

# Making Women's Work Visible: The 19th ICLS Standards, Purpose, and Progress

data2x<sup>o</sup>



## Background

Women's economic empowerment is fundamental to improve all lives. Limiting this progress are the many inequalities that women face in their working lives, such as lower job quality, pay gaps, and limited asset ownership. Unpaid work — such as caretaking, subsistence farming, cooking, and cleaning — overwhelmingly falls on the shoulders of women. This unpaid work is critical to the functioning of communities around the world, yet it is often overlooked. Unpaid work has historically been difficult to measure due to limited traditional definitions of what is considered "work" and poor visibility in official statistics such as *population active in the labor market* or *gross domestic product (GDP)*.

Moreover, while women in the labor market are more likely than men to do unpaid work, they are also more likely to perform multiple roles and face structural or societal barriers to work.<sup>1</sup> The failure of existing data to fully convey the contributions of women limits the ability of governments to design and implement programs and policies that can strengthen women's economic empowerment and ultimately improve their livelihoods, as well as those of their families and communities. By changing how we measure work and holding leaders accountable to ensure that the collection and use of data reflect these changes, we can better understand women's valuable contributions to society and support their needs and aspirations through data-driven policymaking.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has now published two reports showing the results of a series of pilot studies that explore how new approaches can improve the [gender relevance of labor statistics](#) and help to [close](#)

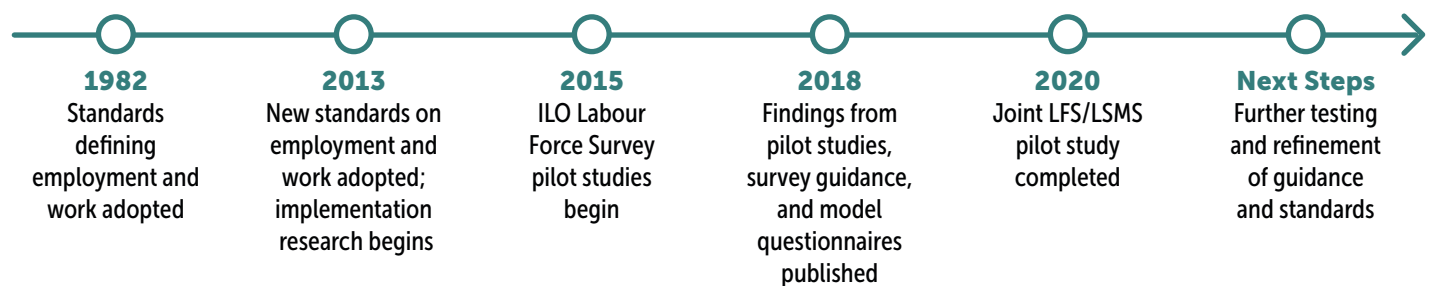
[gender data gaps in the world of work](#). This brief builds on those reports to further illustrate differences between how women and men work and how improved measurement can ultimately support women's economic empowerment.

## Changing the Definition of Work

For over 30 years, key economic indicators have been based on a framework adopted at the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 1982. Within this framework, individuals were either employed, unemployed, or economically inactive. With time, it became clear that these categories, and their accompanying definitions, were insufficient to fully capture how individuals — and women in particular — contributed to the economy or the well-being of their households. At the 19th ICLS in 2013, new, more [gender-sensitive standards](#) were adopted with refined definitions and additional categories. These standards were built on countries' experiences and will support international harmonization and implementation of these best practices. As these changes were introduced, discussion arose on how this would affect data collection and impact women, as outlined [here](#).

The new standards update definitions related to key concepts such as employment and unemployment and expand the framework to enhance understanding of labor underutilization and different forms of work. With these new standards, we can differentiate between paid and unpaid work, define several types of work, and capture when individuals engage in multiple types of work concurrently. Together, these changes make the complexity of how individuals participate in the labor force visible and uncover women's contributions to the economy that were previously hidden or insufficiently measured.

Figure 1: Evolution of the definitions of employment and work



<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted this differential impact on men and women, as resulting economic setbacks and shifts in household responsibilities have had a greater impact on women.

## Collecting New Labor Statistics

The value of the 19th ICLS standards and the framework they create can only be fully understood by collecting data and comparing it with previous statistics. The ILO is partnering with data producers, such as national statistical offices and the World Bank, to pilot and assess the practical implications of transitioning to the new standards, including how to update existing household surveys, what questions to ask, and how to analyze and communicate key findings.

Since 2013, the ILO, with support from Data2X, has been testing new ways of asking questions to measure all types of work and has released [guidance notes](#) on how to collect the new information required. The World Bank has also been updating the Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS) – conducted in many countries around the world – to generate complementary information. Most recently, the ILO and the World Bank tested and refined the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the LSMS questionnaires side-by-side to ensure the standards can be applied across different instruments.

While pilot work is based on experimental survey designs, the analytical potential of the framework created by the 19th ICLS standards is already apparent. The new definitions and these studies are substantially enhancing our understanding of women’s and men’s contributions to their households, their communities, and the economy through both paid and unpaid work. In the pilot studies, we see several specific ways that work differs for women and men. While these exact differences may not be true in every setting, this general pattern of differences is clear where the new definitions have been applied. The pilot studies also demonstrate the new analyses that are possible. Full methodology and study details are available [here](#), and initial insights on gender from the pilot studies are discussed below.

## Initial Insights

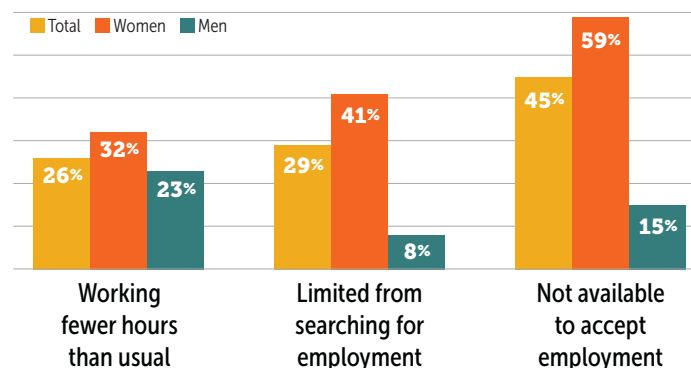
### 1. Women are significantly more likely than men to cite family responsibilities as a main reason that they are limited from looking for or accepting employment.

With the new labor standards, we can better measure the mismatch between an individual’s desire to work and their ability to do so, also known as underutilized labor. Underutilized labor includes unemployed individuals, individuals who are not working as many hours as desired, and individuals who are unable to search for or accept employment because of their current circumstances.

More women than men are limited by circumstances that prevent them from searching for or accepting work. Women cited family responsibilities more than five times as often as men as a reason they were limited from looking for employment and almost four times as often as a reason for not being available to accept employment. Furthermore, even if women are employed, they are significantly more

likely than men to cite family responsibilities as a reason for working fewer hours than a typical workweek.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of working age women and men reporting family responsibilities as a barrier to employment

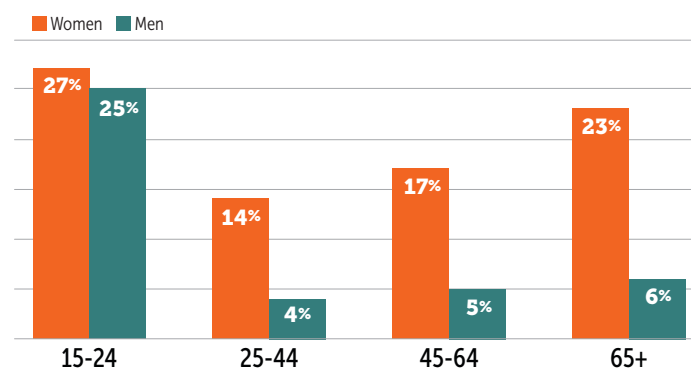


**Source:** International Labour Organization, *Closing gender data gaps in the world of work – role of the 19th ICLS standards*, October 2020.

### 2. Women are more likely than men to do unpaid work for the family business or farm.

The 19th ICLS standards also provide insights into the division of labor within a family business or farm. Individuals who have unpaid support roles in a family business, but do not have the authority to make decisions in that business, are classified as contributing family workers. Women are more likely than men to fall into this category. The ILO pilot studies show that this is partly a result of actual differences in roles and partly a result of women’s perceptions that they play a less important role despite their actual roles being more similar. The ILO has shown that careful questionnaire design is needed to make sure both the perceived and the actual situations are captured. While many young men and women report themselves as falling into this category, as age increases men are less likely to remain in this role than women. In the oldest cohort, people aged 65 or older, women are four times more likely than men to report being contributing family workers. This difference may reflect that men are more able to change roles away from contributor to one of more authority within the family business or shift to working outside the family business.

**Figure 3:** Percentage of employed women and men classified as contributing family workers by age



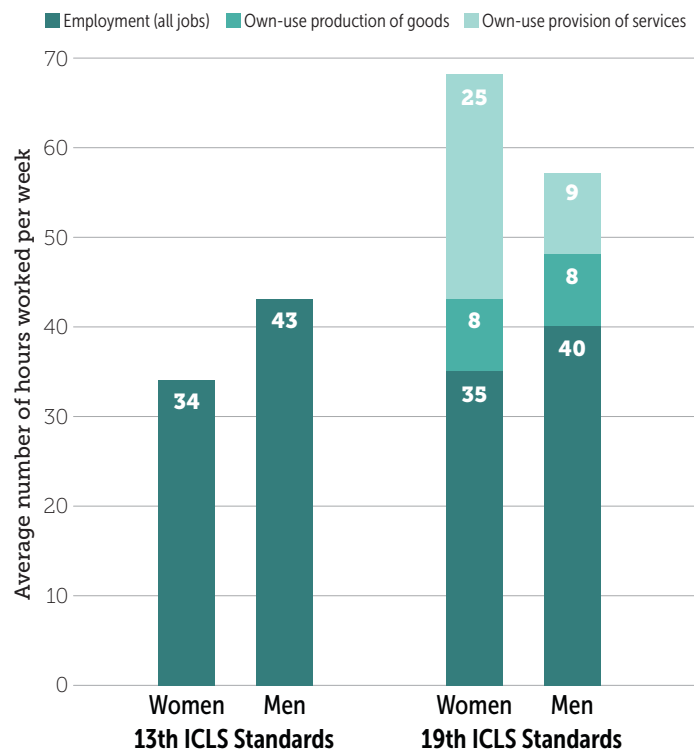
**Source:** International Labour Organization, *Closing gender data gaps in the world of work – role of the 19th ICLS standards*, October 2020.

### 3. Women work more hours than men when employment and unpaid work are both counted.

The 19th ICLS standards measure the multiple forms of work that both women and men take on and enable us to capture the unpaid work done for the household. Unpaid work includes activities such as subsistence farming, fetching water, collecting firewood, and making clothes (production of goods) and activities such as childcare, care for dependent adults, housework, and gardening (services). This demonstrates how these standards offer greater insight into, and a clear measurement of, the double burden of paid and unpaid work women may face.

By shifting from measuring employment only to measuring all work, it is evident that we previously underestimated working time for all individuals, but much more so for women. From the pilot studies, the previous approach showed employed women working an average of nine hours fewer than men per week while the new one shows that women work on average ten hours more than men per week when different forms of work are measured. While men spend 70 percent of their working hours in employment, for women it only accounts for about 50 percent of their working time; however, women spend nearly three times as many hours as men doing unpaid work for their families.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 4:** Average number of hours per week worked by women and men by the old and new standards

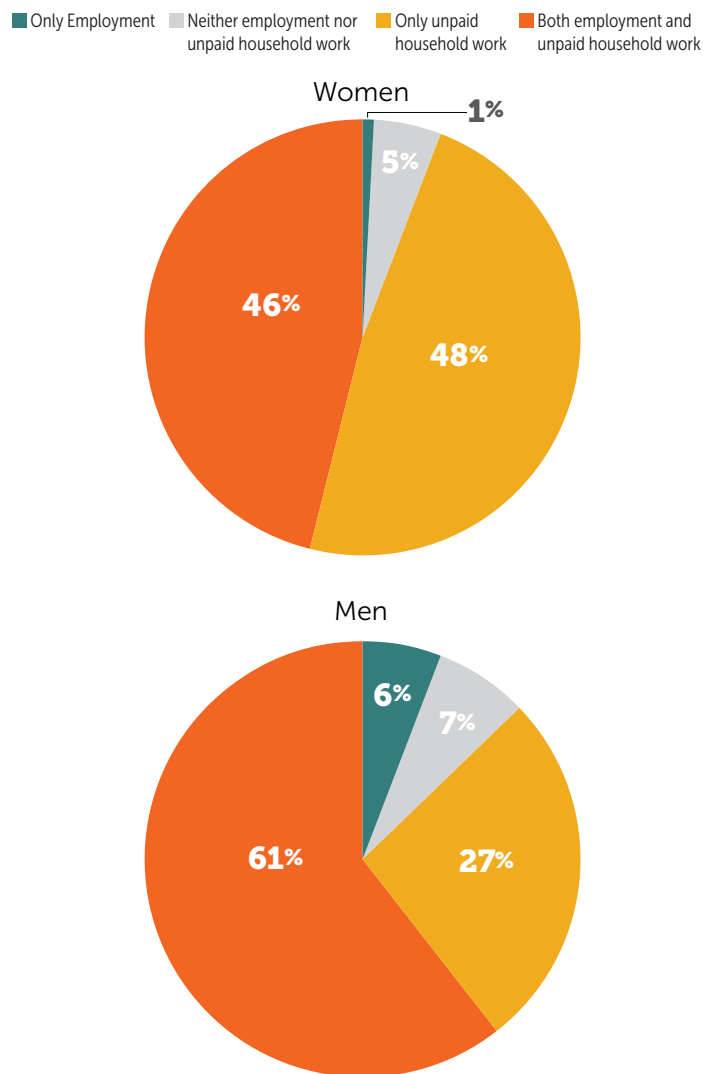


**Source:** International Labour Organization, *Closing gender data gaps in the world of work – role of the 19th ICLS standards*, October 2020.

### 4. Women are more likely than men to do unpaid household work, regardless of employment status.

A feature of the new 19th ICLS standards is that they can highlight concurrent engagement in multiple working activities. This provides a more comprehensive picture of work that captures the substantial gender gaps and the multiple burdens often shouldered by women. While both men and women produce goods or provide services for their household, women are more likely to do so. The pilot studies show that, when employed, the vast majority of women (98 percent) also engage in producing goods or providing services, compared to 92 percent of men. For individuals who are not employed, this holds true for 90 percent of women compared to 80 percent of men.

**Figure 5:** Engagement of women and men in unpaid household work and employment



**Source:** International Labour Organization, *Closing gender data gaps in the world of work – role of the 19th ICLS standards*, October 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The pilot studies did not measure hours spent on volunteer work or unpaid trainee work

## The Way Forward

From the pilot studies, we see that women and men differ in how they engage with the labor market, the barriers they face to working, their status within family businesses, the forms of work they engage in, and the time spent working. This brief highlights a few of the findings examined in depth in the ILO reports.

As labor statistics following the new framework are collected in more geographies and over time, we will be able to better understand and convey how women work, as well as develop interventions and policies to support them. Improving the measurement of work is just the beginning; as the new framework is used, new insights will be gleaned that allow us to further enhance both our measurement and use of the data, including informing the development of future statistical standards.

On the policy side, we need to advance the use of data in step with developments in production to ensure the standards achieve their full potential in supporting evidence-based policymaking, particularly to close the many gender gaps pervasive in the world of work. Finally, we are learning many lessons from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, including the differential impact on work for women and men, and the need to ensure resiliency of data collection. It is critical that we improve data collection and use as we continue to weather and eventually recover from this global shock.

The pilot studies are an important step to providing critical evidence on better measurement of work. The ILO is continuing to refine instruments and testing approaches to strengthen these surveys, and as these updates are made, they will be incorporated into existing measurement [guidance and tools](#).