

Breaking Barriers: Understanding Women's Labour Market Challenges in Uganda

Executive Statement

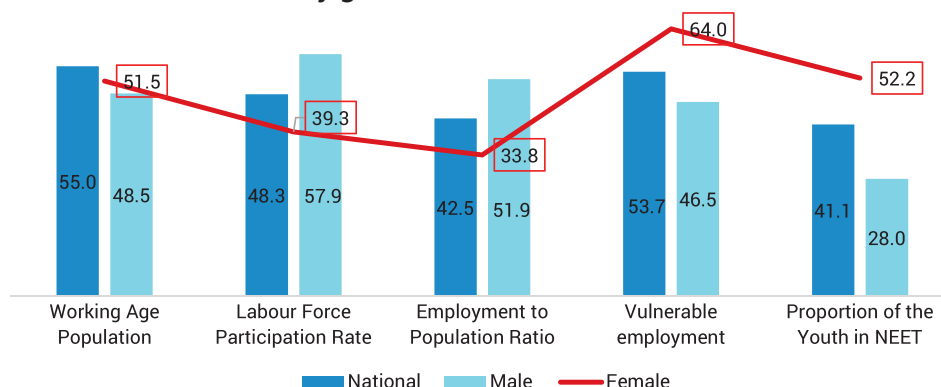
This policy brief addresses the underrepresentation of women in Uganda's labour market, where their participation stands at 39.3% compared to 57.9% for men. Key challenges include wage disparities, with women earning less across all education levels, and a high concentration in low-skilled roles, particularly in the informal sector. Women face significant caregiving burdens, spending 29.7 hours weekly on unpaid care work, which limits their employment opportunities. To address the above challenges there is a need for several interventions, including implementing targeted vocational training, promoting workplace flexibility, expanding social protections for women in vulnerable employment, and providing skills training for NEET female youth to foster gender equality and inclusive economic growth.



Introduction

Women's participation in Uganda's labour force is critical for inclusive economic growth and achieving Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8. While Uganda's working-age population grew from 20.2 million in 2018/19 to over 23.5 million in 2021, the labour market remains skewed, with women's participation at 39.3% compared to 57.9% for men (UBOS, 2021). This gap reflects systemic challenges, including cultural norms, occupational segregation, and unequal access to education and opportunities. This brief is based on the Women in the Labour Force Report 2025, which examined the challenges faced by women in Uganda's labour market.

Despite the various government policies and initiatives to promote gender equality in the labour market, such as the Uganda Gender Policy (2007) and the National Equal Opportunities Policy (2006), evidence shows women lag far behind. For instance, 84.8% of women perform unpaid care work, compared to 66.6% of men, and women's share of vulnerable employment is estimated to be 64% higher than men's 46.5%. Young women face even greater challenges, with 52.2% of female youth (aged 18–30) categorised as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), compared to only 28% of male youth (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Labour market indicators by gender

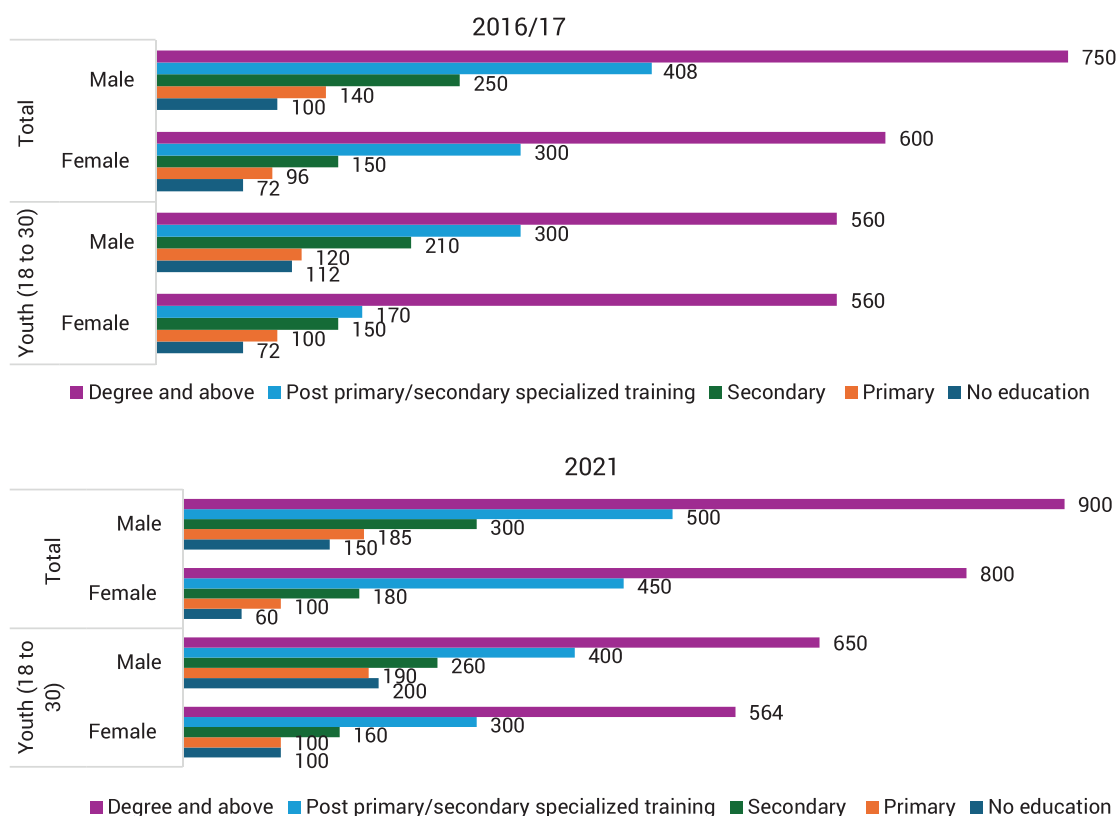
Source: Authors' construction using NLFS 2021

Key Observations

Women have persistently earned lower wages than men

Despite comparable education levels, women earn significantly less than men across all sectors. For example, Figure 2 illustrates that at nearly every level of educational attainment, men

consistently earn higher wages than women with comparable qualifications. This disparity results from the fact that occupational segregation concentrates women in lower-paying roles, even within the same sector (UN Women, 2024). Additionally, societal norms discourage women from pursuing male-dominated fields such as technology, engineering, and finance (Suubi

Figure 2: Median monthly wages by education level and gender - 2016/17 and 2021 ('000)

Source: Authors' construction using NLFS 2021

et al., 2022). Women's overrepresentation in the informal sector—comprising 87% of the workforce—further limits their income potential because of inconsistent earnings and limited bargaining power (UBOS, 2021). These wage gaps are not merely the result of women's limited access to managerial positions, but also reflect cultural attitudes that undervalue women's contributions to the economy.

Women dominate low-skilled and labour-intensive jobs

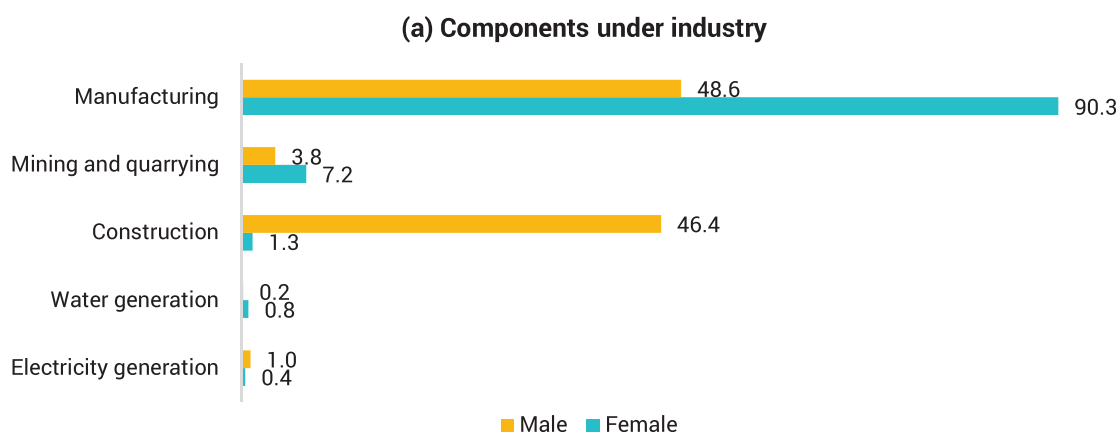
There has been a notable shift of women from agriculture to industry, from 5.8% in 2016/17 to 12.2% in 2021 (See figure 3). While this shift may appear to represent progress toward productive employment, Figure 4 reveals that most women

in the industry remain concentrated in low-skilled, labour-intensive roles. These include assembly line work, packaging, and other manual tasks that offer limited prospects for career advancement. Several factors attribute the predominance of women in such roles. These include limited access to vocational training and gender stereotypes that confine women to tasks perceived as less technical. For example, the Mbale Industrial Park, which employs over 3,500 women, illustrates this dynamic, with most women engaged in craft-related trades or elementary occupations (see Figure 4). Women's limited representation in skilled industrial jobs highlights the need for targeted initiatives to upskill women and encourage their participation in high-value roles within the industrial sector.

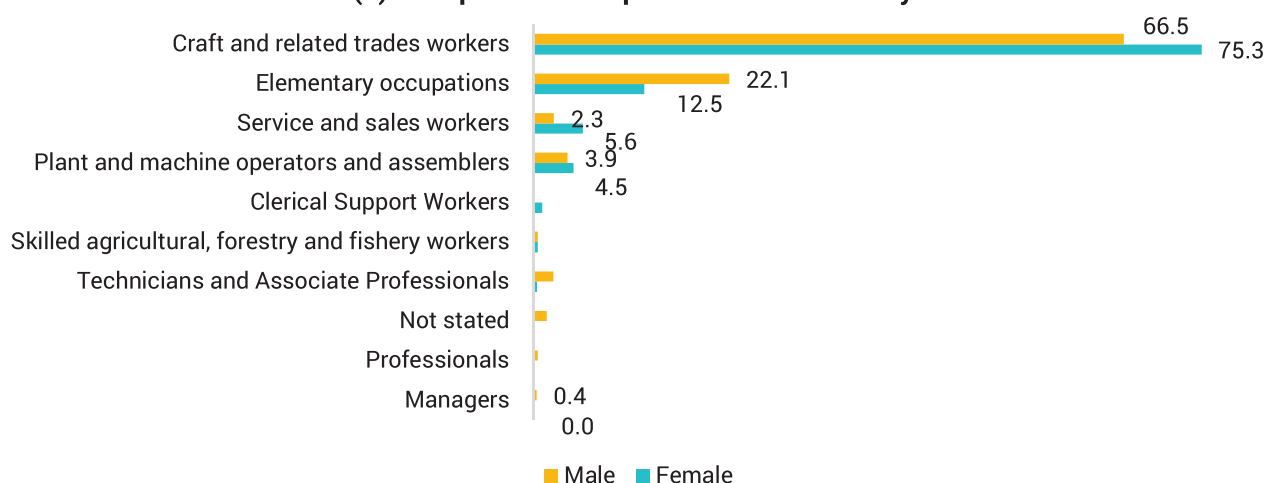
Figure 3: Distribution of the working population by sector of work and sex (%)



Figure 4: Participation in industry and occupations by sex (%)



Source: Authors' construction using NLFS 2021

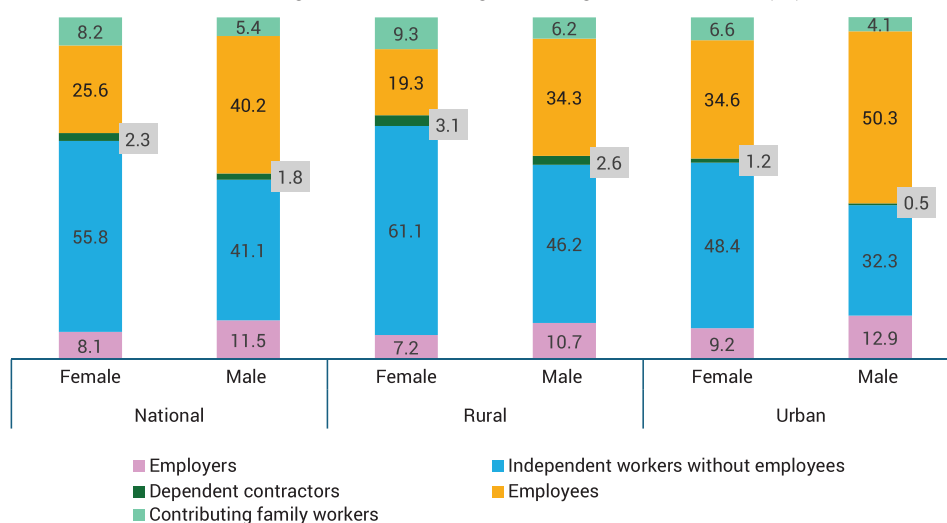
(b) Occupational composition under industry

Source: Authors' construction using NLFS 2021

Most women are independent workers without employers or employees

Independent workers without employees make up 55.8% of employed women, especially rural women (61.1%), primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture and small-scale trade (see Figure 5). Women often choose this employment type for its flexibility, allowing them to balance income generation with caregiving responsibilities. However, these roles frequently lack social protections such as health insurance, paid leave, or retirement benefits, leaving women economically vulnerable. Financial institutions often view women in these roles as high-risk

clients because of their inconsistent income streams, making it difficult for them to access loans or credit to grow their enterprises. This perpetuates a cycle of low productivity and limited economic mobility. This type also contributes to vulnerable employment, including own-account workers and contributing family workers. These roles are characterised by inadequate earnings, low productivity, and difficult working conditions, undermining workers' fundamental rights. Women in such positions often lack employment benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, or retirement benefits, leaving them economically vulnerable.

Figure 5: Distribution of the employed persons by employment status (%)

Source: Authors' construction using NLFS 2021

Women continue to face delayed entry into the labour market

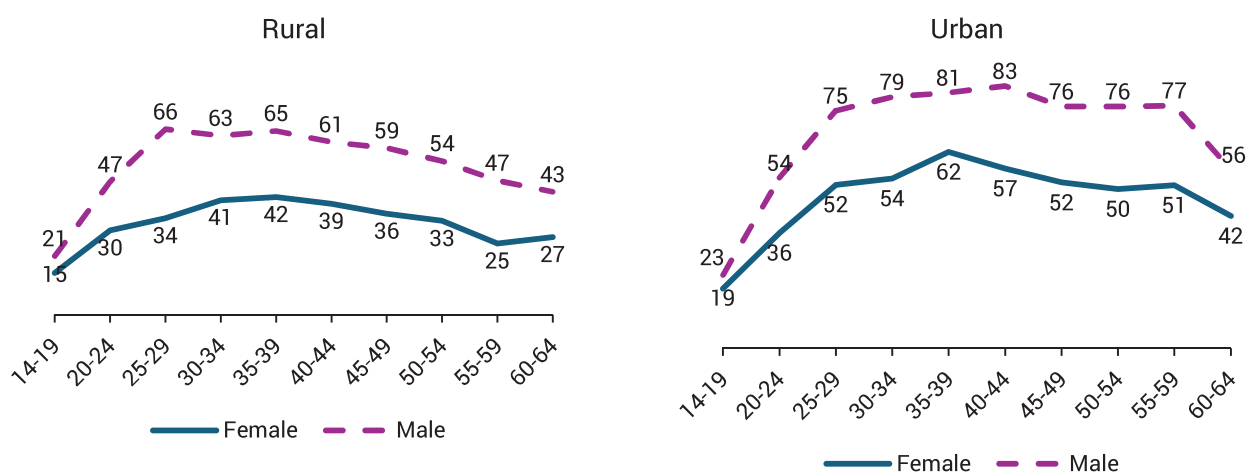
Employment rates for women in Uganda peak between ages 35-39, with urban women reaching 62% and rural women at 42% as shown in Figure 6. Several interrelated factors, including reproductive patterns, early marriage, and educational gaps, account for the observed peak. For example, early marriage and high fertility rates are prevalent in Uganda, particularly in rural regions. Many women marry and begin childbearing at a young age, often completing their desired family size by mid-30s. According to the 2022 UDHS report, the median age at first marriage for women aged 25-49 is approximately 18.8 years, and the total fertility rate stands at 5.2 children per woman, with fertility rates peaking among women aged 20 to 24 years, followed by a decline after that age (UBOS, 2023). This implies that women's economic participation peaks during mid-life (age 35-39), likely because of fewer caregiving responsibilities and accumulated work experience or because many women may have completed their reproductive responsibilities, allowing them to re-enter or increase their participation in the labour market. However, this demographic also highlights a gap in support mechanisms for younger women entering the workforce.

The 2021 NLFS report reveals that 16% of females have no formal education, nearly double the rate for males, and only 10.8% of females complete secondary education or higher. This educational gap significantly constrains women's employment prospects, delaying their entry into the labour market until after childbearing.

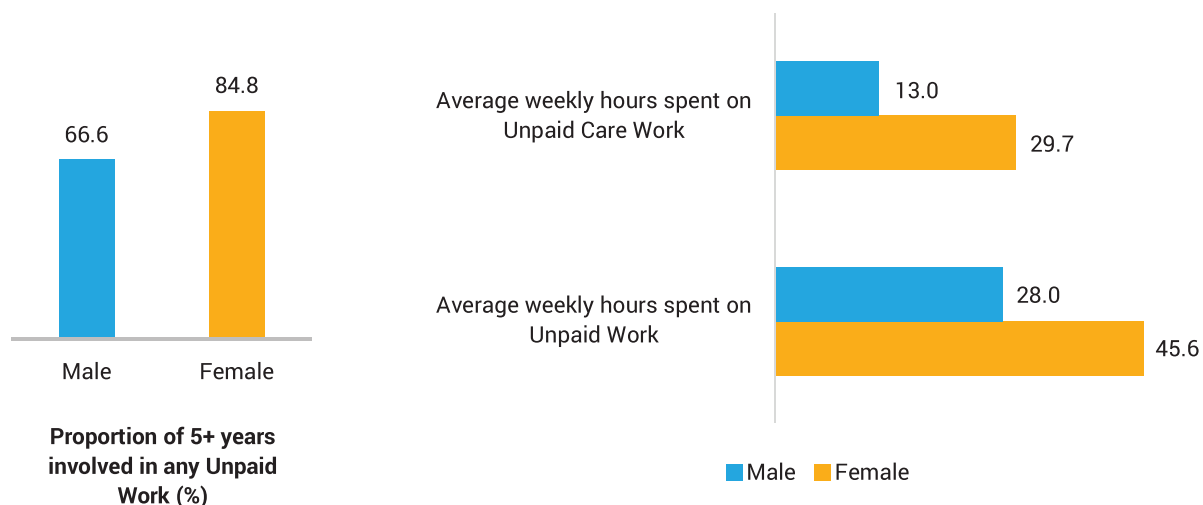
Women suffer a disproportionate burden of Unpaid Care Work

Women in Uganda spend nearly twice as much time on unpaid care work (UCW) as men—29.7 hours per week compared to 13 hours for men, as shown in Figure 7. Societal expectations assigning caregiving responsibilities primarily to women deeply root this inequitable division of labour. This stark contrast raises critical questions about the implications of such inequalities on gender roles, economic productivity, and social well-being. The lack of affordable childcare services exacerbates this burden, forcing many women to withdraw from paid employment or limit their work hours. The economic implications of this disparity are profound. By restricting women's participation in the formal economy, unpaid care work reduces household incomes and constrains national productivity.

Figure 6: Employment rates by age, gender and residence (%)



Source: Authors' construction using NLFS 2021

Figure 7: Participation rates and average weekly hours spent on unpaid work and unpaid care work

Source: Authors' construction using NLFS 2021

Emerging policy actions

Addressing these gender disparities in Uganda's labour market requires targeted interventions to remove structural barriers limiting women's economic participation. By adopting the following policy actions, Uganda can make significant strides toward closing the gender gap in labour force participation and fostering an inclusive and equitable economic environment for all.

1. **Encourage women's participation in skilled industrial roles:** The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MoGLSD) should implement targeted vocational training and incentives to transition women from agriculture to skilled industry jobs, increasing their access to higher-income employment opportunities.
2. **Promote workplace flexibility and return-to-work programs:** In collaboration with MoGLSD, employers should establish flexible work policies and structured return-to-work programs for young women and mothers below 35 years to help them balance work and caregiving responsibilities. This will help keep talented women and reduce the employment gap. To reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women, there is a need to promote shared household responsibilities through public awareness. This will enable women to engage more fully in paid employment and contribute to the labour force.
3. **Strengthen social protection for women in vulnerable employment:** The government should expand social protection schemes, including health insurance and retirement benefits, to cover women in informal and vulnerable employment while incentivizing the formalisation of women-owned enterprises through tax incentives and grants. This is a shared responsibility of MoGLSD, MoFPED and the local governments.
4. **Targeted Skills Training for NEET Female Youth:** Provide tailored vocational and entrepreneurship programs that align with market demands, with strong collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and the private sector to support female youth employment.

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