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Drivers and Barriers to Women Participation in Labour Force in Sub-Sahara Africa: Relevance of Labour Force Theories

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Abstract

Culture-based barriers, such as early marriage, sexuality and gender discrimination, hinder women's participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. This study, through extensive review of literatures, examined drivers and barriers of women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa as well as relevance of labour force theories. Findings showed that the low prevalence of women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa could be attributed to social neglect of the girl child and women in general at various social structures of the society. This has also affected the sexual autonomy of women. It was concluded and recommended that gender equality policies in sub-Saharan Africa need to be geared towards eliminating and preventing harassment and violence at work, creating and harmonising work-life balance for both men and women, creating better working environment for women, and promoting adequate representation of women in leadership. All of these measures, if implemented, will improve the participation of women in the labour force, both in private and public sectors.

Keywords: barriers, drivers, labour force, participation, women

1.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the factors responsible for inadequate participation of women in skilled employment in sub-Saharan African countries is low level of education of women; this limits their participation rate in formal sectors of the economy. Education that empowers women and creates awareness about gender, sexuality and HIV has the tendency of improving the sexual health and overall health conditions of both male and female, thereby enhancing women's participation in the labour force as well as their productivity (Susan *et al.,* 2015). Customs that permit child marriage abound in different parts of the world and create a situation whereby young girls are given out in marriage before their attainment of puberty or the legal minimum age of consent. The incidence of early marriage, according to various sources, is common in Asia, Africa, South America

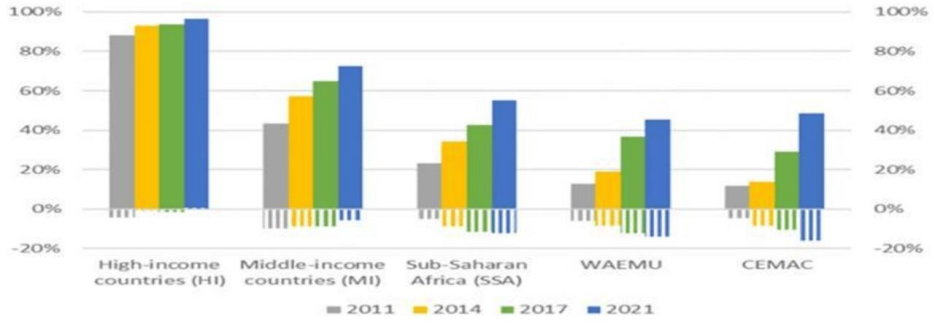
and other parts of the world (Isna, 2020).

Child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, which is usually arranged by parents of the girl, frequently a minor at the time of the engagement, thrives due to mutual benefits or privileges parents derive from such engagements. Child marriage is not in the interest of the girl child because it hinders her freedom and advancement, and denies her right to proper education that will enable her to be more productive and economically active in the labour force. This is one of the core factors behind the low participation of women in skilled labour in Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa. The practice of early marriage has forced many under-age girls into "adulthood" before they were physically and emotionally matured to assume the duties of real adults; this has hindered such girl-child victims from attaining economic, social, and educational development (Emmanuel *et al.,* 2018). This study is aimed at examining the drivers and barriers to women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa and the relevance of labour force theories. Relevant aspects of the topic and extensive review of related literatures are examined below.

1.1 Level of Women Participation in Labour Force in sub-Saharan Africa

Globally, statistics have showed that female participation in labour force is just over 50 percent while male participation in labour force is 80 percent. Women are generally exposed to difficulties in career progression and have fewer business opportunities when compared to their male counterpart. Also, they are less likely to work in formal employment or corporate world; they generally work in the informal sector where they earn less. In sub-Saharan Africa, the latest statistics related to women participation in labour force is "approximately 60%" (World Bank, 2026). This statistics is higher than what obtains in some other parts of the world. However, comparative graphs, such as the one below, indicate that female participation in labour force in high-income countries is higher than what obtains in sub-Saharan Africa (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Comparative Graph of Female Labour Participation (Umar et al., 2025)



That the percentage of women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa is said to be "approximately 60%" does not mean that this number of females are actually gainfully employed in the sub-region. The international group, unwomen.org, has drawn attention to sub-Saharan Africa's "informal trap" whereby "about 66% of this female workforce is concentrated in farming, petty trading, and unpaid family work. These jobs offer no steady salary or benefits" (unwomen.org).

The low-level and low-pay status of women in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa can be largely attributed to social neglect. Inadequate attention paid to the girl child and women in general at various social structures and institutions, including education, politics, the work place and in home, have social implications that deprive women of their reproductive rights and hinder their profitable and full participation in labour force (ILO, 2024).

Household income, education of the girl child, family size, financial conditions of the household, and family background of the girl child are important factors that can determine participation of women in the labour force. The huge number of energy and time spent by women in attending to domestic work at home, such as keeping the home, childbearing and so forth, deprive women the opportunity of engaging in personal development and continuing education, thereby hindering their effective participation in labour force. Other factors that also have the tendency of affecting women's participation in labour force are presence of young children at home, marital status, and religion. These factors have hampered women's participation in labour force in Africa.

The table below presents women labour force participation rate in Africa between 2001 and 2021.

Table 1: Women labour force participation rate in Africa (2001 – 2021)

Region	**1992-2001**		**2002-2004**		**2012-2021**	
	Female	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**
North Africa	17.22	64.22	17.81	64.38	17.19	62.2
Sub-Saharan Africa	60.28	71.62	60.55	70.86	**58.22**	68.84
Africa	50.43	69.88	50.87	69.33	49.51	67.4

Source: International Labour Organisation World Employment and Social Outlook (WESCO)

From the table above, it can be observed that in sub-Saharan Africa, women participation in labour force declined from 60.55 in 2004 to 58.22 in 2021. Marriage, low labour income, religion, economic under-development, most especially as it relates to poor working conditions and

child-rearing, are factors that have negatively affected women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. The above factors are some of the major causes behind the decline in women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into three. The first part addressed drivers of women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. The second part examined the barriers of women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa while labour force theories are discussed in the third section.

2.1 Drivers to Women's Participation in Labour Force in sub-Saharan Africa

Adolescents' sexual knowledge and behaviour can influence participation of women in labour force positively. Adolescents' sexual behaviour and knowledge are often shaped by socio-cultural contexts prevailing in the society. Women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa increased due to the reduction of women engaged in unpaid child-care or unskilled labour. This means that the increase in women's participation in the formal sector in sub-Saharan Africa when compared to the previous years can partly be attributed to reduction of women in non-remunerative duties, such as serving as housewives or domestic servants (Solanke*et al.*, 2022; Chimaraoke, 2005). The improvement in gender equity, which has facilitated shared equality with the male gender thereby making them more compatible with their male counterparts in the labour market has facilitated women's participation in labour force in sub-Saharan African countries such as Nigeria. Other factors that have helped in improving the rate of women's participation in labour force in sub-Saharan African countries are improved girl child education, which has helped in bridging the gender equality gap thereby making it possible for more women to be engaged in the formal sector of the economy.

The consequence of higher participation of female in the labour force can be felt in the earnings of the men. Wages and salaries of men will increase if labour force participation rate of women increases due to higher productivity; so that the economic consequences of barrier against women entering the labour force may affect productivity negatively thereby hampering economic growth and development. Bringing women into the work place increases collaboration, bringing of different skills, attitudes and perspectives thereby leading to improvement in organisational

productivity, reducing risks and improving organisational financial performance which will have an overall effect of improving economic productivity and development, thereby increasing the gross domestic product.

2.2 Barriers to Women's Participation in Labour Force in sub-Saharan Africa

Cultural devaluation of women attributed to patriarchal norms has tendencies of aggravating gender disparity thereby hindering women's participation in labour force. The low participation rate of women in labour force in Africa can also be attributed to gender discrimination. In sub-Saharan Africa, women are exposed to social injustice, discrimination and are highly marginalised despite provisions in many African constitutions that guarantee non-discrimination and gender equality. The prevalence of gender discrimination, practices and social norms in sub-Saharan Africa has made girls to be vulnerable to teenage pregnancy, child marriage, child domestic work, sexual abuse, violence and exploitation and many of these vices cannot be changed until girls are more valued. This has in turn affected women's participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. Due to religious and cultural factors, women are subordinated to their male counterparts (Solanke*et al.*, 2022).

Women labour participation rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 11 percent below male participation rate as at 2021. As at 2022, statistics revealed that the participation rate of the male in the labour force in Africa was 62.3 percent, a slight increase from the previous year. It was projected that by 2023 the participation rate should be around 62.6 percent. Africans within the age range of 25 to 34 years represent the largest labour force population of the country with about 23 million, while individuals within the age of 35 to 44 years represent the second largest group with about 20 million. There are four main types of labour: professionals, skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled; so that these four categories of labour make up the labour force; that is, the economically active population of a particular country. The latest statistics of labour force participation rate in Africa revealed that it is about 53.8 percent of the population, which is below the world average of 60.11 percent. Labour force participation rate can be defined as the proportion of the population that fall between 18 to 60 years that are economically active; that is, people available for supply in the production of goods and services either in the private or public sector for a specified period of time (ILO, 2024).

Low ambitions of women in the society can be attributed to low self-

esteem, low education, and low self-autonomy due to subjugation of women to their husbands. These consequences arise from early marriage and the overall consequence is that the economic activity of such victims will be hindered. Household wealth, family decision-making, degree of marital control and type of marriage, women sexual autonomy at the relational and community level, are significantly related to women participation in labour force. There is need for modification of existing sexual-health promotion programmes and strategies targeted at relational and individual factors of the country in order to adequately incorporate community-level characteristics so as to enhance the prospects of women-controlled safe sex in sub-Saharan Africa which will help in increasing women's autonomy, enhancing good sexual and reproductive health outcomes, geared towards increasing women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan African countries. (Solanke *et al.,* 2022; Emmanuel *et al.,* 2018).

Sexual conduct and sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa are shaped by social constructs and patriarchal ideologies; these have subjectively shaped the perspectives of what is normal, sexually-speaking. Sexuality is a central aspect of a human throughout his life and it encompasses sexual orientation, gender, sex roles, identities, eroticism, intimacy, pleasure and reproduction and it is expressed and experienced in fantasies, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, behaviours, relationships and roles. There is no doubt that if these thoughts are shaped for good and ethical purposes, this will improve women's mental and social health, reduce cultural devaluation of women and have a long-term effect of improving women's participation in labour force in sub-Saharan African countries. The oppressive male-biased influences have exerted three traits and tendencies: support for the hatred and fear of men by their female counterparts; idolization of traditional masculinity and male sexual promiscuous behaviour that encourages the act and subjection of women and their body; penis-centred cultural practices that encourage double standards whereby women are expected to have one sexual partner while males are allowed to have multiple sexual encounters (Mofeyisara, 2019; Chimaraoke, 2004).

2.3 Labour Force Theories

The labour market is often known as the job market and this refers to the demand and supply of labour in which employees provide the supply of labour demanded by the employers. The labour market is a critical component of any economy and it is intricately linked to capital market, goods and services. The labour market can be viewed from both

microeconomic and macroeconomic levels. At the macro-economic level, demand and supply of labour are usually influenced by age of the population, education levels of the candidates, immigration as well as domestic and international dynamics. Relevant measures of the labour force, apart from labour force participation rates, include: productivity, unemployment, total income and gross domestic product (GDP). At the micro level, individual firms or companies interact with employees in terms of hiring, firing, raising or cutting of work hours or wages. At the macro level, the relationship between demand and supply of labour influences the number of work hours of employees, compensation, salary, wages, fringe benefits, and so forth.

Labour market theories are the various explanations on how wages are determined and workers allocated to various jobs. Labour market theories provide an explanation on the reason behind a group of workers, such as the skilled workers, usually earns more than another group such as the unskilled workers. The first labour market theory postulated that the purpose of every firm is to maximise profit; the concept of marginality will always be their topmost basis for decision-making. This simply states that a firm will not pay more in terms of benefits and wages for a worker that will be far above his or her marginal productivity to the firm.

2.3.1 Classical Theory of Labour Market

Classical theory stipulates that there is a classical analysis for every complex concept. The classical theory of labour market stipulated that employment of labour by a firm or organisation and output of a firm are determined by demand and supply of labour in the economy and production function; so that there is a relationship between total output of a firm or organisation and employment in terms of number of workers. The theory also follows that given the technological knowhow, capital stock and other factors, there is a relationship between number of workers, in terms of employment and total output. The classical theory of labour market is often referred to as theory of employment. This theory believes that there can be full employment in the economy. Full employment in the labour market according to this school of thought is a situation where all people that are able bodied and are willing to work at the prevailing wage rate in the labour market are employed; so that full employment in the labour market is a situation where there is no involuntary unemployment.

This school of thought also believes in the existence of equilibrium level; a situation where supply of labour is equal to the demand of labour at the prevalent wage rate. The classical theory of labour market is based on two

main assumptions. These are:

a. over production: this theory believes in over production which is the general condition of the economy, thereby propagating the belief that unemployment does not exist,

b. flexibility of prices and wages: this theoretical school of thought postulate overproduction to be the general condition of the economy, believes that prices of goods and services decreases due to overproduction thereby raising the aggregate demand and consumption expenditure which will in turn result to increased employment opportunities. This theoretical school of thought also believes in cutting down of wage rate thereby enhancing the demand for labour and reducing unemployment.

The classical theory of labour market believes in free market, thereby leading to an efficient outcome and self-regulating economy. According to the macro economists, this school of thought believes in long run aggregate supply curve which is inelastic; so that any deviation from full employment will only be temporal. This school of thought also stressed on the importance of limiting government intervention by allowing the free hands of demand and supply elasticity to operate thereby enhancing efficiency in operations.

2.3.2 Keynesian Labour Market Theory

The Keynesian labour market theory postulates that prices, most especially wages of workers respond slowly to changes in demand and supply; thereby resulting to periodic surplus and shortages in labour. Keynesian theory of labour market postulates that the cause of unemployment in any economy is the deficiency of effective demand so that unemployment can be eradicated by raising aggregate demand and making it more effective. This follows that with increase in effective, aggregate demand, production in the economy will eventually increase. This theory assumes that prices are rigid to some extent in the economy and fluctuations tend to exist in any component of spending – investment, consumption, or government expenditure – and this will invariably cause change in output so that if government expenditure increases in terms of spending and the remaining components; that is, investment and consumption remains constant, total output will eventually increase.

Keynesians believe that prices of goods, services and wages usually respond slowly to changes in demand and supply of labour thereby resulting to periodic shortages and surpluses most especially in labour.

According to this theory, changes in aggregate demand whether unanticipated or anticipated usually have their short-run effect on employment and real output not on prices of goods and services; so that too little aggregate demand will lead to unemployment while excessive demand will cause inflation. Keynesian economists emphasize on government in playing a active role through interventions in addressing unemployment, suggesting fiscal policy measures such government increasing spending or lowering taxes as need arises in order to stimulate demand and reduce unemployment. Keynesians also advocate for deficit spending on labour-intensive infrastructures in order to stimulate employment and stabilize wages during economic down times.

2.3.3 Neo-Classical Labour Market Theory

The neoclassical theory of labour believed that employees with the same characteristics, positions and abilities should be remunerated with the same wages. The theory states that if this principle is not followed, employees with lower wages will migrate to areas of better paid jobs and wages would gradually reach equilibrium. In neoclassical model, the determination of unit price of labour and level of employment of labour is in relation with the perfectly competitive market in comparison with a consumer good. The neoclassical economist believes that demand for labour is derived from the demand of the product or outputs which that labour will produce. This follows that the demand for engineers for example depends on the demand for new construction; so that if firms or companies should invest in construction of more dams, roads or bridges, they will need to hire more engineers.

According to the neoclassical economic theory, product market often determines product quantities and prices in which they will be exchanged. They were in the position that labour markets determine employment levels and wage rates. The neoclassical theory lays its principles more on demand and supply theory; so that the market supply of labour is upward sloping, with wage rate increasing as quantity supply of labour increases; that is, the higher the wage rate, the higher the supply of labour from the job seekers in terms of willingness to work and vice versa. So also, the demand curve of labour is downward sloping implying employees' attitude to work decreases as wages decreases. The theory also presumes that the labour market is perfectly competitive; that is, employers takes the market wage as given by the employee or else, the employee seeks for better alternative job; so that no single employer will have the power of influencing the wage that is paid to workers.

2.3.4 Job Search Theory

The search theory was first applied in labour market but it now has applications in many subjects of economics. The search theory forms the basis in explaining frictional unemployment due to change of jobs by workers. This theory has also been useful in analysing consumer choices. This theory was used by two scholars, Mccall and Mortensen, in seminar articles in 1970. In microeconomics, search theories study the behaviour of sellers and buyers who cannot instantly find trading partners and as a result will need to search for a partner prior to his or her transaction. The goal of this theory is to determine the best search strategy that will minimise search related expenses and maximise the chances of finding the target job. This theory provides explanations on why frictional unemployment happens as corporate organisations look for new employees and people look for jobs.

This theory has been used in explaining inefficiencies in labour markets; analysing frictional unemployment as a result of job searching by workers. Generally, from workers' perspective, an acceptable job is the job that offers desirable benefits such as fringe benefits, pays high wage and other pleasant working conditions are gained. The theory studies individual's optimal strategy when choosing from several opportunities of random quality with the assumption that delaying choice can very costly; so that search models try to illustrate how best in balancing between the cost of delay against the option of trying again. In macroeconomics, this theory is often known as the general equilibrium models; in which in which different job searchers and employers interact and it is often called search and matching theory or 'matching theory'. Job search models are based on the assumption that time is continuous and probability distribution of wages is known and constant over time.

2.3.5 Feminisation Theory

Feminisation theory predicts or explains the relationship between gender and work place. The theory postulates that women tend to experience negative outcomes from their place of work due to their gender such as slow advancement in careers, pay gap and less professional development opportunities when compared to their male counterparts. Feminisation of the work place is the shift from male domination to female domination in the work place. This involves the shift in sex roles and gender roles in place of work; incorporating women into groups and professions that were once dominated by men as it relates to work place. Feminisation is a social theory that tends to explain occupational gender-related discrepancies. One

of the aims of feminisation is to eradicate occupational segregation in the society.

Cultural theories were of the view that lower wages in occupations that are female dominated is as a result of societal bias against the work carried out by women and that sex compositions usually have the tendency of affecting wages of workers; while the human capital theories were of the opinion that wage differentials is as a result specialised trainings, requirements of the job which the female might not have possessed. Even though women participation in the labour market has increased in last thirty years, women still face a lot of discrimination in their work place such as 'glass-ceiling'. Glass ceiling is a situation where women may not rise up to some certain positions in their careers or may not be engaged in some professions or high skilled jobs due to their gender. Women are still facing the problem of 'glass escalator' in their work place. This is a situation whereby a male gender enters a female dominated work place and is quickly promoted through ranks at expense or to the detriment of the female. This phenomenon is common in several professions such as nursing, education, and social work. Societal pressures on men and women to comply with their gender roles, based on the idea that the primary role of the female gender is domestic work, and men seeking managerial positions are some of the factors behind this phenomenon in the work place.

Feminisation of survival is often used in describing a social condition in which women are been forced to conditions that are not humane in order to survive for themselves and their families. Women in African and Asian countries are still being attracted to developed countries for money-making opportunities. Several developing countries most especially in Asia are engaged in exporting women due to unemployment and foreign debt. These women are held to deep responsibility to their family and country and are faced with violence, racism and sexual abuse in the country they are working in.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study was extensive review of scholarly papers and articles based on the themes of the study. The search engine used for this study is the google scholar. The key words used for the electronic search were in accordance with the themes of the study. Labour market theories, job seeking theories were supporting documents for this study. The various labour market theories and job seeking theories were sourced from the internet and the various government strategies most

especially as it relates to labour force. Summarization was deduced from discussions made so far. The last chapter was the author's personal conclusion.

4.0 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Globally, participation rate of women in the labour is just about 50 percent when compared to those of men which is well above 80 percent. In sub-Saharan Africa, the participation rate of women in the labour force is below world average which is about 48.4 percent. Globally, women have few opportunities in career progression or business expansion. They are less likely to take up formal employment due to their gender and to some extent, marital status that will make them more engaged with domestic activities such as taking care of their husband and children, keeping the home and so forth. All these reduce their time for personal development, such as education and job trainings, which will be very useful for their career progression. In sub-Saharan Africa, this is also the scenario of social bias against the female gender, leading to their primary activity being domestic work; very few of them are employed in the public or corporate sector while the rest work in places where they earn very little income.

Household income, education of the girl child, family size, financial conditions of the household, and family background of the girl child are important factors that can influence women participation in the labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. Early marriage will have an attendant effect of subjecting the girl child to early childbearing and handling of domestic work thereby hindering her personal development such as education and participation in the labour force. Women's participation in skilled employment such as teaching, hospital services and so forth in sub-Saharan Africa is low due to low education and the issue of early marriage.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The low prevalence of women participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa can be attributed to social neglect of the girl child and women in general at various social structures of the society.This has also affected women's sexual autonomy. Gender equality policies in sub-Saharan Africa need to be aimed towards eliminating and preventing harassment and violence at work, creating and harmonising work-life balances for both men and women, investing in a future of better working environment for women and promoting equal representation of women in leadership, geared towards improving participation of women in the labour force both

at private and public sectors. Government, women groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and traditional rulers need to collaborate towards ensuring the implementation of the affirmative action aimed at increasing women participation in governance and public offices, eradicating gender discrimination and abuse of women rights, thereby improving women participation in labour force.

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