

Trends, Patterns and Determinants of Female Labour Force Participation in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Female participation in labour force in Africa revealed a relatively high rate when compared to other regions even though most of the participation takes place in the informal sectors of the economy. Some African countries such as Nigeria, Madagascar and Tanzania are leading in female participation in labour force. Regional variability revealed sub-Saharan Africa countries (SSA) having relatively high rate in female participation in labour force even though there are country disparities. This paper examined female participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa with a view to proffering suggestions for policy interventions in improving female participation in labour force in Africa. It was deduced from discussions that marriage, non-labour income, religion, economic development, most especially as it relates to poor working conditions, and fertility are major factors behind the low participation rate of female in the labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. It was recommended that governments of African countries, women groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to collaborate towards ensuring the implementation of the affirmative action on increasing women participation in governance and public offices, eradicating gender discrimination and abuse of women rights as these will go a long way in enhancing women participation in labour force in Africa.

Keywords: trends, patterns, determinants, participation, labour force, sub-Saharan Africa

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Female participation in labour force in Africa revealed a relatively high rate when compared to other regions even though most of the participation can be attributed to informal sectors of the economy. Some African countries such as Nigeria, Madagascar and Tanzania are leading in female participation in labour force. Regional variability revealed sub-Saharan

Africa countries (SSA) having relatively high rate in female participation in labour force even though there are country disparities. Countries like Egypt, Algeria and Morocco are some of the African countries with low female participation in labour in Africa (ILO, 2024). Effectiveness in government, quality of institutions and rule of law have the possibility of influencing female participation in labour force positively. Improvement in information technology (IT) by tailoring it to favour trade within nations and gender economic inclusion could be beneficial towards improving female participation in labour force in Africa, most especially sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria.

Female participation in labour force in sub-Saharan African countries is influenced by various factors such as cultural norms, government policies as well as prevalent economic conditions. Understanding these factors will be very helpful to policymakers in developing strategies towards promoting economic empowerment and female participation in labour force in Africa. Demographic factors such as marital status, age, household composition; socio-cultural factors such as cultural norms, level of education, family structure; economic factors such as level of poverty, economic growth and wage gaps as well as institutional factors such as access to education, trainings, government policies and regulations in labour market have the tendency of influencing female participation in labour force in Africa, most especially sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria (ILO, 2024).

Studies such as Solanke *et al.* (2021) and Olufumilayo *et al.* (2024) revealed that female education is positively associated with female participation in labour force and employment in non-primary sectors,. Early motherhood has the tendency of limiting female education and participation in the labour market as well as decreasing school attendance among young females. Both may contribute to decline in the supply of female participation in labour force. These factors interact towards influencing female participation in labour force in different countries and regions in Africa, most especially sub-Saharan African countries. This study is aimed at examining trends, patterns and determinants of female labour force participation in sub-Saharan Africa through extensive review. The paragraphs below will discuss the trends, patterns and determinants in sub-Saharan Africa.

1.1 Trends in Female Labour Force Participation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Female participation in labour force in Africa revealed a relatively high in Africa with Madagascar, Nigeria and Tanzania leading with 82.56, 80.71 and 80.16 percent respectively while countries such as Algeria, Egypt and Morocco recording the lowest participation rate ranging between 13.99 and

19.53 percent. The table below reveal top five African countries with highest female participation in labour force in Africa in 2023 and 2024.

Table 1.1 Top Five African Countries in Female Participation in Labour Force (2023-2024)

Countries	Percentage in Participation (2023)	Percentage in Participation (2024)
Madagascar	82.58	82.56
Nigeria	52.20	80.71
Tanzania	77.14	80.16
Burundi	78.78	79.86
Mozambique	78.42	78.12

Source: ILO 2024

From Table 1.1 above, Madagascar has the highest percentage of female participation in labour force in Africa as at year 2024 with 82.56 percent followed by Nigeria with 80.71 percent. Tanzania recorded 80.16 percent, Burundi followed with 79.86 percent while Mozambique had 78.12 percent. This implies that Nigeria is second in Africa in terms of female participation in labour force in Africa just behind Madagascar with 80.71 percent. Some of the factors that might have been responsible for the high participation of female in labour force in Nigeria include economic growth and development that might have created opportunities for women to participate in the labour market, government policies that supported childcare, work-life balances and equal pay that encouraged female participation in labour force.

Other factors that might have induced the high participation of women in labour force in Nigeria include easy access to education and training programmes as well as labour market regulations such as regulations and laws in favour of women inclusion in various occupations both in public and private sectors of the economy. In sub-Saharan Africa, the average female participation in labour force is around 56 to 57 percent in 2023 and 2024. Some of the factors that might have been responsible for the low participation rate in sub-Sahara Africa include marital status as majority of women in this sub-region tend to marry at early age thereby limiting their chances in pursuing careers in paid employment. Other factors include cultural norms as social roles of the female gender in Africa, most especially sub-Saharan African countries, is traditionally restricted to domestic services thereby limiting their economic participation in labour force. The table below presents some of the African countries lowest in female participation in labour force in Africa.

Table 1.2 African Countries Lowest in Female Participation in Labour Force (2023-2024)

Countries	Percentage in Participation (2023)	Percentage in Participation (2024)
Somalia	21.15	20.94
Mauritania	26.41	26.12
Sudan	27.87	N/A
Comoros	33.06	41.51
Senegal	37.60	37.21

Source: ILO 2024

From Table 1.2 above, Somalia has the lowest percentage of female participation in labour force in Africa as at year 2024 with 20.94 percent followed by Mauritania with 26.12 percent. Comoros recorded 41.51 percent, while Senegal had 37.21 percent. Similarly, as at 2023 the preceding year, Somalia had the lowest percentage of female participation in labour force in Africa with 21.15 percent followed by Mauritania with 26.41 percent. Sudan recorded 27.87 percent, Comoros recorded 33.06 percent, while Senegal had 37.60 percent. Some of the factors that might have been responsible for the low participation of female in labour force in these countries include family structure as many households in sub-Saharan African countries are patriarchal in nature where the husband is the primary breadwinner and sole decision maker thereby limiting the autonomy of the wife and her participation in labour force. Other factors that may affect their participation are wage gap, government policies, access to training and education as well as poverty.

1.2 Pattern of Female Participation in Labour Force in Sub-Saharan African Countries

The pattern of female participation in labour force in countries in sub-Saharan Africa varies based on their challenges facing labour force participation. Regionally sub-Saharan Africa countries have relatively high participation in labour force when their participation in non-economic activities are been factored in such as trading, farming and domestic services like midwifery. There are variations by countries; countries like Morocco, Egypt and Algeria have low female participation in labour force, ranging between 13.99 and 19.53 percent. Good governance in terms of quality of institutions in the country, effectiveness of government policies and rule of law have the possibility of influencing female participation in labour force in sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria. The graph below presents top five countries having the highest female participation rate in Africa as at year 2024.

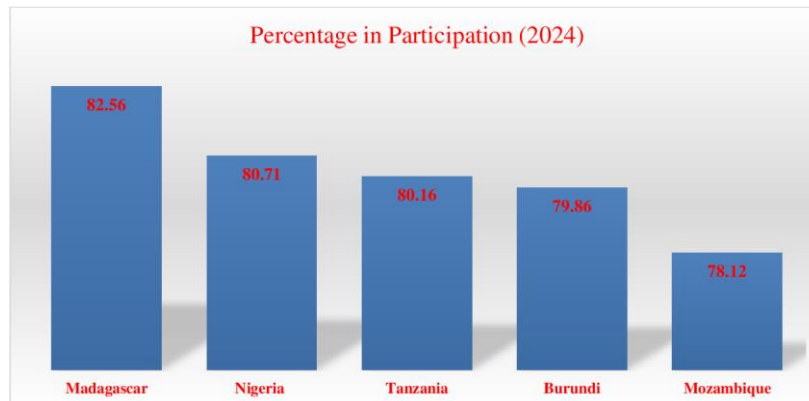


Fig 1.1 Top Five African Countries in Female Participation in Labour Force as at 2024

From Figure 1.1 above, Madagascar had the highest percentage of female participation in labour force in Africa as at year 2024 with 82.56 percent followed by Nigeria with 80.71 percent. Tanzania recorded 80.16 percent, Burundi with 79.86 percent while Mozambique had 78.12 percent. This implies Nigeria is second in Africa in terms of female participation in labour force in Africa just behind Madagascar with 80.71 percent. Similarly, the graph below presents countries having lowest participation rate in labour force in Africa as at 2024.

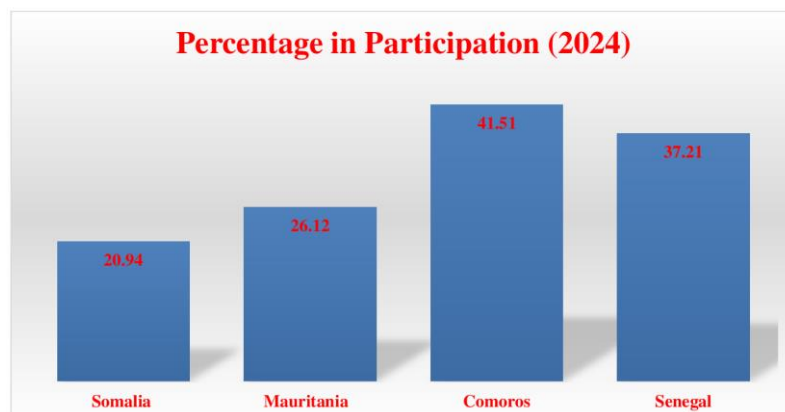


Fig 1.2 African Countries Lowest in Female Participation in Labour Force as at 2024

From Figure 1.2 above, Somalia had the lowest percentage of female participation in labour force in Africa as at year 2024 with 20.94 percent followed by Mauritania with 26.12 percent. Comoros recorded 41.51 percent, while Senegal had 37.21 percent. Some of the factors that might have been responsible for the low participation of female in labour force in these countries include family structure, wage gap, government policies, access to training and education as well as poverty.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviewed the determinants of female participation in labour

force in sub-Saharan African countries, prevalence of female participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa as well as effect of female participation in labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. The discussion is handled in subsequent paragraphs.

2.1 Determinants of Female Participation in Labour Force in Sub-Saharan African Countries

Marriage and gender are related factors that may determine female participation in labour force in sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria. Marriage and gender inequality in terms of disparities in the society have the effect of affecting participation of women in the labour force negatively (Daniel 2010). Female gender, most especially the girl child being coerced to forcefully marry whom she is not interested in, may affect her productivity due to her inner feelings and trauma she may be encountering from a forced relationship. Child marriage is very paramount in Africa and other parts of the world. The attendant effect of this early marriage is that such girl child may be denied some rights such as proper education that will let her be more productive and economically active in the labour force. This explains some of the reasons behind the low participation of women in skilled labour in Africa most especially sub-Saharan Africa (Nnadi 2014). Early marriage has forced girls into adulthood before they are physically and emotionally matured and which has hindered the victims' economic, social, and educational development (Emmanuel *et al.*, 2018).

In sub-Saharan African countries such as Nigeria, most especially in the northern and some southern parts of Nigeria, girls are being forced to early marriage due to attendant benefits partnering parents stand to gain from such union. This is usually attributable to religion and cultural beliefs. This will have its 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 northern Nigeria is low due to low education and the issue of early marriage. Infidelity in the society is often shaped by aspirations for modern lifestyles, economic inequality, contradictory moralities and gender disparities. Economic inequality and gender disparities have the possibility of affecting female participation in the labour force (Simona *et al.*, 2022). Gender differences has exerted influence on wages of employees both in the paid and self-employed sectors. Determinants of employment in the labour market vary by gender and family roles. Gender difference is higher in less

regulated self-employment when compared to the more regulated paid employment in the labour market (Ikechukwu *et al.*, 2016).

The low participation rate of women in labour force in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa can also be attributed to gender discrimination. In Nigeria for example, women are exposed to social injustice, discrimination and are highly marginalised despite provision in the Nigerian constitution for non-discrimination and gender equality. The marginalisation of the female gender in Nigeria is often as a result of cultural and religious norms, discriminatory laws, low levels of education, disproportionate effect of poverty on women and gender stereotypes. The causes of gender inequality in Nigeria have resulted to poor medical care of women, religious freedom have been hampered, political segregation, uneven access to education and employment opportunities, job segregation and low legal protections. The prevalence of gender discrimination, practices and social norms in Nigeria 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 Nigeria. In most parts of the country, due to religious and cultural affiliations, women are subordinated to their male counterparts, most especially in northern Nigeria. In politics, education, and music industry across all regions in the federation, males are usually dominating over their female counterparts and women are usually believed to be best suited for domestic work.

2.2 Prevalence of Female Participation in Labour Force in Sub-Saharan Africa

Globally, statistics have shown that female participation in labour force is just over 50 percent when compared to their male counterpart which is 80 percent. Women are generally exposed to difficulties in career progression and fewer business opportunities when compared to their male counterpart. Also, they are less likely to work in formal employment or corporate world and due to this fact, where they do work, they earn less. In Nigeria as an example, marginalisation of the girl child and women in general at various social structures of the society (in education, politics, place of work and at home) is so devastating that it has even affected women's sexual autonomy and participation in labour force. Findings have also revealed that 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 determines the participation of females in the labour force. Also, the huge number of energy and time spent by women in attending to domestic work

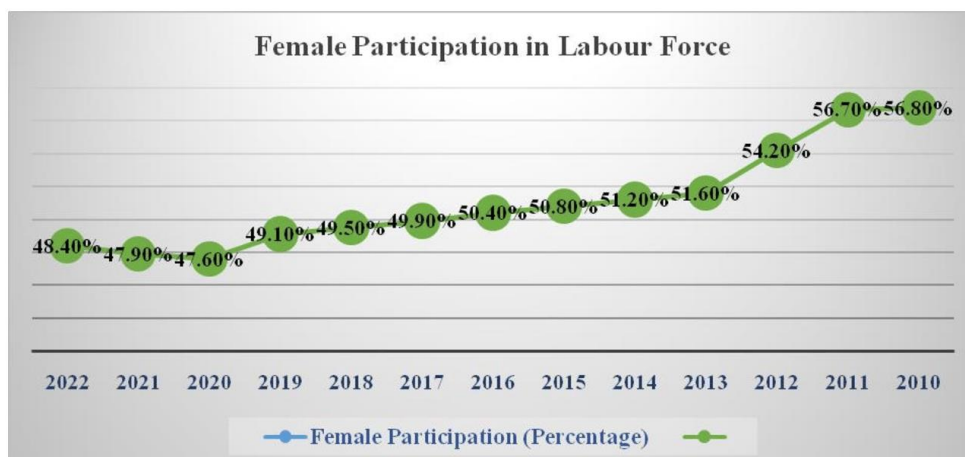
at home such as keeping the home, childbearing and so forth leaves little time for personal development and education thereby affecting their participating in labour force negatively. Other factors that also have the tendency of affecting women's participation in labour force are presence of young children at home, marital status, and religion. These factors have hindered women's participation in labour force in Nigeria, which has led to its continuous decline since 2010.

The table below presents female labour force participation rate in Nigeria from 2010 to 2020.

Female labour force participation rate in Nigeria between 2010 and 2020	
Year	Female Participation (Percentage)
2022	48.4
2021	47.9
2020	47.6
2019	49.1
2018	49.5
2017	49.9
2016	50.4
2015	50.8
2014	51.2
2013	51.6
2012	54.2
2011	56.7
2010	56.8

Source: ILO, 2022

From the table above, it can be observed that in Nigeria, the female participation in labour force has been declining gradually since 2010. Marriage, non-labour income, religion, economic development most especially as it relates to poor working conditions and fertility have been some factors determining female participation in labour force in Nigeria and these factors have been some of the major causes behind the decline in female participation in labour force in Nigeria. The graphical representation is presented below:



2.3 Effects of Female Participation in Labour Force

Statistics have shown that globally participation rate of women in the labour force is just about 50 percent when compared to those of men, which is well above 80 percent. In Nigeria, the participation rate of women in the labour force is below world average which is about 48.4 percent. Reports showed that globally, women have few opportunities in career progression or business expansion and 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, thereby reducing their time for personal development such as education and job trainings which will be very useful for their career progression. In Nigeria, this is also the scenario; a situation where there is social bias to the female gender that their primary activity is the domestic up keep, majority of them are still wanting in the corporate world and public sector that is formal and in cases where women do work, they earn less.

The consequence of higher participation of female in the labour force can be felt in the earnings of the men. Studies have showed that 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. Studies showed that 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 the economic productivity and development through gross domestic product.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed extensive review of scholarly articles as methodology. Meaning and definition of concepts relating to trends, patterns and determinants of female labour force participation in Nigeria were accessed from the internet and other electronic search devices. Deductions were made from the literatures and discussions made so far. The author's personal conclusion formed the last section.

4.0 POLICY RESPONSE

The national gender policy formulated in Nigeria provided guidelines in mainstreaming the two opposite genders in various sectors of the economy

with the overall aim or objective of attaining a reduction in gender inequality and fostering joint participation of men, women, boys and girls in political and socio-economic development. The national gender policy (2021-2026) drew and developed its tenets from the 2006 national gender policy that had its overall goal and objective of providing strategic policy guidelines in mainstreaming opposite genders at all levels of governance and other socio-economic spheres in the country as well as combating all forms of gender-based violence, most especially against women in the country. The policy was also committed to addressing the gender inequalities existing in the socio-economic spheres of the country and preventing all forms of gender-based violence, most especially against women and girls. This policy drew from international and regional instruments in which Nigeria is one of the parties. The policy was based on combating the under-representations and social inequalities of encountered by women at various positions of decision-making at all levels in Nigeria both at public and private spheres.

The impetus for the continuation in providing gender policy in Nigeria can be attributed to policy framework which will be necessary in addressing gender issues in Nigeria. The overall goal or objective of the 2021 gender policy in Nigeria was to build an equitable or “just” society which will be devoid of all forms of gender discrimination, where the yearning and aspirations of both genders in Nigeria will be heard and mainstreamed in an equitable form to all sectors of the national development in Nigeria. The 2021 national gender policy in Nigeria, apart from the international and regional instruments, can also be linked to protocols of various organizational bodies both at national, regional and state levels. For example, the policy has a very strong linkage with several instruments and policies such as the reproductive health policy, Nigerian constitution, education policy, environmental policy, agriculture policy, national youth policy, to mention a few. The United Nations conventions and other international conferences raised the impetus for national governments and other state parties to provide gender equality and equity.

Drawing from the Nigerian government political commitment and will towards ensuring women empowerment and gender equality, the Nigerian government being a signatory to several international and regional instruments ratified these conventional commitments: the convention on the rights of child (CRC), the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), the Beijing platform for action (BPFA), the Vienna conference on human rights, the AU solemn declaration for gender equity, the new partnership for African development (NEPAD),

international conference on population development plan of action (ICPD PoA), the African protocol on peoples' rights and rights of women (APRRW), the millennium development goals (MDGs) and sustainable development goals (SDGs). More importantly, the need for revival of growth plan and economic recovery of the Nigerian economy (2017-2020) serves as a necessary impetus for this policy. All these are basic human instruments needed for advancing both children and women in Nigeria towards economic productivity and betterment in living conditions. The regional and international instruments are aimed at providing useful reference material for national development in Nigeria. The national instruments, most especially the Nigerian constitutions and other policies are helpful in upholding the principle of gender equity and equality of rights of women, most especially laws that are related to gender equity.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Marriage, non-labour income, religion, economic development most especially as it relates to poor working conditions and fertility are major factors behind the low participation rate of female in the labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. Governments of African countries, women groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to collaborate towards ensuring the implementation of the affirmative action in increasing women participation in governance and public offices, eradicating gender discrimination and abuse of women rights as this will go a long way in enhancing women participation in labour force in Africa.

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Writers' Brief Data



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