

Winners and losers: Gender disparities in the South African labour market

Summary

Since the year 2000, the number of South African women in higher-skilled occupations has increased dramatically. With the exception of skilled agricultural and fishery work, women have made net gains in higher-skilled employment, negating the general assumption that women are still concentrated in low-skilled occupations.

But the observed trends have not been accompanied by commensurate easing of gender disparities in the labour market with respect to underemployment, duration out of the labour market, wage bargaining power and income levels. The high levels of women's underemployment indicate that when women leave the labour force, it is often difficult for them to re-enter. There is thus an urgent need to address the barriers to women's re-entry into the labour force, particularly if they left work because of childbearing responsibilities.

Moreover, despite the gains in women's representation and their dominance in the 'technical and associate professionals' category of employment,

male dominance in top management and leadership positions remains the norm. This scenario calls for policy intervention to remove the barriers that constrain South African women's advancement into upper management and leadership positions.

Drawing on data from Quarterly Labour Force Surveys and the 2011 Census conducted by Statistics South Africa, this policy brief interrogates the gains women have made in entering different sectors of the economy and their location in those sectors. Given the global context of women's participation in the labour market, the fundamental question that this policy brief addresses is as follows: Do the changes in women's occupational participation represent a holistic shift with respect to other indicators of labour-market participation?

Introduction

Twenty years after the United Nations Fourth Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, gender equality remains a far-fetched dream for many women, particularly with regard to employment and their position within the labour

market. For example, in discussing the link between education, employment and income among indigenous men and women in Canada, Gerber (2014) argues that rampant discrimination, prejudice and societal stereotypes relegate indigenous women to the lowest types of occupations and the lowest incomes. She further notes that Canadian indigenous women suffer multiple layers of discrimination by virtue of their gender, race and class. Education levels alone do not explain the low incomes of such women because 'despite higher levels of education, Indian women continue to earn less than men even for full-time work' (Gerber 2014: 133).

Women's participation in the labour force varies across countries. In liberal egalitarian countries, female employment is much higher than in conservative patriarchal societies. Employment among women is important as it helps to prevent poverty among children (Macrae 2010). Legislation is crucial in bringing about gender equality in the workplace, but this alone is not sufficient (Munin 2011). Munin (2011) argues that gender equality in the workplace can be achieved through a combination of measures such as equal pay, equal responsibilities and flexible working hours. While such measures might be put in place as a result of legislation, the enforcement of this legislation is critical to ensuring gender equality in the workplace. Because women often have to put in a double shift – that is, work to earn a living as well as carry out childcare responsibilities – prevailing social conditions make it important for employers to provide a supportive working environment.

Policy context in South Africa

Before the transition to democracy in 1994, South African women, regardless of race, were subject to various forms of discrimination in both the private and

public spheres, particularly with regard to employment. Although black South Africans (including African, coloured and Indian) suffered discrimination because of their race, women were subjected to both racial and gender discrimination. In general, then, women were more oppressed relative to men of their own race, and African women were the most oppressed among all women. In theory, the post-apartheid Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and subsequent legislation removed gender oppression and inequality (DoW 2015a, 2015b). Policies enacted to deal with entrenched sexism in employment include:

- Basic Conditions of Employment Act (No. 75 of 1997), which aims to deal with direct discrimination in employment.
- Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998), which is inherently reformist in institutionalising affirmative action for women and addressing discrimination.
- Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (No. 4 of 2000), which makes it illegal to discriminate against women based on gender, sex, pregnancy, and so on (DoW 2015b).
- Protection from Harassment Act (No. 17 of 2011), which seeks to ensure that women are protected from workplace violence whether it is physical or psychological.

By 2015, the South African Millennium Development Goals (MDG) report reported that gender parity in education had been achieved (Stats SA 2015a). However, South Africa has yet to achieve an equal share of women's participation in non-agricultural wage employment, where women comprise 45% of the people in such employment (Stats SA 2015a). Moreover, while seeming to perform better than women in many other countries in terms of representation in political leadership, South African women hold 42% of seats

in the national Parliament, indicating that the target of 50% representation has not been achieved (Stats SA 2015a). Overall, the findings of the MDG report indicate there are a number of milestones that have yet to be attained before South Africa has fully realised the constitutional imperative for gender equality.

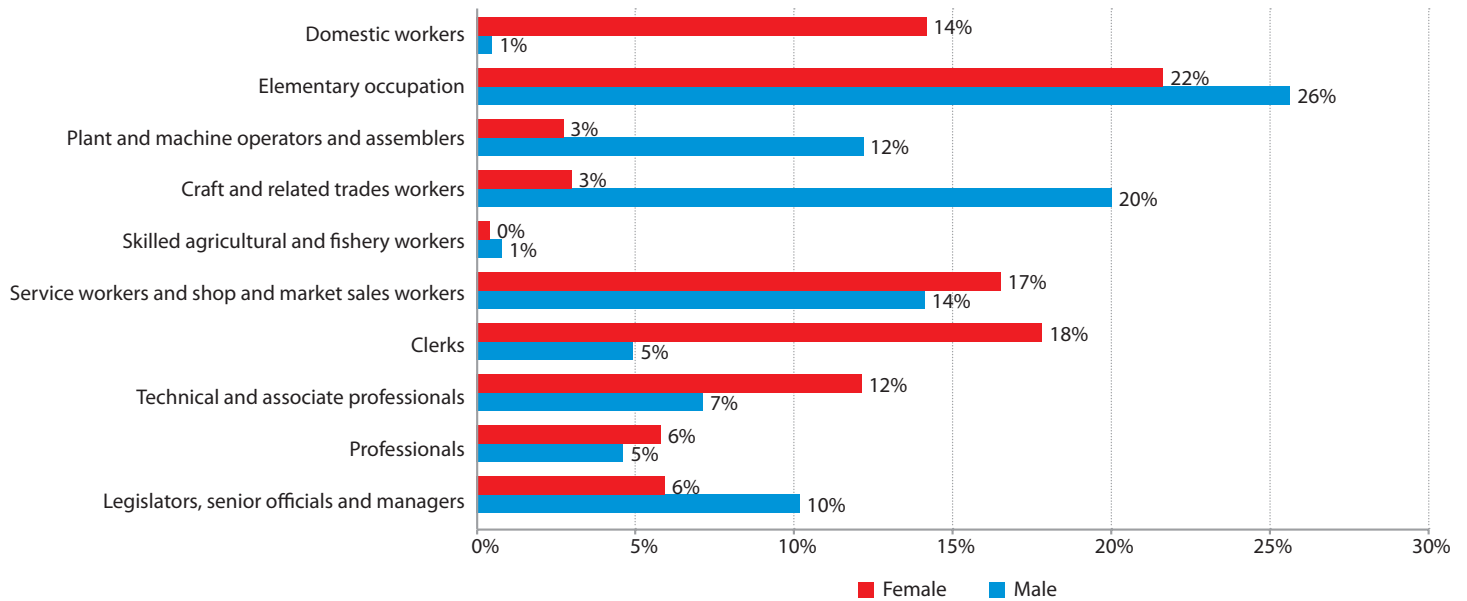
While policies are in place to ensure that overt discrimination in the workplace is eliminated, the implementation of such legislation remains at the discretion of employers. Greater monitoring and enforcement of the Employment Equity Act is required to reduce persistent gender disparities in the labour market. These disparities are discussed in the sections that follow.

Occupational distribution of women

The distribution of gender across occupational classifications is shown in Figure 1. It is clear that a disproportionate number of women work in domestic services (14%), while the number of men in such services is around 1%. Women also predominate in services and marketing (women 17%; men 14%) and in clerical work (women 18%; men 5%). Worth noting is that more women (12%) than men (7%) work as technical and associate professionals. While the proportion of men and women in professional occupations is nearly equal, the proportion of men in leadership positions is almost double that of women (10% men versus 6% women).

The analysis of occupational trends by gender over time, however, indicates that since 2000 there have been occupational shifts in the labour market. As shown in Table 1, between 2000 and 2015, women seem to have made gains in higher-skilled occupations at the expense of men. Women made the highest gains in the occupational category of legislators, senior officials

Figure 1: Employment by gender and occupation, 2015



Source: Based on Stats SA (2015b)

Table 1: Main occupation by gender, 2000 and 2015

Main occupation	2000		2015		% change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Legislators, senior officials and managers	74%	26%	69%	31%	-6%	18%
Professionals	53%	47%	50%	50%	-5%	6%
Technical and associate professionals	42%	58%	43%	57%	2%	-2%
Clerks	35%	65%	26%	74%	-26%	14%
Service workers and shop and market sales workers	52%	48%	53%	48%	1%	-1%
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	53%	47%	72%	29%	35%	-39%
Craft and related trades workers	84%	16%	90%	10%	7%	-35%
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	85%	15%	86%	14%	1%	-4%
Elementary occupation	54%	46%	60%	40%	12%	-14%
Domestic workers	3%	97%	4%	96%	30%	-1%
Total	54%	46%	56%	44%	4%	-5%

Source: Based on Stats SA (2000, 2015b)

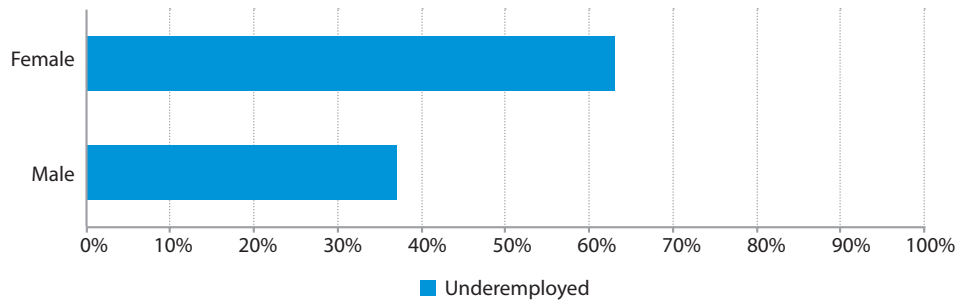
and managers (an increase of 18%) and in clerical jobs (an increase of 14%). During the same period, women made slight losses in low-skilled occupations. Ironically, the participation of men in most low-skilled occupations increased at a time when women experienced losses. The biggest losses for women, 39%, occurred in the agricultural and fisheries sector, where women represented 47% of the workforce in 2000. By 2015, women's participation in agriculture and fisheries represented a mere 29%.

The face of long-term unemployment is female

Although the above data reflect some positive trends, labour-market gender disparities still exist, with more women being most likely to be underemployed than their male counterparts. (Underemployment refers to the situation in which individuals work fewer hours than they would like to.) It is estimated that 751 149 South Africans were underemployed in 2015, with 63% of these being women (see Figure 2).

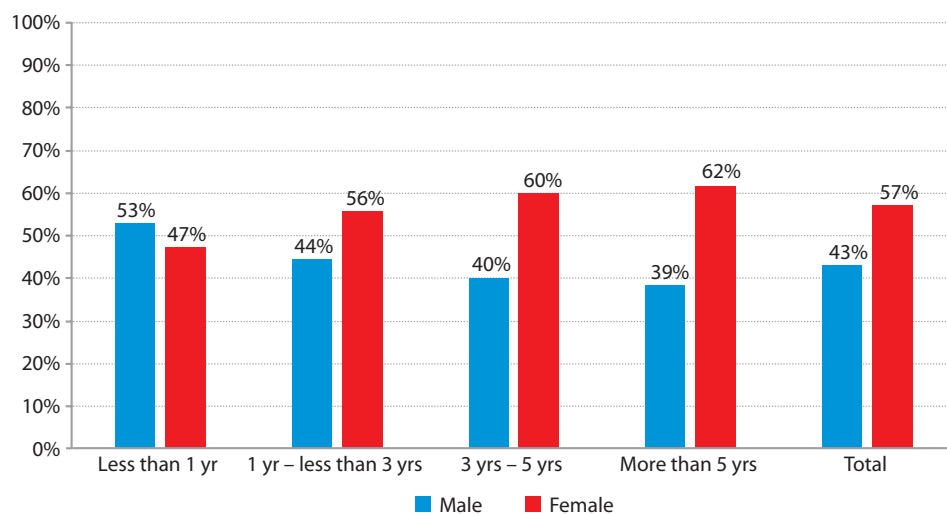
This is consistent with evidence which shows that women are more susceptible to being underemployed (Vera-Toscano et al. 2004; Wu & Eamon 2011) and that underemployment is associated with low job satisfaction, high job turnover and persistently lower wages (Moloney 2013).

Figure 2: Underemployment by gender, 2015



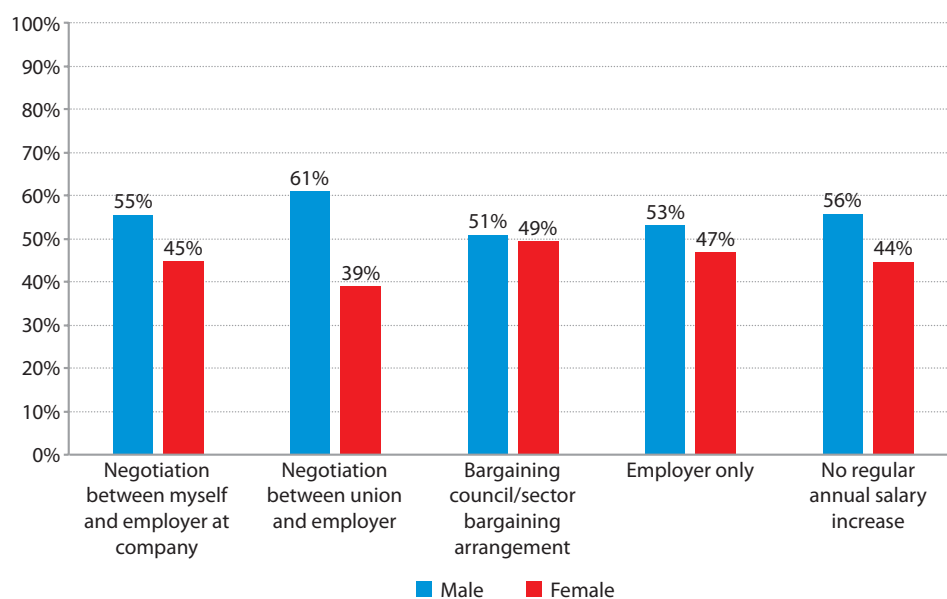
Source: Based on Stats SA (2015b)

Figure 3: Time since last worked, by gender, 2015



Source: Based on Stats SA (2015b)

Figure 4: Negotiation of salary increment by gender, 2015



Source: Based on Stats SA (2015b)

Examining the proportion of men and women unemployed for different periods of time helps illustrate the gendered nature of unemployment in South Africa (see Figure 3). Of the unemployed workers who had spent less than a year since they last worked, men comprised 53% and women 47%. However, in exploring unemployment over a longer period of time, the gendered nature of unemployment becomes more evident. Among workers who had spent between one to three years unemployed, the majority were women (56%). The more time women spend unemployed, the harder it becomes for them to find employment. Among workers who remained unemployed for three to five years, women again comprised the majority (60%), as they did among workers who were unemployed for more than five years (62%). Furthermore, greater length of time spent out of the labour market probably explains why women represent a relatively larger proportion of discouraged workers relative to men: 55.5% and 44.5%, respectively (Stats SA 2015b).

Participation of women in bargaining councils

Union representation in wage negotiations is significantly skewed towards males (see Figure 4). It is estimated that of the 2 818 074 unionised workers in 2015, 61% (1 718 052) were men and the remaining 39% (1 100 022) were women (Stats SA 2015b). The low level of unionisation among women workers implies that their power to bargain for better terms of employment, salary increases and promotions is greatly hampered.

In terms of bargaining strategies, the majority of workers who participate in direct bargaining with employers are men (55%) compared to women (45%). More men (61%) than women (39%) bargain with their employers through unions. However, both women and men

seem to be reasonably well represented in bargaining councils (49% and 51%, respectively), while slightly more men (53%) than women (47%) appear to negotiate for wage increases directly with the employer. The latter could be linked to what has been referred to as the social cost of negotiating for higher pay, which seems to affect women more than men (Bowles 2014 and Bowles et al. 2007).

With respect to workers who reported not having any regular annual salary increase, there are more men (56%) than women (44%). A possible explanation for this is the over-representation of men in elementary occupations and the fact that more men (54%) than women (46%) reported not having any contracts with their employer, an indication that terms and conditions of employment might be loosely defined (Stats SA 2015b).

Income sources

The main sources of women's income are salaries/wages (46%) followed by

grants (33%) and remittances (13%), as shown in Figure 5. The high proportion of women that cite grants as a source of income, points to the important role of, and the dependency of female-headed households on, the social protection system. This reliance on social grants suggests that without this source of income a significant number of these households wouldn't have an alternative income source.

Annual income of household head

In the low-income bracket, where incomes are between R0 – R9 600 per annum, there are no significant gender disparities (see Figure 6). However, more female-headed households than male-headed households are represented in the R9 601 – R19 200 annual income category. It is not clear why, but this is the only income category where there seems to be more women than men.

Above an income level of R19 201 per annum, there is a clear gender distinction. The gender wage gap

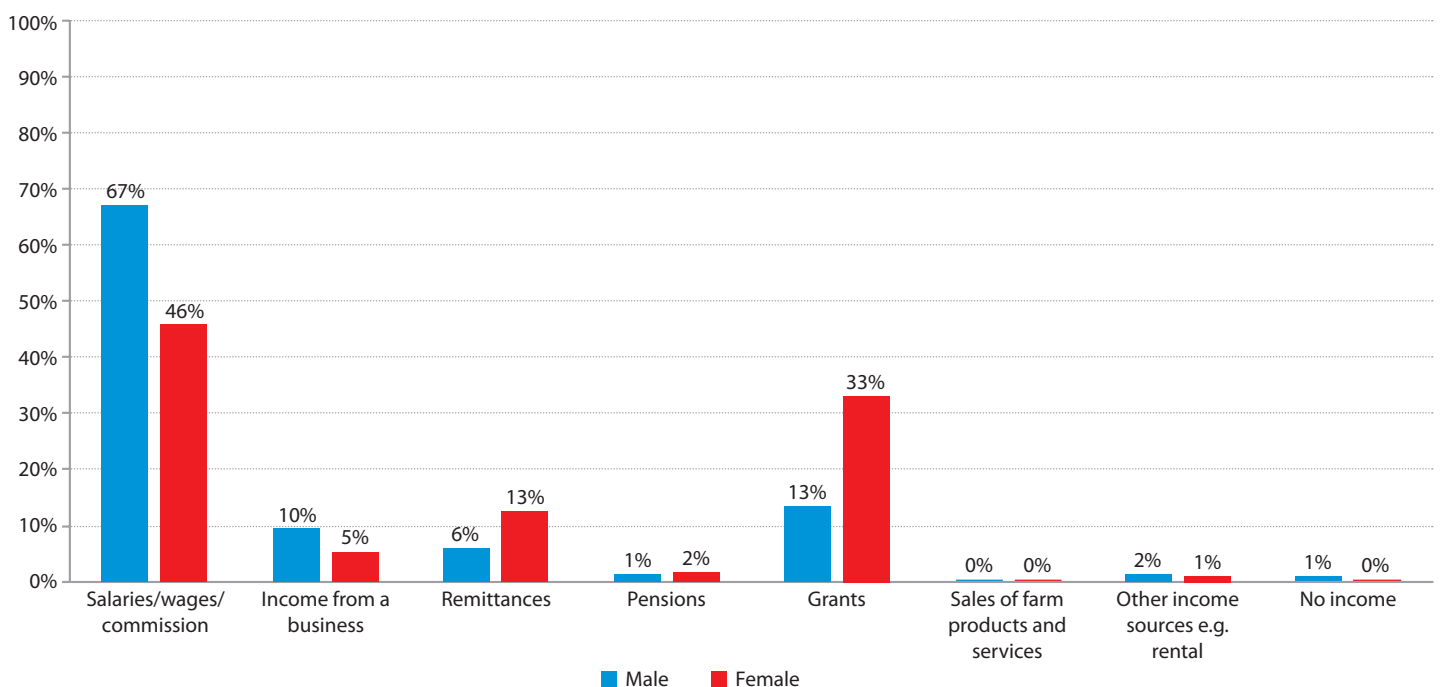
increases with income; male-headed households earn more than female-headed households; and in the top income category (R2 457 601 and above), the proportion of male-headed households represented is more than double that of the female-headed households.

There is clearly a gender wage gap in South Africa. Given the large proportion of households that are female-headed, the head-of-household annual income category may account to some extent for many of the glaring inequalities that persist in the country 20 years after democracy.

Policy implications

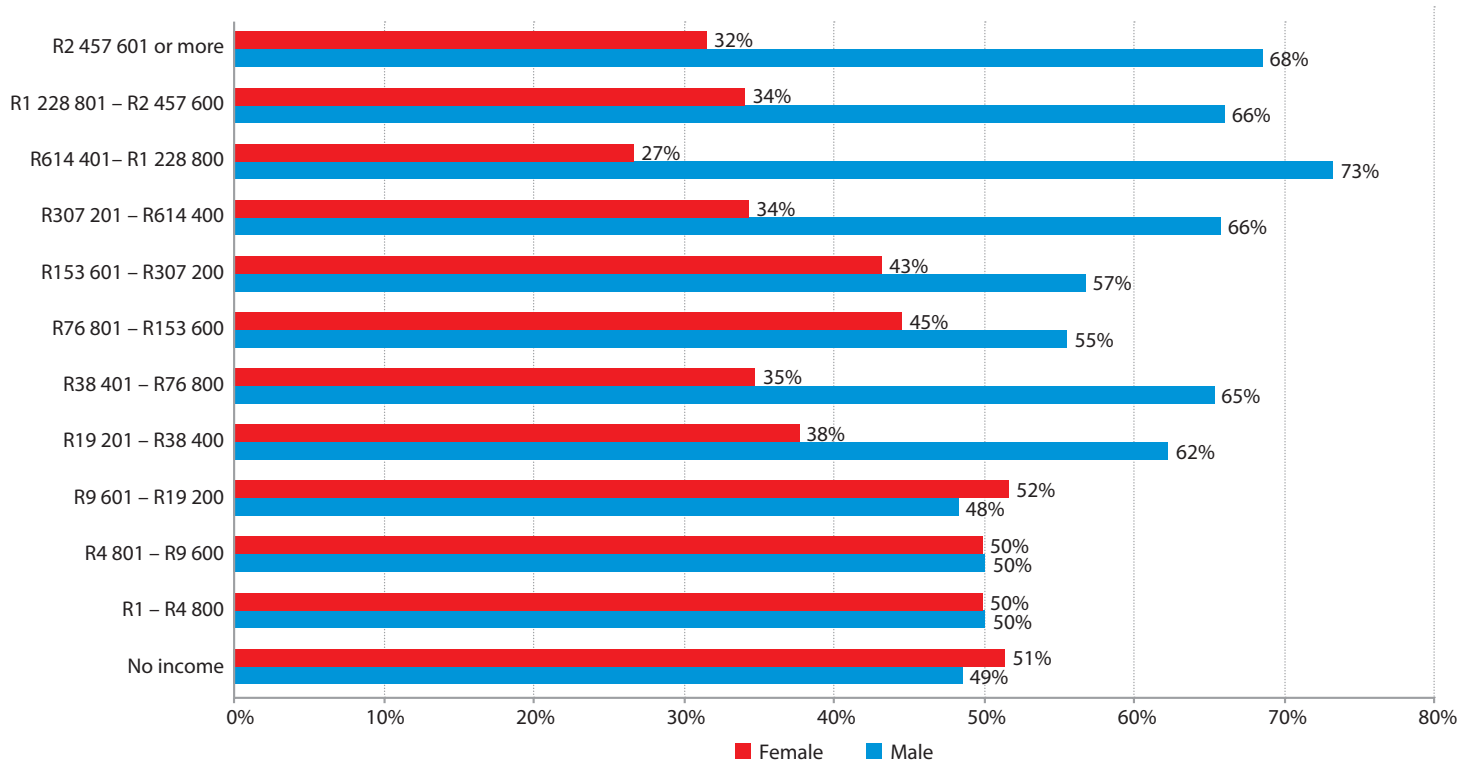
While policies and legislation that support gender equality and women's empowerment are in place, they have not been sufficient to reduce disparities in the labour market. Given the persistent nature of these gender disparities, more targeted policies are needed. These should

Figure 5: Income sources by gender of head of household, 2013



Source: Based on Stats SA (2013)

Figure 6: Annual income of head of household, 2011



Source: Stats SA (2012)

include changes in the design of public works programmes which specifically target women. The following policy interventions are suggested:

- *Increase job opportunities for women to reduce the levels of underemployment.* There is a need to create full-time work opportunities that give women the opportunity to participate in the labour market. Increased labour-market participation will also increase the proportion of women who have access to wages as a source of income. However, this recommendation must take into account the determinants of underemployment among women, such as 'involuntary part-time work' due to childcare responsibilities.
- *Provide consistent and regular exposure to public works employment opportunities.* South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) requires that projects should have 60% female representation.

However, the concern is that the design of the EPWP offers mainly short-term jobs (duration less than 100 days) which do not allow participants to transcend the poverty line during exposure, let alone enable graduation out of poverty. As such, short-term jobs cannot adequately address issues of sustainable livelihoods for women, particularly those experiencing chronic rather than transient poverty. In order to enhance the social protection impact of employment programmes, the design of these programmes should consider the provision of access to consistent and regular work beyond the current 100 days so as to meet the full-time work equivalent (FTE) standard.

- *Facilitate better transfers of skills to enhance successful entry into the labour market.* Public works programmes need to focus on training and skills transfers that enhance the ability of women to

graduate into full-time productive employment. This is particularly important for women with low skills and low educational attainment. However, in order for this to be effective, the training has to be accredited and should provide transferable skills that are relevant to the opportunities in the labour market.

- *Identify why employment equity legislation has not reduced the gender pay gap.* The persistence of the gender pay gap raises questions about the efficacy of employment equity legislation. This is significant given that audit studies tend to find very little evidence of gender pay discrimination. The use of new administrative micro-level tax data from the South African Revenue Service to identify the existence and level of pay differentials is recommended. This can also be used as a basis to further inform employment equity legislation.

- *Policies to increase the participation of women in high-level occupations.* The introduction of quotas for top-management positions, board representation and other leadership positions is required to change the situation where women are concentrated in low- to medium-skilled occupations and are glaringly absent at the decision-making level.

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