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Beyond Skills and Jobs: Understanding Barriers to Women's Job Search and Employment

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ABSTRACT

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This brief summarises evidence from six research projects funded by the Gender, Growth and Labour Markets in Low-Income Countries (G²LM|LIC) programme. Conducted in India, Ethiopia and Nigeria, these projects examine how information frictions, digital exclusion, mental health challenges and social norms shape women's labour market outcomes, while also highlighting the role of data innovation in improving our understanding of labour markets. Together, the studies show that persistent gender gaps in employment cannot be explained by a single constraint. Rather, women face a range of interconnected barriers that influence their ability to find jobs, access opportunities and succeed once employed. At the same time, the evidence points to promising opportunities for policy innovation. By addressing overlooked constraints—including access to information, digital skills, psychological wellbeing and discriminatory hiring practices—policymakers can develop new and creative approaches to expanding women's access to productive employment and narrowing gender gaps in labour markets.

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Introduction

Women's economic opportunities have expanded substantially across many low- and middle-income countries in recent decades. Educational attainment has increased, fertility rates have declined in many settings, and women's participation in labour markets has risen. Yet important gender disparities remain. Women continue to be underrepresented in well-paid jobs and overrepresented among the world's poor, highlighting the persistence of barriers that limit their access to productive employment (Bandiera and Zipfel, 2019).

Much of the policy discussion has focused on familiar constraints such as education, skills and labour demand. These factors undoubtedly matter, but they provide only a partial explanation for why women continue to face disadvantages in labour markets. Recent research supported by G²LM|LIC suggests that gender gaps persist not because there is a single barrier to women's employment, but because women face a range of interconnected constraints. Some arise during the process of finding and securing jobs, as workers and employers make decisions based on imperfect information. Others are less visible, including limited digital skills, poor mental health and social norms that shape both women's choices and employers' hiring decisions. These factors can prevent women from accessing opportunities even when jobs are available and qualifications are not lacking.

This brief brings together evidence from a diverse set of G²LM|LIC projects conducted in India, Ethiopia and Nigeria to examine three dimensions of these constraints. First, it explores how information and search frictions affect labour market outcomes and job matching. Second, it considers a set of less-explored barriers to female employment, focusing on digital exclusion, mental health and social norms. Finally, it stresses the importance of data innovation for understanding labour markets and designing more effective policies. Together, these studies suggest that closing gender gaps in employment requires a broader view of the obstacles women face and a more comprehensive approach to addressing them, highlighting new opportunities for action.

Finding Jobs: Search, Information and Matching

A well-functioning labour market depends on workers and firms being able to find one another. Yet even when suitable jobs and qualified workers exist, matches may fail to occur because individuals make decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information. Jobseekers may not know where opportunities are available, what skills employers value, or whether the effort required to search for work is likely to pay off. These information frictions can lead workers to search inefficiently, miss valuable opportunities, or withdraw from the labour market altogether.

Such constraints may be particularly important for women. In many low- and middle-income countries, women remain less connected to labour markets and have weaker access to information networks than men. Using evidence from one of Nigeria's largest online job platforms, Archibong and coauthors (2026) illustrate how these disadvantages can translate

into poorer labour market outcomes. Despite operating in an environment where information about vacancies and applicants is more readily available than in traditional labour markets, women applied to fewer jobs than men and were more likely to target lower-level positions. These gender differences in search behaviour suggest that information frictions and uncertainty might shape labour market outcomes, even in increasingly digital labour markets.

If imperfect information contributes to these disparities, can better information improve outcomes? A G²LM|LIC-funded project in India provides encouraging evidence that it can. In a randomised controlled trial conducted in partnership with an online job platform, Singh and Ravishankar (2023) provided 5,000 jobseekers with information about local labour market conditions (type and number of vacancies available), labour supply (the characteristics of other applicants in the area) and labour market tightness (the ratio of vacancies to applicants). The intervention led to a significant increase in employment among participants, with the largest effects observed among jobseekers who held relatively pessimistic beliefs about their chances of finding work. The findings suggest that low-cost information interventions can help workers make better decisions and improve matching between workers and jobs.

The evidence points to a common conclusion: information matters. Improving the flow of information between workers and firms can strengthen labour market matching and expand employment opportunities. Yet the persistence of gender gaps even in information-rich environments suggests that information alone is not enough, pointing to a broader set of constraints that continue to shape women's employment opportunities.

Beyond Information: Additional Barriers to Female Employment

The previous section showed how information frictions can affect job search and employment outcomes. Yet information alone cannot explain persistent gender disparities in labour markets. Even when women are aware of available opportunities, they may face other barriers that limit their ability to access or benefit from them. Recent G²LM|LIC research highlights three such constraints: digital exclusion, poor mental health and social norms that shape hiring decisions. While these barriers have received less attention than education or skills, the evidence suggests they can have important consequences for women's employment outcomes.

One increasingly important constraint is digital exclusion. As job search, recruitment and access to information become more reliant on digital technologies, individuals who lack access to these tools risk being left behind. Women are particularly vulnerable to this form of exclusion, as gender gaps in mobile phone ownership, internet use and digital skills remain widespread in many low- and middle-income countries (Troyer Moore et al., 2024). A G²LM|LIC-funded project in India examined whether expanding women's digital access

through the distribution of 2 million free smartphones could help closing the digital gender gap. While providing smartphones increased internet use in the short term, many of these gains faded over time. By contrast, combining access to technology with digital literacy training produced more persistent improvements in digital engagement. The findings suggest that access to technology alone is insufficient; women must also have the skills and confidence needed to use digital tools effectively. Closing digital gender gaps therefore requires investments in capability as well as connectivity.

Access to technology may create opportunities, but individuals must also be able to take advantage of them. A growing body of evidence suggests that mental health can play an important role in shaping labour market outcomes, biasing perceived returns to effort, influencing workers' productivity, decision-making and ability to remain attached to employment (Lund et al., 2024). G²LM|LIC-funded research among factory workers in Ethiopia found that workers experiencing poorer mental health responded less strongly to financial incentives designed to encourage job retention (Abebe et al., 2024). In India, Bennett and Angelucci (2025) explore whether short course pharmacotherapy could provide a scalable response to depression. Among 1,000 mildly to moderately depressed adults, treatment reduced depression severity in short run, but effects dissipates over the seven years covered by the study as the control group recovers naturally. However, treatment reduced stigma towards depression, increasing awareness and care-seeking during later episodes, thus leading to lasting behavioural changes.

Not all barriers originate with workers themselves. Labour market outcomes are also shaped by the decisions made by employers. Research conducted on a large online job platform in Nigeria found that women faced lower hiring probabilities than equally qualified men, even in a setting where information about applicants was readily available (Archibong et al., 2025). The study showed that these disparities were particularly pronounced when employers and applicants shared the same ethnic background and operated in contexts characterised by stronger patriarchal norms. The findings suggest that discriminatory social norms can influence hiring decisions independently of workers' qualifications or access to information. Encouragingly, the research also found that providing employers with information about gender bias and workplace diversity reduced discriminatory behaviour, highlighting the potential for interventions that directly address social norms.

Together, these studies broaden our understanding of the barriers that women face in labour markets. They suggest that improving employment outcomes requires more than expanding education or increasing labour demand. Digital capability, psychological wellbeing and social norms all influence whether women are able to access productive employment and succeed once employed. At the same time, the evidence points to promising opportunities for policy innovation. By identifying and addressing previously overlooked constraints, policymakers may be able to unlock new pathways into employment for women.

Understanding where such barriers exist, however, requires high-quality evidence and data—an issue to which we now turn.

Building Better Evidence

Identifying barriers to women's employment requires high-quality data. Recognising this, G²LM|LIC supported the India Data Lab Initiative by funding the digitisation of the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), India's principal source of information on the organised manufacturing sector (Kotia & Saxena, 2025). The project digitised monthly data for the period 1960-2000, creating one of the most comprehensive plant-level datasets available for a developing economy. The dataset includes information on critical labour metrics such as working days, man-days, absenteeism, turnover, and earnings.

By making these data accessible to researchers, the project has the potential to unlock new insights into employment, wages, productivity and structural transformation. More broadly, it highlights the importance of investing in data infrastructure alongside research and policy innovation. Better data help researchers identify emerging challenges, evaluate interventions and design more effective policies.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this brief suggests that there is no single explanation for persistent gender gaps in labour markets. Women's employment opportunities are shaped by a wide range of factors, including access to information, digital skills, mental health and social norms. While this complexity can make barriers to employment more difficult to identify and address, it also creates opportunities for policy innovation. The studies supported by G²LM|LIC demonstrate that relatively targeted interventions—from improving access to labour market information and digital training to addressing mental health challenges and discriminatory hiring practices—can help reduce these barriers. By broadening our understanding of the constraints women face, this research points towards new and creative ways of expanding access to productive employment and narrowing gender gaps in labour markets.

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