# The position of women in the South African labour force: an overview 

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#### Abstract

The empowerment of women is often cited as a key factor in the economic advancement of a country, as the skills of all citizens are utilized. For this reason, the improved position of women has been put forward as one of the millennium development goals. In South Africa, the past decade has been characterized by a marked increase in female labour force participation. However, it has been debated whether this has been accompanied by true socio-economic empowerment for women. This article aims to give an overview of the current position of women in the South African labour market. Comparisons to other countries as well as an analysis of trends were made. The following issues were addressed: the extent to which South African women are participating in the labour force and how they are situated within the labour force.


Keywords: women, labour force, South Africa, economic empowerment

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## Introduction

South Africa, like many of her African counterparts, is striving to improve the living conditions of her citizens. Part of this movement towards a better quality of life involves the empowerment of women. While it is acknowledged that empowerment encompasses many dimensions of women's lives, one such dimension that has become increasingly visible in international policy debate is the economic dimension (Kabeer, 2012: 7), which includes women's economic independence and labour force participation. It is recognised that "economically empowering women is essential both to realise women's rights and to achieve broader development goals such as economic growth, poverty reduction, health, education and welfare" (Golla et al. as quoted in Kabeer, 2012: 8).

Using statistical analysis, this paper examines the position of women in the South African labour market. However, we acknowledge that this is but one dimension of an analysis of the position of women and that market place indicators can never shed light on all gender issues related to the world of work, such as "...decision-making process that a male or female parent faces regarding employment... [and] the extent of "soft"...discrimination...in the career advancement of men or women" (ILO: 2010: xi). In addition to this, we also acknowledge that economic empowerment, while leading to a myriad of advantages for women, may also have the unintended consequence of increased violence against women, particularly in the South African context as often the changing (and improved) status of women is perceived as a threat to male authority and violence is then used to enforce male authority and put women 'in their place'(Jewkes, Levin and PennKekana, 2002: 1613). However, a general overview of trends regarding the participation of women in the labour market forms part of a study of the extent to which women are free to choose whether or not to become part of the labour force. "While one should not assume that all women want to work, it is safe to say that women want to be given the same freedom as men to choose to work if they want to..." (ILO, as quoted in Kabeer 2012: 17).

## The South African Labour force

SouthAfrica, situated on the Southern tip of Africa is a developing country with a history of social inequality, and has only had a democratically elected government since 1994. Despite high rates of crime and AIDS, South Africa remains one of the most economically stable countries
in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a Global competitiveness index ranking of $52^{\text {nd }}$ world-wide (2012) and $1^{\text {st }}$ in Africa (World Economic Forum, 2013).

South Africa has a population of just over 52 million, of which just over 33 million people are of working age, which includes all people 15 to 64 years of age (Statistics South Africa, 2013a: 3 and 2013b: 2). However, not everyone in the working age group is part of the labour force and only 36 per cent of the entire population forms part of the labour force (Figure 1). However it is important to note that the labour force includes not only employed individuals but also those who are unemployed; in other words, all who offer their labour in the labour market.

Figure 1: Breakdown of the South African population in terms of working age (employed, and not economically active) and nonworking age (2013)


Compiled from Statistics South Africa (2013a: 3) and (2013b: 2).
South Africa has relatively high levels of dependency, with only 26 per cent of the entire population being employed. The South African labour force (working age individuals who are either employed or unemployed) has shown a steady increase over the past decade, mainly due to the fact that South Africa has a young population with a yearly increase in the working age cohorts. However, what does not bode well for the working age group is that this population group is especially vulnerable to HIV infection as it is estimated that 15 percent of South Africans between the ages of 15-64 are living with HIV/AIDS (calculated from South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), 2012: 7, 571).

## The position of women in the labour force

Despite the relatively favourable economic position of South Africa within the African context, a finer analysis of the labour force is needed to better understand the position of women. In this regard, the following will be dealt with: the increasing feminization of the labour force, the placement of women in the labour force, as well as women and unemployment. We acknowledge that South African women do not form a homogenous group; the country is heterogeneous, often with discernible racial, ethnic and class differences. For the purposes of this paper, we will move between a macro level analysis looking at women in general, and, where necessary, examine the finer differences among South African women.

## The increasing feminisation of the labour force

Even though women make up a greater proportion of the working age population (15-64 years), with 17043000 being women compared to 16 197000 men, the actual number of women in the labour force (employed and unemployed) is still slightly less than that of men (Statistics South Africa, 2013b: 2, 3). This has been the reality for most countries worldwide, as women, for various reasons, do not participate in the labour force to the extent that men do. However, South African women have been entering the labour force in increasing numbers even though they are still outnumbered by men (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Women as a percentage of the labour force (1970 and 2012)


Compiled from:Barker (2007: 11) and Statistics South Africa (2013b: 2, 3).

Of the $45 \%$ of women in the labour force, $75 \%$ are Black, $11 \%$ are Coloured, $2 \%$ are Indian and $11 \%$ are White (SAIRR, 2012: 228). Despite the fact that women currently make up just less than half of the labour force, this was a mark reached with a sudden leap, and marked a significant increase over the last four decades. The sharp increase in the female labour participation rate has been regarded as one of the most important changes in the nature of labour supply in South Africa. These figures compare well with the global average reported by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) which points out that women make up 40 per cent of the world's workers (ILO, 2009: 1).

Many reasons have been suggested for this rapid feminisation of the South African labour force; the most important, identified by Barker (2007: 2), include:

- Rising wages and increased access to jobs due to a reduction in discrimination
- Increasing levels of education among women
- Declining birth rates
- Declining proportion of women living with employed men (due to unemployment of men, divorce, widowhood and single parenthood)
- Changes in social conventions about the position and role of women in the society.
With the increasing democratization of the country and the final shift to a democratically elected government in 1994, the last three decades have ushered in a time of human rights awareness in the country. With the new constitution (considered to be one of the most advanced, globally), non-discrimination was of paramount importance. Rectifying the wrongs of the past (mainly racial discrimination) included placing women high on the political agenda. In the area of labour, one of the most important laws passed was the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998), which emphasizes non-discrimination and promotes equity. Consequently, more jobs are now accessible to women, who also demand equal pay. In particular, one previously disadvantaged group, namely African women, was placed in a potentially favourable position.

In addition to democratization, more and more women went through formal education. Historically, in South Africa there were wide gaps in terms of access to education for non-white racial groups (Figure 3). A decade and a half ago, 17.8 percent of African adults had no formal
education. Currently (2011), the rate of 8 per cent, though a significant improvement, still lags behind the rate of school participation by other population groups. This has implications for the employability of black South Africans in general, and black women in particular.

Figure 3: Percentage of persons aged 20 and older with no schooling by race 1998, 2002, 2008 and 2011 (as a proportion of 20 years and older of each group).


Compiled from: SAIRR (2008: 346) and (2012: 424).
In addition to this racial divide, it is often the women within historically disadvantaged groups who remain uneducated. When poverty is a reality, resources are often channelled to educate the male members of the family (Kabeer, 2012). In 1995, 23 per cent of black South African women over the age of 25 had no formal schooling. By 2001 this figure had dropped to 18 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 2002: 24). In 2008 10 per cent of all South African women 20 years and older did not have formal schooling, compared to 7 per cent of men, which signals the closing of the no-schooling gap. However, it should noted that black South African women make up 95 per cent of this category (albeit a shrinking one).

In general then, it is clear that the education gap between men and women in South Africa is closing, with women increasingly gaining access to education. Even though black South African women still make the greatest proportion of women with no formal schooling, it is also within this group that one witnesses rapidly changing trends. What is particularly noteworthy is the increasing enrolment of women in institutions of higher education (Universities, Technikons and

Colleges) where female enrolments outnumbered those of males in 2009 (Department of Basic Education, 2009). This puts women in a better position to access employment once they have completed their schooling (as reflected in the study of Serumaga-Zake and Kotze, 2004 and emphasised in Kabeer, 2012).

South Africa's birth rate has also experienced a sharp decline. Being able to control the number and timing of children is recognized as a crucial right often denied to women. The birth rate declined from 31.4 per 1000 in 1985 to 21.0 per 1000 in 2008 (SAIRR, 2008: 5 and 2012: 42). The total fertility rate for South African women has also shown a steady decline from 3.30 children per person in 1991 to 2.35 in 2011, which is half the rate for sub-Saharan Africa which stands at 5.4 children per person (SAIRR, 1996: 10; Population Reference Bureau, 2008 and SAIRR, 2012: 39). If one makes a distinction between racial groups, it is evident that black South Africans and Coloureds reproduce above the replacement level ( 2,9 and 2,5 respectively), while whites and Indians reproduce below the replacement level ( 1,8 and 2,0 respectively) (Statistics South Africa, 2010: 17).

It is evident that South African women are choosing to have fewer children for various reasons, and are able to exercise this choice (see Swartz, 2002). Having fewer children may enable women to participate in the labour force more readily. Serumaga-Zake and Kotze (2002: 105 ) found that women with five or more children were least likely to participate in the labour force. Thus, those able to control this aspect of their lives are able to join the labour force should they choose to do so.

In addition, many women who may have chosen not to be economically active are being forced to join the labour force in order to provide for their families in the wake of increasing divorce and singlehood rates (Casale and Posel, 2002). Mutedi's (2002) analysis of marital status and the labour market showed that divorced women were more likely than any other group of South African women (married, never married, living together or widowed) to be employed.

What may also be pushing women into the labour market is poverty. Kabeer (2012) points to various studies that have found a strong association between household poverty and women's labour force participation. The rising unemployment of South African males may also explains why more women are being forced to enter the labour market (Casale and Posel, 2004, as cited in Kabeer, 2012).

Thus, an increasing number of South African women are participating in formal education, are having fewer children and are being supported by a political agenda that promotes gender equality. Further, increasing incidences of divorce and rising unemployment among men are pushing women into employment. A combination of the above social factors has resulted in a gradual shift in expectations about the role of women in society, particularly as it pertains to their participation in the labour market, and being family bread winners.

## The placement of women in different sectors and occupations

While the first half of this paper considered the increasing participation of women in the labour force and the change in this regard, the second half provides a finer analysis of the position of women within the labour force itself. In this regard, horizontal and vertical segregation is relevant. Horizontal segregation refers to the distribution of the labour force across a range of different sectors and industries, while vertical segregation focuses on the ranking of jobs (such as the occupational status of individuals). Vertical occupational segregation, on the other hand, refers to the level at which women find themselves within a certain occupation and whether there are barriers to their progress within an occupation (the glass ceiling for instance). In this paper we focus on horizontal segregation as it pertains to occupations.

Figure 4 below indicates that the greatest proportion of economically active men and women are employed in the formal sector. However, more men than women are employed in this sector. The main advantage men have is that the formal sector is traditionally associated with higher earnings and job security. This security of jobs associated with men is confirmed by the fact that the formal sector revealed a net gain of jobs between 2008 (first quarter) and 2009 (first quarter) while the informal sector shed 169000 jobs during this period (Statistics South Africa, 2009a: viii). Hofmeyr (2000) also refers to the segmentation that emerged in South Africa, between employees who had formal sector jobs as opposed to those who did not (particularly those who had unionized formal jobs). The informal sector is defined, for statistical purposes, as the sector with the following two components: i) Employees working in establishments that employ less than five employees and do not deduct income tax from their salaries/wages; and ii) Employers, own-account workers and persons helping without pay in their household businesses and who are not registered for either income tax or value-added tax (Statistics South Africa, 2013b: xxii).

Figure 4: Employment by sector: women and men


Compiled from Statistics South Africa (2013b: 2-3).
While more men find employment in the formal sector, the informal sector is characterised by an even greater gender disparity, with 11 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men finding employment in this sector. However, in the past 5 years the proportion of men in the formal sector has shrunk slightly (from 58 to $56 \%$ ) while for women, it has remained constant at $48 \%$. Conversely, the proportion of men in the informal sector has grown slightly, while for women it has shrunk. For both groups however, unemployment rose by 2\% (Statistics South Africa, 2013b and 2009a). Thus, while it may be true that more women are pushed in to the labour market by poverty and are often prepared to take less secure jobs, the statistics indicate that women are starting to gain a foothold in the formal sector, while a smaller proportion is being pushed into the informal sector.

The other main gender difference in the employment sector is employment in private households, with 12 percent of women and 3 percent of men respectively being employed in this sector. If one looks at the occupational category itself, women make up 96 per cent of domestic workers. Listed as a separate sector to the formal and informal sectors, employment in private households mainly entails cleaning, cooking and gardening in private households, in exchange for a cash payment (Statistics South Africa, 2009b: 324). Domestic workers, because of their spatial distribution (not working for an organisation with a concentration of employees), have found it difficult to unionise. It is only recently that employers of domestic workers have been legally obliged to register as employers so that their employees could receive unemployment benefits (Unemployment Insurance Contributions Act, No. 4 of 2002). The domestic work sector too, has experienced a slight decline of $1 \%$ over the past five years for both women and men.

Apart from an overview of the gender distribution in the major sectors, we feel that it necessary to comment on occupational segregation. Women are concentrated in certain occupations, also sometimes called "pink collar" " occupations.

Figure 5: Employed by sex and occupation (2013)


Source: Compiled from Statistics South Africa, 2013b: 11.
In 2013, just under a million ( 849000 ) women were employed as domestic workers in South Africa compared to 29000 men (Figure 5). This is the most feminized occupational category in the South African labour force with 97 per cent of domestic workers being women. It is also one of the most marginalized categories of workers. Of the women employed in these jobs, approximately 86 per cent are black women (Statistics South Africa, 2002: 19).The main problems associated with domestic work are poor remuneration, long and irregular hours of work, unclear job descriptions and lack of job security. In 2008, the South African Department of Labour announced new wages for domestic workers from December 2008 to an hourly rate of R5.63 rand (US $\$ 0.70^{2}$ ) and a monthly wage of R1340.95 (US\$167.62) (Department of Labour, 2008).

As far as feminized job categories are concerned, as the name suggests, almost all the employed people are women. For example, clerical work is female dominated, with 70 per cent of clerical workers being female (Figure5). This corresponds with global figures which indicate that service, shop and sales jobs are the most feminised occupations. These occupations are also referred to as "mid-skills" occupations (ILO, 2012: 26). In contrast, craft and related trades, and plant and machine operations are male dominated occupational groups (Figure 5). In these occupational groups women make up between 11 and 14 per cent of the work force. These figures have remained more
or less unchanged for the past decade in both occupational categories. Globally this also seems to be the case where these two occupational groups are overwhelmingly dominated by men (ILO, 2012: 26).

In South Africa (as is the case globally), management is still a predominantly male dominated occupation, with more than two thirds of managers being male (Figure 5). However, women appear to be entering this occupation at a steady pace. When one compares the figures for 2000 and 2013 respectively, one sees that about a decade ago only 25 per cent of managers were women, whereas currently the figure stands at 30 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 2013b: 23). Within the professions, sales and services occupations and elementary occupations (which involve simple tasks that often require the use of hand held tools and considerable physical effort) a more even distribution of males and females is found.

The placement of women in certain occupations is relevant as occupational segregation has real consequences in terms of income and security. Isemonger and Roberts (1999:13) state that "The earnings of women appear to be lower because they occupy lower-paying positions[...]". However, when it comes to unemployment, those who are currently unemployed, but had a job in the past five years, mainly came from the elementary occupations (with a more or less equal distribution of men and women), craft and related trades (male dominated) and sales and services (more or less equal distribution of men and women) - none of them being predominantly "feminized" occupations (Statistics South Africa, 2013b: 33).

## Income

Wage differences remain an important form of inequality between men and women in the world of work. It is acknowledged that "[m] any factors contribute to the gap and it is difficult to distinguish between differences resulting from labour market characteristics (skills, education, participation rates, etc.) and direct or indirect discrimination." (ILO, 2010: 52). In 2001, 19 per cent of employed women, compared to 9 per cent of men, earned R200 ( 25 US\$) or less per month. A variety of factors such as the following contributed to South African women earning less than their male counterparts:
i) Women are concentrated in lower income occupations (such as domestic and clerical work) as argued by Isemonger and Roberts (1999:13);
ii) Women work fewer hours than men (in terms of income
generating hours). In this regard women are overrepresented in the underemployed ${ }^{3}$ workers in South Africa. Seven percent of employed women indicated that they would have liked to work more hours. In particular, those found in the following occupation are underemployed: domestic and elementary workers (Statistics South Africa, 2009a:16).
iii) Women spend more time on unpaid tasks such as domestic chores, and this decreases their potential earning hours (Statistics South Africa, 2002:6).
Burger and Yu (as reported in Tijdens and Van Klaveren, 2012: 7) found that between 2001 and 2005 gender inequality in wages persisted, but since 2000 the gap has narrowed somewhat. For 2007-2008 the gender pay gap was calculated at $33.5 \%$, this had decreased from $41 \%$ in 1995 (ITUC, 2012:7).

## Unemployment

In South Africa, an increase in the labour force participation of both men and women has not been matched by an increase in job creation. Over the period 2001-2005 the labour force increased by 1.4 million, while formal job opportunities only increased by 700000 (Barker, 2007: 3). Many people turn to the informal sector for jobs and join the ranks of the unemployed and discouraged job seekers. The official unemployment rate ${ }^{4}$ currently stands at $25,2 \%$ (Statistics South Africa, 2013b:2). It is a greater source of concern when one includes "discouraged workers" in the estimates because then this figure is closer to $34 \%$. When compared to global figures, South Africa has a notoriously high unemployment rate, ranked $28^{\text {th }}$ out of 199 countries world-wide (CIA, 2012).

It is clear that, proportionally, more women than men are unemployed in South Africa. This is true for global figures as well, where in general more women than men are unemployed. What is unique about South Africa, however, is the vast difference between men and women - in 2007 the gap between male and female unemployment in South Africa was comparable to the figures in North Africa and the Middle East (where a percentage gap of $6 \%$ was recorded) and higher than the average for Sub-Saharan Africa which, at that time, stood at around $4 \%$ (ILO, 2008:25). However, this gap is gradually narrowing; in 2013, 27.5 per cent of women were unemployed, compared to 23.4 per cent of men (a decade ago the gap was $6 \%$ and it currently stands at 4\%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Unemployment rates by sex for selected years (2000 2013).


Compiled from: Statistics South Africa (2009b:15), (2011: 2, 3) and (2013b: 2,3).
As mentioned before, discouraged job seekers are not included in the official definition of unemployment. These figures (discouraged job seekers) however, reveal an important aspect of the labour market as they point to the hopelessness that some job seekers experience, as they believe that they will not find a job and therefore have given up trying. Table 1 indicates that more women than men are discouraged when it comes to seeking jobs. However, a more positive trend (in the case of unemployment) emerged when women made up a smaller percentage of discouraged job seekers than they did in the past. This could work in favour of women if more men give up on looking for jobs and more women persist.

Table 1: Discouraged work seekers (in thousands) for selected years (2000-2013)

|  | $\mathbf{2 0 0 0}$ | $\mathbf{2 0 0 4}$ | $\mathbf{2 0 0 7}$ | $\mathbf{2 0 0 9}$ | $\mathbf{2 0 1 1}$ | $\mathbf{2 0 1 3}$ |
| :--- | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Male | $555(36 \%)$ | $974(38 \%)$ | $951(37 \%)$ | $637(42 \%)$ | $995(45 \%)$ | $1017(44 \%)$ |
| Female | $981(64 \%)$ | $1598(62 \%)$ | $1652(63 \%)$ | $880(58 \%)$ | $1212(55 \%)$ | $1312(56 \%)$ |
| Total SA | 1536 | 2572 | 2603 | 1517 | 2207 | 2329 |

Compiled from: Statistics South Africa (2009b: 15), (2011:2-3) and (2013b: 2-3).

## Conclusion

The rapid entry of women in the South African labour force in the past forty years has been considered one of the greatest changes occurring within the labour market. Currently the proportion of women forming part of the labour force compares well with global figures, and this trend will continue if the conditions conducive to the entry of women into the labour force remain in place.

When considering the work sectors, women are still underrepresented in the formal employment sector and improving this situation could lead to more women participating in the labour force. Women are over-represented in the private household employment sector (mainly as domestic workers), and although this is unlikely to change significantly in the future, the challenge is to safeguard job security for women in this sector, something which has already been addressed through legislation, but still has to be implemented.

Unemployment remains a huge problem in South Africa as the labour market is not growing fast enough to accommodate new entrants. Women make up a larger proportion of the unemployed and discouraged job seekers (with a percentage gap higher than the regional average). However, the reduction in the gap between men and women in both these categories (unemployed and discouraged job seekers) is something that cannot be ignored. One can, therefore, be cautiously optimistic regarding the direction of change in the overall position of women in the South African labour market.

## Notes

1. A job traditionally held by women (for example: nurses, Social Workers, secretaries, receptionists). These jobs were usually considered more suitable for women as they tapped into their "feminine" traits. However, they were also jobs that were less well paid or lower in the power hierarchy and for this reason were sometimes referred to as the "pink-collar ghetto". Many argued that channelling women to certain occupations perpetuated stereotypical ideas of what women could and should do and as a consequence also perpetuated gender inequality.
2. $\quad$ Based on an exchange rate of 8 Rands $(Z A R)=1 U S$ Dollar
3. Underemployed (time related) are employed persons who were willing and available to work additional hours, but whose total number of hours actually was below 35 hours per week.
4. Unemployment rate is the proportion of the labour force that is unemployed (this excludes discouraged job seekers).

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