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ABSTRACT

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This brief summarises evidence from G²LM|LIC-funded research on barriers to women's employment in Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and India. The studies show that women's access to work is shaped not only by skills and labour demand, but also by mobility constraints, safety concerns, social networks, and workplace conditions. Policies that make jobs more reachable, support coordination among women, expand professional networks, and strengthen workplace protections can help reduce these barriers and make employment more accessible, safe, and sustainable.

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Introduction

Women's labour force participation remains low in many low- and middle-income countries, despite substantial progress in education, fertility decline, and economic development. A common explanation focuses on individual constraints: women may lack access to skills, information or capital. These constraints matter, but they are only part of the story.

Women's employment is also shaped by the social and physical environment in which work takes place: where jobs are located, whether commuting is safe and affordable, whether women can rely on others when searching for work or travelling, and whether workplaces are organised in ways that allow women to enter and progress.

These barriers may be self-reinforcing. When few women work outside the home, labour markets, transport systems, workplaces, and professional networks may remain organised around male participation. This can make commuting more difficult or unsafe for women, limit access to job information and business networks, and leave workplaces less responsive to women's concerns or hostile to them. Low female labour force participation may therefore be both a consequence and a cause of the constraints women face. This creates the possibility of a low-participation trap, in which women's limited presence in public and workplace spaces reinforces the very frictions that keep them out of employment.

This brief reviews evidence from G²LM | LIC-funded research in four countries¹ on how these barriers can be reduced. The studies cover a range of settings and interventions, but speak to a common question: how can work be made more accessible to women? First, we examine policies and labour market changes that expand women's access to work by altering where jobs are available, reducing the costs of mobility, or making employment compatible with women's constraints at home. Second, we consider the role of networks and coordination in helping women search for jobs, travel safely, and build productive professional relationships. Third, we examine why access to work must also include safe and responsive workplaces, focusing on harassment, worker voice, and grievance mechanisms.

The evidence shows that improving women's employment requires more than creating jobs or increasing individual skills. Work must be reachable, safe, socially feasible, and supported by institutions and networks that allow women to participate on equal terms. The studies reviewed in this brief point to practical ways of expanding women's access to employment, while also highlighting the importance of addressing the social and access constraints that continue to shape labour markets in low-income settings.

Expanding access to work

Women's employment depends not only on whether jobs exist, but on whether those jobs are accessible. Access can be limited by the spatial distribution of employment opportunities, the cost and reliability of commuting, safety concerns, and the extent to

¹ Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and India.

which work is compatible with women's responsibilities at home. Several G²LM|LIC-funded projects show that reducing these access barriers can have substantial effects on women's labour market outcomes.

Evidence from Delhi, India, highlights the importance of the local availability of suitable jobs. Kovvuri and Sharma (2026) study the expansion of the Delhi Metro and show that new transit stations changed the composition of firms located nearby. Rather than raising female employment mainly by reducing commuting costs, metro stations attracted larger, consumer-facing firms that already employed more women. As a result, female employment increased in neighbourhoods around new stations. The study shows that transport infrastructure can affect women's employment not only by moving workers to jobs, but also by shaping where firms locate and what kinds of jobs become available locally.

A second approach is to reduce the need to travel altogether. Adhvaryu and co-authors (2025) study a work-from-home intervention in rural Rajasthan, India, where women were trained and randomly assigned to either home-based work or work in a women-only village workshop. Working from home increased job take-up, daily engagement, output, and earnings. The intervention therefore shows that flexible, home-based work can expand women's access to paid employment in settings where mobility constraints, domestic responsibilities, and social norms limit work outside the home. At the same time, the study also documents an important trade-off: the additional time spent in paid work came largely from reductions in sleep, leisure, and personal care, rather than from reductions in household or care responsibilities.

A third way to expand access is to improve women's own mobility. Sarkar (2025) studies female gig workers on an Indian home-services platform, where workers travel to customers' homes and access to efficient transport is central to productivity. A subsidy that reduced the down-payment required to purchase a scooter substantially increased scooter take-up among female workers, especially among those who did not already use a scooter for work. The subsidy increased jobs completed, earnings, and platform revenue, suggesting that liquidity constraints on productive mobility assets can limit women's ability to take advantage of work opportunities.

Networks, coordination, and safety constraints

One reason why access barriers matter so much for women is that travelling to work is not only costly, but may also be unsafe or socially difficult. These concerns can be reinforced by a low-participation equilibrium: when few women work outside the home or commute regularly, those who do may be more isolated and exposed. In this context, networks and coordination can play an important role by helping women travel, search, and work alongside others.

Evidence from India shows that relatively simple forms of coordination can substantially increase women's job search. Kapoor and Gade (2025) study a field experiment in which job-

seeking women were matched with other women in their neighbourhoods, and both had job interviews scheduled either on the same date or on different dates. Matching alone was not sufficient to increase interview attendance. Instead, the effect came from enabling women to coordinate travel to factory interviews. Women who were matched and assigned interviews on the same date were substantially more likely to attend interviews, continued to coordinate travel afterwards, and increased their subsequent job search and short-run employment. The findings show an additional benefit of social networks beyond information acquisition: making mobility safer and more feasible.

Similar mechanisms appear in evidence from urban Côte d'Ivoire. Donald and Grosset (2024) offered jobs to prospective workers while varying whether their network members were also offered jobs and whether they could work and commute together. Job take-up and retention increased substantially when workers were assigned to the same shift or worksite as their network members, with the effects driven primarily by the ability to commute together. The gains were observed for both men and women, but women reported safety as an important reason for valuing co-commuting.

Safety concerns can also shape labour demand. Buchmann and co-authors (2023) study applications and hiring for a night-shift office job in Bangladesh. They show that employers were less likely to hire women. However, providing hiring managers information about the availability of safe transport for workers increased female hiring, indicating that the gender gap was in part driven by employers' concerns about women's safety when commuting at night. The authors refer to this phenomenon as *paternalistic discrimination*: the barriers and challenges that women face when joining the labour force decrease not only their labour supply, but might be internalised by employers, reducing their demand for female employees.

Policies and interventions that bring women together can have benefits that extend beyond searching for and accessing wage employment. Lambon-Quayefio and co-authors (2024) study an online networking intervention for growth-oriented female entrepreneurs in Ghana. Women assigned to WhatsApp networking groups improved business practices, introduced more innovations, and increased profits in the short run. The gains appear to have been driven by changes in business collaborations and peer effects, rather than by changes in ambition or empowerment. However, the effects faded over time, suggesting that light-touch networks can generate meaningful short-run gains but may require sustained engagement to produce durable business growth.

Making workplaces safe and responsive

Women's safety is not only a concern while commuting or searching for work; it also shapes their experience inside the workplace. Even when women can reach jobs and are hired, harassment, weak grievance systems, and limited worker voice can make employment costly, unsafe, or unsustainable. Making work accessible therefore requires attention not

only to the barriers that prevent women from entering employment, but also to the workplace conditions that determine whether they can remain, progress, and benefit from work.

Evidence from India highlights the scale and cost of workplace harassment. Dam and Dabed Sitniski (2025) survey women working in corporate firms in India and find that nearly 70 percent report experiencing at least one form of workplace harassment in the past year. These experiences include sexist hostility, unwanted sexual attention, sexual hostility, coercion, and criminalised acts such as unwelcome touching and indecent exposure. Harassment affects women's labour market choices. Women report leaving firms altogether in response to unsafe workplace environments are willing to forgo on average 19% of their wage for a safer workplace, suggesting that harassment imposes an economic cost as well as a psychological one.

The question, then, is how workplaces can provide credible channels for voice and remedy. Evidence from Bangladesh's garment sector points to one possible approach. Boudreau and co-authors (2025) study a neutral third-party worker helpline designed to allow workers to report harassment and other workplace issues. Training workers about the availability of the helpline increased calls about non-urgent labour issues, indicating substantial demand for grievance resolution outside standard firm hierarchies. The project also studies reporting escrows, which are designed to reduce coordination problems, retaliation risks, and reputational costs by allowing workers to report misconduct through a trusted intermediary. While the escrow experiment is ongoing, the preliminary evidence shows that workers value credible and independent channels through which to raise concerns.

Conclusion

This brief has reviewed evidence on how work can be made more accessible to women. The studies show that women's employment is constrained not only by whether jobs exist, but by whether jobs can be reached, whether travel is safe and feasible, and whether workplaces are organised in ways that allow women to remain and progress.

Access to work can be expanded through several channels. Infrastructure can change the types of firms and jobs available locally; flexible work arrangements can make employment compatible with women's mobility constraints and responsibilities at home; and productive mobility assets can expand the set of jobs and customers women are able to reach. These findings show that policies aimed at increasing women's employment need to look beyond skills and labour demand, and consider the practical conditions that determine whether women can access work in the first place.

Networks and coordination are central to this agenda. In settings where few women work or commute, women may face heightened safety concerns and weaker access to information, support, and professional relationships. The evidence reviewed here shows that relatively simple forms of coordination can help women travel to interviews, take up jobs, remain

employed, and build business relationships. Networks can therefore act as a form of labour market infrastructure, reducing the individual costs and risks of accessing work.

Finally, making work accessible requires attention to what happens inside the workplace. Women also need workplaces in which they can work safely, report problems, and seek remedy without fear of retaliation or inaction. Policies that reduce harassment, strengthen grievance mechanisms, and make employers more responsive to women's concerns are therefore essential for ensuring that access to work translates into sustained and meaningful economic opportunity.

Expanding women's work requires more than creating jobs or improving individual capabilities. It also requires reshaping the social, spatial, and institutional environment around work so that employment is reachable, safe and sustainable.

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