

FOSTERING LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION AMONG MAURITIAN WOMEN QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE*

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Over the past decades, Mauritius has made significant progress in the labor force participation of women. The share of women of working age (16–64) who are active in the labor market increased from 50.2 percent in 2008 to 57.5 percent in 2018. Despite this progress, the gender gap lies at 31 percentage points, and important challenges lay ahead. This note illustrates the most recent dynamics in female labor force participation and factors that can help explain such changes. It describes what women do when they work outside the home and how much they are paid relative to men. The note identifies reasons for the persistent low rate of participation among women in the labor market based on both quantitative and qualitative evidence. It concludes by proposing policy actions that are key to raising women’s engagement in the labor market.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1. The Mauritian economy has gone through an unprecedented structural transformation that has made steady economic growth possible and has significantly reduced poverty. At independence, the primary sector accounted for over 20 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). By 2017, its share had declined to about 4 percent, offset by a boom in manufacturing in the 1980s and the subsequent development of the services sector. On the one hand, the structural transformation of the economy has contributed to a reduction in poverty. Measured against the US\$5.50-a-day 2011 purchasing power parity poverty line, the poverty headcount ratio declined from 20.3 percent in 2006/07 to 18.1 percent in 2012 and reached 12.1 percent in 2017, well below the average among upper-middle-income countries.² On the other hand, economic growth has been accompanied by widening income inequality, which only now has started to narrow. Measured by the Gini index, income inequality in Mauritius declined from 38.6 in 2012 to 36.5 in 2017. This is comparable with the incidence of inequality in countries at a similar level of economic development and moderate compared with the most unequal countries in the world.

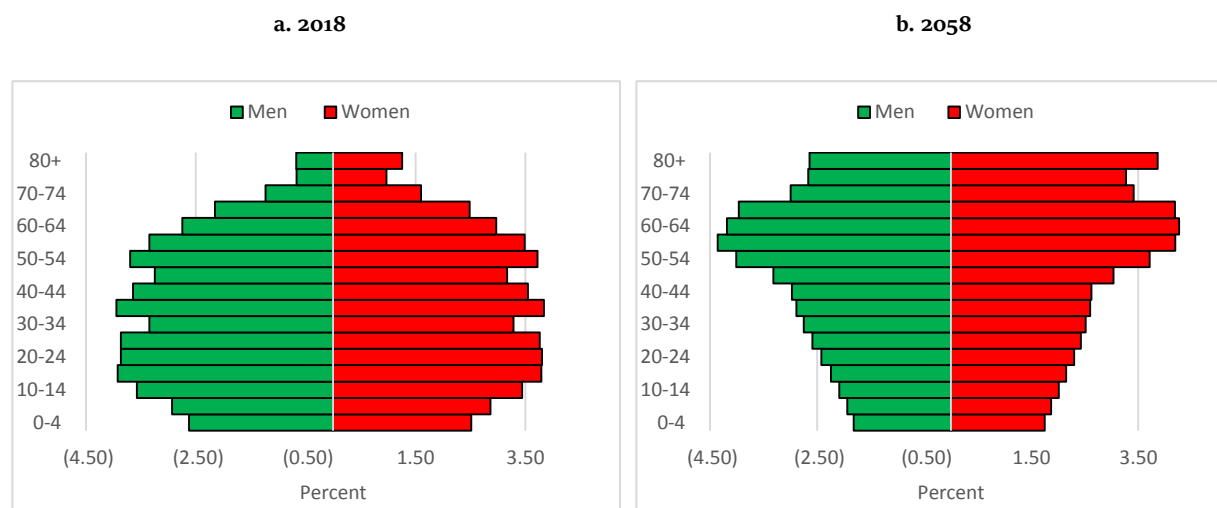
2. Today, rapid population aging and skills shortages represent threats to productivity growth. After decades of sustained fertility decline and rising life expectancy, Mauritius is facing the challenges of an aging society and shrinking workforce. The population ages 65 or older, currently 11 percent of the total, is expected to reach almost 27 percent in 2058 (figure 1). The working-age population, ages 15–64, is expected to fall from the current 71 percent of the population to 61.5 percent by 2058. And the dependency ratio will increase from 40.8 to 62.5 by 2058. In addition, jobs in the high-productivity services sector require advanced skills that Mauritius has not been able to attract and that, despite the improvements in educational outcomes observed in the past decades, the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution (the bottom 40) often does not have.

3. Raising labor market participation among women can help the country address the challenge of population aging and skills shortages. The government is seeking a second economic miracle and hopes to join the group of high-income economies. Since 2013, the contribution of productivity to economic growth has declined (Ranzani, Bergmann, and Tandrayen-Ragoobur 2019). The productivity gains achieved over the past decades thanks to structural transformation and progress in education will gradually fade. Mauritius will require a larger number of working-age individuals, including women, to join the labor force and remain employed longer if productivity is to grow more rapidly. Attracting and retaining foreign highly skilled labor

² Poverty rates are calculated using per capita consumption.

and improving the quality of learning will be key to providing the country with skills that are relevant for a service-oriented knowledge economy.

Figure 1. Population pyramid, by age-group and sex, 2018 and 2058



Source: Data in Statistics Mauritius 2018.

4. Besides the economic rationale, there are meaningful social equity arguments for improving the labor market conditions among women. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals highlight gender equality and women's empowerment as fundamental rights and important development objectives on their own. Globally, gender gaps in labor markets have been remarkably resistant to change, despite progress in other dimensions of gender equality (IMF 2019; Klasen 2019; World Bank 2011, 2014). This highlights the need for policy to address the social norms and assigned gender roles at the heart of these gaps. Boosting labor force participation among low-educated women, many of whom are among the bottom 40, can also make growth more inclusive (World Bank 2017).

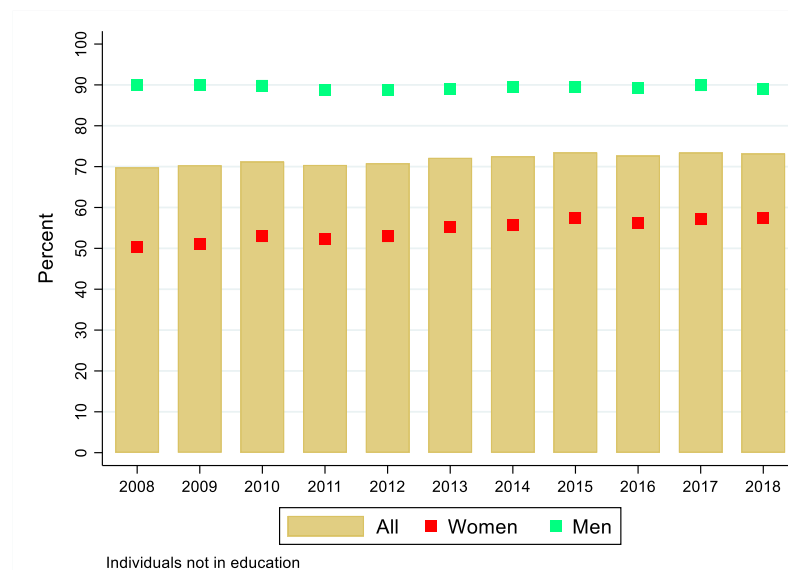
Box 1. Definitions and data sources

<i>Definitions</i>	
Working-age population	The working-age population is defined as the population ages 15–64.
Dependency ratio	The dependency ratio is the ratio of dependents—people younger than 15 or older than 64—to the working-age population, that is, people ages 15–64.
Labor force participation rate	The labor force participation rate is a measure of the share of a country’s working-age population that engages actively in the labor market either by working for pay or profit or by looking for employment.
Employment-to-population ratio	The employment-to-population ratio is defined as the proportion of a country’s working-age population that is employed.
Unemployment rate	The unemployment rate shows the share of the labor force that does not have a job, is available to work, and is actively looking for work.
<i>Data sources</i>	
2008–18 data, CMPHS (Continuous Multi-Purpose Household Survey) (database), Statistics Mauritius, Port Louis, http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/CensusandSurveys/Pages/Continous-Multipurpose-survey-Lists.aspx .	
2018/19 data, LCS (Mauritius: Living Conditions Survey), National Data Archive of Mauritius, Statistics Mauritius, Port Louis, http://196.13.125.127/index.php/catalog/71/sampling .	
Gallup World Poll, 2016 (Gallup and ILO 2017).	

2. TRENDS AND PATTERNS IN FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

5. **Despite considerable progress, women still lag men in labor force participation.** Overall, slightly more than 7 working-age Mauritians in 10 participated in the labor market in 2018 (73.2 percent).³ Compared with a decade earlier (69.8 percent), the participation rate has improved modestly (figure 2). However, labor force participation rates among men and among women have followed different trajectories. Thus, the share of men in the labor force has remained virtually constant, at about 89 percent (declining from 89.9 percent in 2008 to 89.0 percent in 2018). Meanwhile, women’s participation in the labor market rose from 50.2 percent in 2008 to 57.5 percent a decade later (see figure 2). Despite this progress, women still lag men, with a gap of about 31 percentage points in 2018. Other population subgroups—defined by cohort, age, or education—have shown quite different trends.

Figure 2. Labor force participation rates, overall and by sex, 2008–18



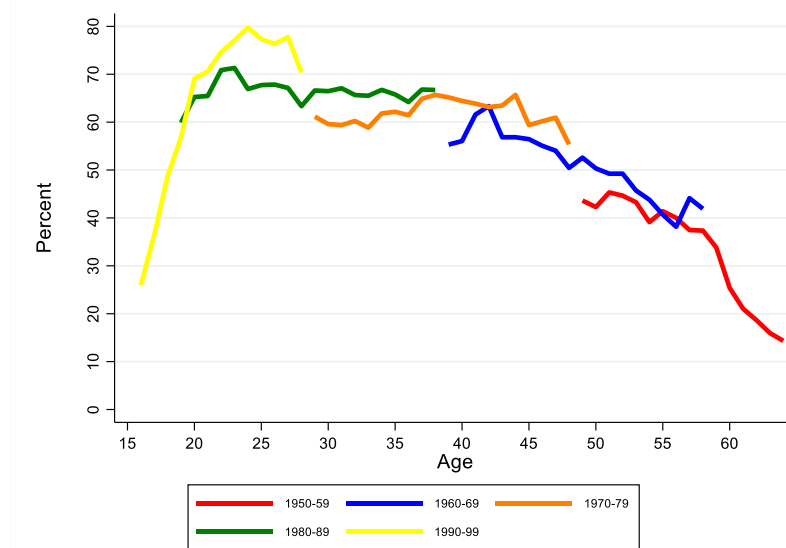
Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

6. **The younger cohorts of women exhibit higher participation rates than older cohorts of women.** A look at female labor force participation at various ages over a decade indicates that, at any age, women born more recently participate in the labor market in larger numbers than women in previous cohorts. For example, about 77 percent of women born in the 1990s were participating

³ All working-age data refer to the population ages 16–64.

in the labor force at age 25, while only 67.7 percent of women born a decade earlier were participating in the labor force at age 25 (figure 3). At age 35, a woman born in the 1980s showed a 66 percent likelihood of participating, while the corresponding share at age 35 among woman who were born in the 1970s was 62 percent. Such a cohort gap may also be detected among women at age 45. Thus, about 59 percent of women born in the 1970s were active in the labor market at age 45 relative to about 56 percent of women who were born in the 1960s and who were active at age 45. This is not an age effect given that the various cohorts are compared at the same age. Rather, it indicates that a set of factors positively correlated with women's participation improved over time. Educational attainment, norms and attitudes, and conditions of employment are potential candidates.

Figure 3. Female labor force participation rates, by cohort over the life cycle, 2008-18



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

7. Labor force participation among women has risen continuously among all age-groups, but particularly among young women. Women ages 16-24 and 25-29 spearheaded the upswing in female participation rates with a growth of 14 and 16 percentage points over a decade, respectively (figure 4). Among the youngest, participation rates have increased from 59.4 percent to 73.7 percent, and, in this age-group, the gender gap declined to slightly above 10 percentage points. A similar reduction in the gender gap is observed among the 25-29 age-group, although the gap still stands at about 21 points. Middle-aged women (30-44) and women ages 45-64 followed with an rise of 8 and 5 percentage points, respectively. In the two age-groups 30-44 and 45-64, the gender

gap in participation in 2018 is estimated at about 9 and 4 percentage points, respectively. Differences in labor force participation among women on the two main islands of Mauritius—Mauritius and Rodrigues—help determine differences in the gender gap by location (box 2).

Figure 4. Labor force participation rates, overall, by sex, and by age-group, 2008–18

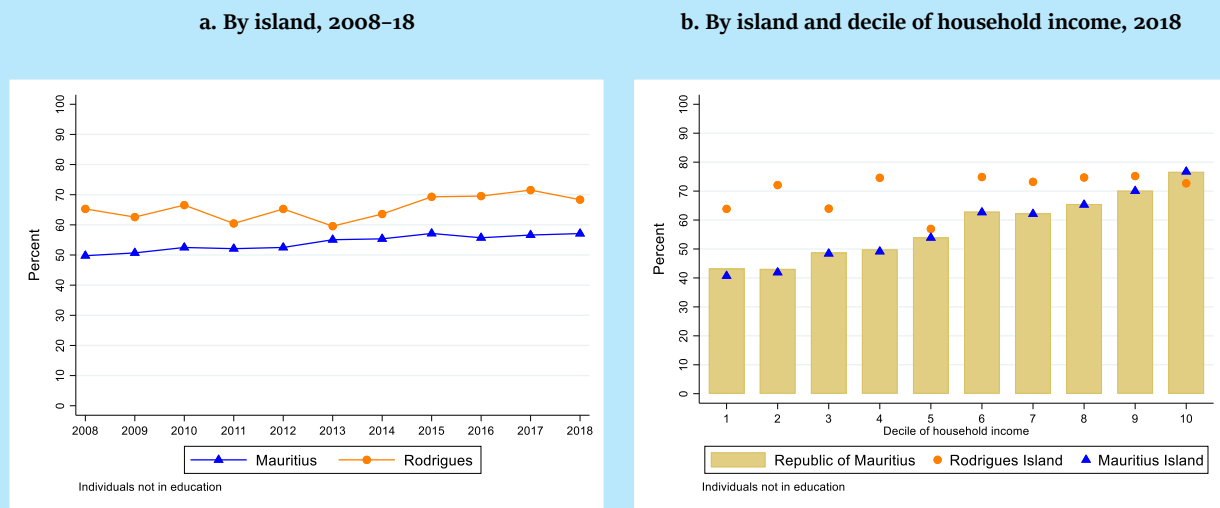


Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

Box 2. The labor market participation among women on the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues

Although the gender gap in participation rates exists on each of the two main islands of the Republic of Mauritius, namely, Mauritius and Rodrigues, it is substantially larger on the island of Mauritius. In 2008, the gender gap was about 24.5 percentage points on Rodrigues, and female labor force participation was estimated at 65 percent (figure B2.1, panel a). In Mauritius, the gap was almost twice as large, at 40 points, with a participation rate among women of about 50 percent. Men’s participation rate was virtually identical on the islands, at about 90 percent. Over the last decade, the island of Mauritius has achieved more progress, with female participation rising by 7 points, while Rodrigues has posted an increase of only 3 percentage points, to reach 68 percent in 2018. The higher participation rates of women on Rodrigues is at least partially attributable to the more difficult economic conditions and higher poverty rates there, which lead women to work outside the household to make ends meet. This is, to some extent, corroborated by the fact that women’s participation on Rodrigues does not vary considerably across the deciles of household income, while the differences by decile are sharp on the island of Mauritius (figure B2.1, panel b).

Figure B2.1. Female labor force participation, by island and decile of household income



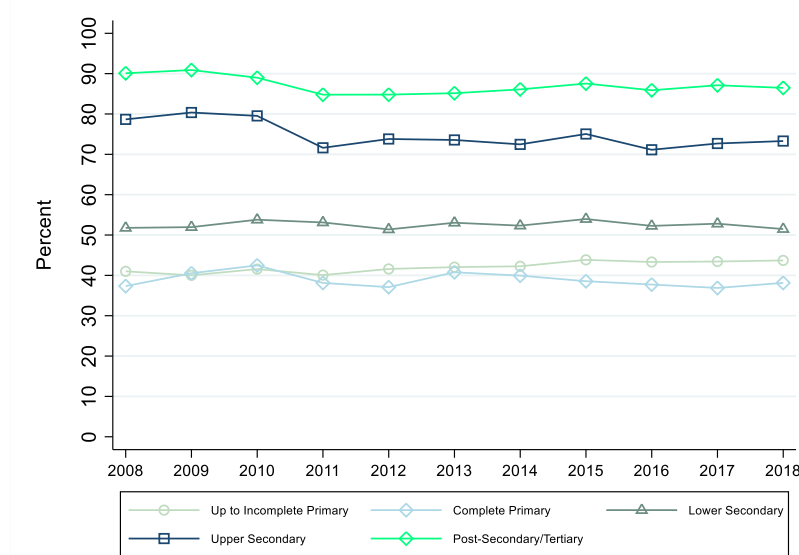
Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

8. Well-educated women show a higher probability of participating in the labor market.

An additional factor that helps explain the growth in female labor force participation is education. Individuals with higher educational attainment participate in larger numbers in the labor market and exhibit a greater degree of attachment to labor participation. Women are no exception (figure 5). About one woman in three with up to primary educational attainment participates in the labor market. This compares with more than two women in three with upper-secondary education. More than 80 percent of women with post-secondary or tertiary education participate in the labor force, which is about the same as the average rate among men. Although activity rates at each level of

educational attainment have not posted sizable increases over time, the key element has been the rise in the share of more well educated women in the working-age population. This means that the expansion in the population shares of more highly educated women who participate at a higher rate than the total population has contributed enormously to the change in the participation rate.⁴

Figure 5. Female labor force participation rates, by educational attainment, 2008–18



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

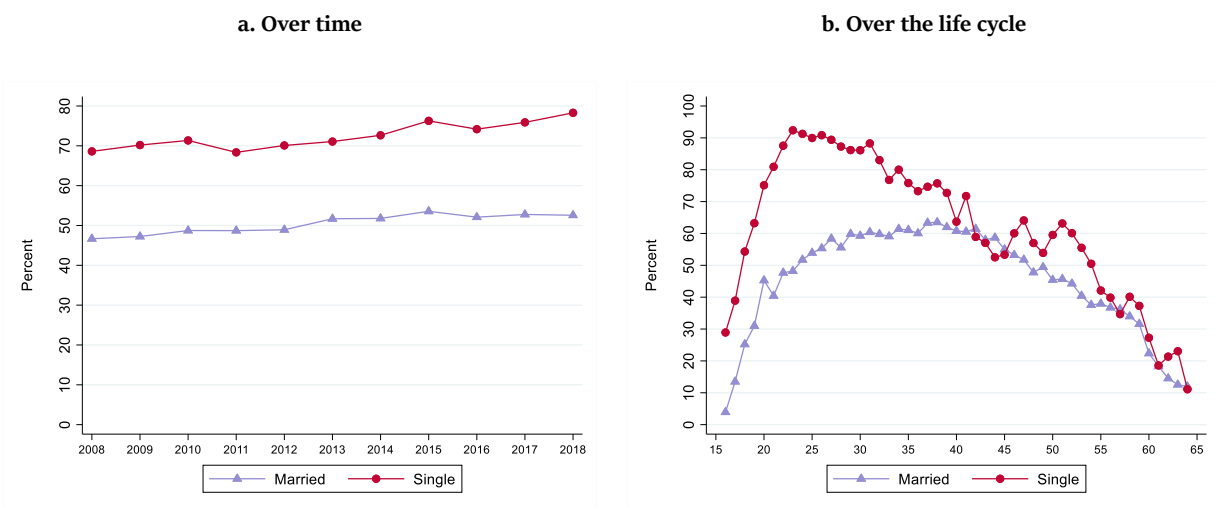
9. Marriage, childbirth and childcare responsibilities are key to explaining patterns of female labor force participation. Women’s marital status determines large differences in women’s participation rates. The average age at first marriage is 24 (latest available data year is 2011), and about 90 percent of women are married by age 35.⁵ The share of single women who participate in the labor force is about as high as that of men and estimated at 78.3 percent in 2018 (figure 6). By contrast, married women are significantly less likely to remain in the labor force. The average participation rate among married women is estimated at 52.6 percent in 2018. The gap between married and single women widens over time, with a more rapid rise in participation among single women. This gap expands early in women’s life cycle, reaches a peak at around age 25, and virtually

⁴ The share of women with postsecondary or tertiary education in the female working-age population rose by 15 percentage points, from 6 percent to almost 22 percent, in 2008–18. At the same time, the share of women with low participation rates, namely, women with primary or secondary education, declined by between 5 and 6 percentage points.

⁵ This figure includes women who by age 35 are divorced or widowed.

closes after age 55, when Mauritians become eligible for the basic retirement pension. As argued by the World Bank (2017), this pattern might indicate that marriage, pregnancy, and childcare deter women from (re)entering the labor market because of prevailing social norms and gender roles that attribute to women the primary role of caregiver.

Figure 6. Female labor force participation, by marital status and the life cycle, 2008–18



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

3. WORKING WOMEN: WHAT DO THEY DO?

10. **Trends in female labor force participation mirror, for the most part, trends in women's employment.** The employment-to-population ratio is systematically lower among women than among men (annex A, figure A.1, panel a). In 2018, the female employment rate stood at 52 percent, compared with 85 percent among men. This translated into a gap of 33 percentage points. However, the gap has narrowed over the last decade from 42.5 points in 2008.

11. **Women face more difficulties in obtaining a job, and unemployment rates are notably larger among women than among men** (annex A, figure A.1, panel b). Between 2008 and 2018, the unemployment gender gap dropped from 2.8 to 1.6 percentage points. The female unemployment rate is estimated at 5.5 percent in 2018, compared with 3.9 percent among men.

12. **Young women have spearheaded the trend toward the narrowing of gender gaps in employment and unemployment.** Young women ages 16–24 and 25–29 have made much more progress toward gender equality in access to jobs than older cohorts (figure 7). The employment rate among women ages 16–24 is estimated at 52 percent in 2018 (44 percent in 2008). Similarly, women ages 24–29 posted a decline of about 18 percentage points in the gap with their men counterparts. As of 2018, the female employment rate was 66.2 percent. Older cohorts of women, ages 30–44 and 45–64, have recorded significant improvement over the past 10 years. However, the gap with men is still rather large, at about 32 and 41 percentage points, respectively.

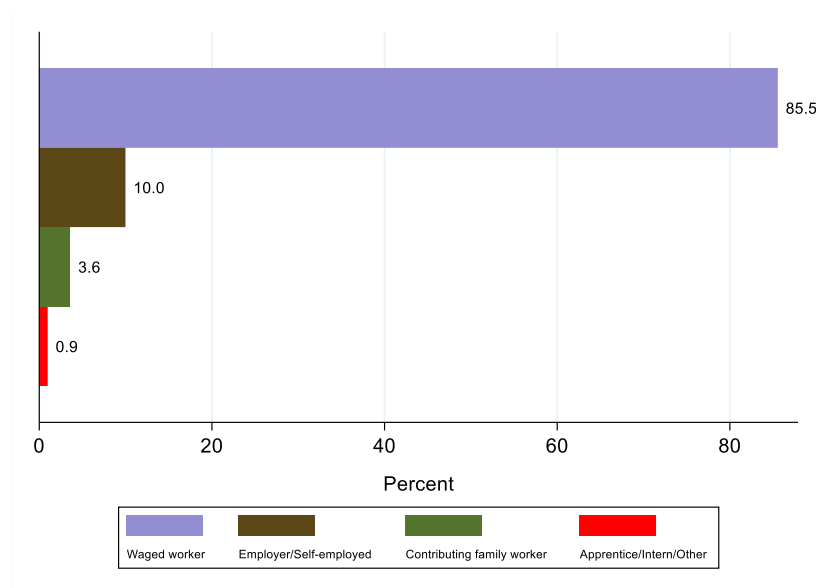
Figure 7. Employment-to-population ratio, by sex and age-group, 2008–18



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

13. The overwhelming majority of working women—85 percent—are employed in wage work. In Mauritius, most of the employed population works for a wage (World Bank 2017). Women are also largely employed as wage workers, 85.5 percent in 2018. About 23.0 percent are employed in the public sector, in public administration and state-owned enterprises. The rest are classified as employers (1.5 percent), own-account workers (8.5 percent), or contributing family workers (3.6 percent) (figure 8). The rest of the analysis is focused especially on wage workers.

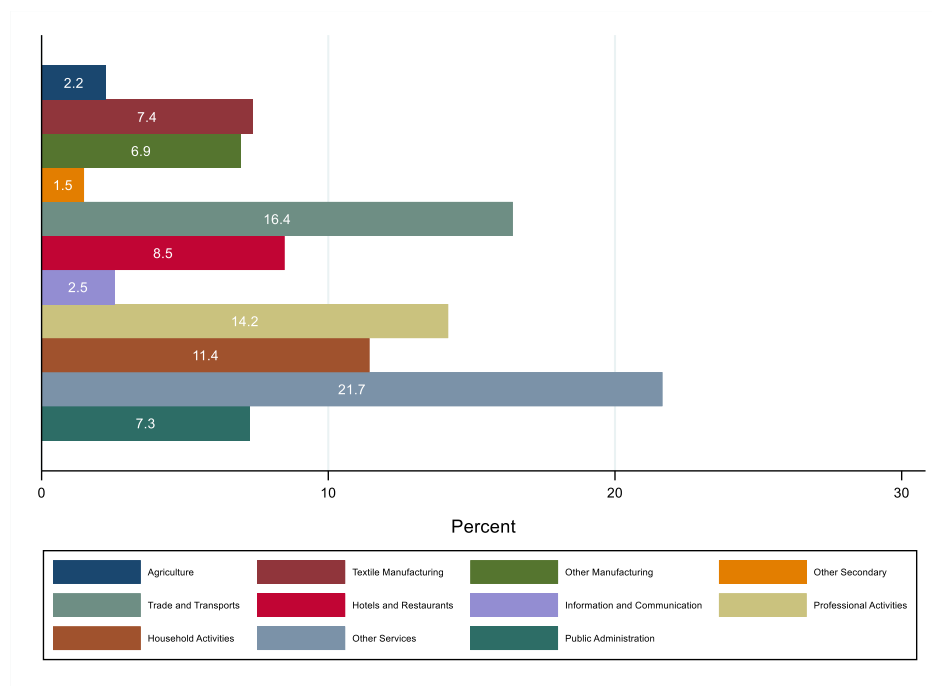
Figure 8. Employment type distribution, women, 2018



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

14. The services sector employs over 70 percent of women wage workers. The structural transformation process, from a traditional services sector to modern services, has continued in Mauritius over the past decade (World Bank 2017). As of 2018, only 4 percent of women working for wages were employed in agriculture; the textile sector employed almost 5 percent; and the rest of the secondary sector—other manufacturing, construction, and utilities—accounted for about 18 percent of women wage employment (figure 9). Within services, trade (12.7 percent) and public administration (10.5 percent) took up the lion’s share, followed by hospitality and food services (8.9 percent), education (7.4 percent), administrative and support activities (6.1 percent), transport and storage activities (5.9 percent), private household activities (5.4 percent), and health services (4.9 percent).

Figure 9. The sectoral distribution of women wage workers, 2018

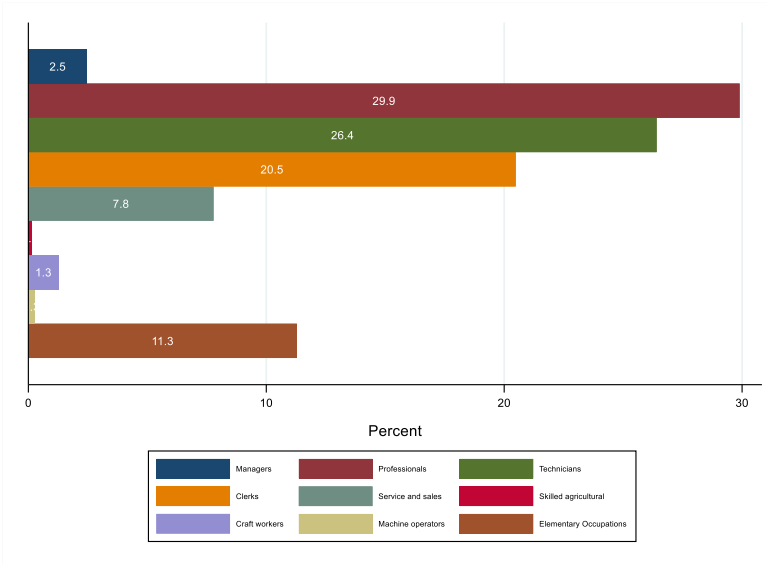


Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

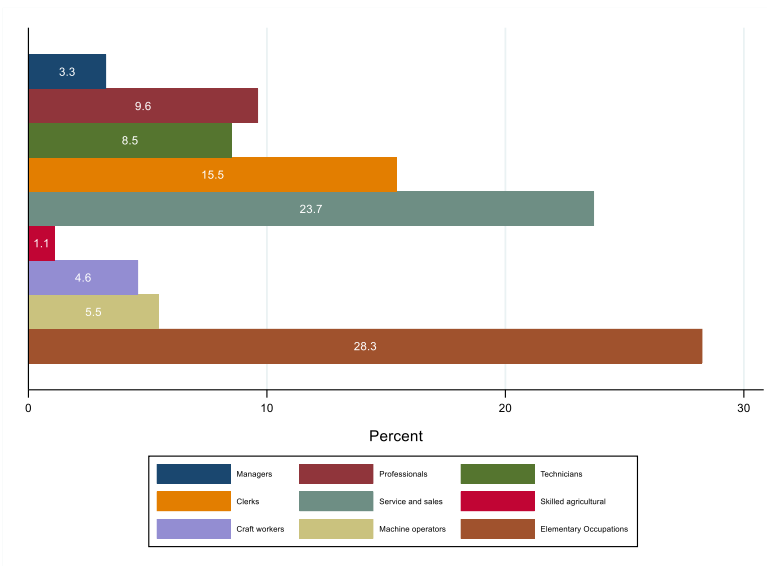
15. Women employed in the public sector are more likely to have high-skill jobs. About one woman in three employed in the public sector is either a manager (2.5 percent) or a professional (30 percent). Together with technicians (26.4 percent), these two job categories account for almost 60 percent of all women employed in the public sector (figure 10, panel a). The share of women employed in low- or mid-skill jobs is around 11 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Relative to men employed in the public sector, the distribution of women is skewed toward high-skill occupations (World Bank 2017).

Figure 10. Occupational distribution of women wage workers, by sector, 2018

a. Public sector



b. Private sector



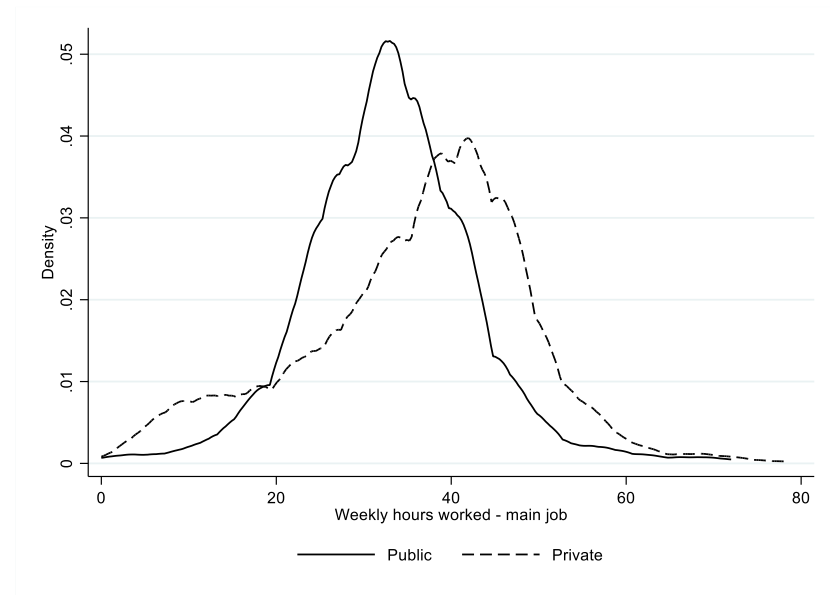
Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

16. **By contrast, in the private sector, women are largely employed in low- and mid-skill jobs.** Over one-quarter of women perform low-skill jobs or fill elementary occupations, and one woman in two has a mid-skill job (see figure 10, panel b). About 15 percent are clerks; 23.7 percent

are service and sales workers; and the remaining 12 percent are craftswomen or machine operators. Only about 21 percent have high-skill jobs. Meanwhile, men are more likely than women to hold mid-skill jobs. Only about 14 percent of men were employed in low-skill jobs in 2018.

17. Women working in the public sector have more flexibility in working hours. Women working for wages are employed an average of 33 hours a week in the public sector or an average of 39 hours a week in the private sector, that is, about the same number of hours as a full-time worker. The difference in average working hours is largely attributable to the substantially larger number of women working between 20 hours and 40 hours a week and the lower number of women working more than 40 hours a week in the public sector (figure 11). In the public sector, one woman in four works full time (40 hours a week or more), compared with about one woman in two in the private sector.

Figure 11. Distribution of women wage workers in the public and private sectors, by the number of hours worked per week, 2018

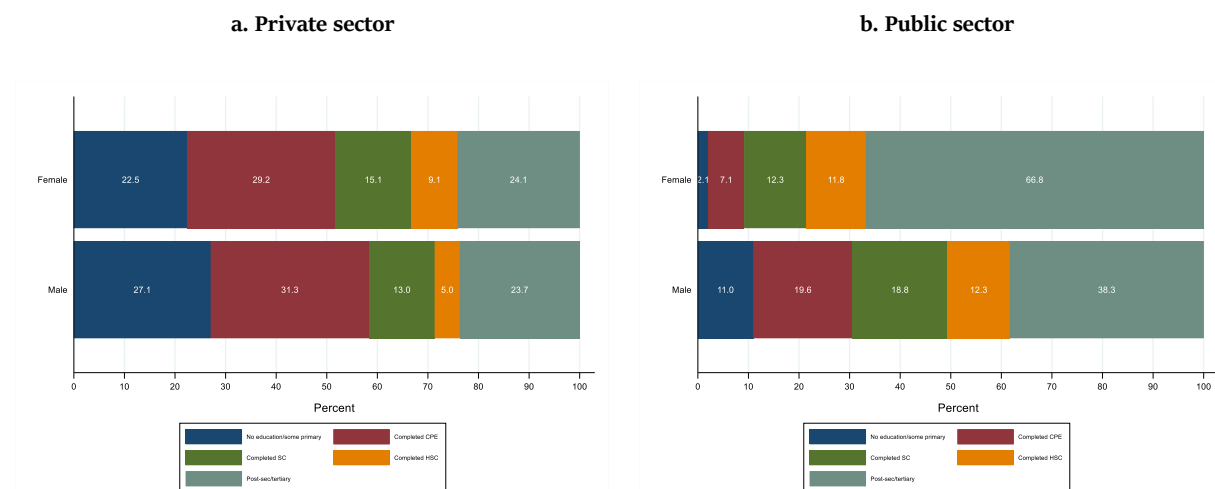


Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

18. In the public sector, women are, on average, more well educated than men. The population of Mauritius has made considerable progress in educational attainment (World Bank 2017). Girls outstrip boys in schooling outcomes. According to data of 2018, 58.2 percent of the student population of 34,305 in tertiary education are women (HEC 2019). Yet, the considerable achievements of girls and young women in school are not carrying over to employment opportunities, with the exception of the public sector. While no substantial educational differences emerge between men and women in the private sector (figure 12, panel a), the public sector is able

to attract more well-educated women than men. More than two women in three working in the public sector in 2018 had postsecondary or tertiary education, compared with 38.3 percent of men (figure 12, panel b).

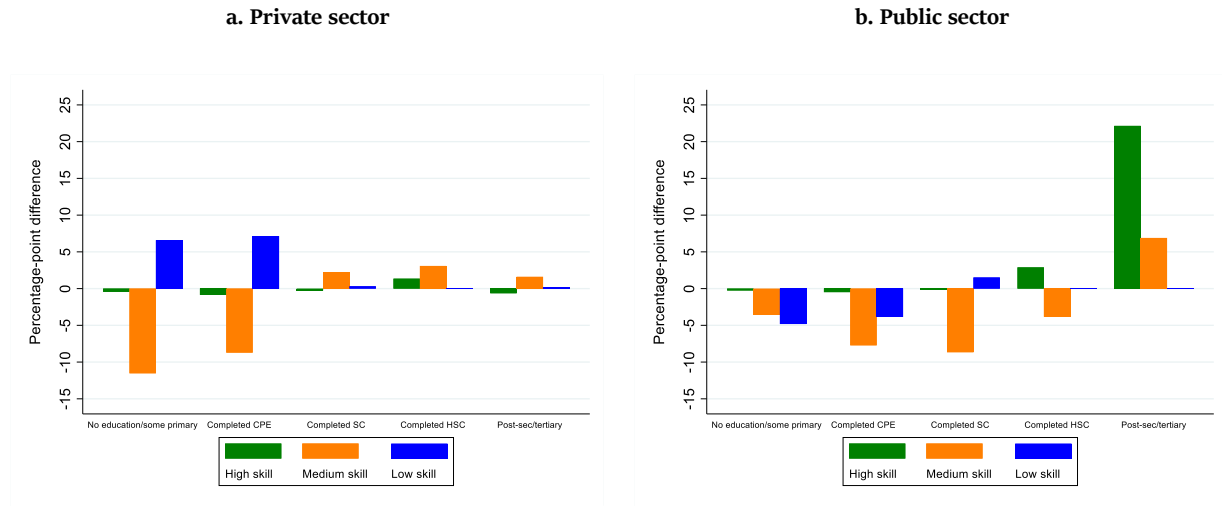
Figure 12. Distribution of wage workers, by educational attainment, sex, and sector, 2018



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

19. **In the private sector, a skills mismatch persists among working women.** Educational and occupational streaming have led to a skills mismatch between women’s human capital and the labor demands of private sector employers. Men are advantaged in obtaining high-skill jobs, even though more women than men attend university. The gender skill gap among workers with postsecondary or tertiary education slightly favors men over women (figure 13, panel a). Highly educated women tend to be employed in low- and mid-skill jobs. By contrast, women with lower educational attainment, that is, with up to primary-school certificates, are employed in low-skill jobs more frequently than men; the gaps are 5 to 7 percentage points. In the public sector, meanwhile, women with postsecondary or tertiary education have a large advantage over men (over 20 percentage points) in landing high-skill jobs (figure 13, panel b). This may derive from women’s preference for public sector jobs as such jobs offer more stability and more flexible working hours or from their inability to get high-skill jobs in the private sector. Among individuals with primary or secondary education, men are advantaged over women in obtaining low- and mid-skill jobs in the public sector.

Figure 13. Sex differences in skill levels, by educational attainment, 2018

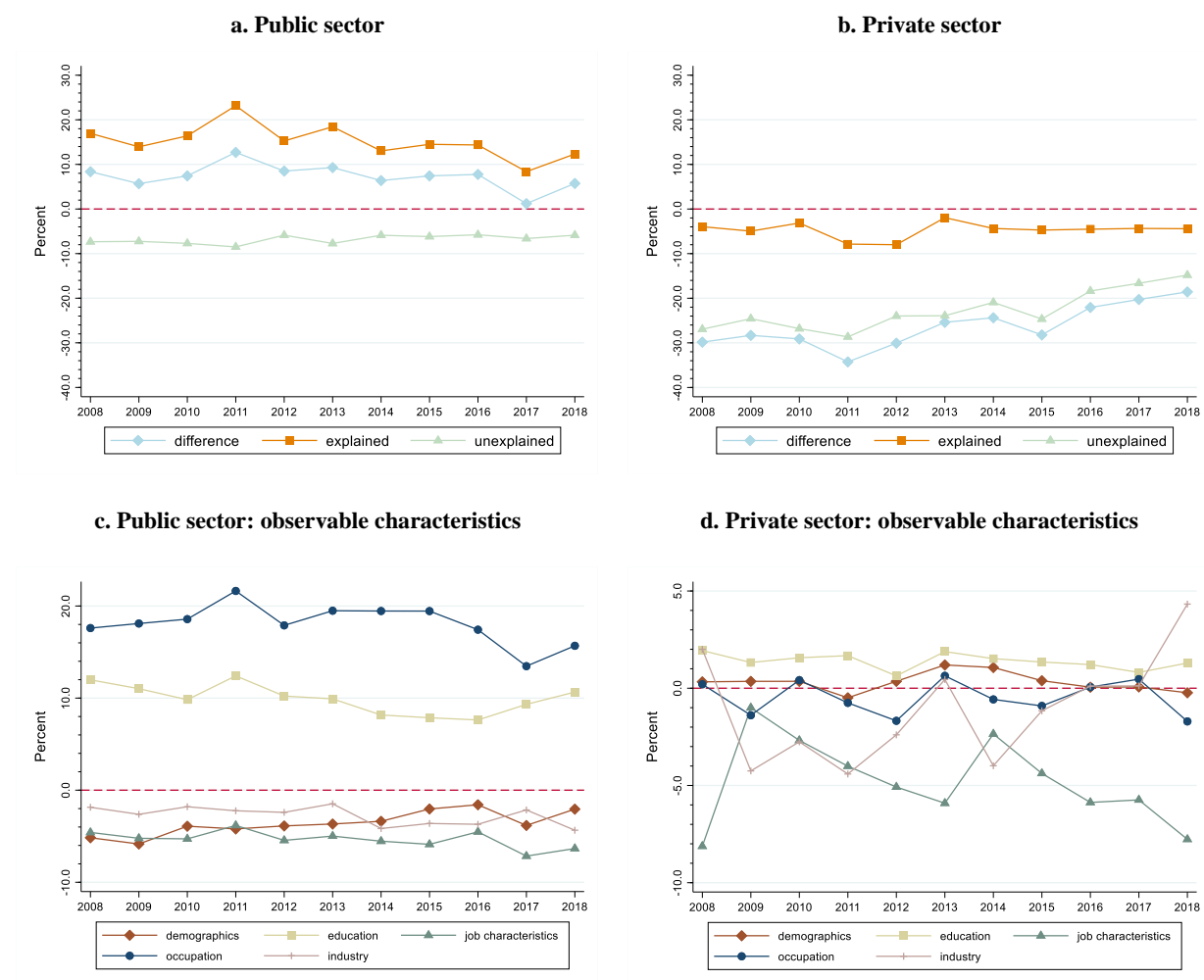


Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

4. HOW MUCH DO WORKING WOMEN MAKE?

20. Women employed in the public sector are paid more than men, on average. Conditional on a set of individual and job characteristics, women working in the public sector in 2018 received an average wage premium of about 6 percent per hour worked. The wage premium has remained roughly constant over the last decade. A decomposition of the gender hourly wage gap shows that differences in observable characteristics or the explained component exert a positive effect on hourly wages in favor of women (figure 14, panel a). The gender wage gap is narrowed by occupation and education, while other characteristics, such as demographics, industrial sector of employment, and other job-related characteristics, appear to disadvantage women (figure 14, panel c). This is consistent with the stylized facts presented above, whereby women in the public sector are relatively more concentrated in high-skill jobs and have, on average, higher educational attainment. By contrast, the unexplained component drags the wage differential down toward negative territory. This component is associated with a different wage structure or to unobserved characteristics that would, on average, increase wages among men relative to the wages among women.

Figure 14. Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition: mean gender hourly wage differential, by sector and characteristics, 2004–15



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

21. In the private sector, women are paid about 20 percent less than men per hour worked. The analysis indicates that, all else being equal, women in the private sector are paid hourly wages that are 20 percent lower than the wages of men. Although the gap has declined over the last 10 years, it is still above the average observed in other middle-income countries, where women are paid, on average, 16 percent less than men per hour worked (ILO 2018). The two components—explained and unexplained—run in the same direction in the case of women working in the private sector. Most of the difference in hourly wages is attributable to the unexplained component (about 78 percent in 2018). Observable characteristics can only explain a small fraction of the observed gap. In particular, the effect of demographics, occupation, and industrial sector is flat at around zero (industrial sector in recent years only), while education and job characteristics exert a positive and

negative effect upon the wage differential, respectively. Moreover, the gender gap persists along the entire wage distribution; it was larger among the bottom 50 percent up to 2018, when the difference relative to the top seems to have disappeared (annex A, figure A.2).

5. BARRIERS TO LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION AMONG WOMEN

This section examines the main barriers to female labor force participation in Mauritius, drawing on quantitative data sources (including the evidence presented in the previous sections), focus group discussions conducted among low income women in October 2019 (box 3), and other reports.

Box 3. Focus group discussions

Study sites: Curepipe (two groups), Port Louis (one group), and Quatre Bornes (one group)

Dates: October 12-19, 2019

Data collection method: discussions in four groups with 4-10 women each (22 women in total), recruited through local nongovernmental organizations. The interviews were mostly conducted in Creole.

Participant demographics: The women were ages 16-58 (the average age was 26); 16 women were married at the time of the interview; four were single; and one was widowed.^a Only women who were not engaged in any economic activity at the time of the focus group discussions were recruited for the exercise.

The team used participatory research methods to facilitate a discussion with inactive women, that is, women who were not engaged in any economic activity, around barriers, enablers, and social norms related to female labor force participation.

Each focus group discussion started with a short description of the purpose of the discussion. The team also collected information on the core demographics of each participant using a short questionnaire. This was followed by group discussions covering four broad topics: (a) gender differences in life aspirations, (b) process and perceived barriers to female labor market participation, (c) social norms in labor market participation, and (d) awareness, benefits, communication, and interaction with existing labor market programs.

The team also conducted separate focus group discussions with employed, unemployed, and inactive youth as well as semistructured interviews with employers, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, and government officials.

a. The marital status of one woman and the ages of two women were not recorded.

The availability and affordability of childcare

22. While preprimary education among children ages 3-5 is largely free, there are not enough affordable day-care centers with extended opening hours for younger children. Early childhood education in Mauritius includes day-care centers (for children ages under 3) and preprimary schools (children ages 3-5). The day-care centers serve, on average, a population of between 86 (Rivière Noire) and 180 (Port Louis) age-eligible children, which is insufficient to meet the demand of all parents with young children, especially in the regions that are relatively underserved (box 4). In addition, cost is an important barrier among households with low incomes. Most day-care centers are privately owned, and these typically charge fees in the range of MUR 2,500-MUR 3,500 per month, which amounts to approximately 30 percent-40 percent of the

average wage of women with low educational attainment (MUR 8,650 per month).⁶ Moreover, many centers have limited opening hours that do not cater to the needs of working households and/or may not meet the parents' expectations on quality standards. Focus group discussions among low-income women highlighted that affordability and restrictive opening hours are major constraints for less well educated women with children. While access to affordable day care remains a bottleneck, preprimary education is almost universal. Most (though not all) preprimary schools do not charge fees either because they are operated by the government or, in the case of private schools, because they receive financial support from the government.

Box 4. Child day-care centers and preprimary schools

Child day-care centers

Children ages between 3 months and 3 years attend day-care centers. These centers are all registered with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare. As at November 2019, there were 387 such centers (excluding the island of Rodrigues). The majority are privately owned. Only a limited number have been established by the government, in collaboration with nongovernmental organizations and parastatal entities. Based on the estimated number of children ages under 3, table B4.1 illustrates the ratio of children to day-care centers. Large variability is found across districts. The poorest southern districts of Savanne and Grand Port are at the bottom of the ranking that is led by Plaines Wilhmes, Rivière Noire, and Moka.

Table B4.1. Number of day-care centers and the ratio of children to center, by district, circa 2018

District	Number of day-care centers	Ratio of children to day-care center
Port-Louis	35	180
Pamplemousses	40	166
Riviere du Rempart	36	108
Flacq	32	152
Grand Port	14	286
Savanne	7	389
Plaines Wilhems	147	80
Moka	30	88
Rivière Noire	46	86
Rodrigues	n.a.	n.a.

Sources: Based on data of the CMPHS database; data of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare.

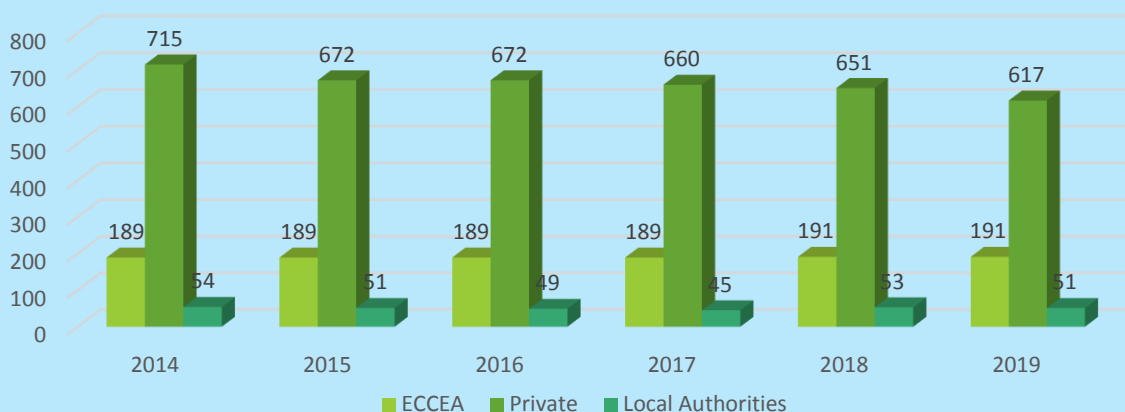
Preprimary schools

Children typically attend preprimary school from age 3 to age 5. Policies pertaining to preprimary schools fall under the purview of the Early Childhood Care and Education Authority under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science, and Technology. The aim of the ministry is to encourage all children of preprimary-school age to attend preprimary school in suitable buildings with trained teachers, adequate playing

⁶ A few social programs seek to raise the access to childcare among low-income households, such as day-care centers run by municipal councils that charge only a token fee or the crèche voucher provided under the Marshall Plan Social Contract (see box 3). However, many low-income households are not covered by the Marshall Plan, and childcare centers run by nongovernmental organizations have limited capacity and are only available in some localities.

space, and appropriate teaching materials. Preprimary education is provided mainly by private organizations and local governments. However, the government has set up a number of preprimary schools within primary schools. The number of schools providing preprimary education was 851 in March 2019: 817 on the island of Mauritius and 34 on Rodrigues.^a Today, preprimary education is mainly provided by private institutions (figure B4.1). While the number of private institutions has declined over the years, the number of public institutions has remained roughly constant.

Figure B4.1. Number of preprimary education institutions, by administration, 2014-19



Source: Based on data in ECCEA Statistics (database), Early Childhood Care and Education Authority, Saint Pierre, Mauritius, <https://www.tipti.org/stat.htm>.

Table B4.2 shows the ratio of children to preprimary schools, by district. In this case, Savanne is still in the lower tail of the distribution. However, Rodrigues and Rivière Noire have the lowest number of children per preprimary school. Port Louis and Plaines Wilhems are at the top of the ranking.

Table B4.2. Number of preprimary schools and the ratio of children to preprimary school, by district, circa 2018

District	Number of preprimary schools	Ratio of children to preprimary schools
Port Louis	110	37
Pamplemousses	85	60
Rivière du Rempart	76	43
Flacq	104	44
Grand Port	73	55
Savanne	48	51
Plaines Wilhems	228	39
Moka	52	46
Rivière Noire	41	78
Rodrigues	34	82

Sources: Based on data of the CMPHS database; Statistics Mauritius 2019.

Cost of child day-care centers, crèches, and kindergartens

Most child day-care centers are privately owned. A few municipal councils run day-care centers with the collaboration of nongovernmental organizations. This service is provided against payment of a nominal fee and is mainly targeted on vulnerable households. The token fee is in the range of MUR 400–MUR 700 per month.^b Access

to day-care centers run by municipalities is based on three main criteria: (a) residency in the region; (b) admission on a first-come, first-served basis; and (c) preference for low-income parents.

The cost of private day-care centers varies by service provider. To estimate an average cost of private centers, a survey of nurseries, crèches, and kindergarten was conducted in various areas of Mauritius in January 2020. Between 5 and 8 crèches were selected randomly in each zone for a total of 30 private crèches.^c The average monthly cost is in the range of MUR 2,500–MUR 3,600 (table B4.3). While this is between 12 percent and 16 percent of the average wage, it is a large share of the average wage of less well educated workers (MUR 12,900) and less well educated women (MUR 8,650).

Table B4.3. Average monthly fee at day childcare centers, by zone, January 2020

Zones	Lowest fee (MUR)	Highest fee (MUR)	Average fee (MUR)
Zone 1: Port Louis and North	1,800	5,000	2,800
Zone 1: Beau Bassin–Rose Hill, Centre and East	1,200	5,500	2,500
Zone 3: Curepipe and South	2,500	6,000	3,600
Zone 4: Quatre Bornes, Vacoas-Phoenix and West	2,500	6,000	3,500

Sources: Based on data collected through phone interviews with 30 private crèches on the island of Mauritius. See Tandrayen-Ragoobur 2019.

- a. The total number of preprimary schools based on data of the Early Childhood Care and Education Authority stood at 859 on the island of Mauritius in 2019, while Statistics Mauritius indicates the number at 817. Hence, there is a discrepancy in the totals.
- b. The data are derived from information provided from five crèches run by nongovernmental organizations on the island of Mauritius.
- c. The sample is drawn from a list of registered crèches as of November 2019 provided by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare.

Parental leave legislation

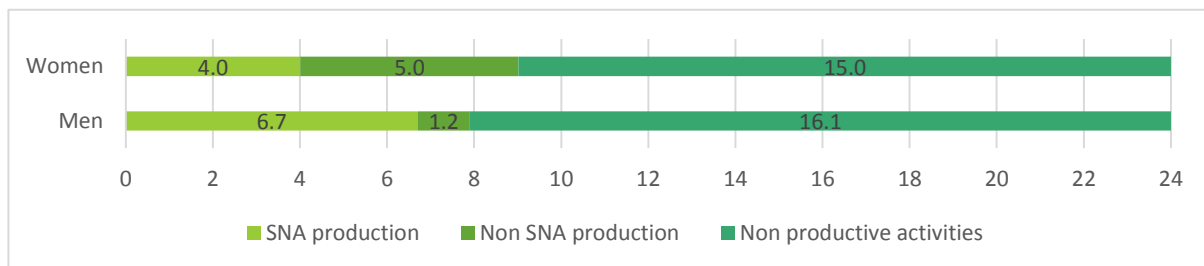
23. Over the past decade, the government has enacted several reforms to enhance women’s economic opportunities, but gaps remain in the area of parental and maternity leave legislation. Mauritius has been highlighted as a top reformer by the World Bank (2019) and improved its overall score from 75 to 92 out of 100 on the World Bank women, business, and the law index. These reforms have included an increase in 2015 in the length of maternity leave from 12 to 14 weeks, which brought the country in line with standards of the International Labour Organization on the duration of maternity leave (ILO 2014). However, Mauritius still only scores 60 out of 100 on the parenthood subindicator. This is because, first, there is currently no legislation that would entitle both mothers and fathers to full-time paid parental leave and, second, maternity leave benefits are the liability of the employer rather than being funded out of mandatory social security or other public funds. In this respect, the country lags many other middle- and high-income countries that have instituted more progressive parental leave legislation funded by social security.⁷

Social norms and assigned gender roles

⁷ See ILO (2014) for examples of countries that have shifted from employer-liability to maternity insurance schemes and for further details on how countries are funding and administering social insurance cash benefits for maternity.

24. Many Mauritian women shoulder the double burden of paid and unpaid work, which is likely a strong barrier to greater female labor force participation. Labor force participation is much lower among married women than among single women, especially during the prime reproductive years when many women have young children at home (figure 7, panel b). Data of the Living Conditions Survey 2018/19 show that women ages 25–34 spend, on average, over five hours a day on “non SNA production activities” (SNA=System of National Accounts), which includes both care work and unpaid domestic work. The corresponding average among men is only about 1 hour and 20 minutes (figure 15). Women also spend less time than men on nonproductive recreational activities, another indicator of time scarcity. Gender differences in time allocation across SNA and non-SNA activities are even more pronounced for low educated men and women with low educational levels. Asked about the main reason why they are not engaged in the labor market, most inactive women ages 25 or more mention household responsibilities (figure 16). Men rarely mention household responsibilities as a reason for not looking for work.

Figure 15. Time allocation (hours per day) of men and women ages 25–34, 2018



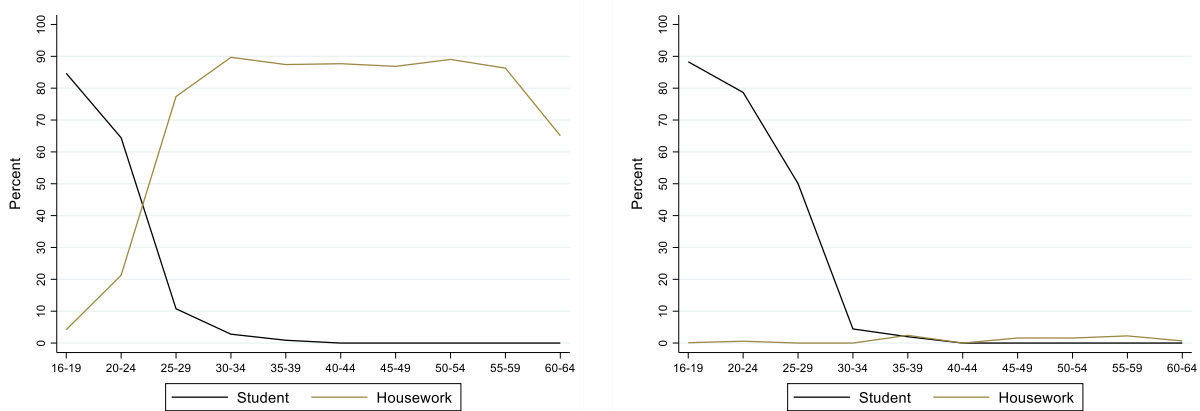
Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

Note: Excludes individuals currently in school. SNA = system of national accounts.

Figure 16. Reasons for not working over the life cycle, by sex, 2018

a. Women

b. Men

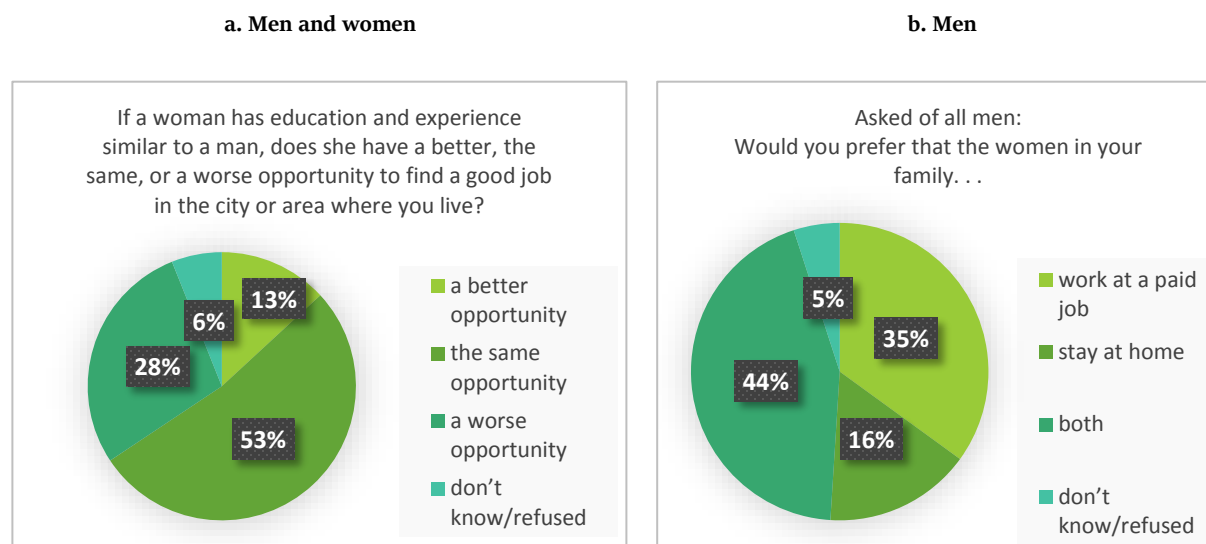


Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

Note: Respondents could also mention other reasons. Responses therefore do not sum to 100 percent.

25. Quantitative and qualitative studies confirm that social norms in Mauritius assign women the traditional role of providing childcare and other unpaid family work. According to data of Afrobarometer (2017), 7 Mauricians in 10 report that it is better for a household if a woman has the main responsibility for the home and for childcare, and almost half of Mauricians agree with the statement that men should be given preference in employment opportunities. Data collected through the Gallup World Poll in 2016 elicited slightly more balanced responses that are, however, qualitatively similar (Gallup and ILO 2017). Asked if a woman with similar education and experience to a man would have a better, the same, or a worse opportunity to find a good job, slightly more than half of the respondents said the woman would have the same opportunity. However, 28 percent of men and women respondents said the woman would have a worse opportunity. Only 13 percent said the woman would have a better opportunity (figure 17, panel a). In addition, when asked about their preferences regarding the women in their households, only 35 percent of men said they prefer that women work at paid jobs, while 16 percent said they prefer that women stay home, and 44 percent said they prefer that women work and stay at home (figure 17, panel b). These responses suggest that social norms assign women the responsibility for care and other unpaid domestic work in the family home, even if they are working. The responses are similar if women are surveyed, which could indicate that women have internalized traditional gender norms or that they face (reputational) costs if they deviate from the prescribed social norms (Bertrand 2020). These broad findings were echoed in the focus group discussions, where many women commented on the difficulty of balancing work with care for young children and other unpaid household work. Some also mentioned that female labor force participation may be viewed by men as threatening to traditional gender roles. Together, this evidence highlights the crucial role of culture and social norms as constraints on women's engagement in paid work.

Figure 17. Social norms revolving around women's engagement in paid and unpaid work, 2016



Source: Gallup and ILO 2017.

The gender wage gap

26. Low wages among women may reduce women's incentives to join the labor force.

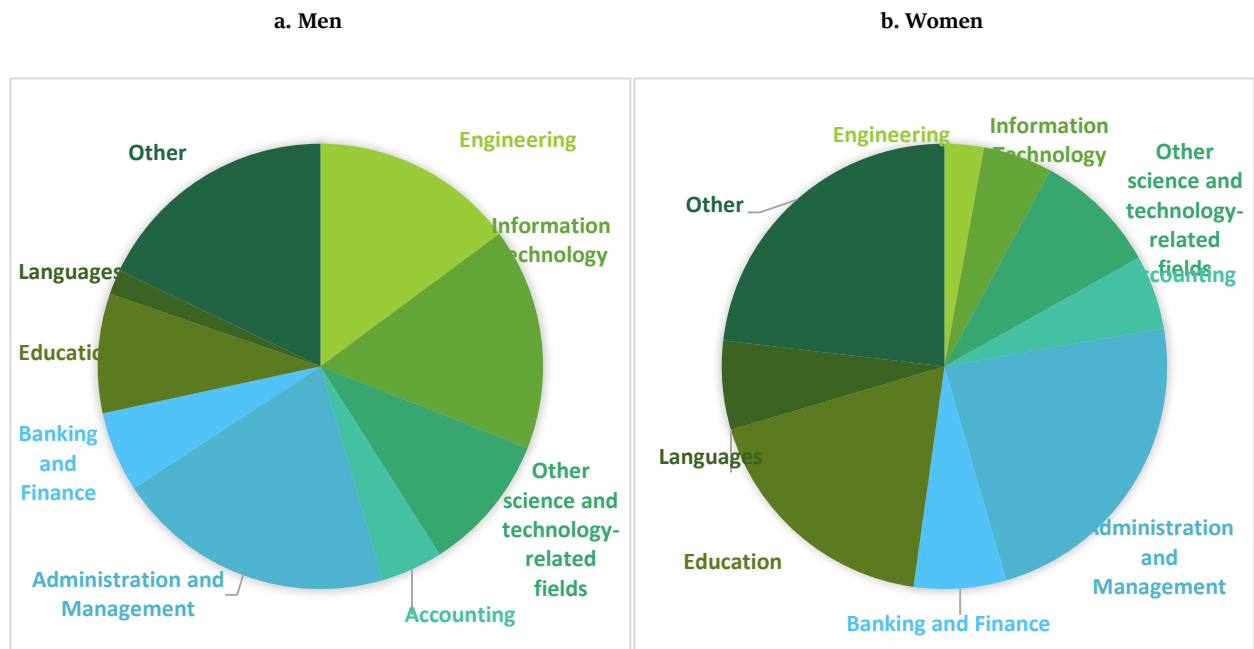
Women are paid about 20 percent less than men per hour worked in the private sector. This gender pay gap may reduce female labor force participation because, even if women wanted to work, they would be paid less than their husbands per hour worked.

27. Labor market segregation and social norms are key factors contributing to the gender wage gap. Data of the most recent round of the labor force survey show that women and men tend to work in different sectors in the economy. Trade, education, and household activities are the three most important sectors of women's employment in the private sector, and construction, public administration, and manufacturing (other than textiles) dominate among men in the private sector. Gender differences in the industrial sector of employment, occupation, and enterprise size contribute to the observed gender wage gap. In addition, the social norms affecting women's responsibility for unpaid work could also play an important role, as they may lead women to pursue less remunerative employment, often in exchange for greater employment flexibility.

28. Gender segregation in areas of employment is rooted in the curriculum choices young men and women make beginning in high school and continuing in institutions of higher learning. For example, among tertiary students, there are clear differences in fields of study by sex. Men students are disproportionately represented in engineering and information technology, while women students are disproportionately represented in administration and management, education, and languages (figure 18). These gender differences in curriculum choices often reflect gender-

stereotyped views over the jobs that are appropriate for men and women. During the focus group discussions, some participants recognized that societal norms channel women into specific career paths. Others, however, highlighted that it is more acceptable nowadays for women to work in stereotypically male jobs, indicating that the underlying social norms may be somewhat fluid and less binding among younger generations.

Figure 18. Fields of study in publicly funded institutions, by sex, 2018/19



Source: HEC 2019.

Safety and violence

29. **Another potential barrier to female labor force participation is represented by concerns over safety and gender-based violence, including sexual harassment at the workplace.** Data collected in 2010–11 show that women who had worked over the previous 12 months were significantly more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women who had not been working (7.3 percent versus 3.0 percent) (Machisa and Virasawmy 2012). It is difficult to interpret these numbers, but research in other contexts shows that, in some situations, economic activity can put women at greater risk of gender-based violence because the women may be viewed as challenging traditional gender norms and undermining men’s control and power, which may induce a so-called ‘backlash’ (Bhalotra et al. forthcoming; Taylor 2015). Some of the participants in the focus group discussions argued that a married man may feel threatened if his wife decides to work

and that a woman who works against the wishes of her husband may be regarded as disobedient. More recent data are not available, but evidence from newspaper reports suggests that gender-based violence is still very prevalent. The 2010–11 data show further that 6 percent of women who had ever worked had been sexually harassed in the workplace (Machisa and Virasawmy 2012). Mauritius passed two laws in 2008 that include provisions against sexual harassment: the Employment Rights Act and the Equal Opportunities Act. However, there is some evidence that the implementation of the laws has been difficult, and that sexual harassment continues to be widespread.⁸ In addition, according to Afrobarometer (2017) data, one woman in five felt unsafe walking in their neighborhood at least once during the previous year. There is evidence from other countries that concerns over sexual harassment and other forms of violence can negatively impact women's decision to participate in the labor force (Siddique 2018). However, given the overall paucity of data and sensitivity of the subject nature (which may have also affected the team's ability to obtain information on this during the FGDs), it is difficult to judge whether safety concerns are a major constraint to female labor force participation in Mauritius.

⁸ "Mauritius 2014 Results," SIGI (Social Institutions and Gender Index) (database), Development Centre, Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris, <https://www.genderindex.org/country/mauritius-2014-results/>.

6. WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT?

This section discusses potential policy options to increase female labor force participation in Mauritius, drawing on the analysis presented in the preceding sections and the broader academic literature. To these, box 5 adds policies aimed at maintaining women in the workforce during the coronavirus pandemic.

30. Expand subsidized childcare with after-hours services. The international evidence shows that access to childcare can increase female labor force participation. Mateo Díaz and Rodríguez - Chamussy (2013, 2), in a review of childcare policies and programs in Latin America and the Caribbean, argue that “almost all random assignment and quasi-experimental studies show consistent positive effects either on the intensive or extensive margins of female labor supply.” Likewise, Buvinic and O’Donnell (2016, 27), based on a global review of impact evaluation studies, conclude that “new evidence supports that childcare is ‘proven’ to increase women’s employment and earnings.” And Olivetti and Petrongolo (2017) show that childcare subsidies are linked to expansions in maternal labor supply in several high-income countries, especially those where childcare is otherwise relatively costly. Policy options to enhance access to childcare may include (a) enlargement of the current voucher and subsidy scheme to improve access to private day-care centers (targeted at low-income households, for example, by broadening the existing scheme under the Marshall Plan Social Contract); (b) the promotion of workplace-based childcare (for instance, through fiscal incentives or a government mandate for large firms); (c) raising the availability of government-provided childcare (based on a sliding fee scale, that is, a payrate based on income); or (d) government-supported childcare through a public-private partnership (see examples in IFC 2017).

Box 5. Policies to keep women in the labor force during the COVID-19 pandemic

The world is currently witnessing a rapid escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic and a related unprecedented economic downturn. Mauritius is no exception. While it is too early to predict the longer-term consequences of the crisis, there is a risk that the pandemic may reinforce traditional gender roles and erode recent gains in female labor force participation.

Women will likely experience a substantial burden on their time given their multiple care responsibilities and in light of school closures and confinement measures. This may result in reductions in women’s working time and trigger permanent exits from the labor market. Social messaging as part of the emergency response can contribute to a more balanced distribution of household responsibilities. Some of the policy options outlined in this note, for example, those related to parental leave and investments in childcare, can support the economic empowerment of women with high-load unpaid care roles once the pandemic is under control and economic activity resumes.

Sex segregation in sectors and occupations will also lead to differential impacts of the pandemic on

men and women. These impacts depend on which jobs are sustained, for instance, if the jobs allow for telecommuting, are in countercyclical industries (government and education), or are at higher risk of disappearing. Women are overrepresented in some of the occupations that are being most affected by the pandemic and that may take a long time to recover, for example, trade, household activities, or leisure and hospitality. Policy makers should anticipate and monitor the effects of the pandemic on key labor market indicators of men and women and proactively favor policies that help women keep their jobs during the pandemic, for instance, by mandating and financially supporting firms in the provision of paid sick and family leave.

Source: Based on the framework and discussion in World Bank (2020).

31. Promote pay transparency. A growing number of mostly high-income countries are mandating pay transparency as a means to reduce gender pay gaps, which may lead to an increase in incentives for women to join the labor force. The relevant laws typically stipulate that companies must publicly report their gender pay gaps, though special provisions and exemptions may apply to small companies. While this is a relatively new type of intervention, some early assessments suggest that such legislation can be effective. For example, Baker et al. (2019) show that Canadian public sector salary disclosure laws have reduced the gender pay gap affecting university staff by approximately 30 percent, primarily in institutions in which faculty are unionized. Similarly, Bennedsen et al. (2020) find that a 2006 law in Denmark that required firms to provide sex-disaggregated wage statistics narrowed the gender pay gap by 13 percent relative to the prelegislation mean, which was, however, primarily driven by a reduction in the growth of wages among men.

32. Provide paid parental leave. A rising number of high- and middle-income countries are offering paid parental leave, which is often supplementary to specific maternity and paternity leave periods. Parental leave can either be a sharable household entitlement or an individual entitlement that each parent can take regardless of the other and may include elements that incentivize uptake by fathers (through bonus months or daddy quotas). Evidence from Quebec shows that well-designed parental leave regulations (for instance, daddy quotas that earmark some parental leave for use by fathers) can expand uptake by fathers and lead to a more equitable sharing of home and market work between parents (Patnaik 2019). These positive effects of father's parental leave have persisted over the long run, that is, for one to three years after the leave period ended, and shifted households toward a dual earner, dual caregiver model.

33. Institute the public funding of maternity leave benefits. International labor standards recommend that employers should not be individually liable for the cost of maternity leave benefits and advise countries to transition from an employer liability to an insurance system, whereby maternity and other parental benefits are funded through social security (ILO 2014). This is because employer liability schemes may run counter to the interests of women workers by disincentivizing employers in hiring, retaining, or promoting pregnant workers. For example, using firm-level

survey data on 66, mostly developing countries, Amin and Islam (2019) find a positive, statistically significant relationship between the length of paid maternity leave and the share of women workers in the private sector, and this relationship is stronger if maternity leave benefits are publicly funded.

Box 6. Estimating the Cost of Publicly Funded Maternity Leave Benefits

An employed woman is entitled to 14 weeks of maternity leave on full pay. In addition, if the worker has been employed by the same employer for 12 consecutive months, she is entitled to a maternity allowance of Rs. 3,000 (The Workers' Rights Act 2019).

Under the current system, employers are individually liable for the cost of maternity leave benefits. The transition from an employer liability to an insurance system, whereby maternity leave benefits are funded through social security, and provided to firms for example in the form of tax credits, could contribute to promote the employment of women in the private sector (ILO 2014, Amin and Islam 2019).

This proposal envisages full public funding of one component of the remuneration paid to women during the 14 weeks of maternity leave, namely the basic salary. The rest of the benefit replacing other components of women's pay would continue to be a liability of single employers. On average, the basic salary contributes about 85 percent of the average remuneration of a woman ages 16-49 based on 2019 data. The basic salary ranges between 100 and 80 percent among women in the bottom and top quintile of the earnings distribution, respectively. It is therefore a larger component of earnings among low-pay women.

Costing this type of proposal requires a number of assumptions and the actual cost ultimately depends on individuals' behavior that can be changed by the policy itself. Therefore, what is illustrated here are simple back of the envelope estimates that shall be taken with extreme caution and as merely indicative. In addition, estimates are based on survey data and are therefore subject to sampling and non-sampling error.

Two different set of assumptions are used to estimate the cost of publicly funded maternity leave benefits. 1. Publicly funded maternity leave benefits are paid to all women working in the private sector ages 16-49.

As mentioned above, the publicly funded benefit would replace 100 percent of the basic salary of private sector women employees for 14 weeks. The estimated cost is based on age-specific fertility rates from Statistics Mauritius (2018), number of women ages 16-49 employed in the private sector and age group specific average basic salary (CMPHS 2019).⁹ In addition, for non-Mauritian workers, the average fertility rate of Mauritian women is applied to the total number of foreign women employed in Mauritius holding a valid work permits (approximately 8,500 in 2019 according to data from the Employment Division of the Ministry of Labour, Human Resources Development, and Training).¹⁰

2. Publicly funded maternity leave benefits are paid to all women ages 16-49.

As under (1), the publicly funded benefit would replace 100 percent of the basic salary of private sector women employees for 14 weeks. However, unlike (1), which takes the current levels of female employment as given, this scenario assumes that all women ages 16-49 work in the private sector. The estimated cost is based on the total number of live births from Statistics Mauritius (2019), and on average basic salary from labor force

⁹ http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/StatsbySubj/Documents/Digest/Demography/Digest_Demo_Yr18.pdf

¹⁰ Both average fertility rate and average basic salary of foreign women might differ considerably from those of Mauritian women.

survey data (CMPHS 2019).¹¹ This means assuming that all women ages 16-49 in Mauritius are employed in the private sector and receive the average basic salary of women currently employed.

The estimated cost in both cases is equivalent to less than 1 percent of total tax revenues that is estimated to be collected in FY2019/20 (about Rs. 89 billion).¹² The first method leads to an estimated cost of about Rs. 211 million per year. This estimate is likely to reflect the cost of the first year the policy is implemented since no behavioral changes are taken into account that could lead to an increase in women's employment and labor force participation in the medium-term. The second approach leads to an estimated cost of about Rs. 545 million per year. This estimate shall be considered as an upper bound since it assumes that all women currently between 16 and 49 years of age in Mauritius are employed in the private sector and benefit from paid maternity leave.

34. Transform social norms and gender stereotypes. A growing body of literature shows that social norms can be amenable to policy interventions at least in some contexts. For example, educational entertainment (edutainment) programs, that is, media-based interventions that convey socially desirable messages in an entertaining format that is relatable at an emotional level, can be an effective tool in shifting attitudes, transforming perceived social norms, and generating behavioral changes in several spheres and contexts.¹³ Likewise, school-based programs targeted at adolescents and combining edutainment with classroom discussions about gender equality can lead to more gender-equitable behavior, including the sharing of household work.¹⁴ Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott (2018) show that correcting perceptions about social norms at the community level by providing evidence to young married men in Saudi Arabia that most of their peers privately support female labor force participation increases the willingness of these men to let their wives join the labor force. This evidence suggests that there may be scope to change the social norms that constrain female labor force participation through public interventions, though the relevant programs would have to be carefully evaluated for their effectiveness and ethical implications.

35. Encourage girls to enter man-dominated industries and occupations. Women and men tend to work in different jobs, sectors, and industries. This type of segregation can limit women's economic opportunities and may also contribute to gender pay gaps. International evidence shows that employment segregation generally does not decline with rising educational attainment among women (Borrowman and Klasen 2020). Employment segregation, however, appears to be linked to educational choices and streaming, especially in secondary schools, when adolescent girls sort into

¹¹ http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/Publications/Documents/2020/EI1505/Pop_Vital_Yr19.pdf

¹² http://budget.mof.govmu.org/budget2020-21/V_A2020_21AppendixA.pdf

¹³ For extensive reviews of the literature, see DellaVigna and La Ferrara 2015; La Ferrara 2016.

¹⁴ For example, see the discussion of Jayachandran (2019) on the Taaron ki Toli–League of Stars Program in Haryana, India.

lower-paying fields (Das and Kotikula 2019). Data on countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that parents are more likely to expect their sons rather than their daughters to work in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics, even if the sons and daughters perform equally well in mathematics at age 15 (OECD 2015). Chowdhury et al. (2018) show that girls self-select into fields with more flexible working hours and better nonmonetary benefits. To break these patterns, efforts should be undertaken with teachers and career services to ensure that they encourage girls and young women to enter non-traditional fields, even if these currently employ mostly men. Mentoring programs, support networks, and information campaigns on the profitability of jobs across industries can encourage women to enter and stay in man-dominated fields (Alibhai et al. 2017; Campos et al. 2015; Goldstein, Martinez, and Papineni 2019; Herrmann et al. 2016; Hicks et al. 2016). In addition, the promotion of more flexible and improved working conditions in sectors traditionally dominated by men may also reduce sectoral segregation based on sex.

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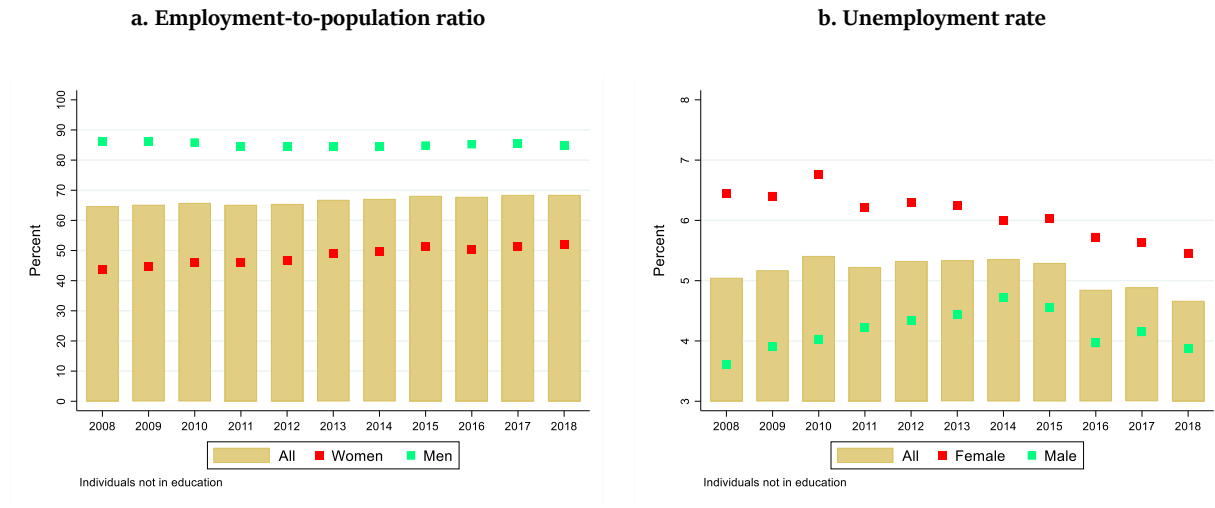
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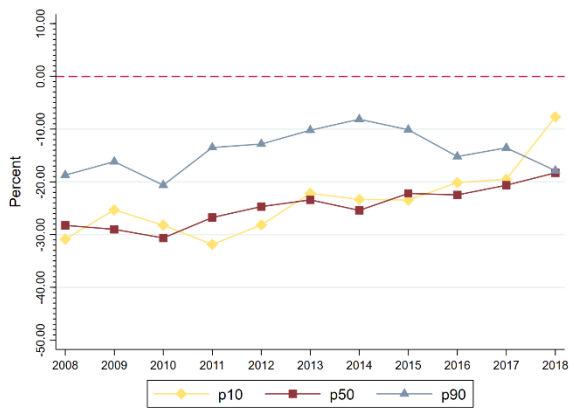
ANNEX A

Figure A.1. Employment-to-population ratio and unemployment rate, by sex, 2008–18



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.

Figure A.2. Gender hourly wage differential, selected percentiles, private sector, 2008–18



Source: Based on data of the CMPHS database.