

Women's economic empowerment and decent work in Côte d'Ivoire

Labour market integration

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May 2023

Key messages

Including women in the formal workforce can be an important step towards improved women's economic empowerment (WEE) but conditions of entry into the labour market are crucial to the outcomes of WEE.

Women in Côte d'Ivoire combine multiple occupations, undertaking wage and non-wage work and cash-earning in the formal and informal labour market.

National policies related to the labour market have focused on formalisation of entrepreneurs, financial inclusion, female education and national planning.

Critically, greater WEE will rely on simultaneously addressing the demand and the supply of labour: on the one hand creating more and better jobs for women through horizontal and sectoral policies; and on the other hand supporting education and training to improve women's skills and support a shift in gender norms.

Drivers of entrepreneurship should be addressed – that is, by switching from 'entrepreneurs out of necessity' to 'opportunity entrepreneurs.'

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How to cite: Pettinotti, L. and Calabrese, L. (2023) Women's economic empowerment and decent work in Côte d'Ivoire. ODI Policy Brief. London: ODI

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Marieke Kelm and Dirk Willem te Velde for their comments on earlier drafts of the report, as well as Sherilyn Raga for her contributions. This study has been commissioned by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German government. The views presented in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of GIZ, the German government or ODI. Comments are welcome to l.pettinotti@odi.org.uk

About this publication

This paper is part of the GIZ regional project Support to Reform Partnerships.

Disclaimer: The content of this brief has been produced rapidly to provide early ideas and analysis on a given theme. It has been cross-read and edited but the usual rigorous processes have not necessarily been applied.

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Executive summary

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is a process and a goal with the potential to improve outcomes for women and their families as well as societies as a whole. Including women in the formal workforce can be an important step towards improved WEE but terms of entry into the formal labour market are important and should come within the scope of decent work – to include fair income, safe work, freedom to organise as a collective, etc.

Women in Côte d'Ivoire work: they often have multiple occupations and combine wage work, non-wage work and cash-earning in the formal (6% of working women) and informal (94% of working women) labour markets.

A host of national policies related to the labour market have focused on formalisation of entrepreneurs, which are predominantly female; financial inclusion; female education; and national planning. Some of these policies have an explicit WEE component or objective. Legal reforms regarding women's rights have supported these policies.

Gaps remain in the policy framework: the terms of entrepreneurship issue are not addressed – that is, switching from 'entrepreneurs out of necessity' to 'opportunity entrepreneurs' remains a gap that could be addressed through job creation. Current policies for job creation, such as the *Politique nationale de l'emploi*, do not have specific provisions for WEE, when more and better jobs should be created for women in conjunction with education and training programming to improve women's skills.

Gender norms shape and constrain economic opportunities for women. Legal reforms; supportive policies, wherein WEE is an objective that is acted upon with corresponding budget; and monitoring and reporting efforts can help change gender norms and, at the same time, open up greater economic possibilities for women.

Further actions to improve WEE in Côte d'Ivoire require a multi-pronged approach. First, and most crucially, there is a need for a response that targets labour supply and demand simultaneously. This will entail creating more and better jobs for women through horizontal and sectoral policies, and at the same time putting in place education and training to improve women's skills and support a shift in gender norms. Second, support to a switch from 'entrepreneurship out of necessity' to 'opportunity entrepreneurship', to support women-led businesses, will be required.

1 Introduction

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is central to realising gender equality. It is a process and a goal with the potential to improve outcomes for women and their families as well as societies as a whole. Many definitions exist; at the core are ideas of a process – at times non-linear – to gain equal access to and control over economic resources for women as individuals and as a group (Hunt and Samman, 2016; UN Women, 2018). For example, the targets under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality all speak of notions of agency, autonomy and free choice (UNDESA, 2015).

As such, WEE is connected to social norms and gender-based violence. Norms shape ideas about whether women should work and the kind of work they can do, the care work expected from them, and the harassment and violence they may be subjected to (Marcus, 2018). All three aspects play a part in shaping WEE; conversely, greater economic autonomy can be used for women to gain greater control over other aspects of their lives (Harper et al., 2020).

Including women in the formal workforce can be an important step towards improved WEE. However, the conditions of entry into the formal labour market are important, and empowerment for women can be limited if such entry occurs on unfavourable terms, such as through insecure jobs or stigmatised work, with low pay or in poor or dangerous working conditions. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2013) defines decent work as :

Work that is productive, and delivers: a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families; better prospects for personal development and social integration; freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and equality of opportunity and treatment for all people.

The multidimensional concept is included under SDG 8, whose target 5 aims for decent work for all by 2030 (UNDESA, 2015).

As a result, decent work and labour market inclusion to improve WEE are related to legal and regulatory policies regarding social protection, collective action, property rights, financial inclusion, unpaid care work, education and skills, and sexual and reproductive health (Grantham et al., 2021).

This brief covers the issue of WEE by speaking to challenges related to decent work and labour force inclusion in connection to the difficulties of a low-income country such as Côte d'Ivoire, where employment's reality corresponds to a mix of occupations – of wage work, non-wage work and cash-earning – that is fully embedded in the formal and informal labour market (Stevano, 2022).

First, the brief looks at the current labour market in Côte d'Ivoire as well as related national policies. Second, it explores challenges and potential policy avenues to improve the economic situation of women in the country.

2 Current labour market and national policies

2.1 Characteristics of women's labour force participation in Côte d'Ivoire

Globally, if women and men worked equal hours for equal pay, economic growth would increase by US\$172 trillion. Instead, women earn two third less of what men can be expected to earn and countries incur 14% less growth as a result of gender inequalities (Wodon et al., 2020).

Côte d'Ivoire is no exception: national median earnings for men in 2021 were more than twice those of women (CFA 90,000 against CFA 40,000, as per INS, 2022). Mainly, participation and pay are two factors explaining women's lower earnings than men: women tend to participate less in the formal labour market and work fewer hours than men; when in paid employment, they tend to be paid less than men (ILO, 2016). Section 3.2 explores gender norms explaining labour market outcomes for women.

In Côte d'Ivoire, only 6% and 4% of women and men, respectively, are counted as inactive (INS, 2022). Such statistics¹ hide disparities regarding the terms of entry into the labour market. Women tend to work in time- and labour-intensive activities, often unpaid or poorly paid. They mostly work in the agriculture and small retail sectors (see Table 1), are self-employed and engage in unpaid family work. A full 94% of working women are within the informal sector, as self-employed workers, contributing family workers or employees. By contrast, only 77% of employed men work informally (INS, 2022).

Table 1 Sex-disaggregated labour force participation by sector, 2021 (%)

Sector	Female	Male	National
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	18	31	26
Mining and quarrying	0	2	1
Manufacturing	11	16	14
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	2	0	1
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	0	0	0
Construction	0	6	4

¹ This is because the ILO definition of active is of a person who has done at least one hour of work in the past seven days, which leads to very high active population rates. These figures hide high levels of underemployment.

Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	41	18	26
Transportation and storage	0	5	4
Accommodation and food service activities	7	1	3
Information and communication	0	1	1
Financial and insurance activities	0	0	0
Real estate activities	0	0	0
Professional, scientific and technical activities	1	0	1
Administrative and support service activities	2	2	2
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	0	1	1
Education	2	7	5
Human health and social work activities	3	1	2
Arts, entertainment and recreation	0	0	0
Other service activities	6	1	3
Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use	5	0	2
Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies	3	7	6
Total	100	100	100

Note: The table gives the distribution of female participation across sectors rather than the relative participation of females to males by sector. The latest labour market survey led by INS, to be released in 2023, may cover such information. Source: INS (2022).

In the literature related to WEE and work in Côte d'Ivoire, much is framed around entrepreneurship rather than labour force participation, reflecting that women form the large majority of small and micro enterprises in the country (Altair, 2017; Kalsi and Memon, 2020). This is reflected in the data on self-employment, shown in Figure 1. Self-employment is widespread in Côte d'Ivoire: 81% of women in employment are self-employed. This is in line with the sub-Saharan average but much higher than the average of other lower-middle-income countries, of which Côte d'Ivoire is one. Moreover, the share of women in self-employment is much higher than that of men, which stands at 64% of total male employment.

Figure 1 Self-employment as a share of total employment, by sex, 2019 (%)



Source: World Bank (nd).

Labour market policies do little to integrate women in the labour market. The inclusion of women's enterprises in the formal economy is not a key feature of the National Integrated Strategy on Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy and its corresponding Operational Action Plan, which represent the country's attempt to transition a larger share of economic activity into the formal economy.

2.2 Women economic empowerment policies and strategies

In the past three decades, the Ivorian government has developed several development plans and policies that highlight the role of women in economic and social development: the *Politique nationale de la population* (1997); the *Livre blanc des femmes*² (1997); the *Plan national d'action pour la femme* (2003–2007); the Gender component of the 2012–2015 and 2016–2020 National Development Plan; the *Plan stratégique d'accélération de l'éducation des filles* (2018) aimed at improving girls' access to education; the Support Fund for Women of Côte d'Ivoire; and the Compendium of Female Expertise to promote women's visibility and public profile. However, disparities persist: for instance, the 2019 gender parity index literacy rate for youth³ was 82%, indicating that only 82 females aged 15–24 could read and write for every 100 males of the same age group (World Bank, nd). Other indicators that show the persistence of these disparities include the employment data shown in Section 2.1 and those shaped by gender norms, provided in Section 3.2. These disparities limit WEE (World Bank, 2013; Kalsi and Memon, 2020).

Legal reforms have aimed at improving women's rights; if implemented, these would support greater access to and control over

² The term 'Livre blanc' is used for strategic policy documents

³ The gender parity index literacy rate for youth is the ratio of females to males aged 15–24 who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement about their everyday life (World Bank, nd).

resources for women. For instance, the 1998 Rural Land Law granted women land tenure rights equal to those of men; the 2019 Marriage Law affords women the same rights as their husbands over marital property and grants them their husbands' inheritance; and the 2015 Labour Code mandates non-discrimination based on gender in hiring. However, these legal protections, which could support WEE, are often overturned by patriarchal customs and practices that favour men in many circumstances (Kalsi and Memon, 2020).

Recognising the importance of financial inclusion for WEE, the Ivorian government's *Stratégie nationale d'inclusion financière 2019–2024* pays particular attention to women (as well as other vulnerable groups such as youths, small and medium enterprises – SMEs – and the informal sector). There also exist funds dedicated specifically to women entrepreneurs: the *Fonds d'appui aux femmes de Côte d'Ivoire*, the *Fonds pour la promotion des PME et de l'entrepreneuriat féminin* and the *Projet de gestion novatrice du fonds national femmes et développement*. These funds support female entrepreneurship, providing financial resources for women to set up their own income-generating activities.

Other policies and strategies that do not target women directly but could benefit women include those that support entrepreneurship and SMEs, such as the *Stratégie de développement des PME ivoiriennes*, the *Programme Phœnix 2015–2020* and the *Politique nationale de promotion des PME* (Doumbia, 2019).

2.3 Labour market inclusion policies and strategies

While there exists support for women entrepreneurship, as cited in the previous section, our research has not identified policies and strategies geared towards labour market inclusion. This is despite the Constitution committing to equal opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship (Articles 14 and 15) – but can be explained by the structure of the country's economy, as highlighted in Section 2.1.

Some of the policies mentioned above, such as the education strategies, aim at improving women's access to the labour market. Others, such as the Labour Code, aim at eliminating discrimination in the labour market. However, the latter fails to introduce a requirement for equal pay for work of equal value for men and women (Kalsi and Memon, 2020). As a result, for employed work, women's average national revenue is 1.6 times lower than men's (INS, 2022).

Apart from these strategies aimed at (partially) removing discriminatory behaviours, we have not come across any plans to actively draw women into the labour market. There do exist policies for labour market growth, such as the 2012–2015 and 2016–2020 versions of the *Politique nationale de l'emploi*, geared at creating 200,000 jobs per year. Implementation of this is supported by the *Agence nationale pour l'insertion et l'emploi des jeunes*.

3 Challenges to greater women's economic empowerment via labour market inclusion in Côte d'Ivoire

3.1 Gaps in the policy framework

The review of policy documents presented above highlights two major limitations of the Ivorian policy framework that may prevent greater WEE via labour market inclusion.

The first limitation is the emphasis on entrepreneurship-led WEE. Underpinning this is the idea that many women in the African context already operate as entrepreneurs, and that this can be a route to escape poverty and achieve economic empowerment. This narrative is supported by global rankings on women's entrepreneurship, in which African countries often top the charts. For instance, the Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurship 2022 shows that the three countries with the highest share of women business owners (as a share of all business owners) are Botswana, Uganda and Ghana (Mastercard, 2022).

This narrative, however, misinterprets the reality of women's entrepreneurship in Africa. Unfortunately, women are often not 'opportunity entrepreneurs' who are making business by choice or to follow their innovative ideas but 'necessity entrepreneurs' who find themselves setting up their own business for lack of options for work other than self-employment (Acs, 2006). This is a general tendency in Côte d'Ivoire (Christiaensen and Premand, 2017), and it is particularly marked for women. For example, in Botswana and Ghana, about 40% of women entrepreneurs are so by necessity (Mastercard, 2022). Many women-led businesses in Africa are micro firms, often with no employees other than the owner, buying and selling products to eke out a livelihood, hardly matching the objectives of decent work. While promoting women's entrepreneurship is valuable and can be done in the context of government assistance and policies related to higher education and entrepreneurial training, and support to venture capital access, this

should not be the only focus, and should not substitute for inclusion in the broader labour market for decent work.

This leads to the second limitation: the absence of specific provisions for women in labour market policies. Both the cross-cutting job creation policy and sectoral policies, such as those pertaining to the agriculture sector and SMEs, do not have specific provisions for including women. Women are mentioned only among other 'vulnerable' groups, such as youth and people with disabilities. There is no effort to understand, let alone address, challenges related specifically to women, such as those surrounding education, vocational training or care work. This leads to inadequate support to women in the labour market.

3.2 Women's rights and gender norms limiting labour market participation

Legally, Côte d'Ivoire's Constitution bans employment discrimination on the basis of gender. However, gender norms related to who is in charge of care and domestic unpaid work, as well as perceptions related to women's skills and education routes, constrain their employment. Educational attainment is low but particularly for girls: 12% of girls in 2014 had completed secondary school against 16% of boys, and the figures drop to 4% of girls and 7% of boys when it comes to post-secondary school completion (World Bank, nd). This is compounded by early marriage: 27% of girls in 2016 had been married before the age of 18 (ibid.).

A 2021 survey in Côte d'Ivoire revealed that 80% of men thought men had greater leadership and management skills than women (INS, 2022). Not unrelatedly, women's representation in parliament in Côte d'Ivoire in 2021 was at 14%, showing a slow increase from 8% 10 years earlier and lower than the lower-middle-income group average of 21% (World Bank, 2023). Similarly, 70% of men felt that, in a context of limited employment opportunities, male employment should be a priority (INS, 2022). Such perceptions link back to expectations that women will provide the large share of unpaid domestic and care work in the household. In 2021, women spent 14 times more time than men on cooking, and up to five times more time on other domestic chores (ibid.).

Meanwhile, in the same survey, half of women working in Côte d'Ivoire reported having had to ask for permission from a family member to do so, while this was the case for only 11% of employed men. Rural areas and unmarried status are strong determinant factors at play in the need to ask for permission (INS, 2022).

Such a situation highlights the interconnection between legal reforms, changes in gender norm and greater WEE. While a legal framework exists, gender norms mediate what is deemed possible for women, *de facto* shaping their economic empowerment.

In a way, this linkage shows up in the institutional environment of ministries in Côte d'Ivoire. The ministry in charge of the gender equality agenda addresses this from the angle of family and children – it is the Ministry of Women, Family and Children. The degree to which WEE is embedded – and in what format and with what institutional modality and related budget – in the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection; the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and SME Promotion; and the Ministry for the Promotion of Youth, Youth Employment and Civic Engagement, as well as other ministries of relevance to economic growth – will give some indication as to progress on WEE mainstreaming to date.

4 Conclusion: possible entry points for policy support

The description of the current status in Côte d'Ivoire presented in Section 2 and the analysis in Section 3 point to large gaps with regard to improving women's terms of inclusion in the labour market, and in the related policy framework, in the country. Section 3 shows that a major gap exists in terms of inclusion in labour markets beyond some support to entrepreneurship, and that labour market and sectoral policies do not provide avenues to offer decent work and to better integrate women in the labour force. The resulting situation, whereby women have lower educational attainment, fewer skills and less access to finance, coupled with detrimental gender norms, tends to limit women to micro entrepreneurship. In this final section, we discuss possible entry points to provide policy support to WEE in Côte d'Ivoire.

Increasing job demand: job creation and diversification

First, and most importantly, efforts are needed to create jobs at the economy-wide level. While this strategy does not at first glance seem to be targeted specifically at women, creating jobs is crucial as a first step to be able to offer opportunities to women in the labour market, and to avoid relying on 'necessity entrepreneurship.' If more wage jobs were available to women, Côte d'Ivoire could move away from this generalised support to entrepreneurship and offer a wider range of options to its women.

Job creation not only should be developed in the sectors that already dominate in the economy, such as services, but also should diversify into others, for example manufacturing. In many countries, light manufacturing is a large employer of women, although it often entails low wages. If paying a living wage, light manufacturing jobs can contribute to WEE through income-earning. Côte d'Ivoire has achieved some success in its industrialisation in the past decade (UNIDO and Ministry of Commerce, Industry and SMEs, 2021).

Improving working conditions for women

However, not all jobs are compatible with care and domestic work, which remains women's responsibility as a result of prevailing gender

norms. As mentioned above, light manufacturing can employ large numbers of women but long hours and distant working sites can be incompatible with care work and raise safety and harassment risks for women.

Research has shown that, for many women, wage work may not entail an improvement of their socioeconomic conditions. On the one hand, working women can gain autonomy and greater bargaining power within their household (Hossain, 2011), which could affect their decision-making power in terms of education, marriage and childbearing (Heath and Mushfiq Mobarak, 2015). On the other hand, when women gain work opportunities, the costs in terms of increased workload, both at home and in their paid work, could outweigh the gains (Ansell et al., 2015; Arslan, 2018; Mamun and Hoque, 2022). Many women face unfavourable working conditions, and for many entry into wage work can represent a new form of subordination, bringing a risk of physical harassment (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Were, 2011). Moreover, gender wage gaps are persistent or can increase, diminishing the gains women access from joining the labour market (Seguino, 2000; Nicita and Razzaz, 2003; Nordman and Wolff, 2010; Seguino and Were, 2014).

Any type of job offered, therefore, should not only entail decent work (in line with the ILO definition) but also consider the specific needs of the women undertaking it. For instance, support to childcare in the form of childcare services or subsidies offered by the employer, or flexible hours, should be mandated by law (possibly in labour market laws and regulations), so that they are not a voluntary choice of the employer but a mandatory requirement to support working parents regardless of their gender.

Improving the labour supply: education and skills

The most important part of this equation – that is, job demand – has already been discussed; it is also necessary to consider supply constraints. Once the right types of jobs are available for women, it will then be necessary to make sure that women have the appropriate skills to undertake them.

Support should be provided in the form of training and capacity-building through technical and vocational education and training programmes. At the moment, the focus of the Ivorian government is on alphabetisation and basic education, but skills that are directly linked to jobs in the sectors earmarked for growth in national agendas should be built as well. Ideally, any training programmes could be targeted directly at women, or should reserve at least half of their spaces for women, to ensure they can support WEE.

Continued support on changing gender norms

Gender norms shape and constrain economic opportunities for women. Legal reforms; supportive policies, wherein WEE is an

objective that is acted upon with a corresponding budget; and monitoring and reporting efforts can help change norms and open up greater economic possibilities for women. Continued support to greater representation of women in education, leadership, etc. – that is, acting on the most visible manifestations of inequality – needs to be accompanied by changes in attitudes around women in education (e.g. on the elimination of gender-based violence in educational settings, on access to sexual health services so that the education of girls and women can be invested in rather than perceived as a waste as a result of the risk of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies) and women's leadership skills (e.g. on women's ability to lead on domains perceived as 'male,' such as finance and security) to change economic opportunities available to women (Harper et al., 2020).

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