a training course or on-the-job training/internship within 12 months of completion.
- In **Mexico**, the [Mexico Promoting Women's Economics Opportunities and Sustainable Productivity Growth DPL](#) (2023 – to date) supports the Mexican Government's reforms to facilitate women's access to jobs and increase female labor participation. A key component of the DPL consists of expanding social protection coverage for domestic workers (affiliation with the National Social Security System), who are mostly women (89 percent), so that they have greater rights in setting the terms of their employment. In addition, considering that 70 percent of Mexican women and girls over 15 years have experienced some type of violence, another component of the DPL are legal reforms that enhance overall safety and security of women against GBV. Activities include enhanced inter-institutional coordination and monitoring mechanisms, a mandate to adopt a national policy to address GBV, activating early warning mechanisms, among others.
- In **Brazil**, the [São Paulo Aricanduva Bus Rapid Transit Corridor](#) project (2020 - to date) aims to address women's concerns about safety and GBV in public transportation. For many women, use of public transport (mainly buses) is the main mode of getting to work. However, as many as 46 percent of Brazilian women over the age of 18 report not feeling safe using public transport and 25 percent have been victims of sexual harassment. To address these concerns and increase female ridership, a subcomponent of this project includes safety features such as implementing proper lighting and cameras in the stations. Transport operators will also be trained to appropriately respond to incidents of sexual violence and harassment. Project indicators include targets on increased satisfaction and safety among women as well as increased female ridership.

RELEVANT RESOURCES

WORLD BANK RESEARCH ON THE TOPIC

- Almeida, Rita K.; Viollaz, Mariana. 2022. [Women in Paid Employment: A Role for Public Policies and Social Norms in Guatemala](#). Policy Research Working Paper; No. 9919. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Beegle, Kathleen; Rubiano-Matulevich, Eliana. 2020. [Adapting Skills Training to Address Constraints to Women's Participation](#). Jobs Notes No. 7. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Carranza, Eliana; Das, Smita; and Kotikula, Aphichoke. 2018. [GenderBased Employment Segregation: Understanding Causes and Policy Interventions](#). Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Chioda, Laura. 2016. [Work and Family: Latin American and Caribbean Women in Search of a New Balance](#). Latin American Development Forum. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Cucagna, Emilia; Romero, Javier. 2021. [The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on Labor Markets in Latin America and the Caribbean](#). World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Datta, Namita; Kotikula, Aphichoke. 2017. [Not Just More, but Better : Fostering Quality of Employment for Women](#). Jobs Working Paper, No. 1. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Devadas, Sharmila; Kim, Young Eun. 2020. [Exploring the Potential of Gender Parity to Promote Economic Growth](#). Research and Policy Brief; No. 39. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Halim, Daniel; O'Sullivan, Michael B.; Sahay, Abhilasha. 2023. [Increasing Female Labor Force Participation. World Bank Group Gender Thematic Policy Notes Series; Evidence and Practice Note](#). World Bank, Washington, DC.
- LACGIL. 2021. [Including Women in the Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery](#). Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Muller, Miriam; Sousa, Liliana D. 2020. ['She Helps Me All the Time': Underestimating Women's Economic Engagement in Rural Honduras](#). Policy Research Working Paper; No. 9217. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Reynolds, Sarah Anne. 2021. [Improving Gender Wage Equality Reduces Intimate Partner Violence in Brazil: Policy Implications for Mothers](#). World Bank, Washington, DC.
- World Bank. 2014. [Gender at Work: A Companion to the World Development Report on Jobs](#). Washington, DC: World Bank.
- World Bank and UNDP. 2022. [Uneven Recovery in Latin America and the Caribbean: Are Women Being Left Behind?](#) Washington, DC: World Bank and UNDP.
- World Bank. 2023. [From Infection to Inflation](#). LAC Poverty and Labor Brief. Washington, DC.

World Bank. [Women, Business and the Law 2023](#). Washington, DC: World Bank.

OTHER RECENT KEY REPORTS

- Ameratunga Kring, Sriani. 2017. [Gender in employment policies and programmes: What works for women?](#) Employment Working Paper No. 235. Geneva: International Labor Organization.
- Beghini, Valentina; Umberto Cattaneo; and Emanuela Pozzan, 2019. [A quantum leap for gender equality: For a better future of work for all](#), Paris: ILO.
- Bergallo, Paola; Mangini, Marcelo; Magnelli, Mariela;. and Bercovich, Sabina. 2021. [The impacts of COVID-19 on women's economic autonomy in Latin America and the Caribbean](#). UNDP LAC C19 Pol Documents Ser, 25, pp.1-32.
- Berniell, I., Gasparini, L., Marchionni, M. and Viollaz, M., 2023. [Lucky women in unlucky cohorts: Gender differences in the effects of initial labor market conditions in Latin America](#). *Journal of Development Economics*, 161, p.103042.
- Bustelo, Monserrat; Suaya, Agustina; and Viollaz, Mariana. 2019. [The Future of Work in Latin America and the Caribbean: What will The Labor Market Be Like for Women?](#) Washington DC: Inter-American Development Bank.
- Chinen, Marjorie; de Hoop, Thomas; Alcazar, Lorena; Balarin, Maria; Senner, Josht. 2017. [Vocational And Business Training To Improve Women's Labour Market Outcomes In Low- And Middle-Income Countries - A Systematic Review](#). Campbell Systemic Review.
- ECLAC. 2019. [Employment Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean: Evolution of and prospects for women's labour participation in Latin America](#). Santiago Chile: ECLAC.
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- ILO. 2018. [World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2018—Global snapshot](#). Geneva: International Labor Organization (ILO).
- Martinez, Daniel; Mitnik, Oscar A.; Salgado, Edgar; Scholl, Lynn; YañezPagans, Patricia. 2020. [Connecting to economic opportunity: The role of public transport in promoting women's employment in Lima](#). *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy*, 3, pp.1-23.
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GENDER STATISTICS, INDICES AND MEASUREMENT TOOLS

- [UNDP Human Development Gender Inequality Index](#)
- [UNDP Human Development Gender Development Index](#)
- [World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report](#)
- [OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index](#)
- [World Bank Gender Data Portal](#)
- [World Bank World Development Indicators](#)
- [World Bank Women Business and the Law](#)
- [World Bank Global Index](#)
- [World Bank Group Enterprise Survey](#)

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