



# Identifying How Gender Norms Impact Women's Labor Participation and Effective Strategies to Boost Their Workforce Involvement in Low-and Middle-Income Countries

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## Abstract

This paper explores how cultural contexts shape gender norms in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs) and identifies strategies that effectively address these norms to improve women's workforce participation. It seeks to enhance gender equality by consolidating successful strategies that have expanded women's employment opportunities in LMICs. While existing research often concentrates on individual countries or regions, this paper provides a comprehensive overview of strategies employed across various LMICs. The findings reveal that gender norms, especially familial pressures, play a crucial role in shaping women's engagement with the labor force in LMICs. Cultural factors, including religious beliefs, social systems, and legal frameworks, impose significant expectations on women, often limiting their employment opportunities. Strategies effective at increasing women's labor participation addressed deep-rooted sociocultural and structural barriers, while those not engaging with these underlying issues proved largely ineffective.

## Introduction

The recent rape and murder of a female trainee doctor in India has sparked a nationwide outcry, with thousands taking to the streets in demand of justice (Nagpal, 2024). This tragedy starkly illustrates the ongoing relevance and urgency of addressing gender equality and violence against women in the workplace. It highlights the critical need for continued advocacy and reform to ensure all women can work without fear of survival.

Although participation in the workforce is not necessary for people to achieve well-being and is ultimately a choice to be made by each individual, the author believes that obtaining the right to choose whether or not one wants to be employed is fundamental. By stripping certain groups of women of their ability to work—whether through restrictive legislative policies or societal pressures to conform—these women are denied the opportunity to gain economic independence and professional power. Empowering women by finding methods to increase their participation in the workforce is valuable to society. It can ultimately be a stepping stone for women to achieve equality in other domains like economic independence and political representation (Jayachandran, 2020).

This paper will begin by contextualizing the global issue of gender inequality and then explain the rationale for focusing specifically on low-and middle-income countries (LMICs). It will illustrate how cultural differences in LMICs affect women's employment opportunities. The paper will then examine the past and current situation of gender norms in LMICs, arguing that cultural traditions and historical events significantly influence women's labor participation in LMICs. Next, the discussion will narrow to the influence of familial pressures on women's work, addressing the impacts of childbearing, elder care, and financial stability. The paper will then evaluate effective and ineffective strategies employed by various LMICs to address these issues, aiming to identify approaches that may be applicable to countries with similar social and cultural contexts. The conclusion will offer personal insights, acknowledge the paper's limitations, and propose directions for future research on women's labor.

## **The Dire Realities of Gender Inequality**

While we may not realize it, gender norms are enforced from the moment we are born, shaping our identities through the clothes we wear, the toys we play with, and the behaviors we are expected to exhibit (Heise et al., 2019). Girls are often encouraged to embody traditional femininity, while boys are pressured to embrace masculinity, sometimes including the aggression and dominance that come with it. This early socialization not only molds our identities but also perpetuates a cycle where boys and girls internalize and endorse gender inequalities (Heise et al., 2019).

These entrenched beliefs carry over into adulthood, significantly shaping the global discourse on women's rights. The Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) provides a sobering measurement of these biases, assessing attitudes toward women's roles across political, educational, economic, and physical integrity dimensions (UNDP, 2023). According to the UN Human Development Reports, the 2023 GSNI, which covers 85 percent of the global population, reveals that nearly nine out of ten people—both men and women—harbor fundamental biases against women (2023). Similarly, a survey conducted in Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine found that over 60 percent of both men and women at each site believed that women who dress provocatively deserve to be harassed (Jayachandran 2021). This pervasive prejudice underscores a troubling reality: despite progress in many areas, deep-seated gender norms continue to hinder true equality; these widespread biases are not just abstract concepts but daily realities that shape and limit the opportunities and rights of women worldwide.

Consequently, such ingrained biases significantly impact women's participation in the labor force. Statista estimates that in 2023, more than two-thirds of men were employed worldwide, while only 44 percent of women were the same (Dyvik, 2024). This disparity highlights the pervasive barriers that women face in achieving equal employment opportunities, reflecting deeper issues of gender inequality that impact economic growth and social development. Despite advancements in various areas, gender inequality remains a pressing humanitarian concern that demands urgent attention.

In developing countries, women restricted to domestic work frequently endure additional health burdens associated with these responsibilities (Heise et al., 2019). Women living in developing countries are often confined to domestic work, which brings significant health and safety risks. National surveys from 61 countries show that women are responsible for water collection in 73-75 percent of households, exposing them to diseases, injuries, and violence during transport (Heise et al., 2019). Additionally, reliance on solid fuels and biomass for cooking due to the high cost or inaccessibility of cleaner energy sources leads to severe health issues like stroke and lung cancer (Heise et al., 2019). Reducing the domestic workload through changing gender norms and increasing women's participation in the formal labor force could help mitigate these risks.

In general, the exclusion of women from the workplace due to entrenched gender norms not only limits their potential but also reinforces broader power imbalances, preventing them from achieving equality with men. As a result, women remain marginalized in both economic and social spheres, perpetuating a cycle of inequality.

## **Why Low-and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs)?**

Before delving into the substance of this paper, the author will elucidate the definition of low-and middle-income countries (LMICs). According to the World Bank, low-income economies are defined as those with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of \$1,145 or less in 2023;

lower-middle income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$1,146 and \$4,515; upper-middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$4,516 and \$14,005 (“World Bank,” n.d.).

Studying low-and middle-income countries (LMICs) is crucial for understanding the transformation of gender norms and enhancing women’s participation in the workforce, as these regions typically experience higher levels of gender inequality in areas such as education, employment, and political representation (Ma et al., 2022). The presence of entrenched cultural beliefs and practices often plays a more dominant role in defining and reinforcing gender roles in LMICs, offering valuable insights into how cultural factors shape gender expectations (Kågesten et al., 2016). This understanding is essential for developing policies and interventions tailored to local cultural contexts and improving their effectiveness.

Additionally, gender norms have a more pronounced impact on LMICs. Inequalities are more prevalent in the developing world compared to developed regions, often exacerbated by poorer socioeconomic conditions, limited access to education, and cultural and religious influences (Gupta et al., 2019). Despite rapid economic growth in some LMICs, progress on gender equality, especially in economic and political spheres, remains limited (World Economic Forum, 2018). Traditional views on women’s roles within families are more common in these regions, sometimes resulting in restricted freedom of movement for girls and exposing them to dangerous health conditions due to domestic responsibilities (Kågesten et al., 2016). This reality underscores the urgent need for tailored interventions that address both cultural and structural barriers, ensuring that efforts to promote gender equality are both relevant and impactful.

## Research Questions

The author seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does culture play a role in shaping varying gender norms in LMICs?
2. What are common gender norms, and more specifically, familial pressures in LMICs?
3. What strategies have proven effective in facilitating women’s increased employment in LMICs?

## Methods

A literature review is ideal for this research as it explores the complex relationship between gender norms and women’s labor participation, which is influenced by various cultural, social, and economic factors not fully captured by quantitative data alone (Bisht, 2024). It allows for the synthesis of existing studies and theories, providing insights into how gender norms affect women’s workforce involvement and highlighting effective strategies from different contexts. This approach is particularly valuable in low- and middle-income countries where localized knowledge is essential for developing targeted interventions.

This paper employs a literature review to analyze existing research found on Google Scholar and Google Search. It includes studies published in English between 1970 and 2024. Tables were created using Google Docs. The paper was written from April 2024 to September 2024 and synthesizes 21 articles and 60 research papers. Keywords such as “low-and middle-income countries,” “gender equality,” “gender norms,” and “female labor participation” were used to gather relevant resources.

## Culture Matters: Different Cultural Contexts in LMICs

In many cases, country or region-specific policies, systems, or commonly practiced religions can challenge women's rights and their ability to work. The author highlights three examples in the below sections: the Hindu Caste System, the religion of Islam, and the impacts of varying legislation.

### A. The Hindu Caste System

Under the Hindu caste system, men who are not part of the family are often perceived as a source of "pollution" for women, a notion that reveals deep-seated cultural biases (Jayachandran, 2020). This restriction primarily affects women from upper castes, who face more stringent limitations than their lower-caste counterparts, who generally enjoy greater flexibility (Agte & Bernhardt, 2023). In India, preserving the "purity" of upper-caste women is highly emphasized. For instance, preventing women from working outside the home to avoid contact with unrelated men is seen as a way to uphold this perceived purity (Chen, 1995).

The caste system enforces a range of limitations—such as seclusion and segregation—that significantly hinder women's professional opportunities. This not only impacts individual women but also contributes to broader economic stagnation by keeping a substantial portion of the female population, an estimated 100 million Hindu women, from participating in the workforce (Agte & Bernhardt, 2023). These restrictive norms significantly limit the employment opportunities available to Indian Hindu women, contributing to India's low female employment rate of just 28.7 percent ("Labor force, female," 2023).

### B. The Religion of Islam

The religion of Islam and Sharia<sup>1</sup> Law can also be interpreted in ways that restrict women's capacity to participate in the labor force (Syed & Van Buren, 2014). Similar to the values of India's caste system, Islamic culture endorses a practice called *pardah*, or female seclusion, which contributes to the low female employment rates in the Middle East and North Africa (Jayachandran, 2020).

For many who practice Islam, the normative pillars of Muslim society and social obligations motivate their adherence to Islamic teaching (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). For finances, husbands are solely responsible for providing for their families' needs. In the United Arab Emirates<sup>2</sup> (UAE), domestic violence is legal as Islam allows a husband to discipline his wife and minor children (Marie, 2024). Even if some believe Islam itself cannot be blamed, Islamic law does place constraints on the economic sectors that women can work in, contributing to the low workforce participation of women in many LMICs where Islam is commonly practiced.

To clarify, Sharia Law does not forbid women from economic and political participation and permits them to work in certain sectors. However, Islamic teachings reinforce gender differences, granting men authority over women. Many scholars suggest that Islam itself cannot be blamed for gender barriers, but rather, the confusion between Islam, culture, and conservative interpretations of Islamic texts is to be blamed (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

It is important to note that these restrictions or norms are more complex than simply being religious and are often intertwined with cultural, economic, and historical factors. Interpretation of certain religions can play a large role in reinforcing gender roles, and it may not necessarily be the religion itself. Even in specific LMICs where the majority of the population practices a specific religion, women's participation in the labor force can vary due to factors like urbanization, education levels, and economic opportunities available to women (Akwara et al., 2023).

### **C. Culturally Influenced Legislation Impacting Women's Employment in LMICs**

The presence or absence of legislation can also play a role in limiting women's workforce engagement. While many laws claim to protect women's rights and enforce gender equality, their effectiveness is debatable.

#### **i. How Legislation or the Lack Thereof Perpetuates Gender Inequality**

Gender inequality and employment restrictions on women in LMICs are further perpetuated by legislation or the lack thereof. In fact, the World Bank estimates that the employment choices of around 2.7 billion women worldwide are affected by labor laws that restrict the types of jobs they can take (2018). In Afghanistan, women cannot travel outside their homes or choose where to live in the same way as a man (Hyland et al., 2020). The Kafala, or sponsorship, system practiced in LMICs like Lebanon ties groups of majority-female workers to their employers, limiting women's ability to change jobs or leave the country without employer consent (Robinson, 2022). In Bangladesh, the law does not mandate non-discrimination in employment based on gender, and legislation establishing penalties for sexual harassment in the workplace has not been enacted ("Bangladesh - Women," 2021). These are just a few examples of challenges women in LMICs face with restrictive laws or the lack of supportive laws. The absence of adequate regulatory support reinforces discriminatory practices and hinders women's career advancement.

#### **ii. Many Existing Laws Are Ineffective**

At the same time, while many LMICs have enacted laws designed to protect girls and women, the effectiveness of these policies often varies significantly. For example, Nigeria's 2003 Child Rights Act was a progressive step intended to safeguard children, including protecting girls from child marriage ("Child's Right Act," 2003). Despite this legal framework, the act has only been fully adopted in twenty-four of Nigeria's thirty-six states, resulting in uneven protection for girls across the country ("Child Rights," 2019). This inconsistency undermines the law's intended impact, highlighting how the patchy implementation of protective laws can perpetuate issues like child marriage. The consequences are profound: girls who marry early often have lower educational attainment, which diminishes their chances of entering the labor market and limits their employment opportunities ("Economic Impacts," 2017). This illustrates how legal frameworks alone cannot guarantee progress; effective implementation and enforcement are crucial for achieving real change.

Similarly, Bangladesh's Dowry Prohibition Act of 2018 was introduced to eliminate the practice of dowries and alleviate the financial strain on brides' families (Morely, 2021). However, the persistence of dowry-related violence and the weak enforcement of the law in some regions demonstrate the gap between legislative intent and actual outcomes ("Country policy," 2024). While laws may set a vision for gender equality, their impact is often diminished by inconsistent enforcement and cultural resistance. Addressing these issues requires robust legal frameworks and comprehensive strategies that engage local communities, address cultural norms, and ensure that laws are effectively implemented and enforced.

#### **iii. Post-Reformation, Many Laws Remain Ineffective**

Although amends have been made to restrictive laws in many LMICs over the past few decades, reformed laws can still have little power in effect. In Saudi Arabia<sup>3</sup>, the ban on women

driving was repealed in 2018 (Al-Rashid et al., 2020). This marked a significant change in Saudi Arabia's laws regarding women's mobility. However, due to independent driving being in the initial phases, many women still depend on drivers (husbands or male relatives). As public transport and taxis are still more popular options compared to driving, the points of concern are making public transport stops safe and adapting the interior fittings of public transportation to the needs of women (Al-Rashid et al., 2020).

India's Maternity Benefit Amendment Act (2017) extended maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks for women working in the formal sector. However, implementation challenges have limited its impact, especially for women in the informal sector and small enterprises. Tanzania's 1971 Law of Marriage Act has been amended to provide equal inheritance rights for women. These amendments aim to ensure that daughters and widows are entitled to inherit property equally with sons and male relatives. However, women who are victims of property grabbing are generally unable to obtain assistance from the police; Tanzanian police often regard inheritance disputes as family matters outside their jurisdiction (Ezer, 2006).

As shown above, cultural differences exist amongst different countries, each assigning specific roles, responsibilities, and attributes associated with being seen as a woman in their respective areas. Because discussion around gender norms and legislation concerning gender norms is evolving differently in all LMICs, each country cannot be expected to be identical in terms of progressive gender norms. Thus, it's important to be conscious of the practicability of applying effective strategies from one region to another to raise women's labor force participation in those specific areas.

### **Gender Norms: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives in LMICs**

Looking at the different cultural contexts in LMICs, it's clear that expectations for women vary across regions. Accordingly, cultural contexts have played a considerable role in shaping gender norms in LMICs. Socially accepted gender norms in LMICs often portray women as unfit to work or destined for familial duties, pushing many girls and women away from education and towards domestic work, absorbing beliefs of restrictions on females in the workplace ("How Harmful Gender," n.d.). This cultural shaping of gender norms diminishes the urgent need to increase female labor force participation, as women contribute innovative perspectives and drive progress across all sectors (Nenci, n.d.).

This raises a fundamental question: How have entrenched gender norms come to restrict women's professional opportunities?

#### **A. Cultivation of Gender Norms in LMICs**

Economist Esther Boserup previously hypothesized that in societies where men originally had agricultural advantages, the view that work was exclusively for men was cultivated (Jayachandran, 2020). Boserup (1970) argued that economic benefits initially led to a gendered division of roles in regions that relied on the plow, or agriculture. However, those gender roles became social norms that have persisted even as the economic environment has changed. The effects of this phenomenon have continued into the modern day, where civilizations that were once reliant on the plow are strongly correlated with gender attitudes that scorn women's employment. Many low-income countries are still heavily dependent on agriculture ("HIGHLIGHTS FOR," 2015); according to World Bank data from 2022, an average of 59 percent of people worked in agriculture in low-income countries, and 40 percent did the same in

lower-middle-income countries. Thus, Boserup's belief could help to explain the strong gender norms restricting women from working in many LMICs in the modern day.

### **B. How Complex Histories Have Led to Gender Disparities**

The history of LMICs differs significantly from that of developed countries in several key ways, which have profound implications for gender disparities.

First, many LMICs experienced colonization, which created social structures and norms often based on patriarchal and colonial ideologies (Mannell et al., 2021). The impact of colonization extended beyond mere political control; it fundamentally altered social hierarchies and cultural norms. Despite efforts to reclaim and revitalize cultural identities in the post-colonial era, the lingering effects of colonization continue to shape gender relations and social structures in these countries (Acemoglu, 2017).

Second, economic development in LMICs has often been uneven and heavily reliant on a limited number of primary industries (Khan, 2022). This economic imbalance has far-reaching consequences, particularly in sectors like education and child health, which suffer from inadequate funding and poor inter-sectoral coordination (Kruk et al., 2022). The resulting limitations in these critical areas contribute to entrenched gender disparities, such as restricted educational opportunities for girls and lower female participation in the formal labor market (Ma et al., 2022). This systemic imbalance not only hinders economic progress but also reinforces existing gender inequalities by limiting women's access to essential services and opportunities.

Third, many LMICs grapple with political instability, governance challenges, and authoritarian regimes that undermine effective policy implementation and enforcement related to gender equality (Mahmood & Muntaner, 2020). These political and governance issues create an environment where gender equality initiatives may be stifled or inadequately supported, further entrenching disparities. Political instability not only disrupts economic development but also impedes efforts to address gender inequities through policy and reform.

Fourth, global corporate practices in wealth extraction and distribution often deprive LMICs of critical resources necessary for sustainable development (Stiglitz, 2017). This external economic pressure exacerbates gender inequalities by limiting access to global markets and technology, access that is vital for economic and social advancement. The unequal distribution of wealth and resources reinforces existing disparities, making it even more challenging for LMICs to address gender imbalances effectively.

Finally, historical contexts have shaped legal systems and societal norms concerning gender roles. In many LMICs, these norms are more conservative and reflective of patriarchal traditions, which can significantly limit women's autonomy and undermine their dignity (Wessells & Kostelny, 2022). Such deeply ingrained traditions perpetuate gender inequalities by restricting women's rights and opportunities, thus highlighting the need for comprehensive and context-sensitive approaches to promote gender equity.

### **C. Common Gender Norms in LMICs**

To simplify for better understanding, the author has decided to select many gender norms affecting women's labor participation in LMICs and separate them into six categories: domestic responsibilities, educational attainment and occupational segregation, socio-cultural barriers, legal barriers, violence and harassment, and decision-making power. Table 1 summarizes the findings and includes commentary from the author.



Gender Norm Category	Description of Gender Norm	Consequence of Gender Norm	Author's Insights
Domestic Responsibilities	Many norms designate women as primary caregivers for children and elderly relatives as well as being responsible for household chores. This leads to a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work (Heise et al., 2019).	Women in LMICs often have less time available for paid employment due to extensive domestic responsibilities, which limits their ability to pursue full-time or higher-paying jobs ("Unpaid care work," 2017).	The disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities on women restricts their economic opportunities, educational attainment, and overall well-being, perpetuating gender inequality in LMICs.
Education Attainment and Occupational Segregation	Cultural norms may prioritize boys' education over girls', resulting in lower educational attainment for women and girls (Ekeruche et al., 2023).	Women are often concentrated in lower-wage sectors, such as agriculture and domestic work, with limited opportunities for advancement (Lim, 1990).	Women's lower educational attainment and occupational segregation contribute to limited career opportunities and persistent income disparities, reinforcing gender-based economic and social inequalities.
Sociocultural Barriers	Traditional beliefs and social expectations discourage women from joining certain industries seen as "male-dominated" (Kossek et al., 2017).	Women who choose to work in male-dominated industries are more likely to face judgment and harassment than those working in other industries ("Women in male-dominated," 2023).	Women in LMICs face pressure to prioritize family responsibilities over career ambitions, limiting their employment opportunities and career progression.
Legal Barriers	Gender norms can be enforced by laws and policies restricting	Women may face barriers to economic opportunities, leading	Laws that fail to address or enforce gender equality in



	women’s ability to work, own property, access credit, or make independent decisions about employment (Kabeer, 2021).	to lower income levels and reduced economic independence compared to men (“Gender,” 2024).	hiring, pay, and promotions can perpetuate workplace discrimination and limit women’s career opportunities.
Violence and Harassment	Fear of violence or harassment in public spaces or workplaces can restrict women’s mobility and willingness to seek employment outside the home (Jayachandran, 2020).	Toleration or normalization of workplace harassment and discrimination can create hostile work environments that deter women from entering or remaining in the labor force (Hardt et al., 2023).	Violence and harassment can negatively impact women’s mental and physical health, reducing their productivity and increasing absenteeism; this would reduce their participation in the labor force.
Decision-Making Power	Cultural norms can prioritize male control over household finances or property, limiting women’s economic autonomy and decision-making power (Jayachandran, 2020).	Limited representation of women in political and decision-making roles can perpetuate gender inequalities in policies and resources that support women’s economic empowerment (Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019).	Decisions about access to education, training, and financial resources often lie with male family members, hindering women’s opportunities to develop skills or invest in their desired careers.

**Table 1:** Summarization of Gender Norms Affecting Women’s Labor Participation in LMICs

Gender norms like these sustain a hierarchy of power that rewards masculinity, establishing a cycle of inequality that continues to undermine the rights of women and girls. These gender norms are reinforced by social and cultural contexts, causing slight variations between LMICs (Bornstein, 2016).

**Current Familial Pressures Hindering Women’s Workforce Participation**

As a subset of gender norms, familial pressures—the obligations and responsibilities that family members place on each other—place considerable limitations on women’s ability to work.

## A. Childcare

Childcare refers to the supervision, care, and early education of children, usually during the parents' working hours. Globally, the burden of childcare rests largely on women; on average, women undertake three-quarters of all childcare (Samman et al., 2016). For non-working women, the burden of childcare can dissuade them from joining the workforce. For instance, 24 percent of caregivers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 86 percent of which were mothers, reported previously turning down paid work due to lack of childcare (Elsey et al., 2020). For working mothers, the burden of managing work and childcare could potentially disadvantage their health and pose a challenge to the well-being of their children (Waterhouse et al., 2022).

Childcare deserts refer to areas with a significant lack of access to affordable and quality childcare services. In LMICs, childcare deserts can manifest for several reasons: geographical disparities, cost barriers, and limited infrastructure, to name a few. Childcare deserts exacerbate women's challenges in balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, leading to reduced workforce participation and economic opportunities. Further, gender norms often dictate that women are primarily responsible for childcare, causing an uneven split of parental duties in LMICs. This limits women's ability to fully participate in the labor market and advance their careers. Being compensated for labor often gives women more autonomy and influence than unpaid domestic labor (Jayachandran, 2020). This contributes to disparities in household decision-making, economic empowerment, and women's overall well-being.

The early years matter profoundly for the rest of a child's life. In sub-Saharan Africa, there seems to be an increase in the use of childcare of low and unknown quality (Hughes et al., 2021). The absence of widespread paid maternity leave and effective social protection systems in urban informal settlements in sub-Saharan Africa means that many working mothers need to return to work soon after childbirth, with many having to bring their children to work with them. A common strategy for working mothers was to take their young children to work with them, which often proved difficult and painful. This practice restricts mothers' work and can lead to job loss (Elsey et al., 2020). Much of the currently available paid childcare in sub-Saharan Africa is poor in quality: staffing ratios are high, training is minimal, and learning resources are poor or absent. Conditions are often unsanitary and unsafe, and the first aid skills of providers are poor (Hughes et al., 2021).

Since LMICs have higher total fertility rates compared to high-income countries, women in those countries tend to have more kids, which makes childcare even more difficult. This also contributes to higher levels of sibling-provided childcare in LMICs. In some cases, sibling-provided childcare is the only option, but this choice is not preferred because it places unrealistic pressures on older siblings. In many companies, maternity leave is inflexible and limits how long women can be away from their jobs. In many cases, they do not receive any pay during leave, making it hard for women to care for their newborn children. Lack of childcare is frequently cited as the primary barrier to maternal employment. Within the formal sector in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 39 percent of women must mind their children at work (Samman et al., 2016). Lack of affordable and quality childcare restricts women's employment opportunities and productivity. Balancing parental leave, childcare, and women's workforce roles can be challenging. Having reliable, high-quality childcare can enable women to advance their employment opportunities and their empowerment in decision-making (Behbehani et al., 2024). In LMICs, the need to expand childcare services is great, as more childcare services would put less pressure on women, allowing more women to work and not have to constantly worry about the well-being of their children during the workday. Even though women have always

contributed more than men to domestic responsibilities like childcare, which creates immense economic value, women are greeted with less power than their male counterparts (Beneria 1981).

## **B. Elderly Care**

In LMICs, the increasing populations of older individuals, inadequate health systems infrastructure, and the rise of non-communicable diseases have shifted a significant portion of caregiving responsibilities to family members (Bhan et al., 2020). This trend underscores a critical issue: families are left to fill the gaps as formal healthcare systems struggle to keep up with the growing demand. Women, in particular, bear the brunt of this responsibility. Beyond their essential roles in childcare, they are also more likely than men to provide unpaid care for elderly relatives (Carli, 2020). This disparity is not merely a reflection of personal choices. Still, it is deeply rooted in entrenched social norms and institutions that confine women to roles primarily focused on reproduction and domestic responsibilities (Ferrant et al., 2014). As a result, women in LMICs often find themselves managing complex healthcare needs with limited support from formal health services. The burden of this unpaid caregiving often leads to significant emotional and psychological strain, manifesting in higher levels of anxiety and depression among caregivers (Magaña et al., 2020).

The cultural emphasis on respecting and caring for elderly relatives further compounds this issue. In many societies, especially those influenced by Confucian principles, the concept of "filial piety" holds that caring for one's parents and elderly family members is both a virtue and a primary duty ("Filial Piety," n.d.). This cultural expectation places a disproportionate caregiving burden on women, who spend significantly more time on unpaid care work compared to men—often between 2 to 10 times more (Ferrant et al., 2014). This imbalance not only exacerbates the physical demands on female caregivers but also amplifies their vulnerability to mental health issues due to the lack of adequate social support (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2006; Vitaliano et al., 2003).

In regions such as Asia and South America, where traditional familial caregiving practices are prevalent, poorer health outcomes among unpaid caregivers of patients with chronic diseases are increasingly observed. The scarcity of health services for managing chronic conditions may contribute to these adverse health outcomes. Moreover, the strong cultural emphasis on filial obligation can add layers of psychological stress for caregivers (Zhang et al., 2019). Despite the significant role of informal caregivers, their health risks and the broader implications of their work are often overlooked in LMICs. Much of the focus remains on formal health systems and community health workers, neglecting the economic and emotional value of informal caregiving. For instance, in the United States alone, informal caregiving was valued at approximately \$470 billion in 2013, translating to around 37 billion hours of care, a substantial portion of which is provided by women (Bhan et al., 2020). This starkly illustrates women's labor's profound yet frequently undervalued contribution to caregiving.

The disproportionate burden of elderly care on women in LMICs is further exacerbated by socioeconomic factors that limit their access to resources and opportunities (Langer et al., 2015). Women often face economic constraints that hinder their ability to seek external help or respite from caregiving responsibilities. External caregiving help can be expensive, leaving many women in LMICs with few alternatives but to shoulder the full burden of care. This economic strain is compounded by the fact that caregiving responsibilities can limit women's ability to engage in paid work, reducing their income and long-term financial security (Sinha et

al., 2024). The cycle of financial dependency and caregiving further entrenches gender inequalities and perpetuates the marginalization of women in economic and social spheres.

Moreover, the lack of recognition and support for informal caregivers in LMICs often leads to an undervaluation of their contributions, both socially and economically (Langer et al., 2015). This undervaluation is reflected in the minimal policy attention given to the needs of caregivers, which reinforces their isolation and neglect. Initiatives that could alleviate the caregiving burden—such as caregiver support programs and financial aid—are often underdeveloped or absent (Bhan et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps requires a concerted effort to integrate caregiver support into broader health and social policies, women’s essential role in caregiving. By improving support systems and acknowledging the economic value of informal caregiving, LMICs can mitigate the profound disparities women caregivers face and work towards a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities.

### **C. Financial Contributions**

In many LMICs, women face intense pressure to contribute financially to their households despite unpaid caregiving and domestic work burdens. While domestic responsibilities like childcare form the backbone of households, economies, and societies globally, they are often neglected in policymaking and not seen as “real jobs” due to their largely unpaid nature (Grantham et al., 2021). This pressure to contribute financially is often driven by economic necessity, as household incomes may be insufficient to meet basic needs. In contexts where formal employment opportunities are limited and social safety nets are weak, women must balance caregiving responsibilities with paid work to ensure family financial stability. This dual burden can significantly impact their labor force participation and career progression.

The need for women to contribute financially often forces them into low-paying, informal, or more precarious employment opportunities; these jobs typically offer limited job security, few benefits, and minimal opportunities for advancement, exacerbating economic vulnerability and perpetuating gender inequalities (Mabilo, 2018). Women working in informal sectors may also face exploitation and lack of legal protections, further diminishing their economic security and well-being (Chant & Pedwell, 2008). The struggle to manage caregiving and paid work can result in high levels of stress and burnout, leading women to reduce their working hours or withdraw from the labor market entirely.

Moreover, the expectations placed on women to juggle multiple roles can undermine their ability to pursue higher education or vocational training, which are crucial for improving employment prospects and income potential. This limitation affects individual women and has broader economic implications, as it reduces the overall productivity and economic growth of LMICs (Asaleye & Strydom, 2023). By failing to support women in balancing caregiving with employment, these countries miss out on the full potential of their workforce and perpetuate cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

The dual burden of caregiving and income generation also means that women frequently encounter conflicts between work and family responsibilities. Many women in LMICs are employed in sectors with inflexible working conditions, making it difficult for them to balance their professional and domestic roles (Chant & Pedwell, 2008). This struggle can also result in high levels of stress and burnout, which can demotivate women from working. Consequently, this dynamic impedes women’s career progression and perpetuates gender disparities in labor market participation and earnings (Kabeer, 2021). Addressing these issues requires comprehensive policies that support women’s workforce integration, including improved access

to childcare, flexible working arrangements, and greater protection for informal sector workers. By addressing these challenges, LMICs can enhance women's economic opportunities and well-being while fostering a more inclusive and equitable labor market.

### **Strategies to Increase Women's Labor Force Participation**

To improve the future of work for women, this paper has looked at various attempted strategies to facilitate women's increased engagement in the workforce in LMICs. The below sections summarize findings on the effectiveness of different strategies.

#### **A. Ineffective Strategies:**

While this section focuses on identifying effective strategies, it is equally important to examine a few ineffective ones and the reasons for their ineffectiveness.

First, presentation-type strategies—such as informational videos and business training—have limited effectiveness. For instance, Jayachandran (2020) found that informational videos discussing workplace safety did not lead to significant changes in the level of support from family members or in women's job retention. This highlights a key limitation of such strategies. While they may provide valuable information, they often fail to address more profound, structural barriers that impact women's ability to participate in the workforce. The lack of significant behavioral change underscores that informational content alone is insufficient for altering entrenched social norms and family dynamics that influence women's employment outcomes.

Similarly, though somewhat more effective, business training programs exhibit constraints. Research indicates that while short-term business training programs can improve business performance and income for female micro-entrepreneurs, their impact is only sometimes transformative (Jayachandran, 2020). For instance, in Ahmedabad, India, women who attended a two-day business training session, particularly when accompanied by a friend, experienced higher business volumes and increased household income compared to a control group (Field et al., 2010). However, the benefits were less pronounced for women who attended the training alone (Jayachandran, 2020). This suggests that while such programs can provide valuable skills and support, their effectiveness can be limited by the social and cultural contexts within which they are implemented. Women facing restrictive societal norms related to caste or religion saw more pronounced benefits, yet this highlights how localized cultural factors can shape the outcomes of such training programs.

Moreover, these strategies often fail to address the underlying issues, such as social norms, family dynamics, and systemic barriers that influence women's economic participation. Thus, while they can provide some support, they do not fundamentally alter the structural and sociocultural constraints that restrict women's labor market involvement.

Second, if not carefully designed, legislative efforts to enhance women's participation in leadership roles can have limited or even counterproductive effects. A study in India illustrated that introducing a law mandating 30 percent reservation of local village council seats for women led to a significant shift in attitudes towards female leadership (Heise et al., 2019). This demonstrates the potential for legal measures to drive change on a broad scale. However, the success of such legislative strategies relies heavily on effective execution and enforcement, which can be inconsistent. If laws are enacted without adequate mechanisms for implementation and support, their impact can be minimal. Additionally, imposing new norms through legislation can sometimes backfire; Kahan (2000) points out that when legislative

changes are perceived as too distant from the existing status quo, they may encounter resistance or fail to achieve their intended outcomes.

While presentation-type strategies and legislative measures have potential, their effectiveness is often limited by their inability to address deeper cultural and structural barriers. Both approaches can lead to incremental improvements, but their impact on women’s labor participation and leadership roles may need a comprehensive understanding and integration of sociocultural contexts.

### **B. Successful Strategies:**

To provide a clearer understanding of what factors contribute to a successful strategy, the author presents a concise overview of effective approaches. In Table 2, the author summarizes the findings related to successful strategies.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description of Problem</b>	<b>Example(s) of Success</b>	<b>Author’s Insights</b>
Making Women’s Money Less Visible and Accessible to Family Members	There is a norm that men should serve as the family’s main financial decision-makers; thus, a woman’s money should be channeled to her husband to control (Jayachandran, 2020).	Making money less accessible to family members by providing loans through mobile deposits in Uganda led to higher business profits for women (Riley, 2020). The reduced visibility of the money also decreases intimate partner violence (Buller et al., 2018).	Women who control their finances are better positioned to manage their economic risks and uncertainties. This financial security can reduce their need to rely on familial support or compromise employment opportunities due to monetary constraints.
Increasing Access to Childcare	Many mothers in LMICs must take their children to work due to the lack of childcare services, limiting the jobs they can take; in poor urban neighborhoods, children can easily contract infectious diseases and often lack nutrition (Elsey et al., 2020).	In Ecuador, increased access to daycare services led to a thirty-one percent increase in maternal employment. Additionally, childcare centers had a significant positive impact on the mother’s income (Evans et al., 2021).	High-quality child care benefits mothers and contributes positively to child development. Children receiving quality early education and care are healthier and better prepared for educational success and social integration.



<p>Increasing Access to Safe Transportation</p>	<p>A lack of access to transport or a lengthy commute can disincentivize women from taking up formal or higher-paying jobs (Gupta et al., 2018), partly due to the inability to balance household and work responsibilities (Rachmad et al., 2018).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Women-only spaces on the subway in Rio de Janeiro reduced verbal and physical harassment experienced by female riders (Kondylis et al., 2020).</li> <li>2. Expanding the bus rapid transit and elevated rail system in Lima, Peru, increased female labor supply despite not having a women-only component (Martinez et al., 2018).</li> </ol>	<p>Access to transportation supports women's ability to pursue employment opportunities independently without relying on others for transportation. Safe and reliable transportation also reduces the risk of job loss due to attendance issues or difficulties in reaching the workplace.</p>
<p>Increasing Participation in Education</p>	<p>In LMICs, primary and secondary school completion rates for girls are lower than for boys ("Girls' Education," n.d.). This negatively impacts women's participation in the labor force, as women with higher levels of education generally have better chances of participating in the labor market (Ma et al., 2022).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Giving away bicycles or credit schemes boosted girls' secondary school enrollment in rural India (Muralidharan, 2017).</li> <li>2. A 1997 law mandating more education in Turkey led women to higher employment in jobs with social security benefits (Erten and Keskin, 2018).</li> </ol>	<p>Besides increasing women's chances of securing formal employment, educated women are more likely to prioritize their children's education, creating a cycle of heightened labor force participation for future generations. Education also fosters confidence, empowering women to seek better job positions.</p>
<p>Providing Paid</p>	<p>Maternity leave in</p>	<p>Vietnam offers</p>	<p>Paid maternity leave</p>

<p>Maternity Leave</p>	<p>LMICs is shorter than in high-income countries, and parental leave for additional time off is rare (Guerrero-Carvajal, 2020).</p>	<p>comprehensive labor market policies for care, including six months of fully paid maternity leave and paid antenatal and breastfeeding breaks (Samman et al., 2016).</p>	<p>increases the likelihood that women will stay with their employer; those who feel supported by their employer are more likely to be engaged employees.</p>
<p>Female Labor Unions</p>	<p>Women’s efforts to organize into unions have been difficult, as many societies have historically perceived unions as male-dominated institutions (Bryan, 2008).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Women in the Informal Economy, Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) supports global networks of street vendors and home-based workers (“About Us,” n.d.).</li> <li>2. The Indonesian Migrant Workers’ Union in Hong Kong informs female immigrants of their rights before migration (Bryan, 2008).</li> </ol>	<p>Female labor unions often work to improve workplace safety and health standards, which is particularly important for women in informal sectors. These labor unions negotiate for fair wages and benefits, making employment more financially viable for many women in LMICs.</p>

**Table 2:** Summarization of Successful Strategies

**Discussion**

This paper underscores the critical role of culture in shaping gender norms within low-and middle-income countries (LMICs), highlighting how various cultural contexts uniquely influence gender norms and women’s labor participation. One prominent finding is that conservative interpretations of religions, such as Islam, have been shown to restrict women’s involvement in the workforce. However, it is essential to note that this topic remains contentious among scholars, with ongoing debates about the extent and nature of religion’s impact on gender norms. Additionally, the paper reveals that laws shaped by the sociocultural contexts of LMICs also play a significant role in constraining women’s employment opportunities. These legal frameworks, often influenced by traditional norms and values, can perpetuate gender inequalities in the workplace.



The study identifies that common gender norms in LMICs are deeply rooted in historical and agricultural contexts, reflecting long-standing societal structures and practices. The author categorizes these norms into six primary areas: domestic responsibilities, educational attainment and occupational segregation, socio-cultural barriers, legal barriers, violence and harassment, and decision-making power. While these categories are relevant across various LMICs, their significance and impact can vary significantly from one country to another. For example, familial pressures, a subset of gender norms, were particularly influential in shaping women's work choices and opportunities. The additional domestic responsibilities often limit women's available time and motivation to engage in paid work, further constraining their participation in the labor market.

When examining strategies to improve women's labor force participation, the paper critiques several approaches, including presentational strategies, business training, and poorly executed legislation. These methods were found to be largely ineffective, often resulting in moderate to low impact (Jayachandran, 2020; Kahan, 2000). A common flaw in these strategies is their failure to account for the unique social and cultural landscapes of specific LMICs. Many initiatives adopted a one-size-fits-all approach, bombarding women with information and resources without a tailored action plan. A lack of contextual understanding often leads to mediocre outcomes.

In contrast, the paper highlights the effectiveness of strategies that address the root causes of gender inequality. For instance, one successful approach involved making women's earnings less visible and less accessible to family members, directly addressing the issue of money being redirected from women to their husbands or other family members (Riley, 2020; Buller et al., 2018). This strategy tackled a core problem in LMICs where women's financial autonomy is often undermined. On the other hand, policies that mandate equal pay without addressing the underlying issue of money redistribution could be less successful. This illustrates the importance of targeting the fundamental issues rather than implementing superficial solutions.

Table 2 summarizes effective strategies, emphasizing that they all share a common approach to addressing the root causes of gender inequality. By focusing on the underlying cultural and structural issues, these strategies offer a more impactful and sustainable solution to improving women's labor market outcomes.

Overall, this paper emphasizes that no universal solution exists for increasing women's labor force participation in LMICs. Generalized methods are often inadequate; a nuanced understanding of each country's cultural context is essential for developing effective strategies. Without a deep comprehension of the cultural forces that shape societies, efforts to improve gender equality will likely fall short. This insight underscores the necessity for tailored, culturally informed approaches to addressing gender disparities in the workforce.

### **Limitations of This Paper**

Understanding cultural contexts is crucial for effective strategies to increase women's participation in the labor force. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the norms and challenges across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), shedding light on how these cultural contexts impact the success of strategies designed to transform gender roles. The unique value of this paper lies in its focus on the importance of incorporating socio-cultural factors when developing a plan for gender equality.

However, this paper has several limitations. While it offers a broad overview of gender norms and women's labor force participation across various LMICs, it does not delve deeply into specific subtopics or individual studies. Consequently, the analysis may need to capture the nuanced effects of strategies in different cultural settings. The findings are based largely on qualitative data, which may only partially reflect the diverse realities of every LMIC.

Additionally, the scope of available research varies significantly across LMICs. Particularly, there is a lack of research concerning Asian and Latin American LMICs, with most research on this subject being concentrated in African and Middle Eastern LMICs; this limits the paper's ability to address those areas comprehensively. Future research should aim to expand into these under-studied regions to better inform strategies for improving women's labor force participation.

Some of the literature included may be outdated, though efforts were made to use the most recent studies to enhance relevance. As a result, certain theories discussed might not fully align with contemporary conditions in LMICs. Overall, while the paper offers valuable insights, its applicability may vary depending on the specific cultural and contextual factors of different LMICs.

#### **A. Outliers in Female Labor Participation: Sub-Saharan Africa and High-Income Cases**

Experts may point out that Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has one of the world's highest female labor participation rates, averaging 61 percent in 2020, compared to the global average of 47 percent, although rates vary by country. This high participation rate is linked to the fact that 41 percent of the SSA population lives in extreme poverty, making it essential for women to work as a means of survival. However, being part of the labor force does not necessarily lift them out of poverty. Therefore, increasing female labor participation remains crucial for poverty reduction (Waterhouse et al., 2022). Despite these high participation rates, SSA has yet to see much research and policy focus on women's dual roles as workers and mothers (Waterhouse et al., 2022).

Regarding the inclusion of outliers like the UAE and Saudi Arabia in this research, it's important to note that these countries are classified as high-income. Yet, they are often considered developing nations due to their economic structures and market maturity, comparable to those of LMICs (Sahnoun, 2014). Saudi Arabia and the UAE rely heavily on oil and must diversify their economies to increase financial stability (Al Naimi, 2022). Thus, including these countries in the discussion remains relevant to provide a comprehensive perspective.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper analyzes the evolution of gender norms in LMICs and identifies the most effective strategies for enhancing women's labor force participation. By employing a literature review approach, the author consolidates successful strategies that have broadened employment opportunities for women across various LMICs, offering a broader perspective than research typically confined to specific countries or regions.

The findings reveal that historical influences, including agricultural roots and colonization, continue to shape gender norms, restricting women's labor force participation in many LMICs. Familial pressures—such as childbearing, elderly care, and financial responsibilities—impose additional burdens on women, impacting their ability to work due to constraints on time and safety.

Gender norms and their impact on women vary depending on cultural contexts, with religion playing a significant role in some LMICs. While general patterns of gender norms are similar, local nuances can determine the success of policies and interventions to increase women's workforce participation. Thus, understanding cultural contexts is essential for developing effective strategies that address the root issues rather than relying on one-size-fits-all solutions.

The paper's consolidation of effective and ineffective strategies reveals that the most successful interventions tackle deep-seated socio-cultural and structural barriers. Effective strategies are tailored to meet women's specific needs and preferences in these contexts, aiming to alleviate the obstacles that discourage their participation in the labor market. Conversely, strategies that impose changes without considering local social norms or provide inadequate implementation mechanisms tend to be ineffective, often perceived as too radical or disconnected.

Future research should focus on women's dual roles as workers and caregivers. More studies are needed examining the intersection of family responsibilities and employment, including the availability and impact of support systems such as childcare and parental leave. Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to better understand how women's labor market outcomes evolve in response to changing policies, economic conditions, and social norms over time; much of existing research is cross-sectional.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Sharia, or Islamic law, guides all aspects of Muslim life. It is derived primarily from the Quran and the Sunna, which are the sayings, practices, and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. Precedents and analogies applied by Muslim scholars are used to address new issues. Agreements of the Muslim community also play a role in defining Sharia (Johnson & Sergie, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Although the World Bank classifies the UAE as a high-income country by the World Bank, it ranks with the ninth-lowest percentage of women in the workforce, at 18.5 percent ("Labor force, female," 2023). Due to the disparity between men and women working in the UAE, which heavily favors men, the author believes it is imperative and appropriate to include the UAE in this discussion.

<sup>3</sup>Similar to the UAE, Saudi Arabia is classified as a high-income country by the World Bank. Despite this, it is the country with the fifteenth lowest percentage of women in the workforce, at a mere 22.6 percent ("Labor force, female," 2023). Due to the extremely low percentage of women participating in Saudi Arabia's labor force, the author believes it is necessary to include Saudi Arabia in this discussion as well.

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