

Source:

ILO: The changing role of women in the economy: Employment and social issues, Governing Body doc. GB.261/ESP/2/2, 261st Session (Geneva, November 1994).

In Africa, although there are numerically fewer women than men in the informal sector, a higher proportion of the female than male labour force tends to be concentrated in small-scale, undercapitalized, low-productivity market trade and personal service activities. In West Africa, women constitute 60 to 80 per cent of the urban workforce in trading and dominate the open market and petty trading. In sub-Saharan Africa, some women leave occupations such as teaching and nursing to engage in potentially more lucrative informal sector activities. More commonly, women, like men, keep their jobs in the public sector but engage simultaneously in informal sector activities. Those in rural areas combine informal sector work with farming. Since 1985, women have faced increased competition from men who have been entering the informal sector in greater numbers, especially in trading.

In Latin America, older women and especially female heads of households are more likely to be in the informal sector than younger women. In Ecuador, female participation in the informal sector rose from 40 per cent in 1978 to 52 per cent in 1988. In Jamaica, female self-employment rose by 25 per cent as compared to 15 per cent in male self-employment between 1980-87. In the Dominican Republic, the share of the economically active population, both male and female, in the informal sector has been growing, with 70 per cent of the women in the sector earning incomes below the poverty line. In Mexico, 77 per cent of the workers in the maquiladora industry were female in 1981; in 1992, the ratio was 59 per cent. There has been a rise in the number of small units in trading, manufacturing and service activities and an increase in part-time employment especially among women.

In Asia, women commonly dominate in hawking and trading activities. More recently, there has been an increase in their involvement in micro and small-scale production activities and home-based activities, as self-employed or piece-rate workers. ILO flexibility surveys in the Philippines and Malaysia have shown that the greater the degree of labour casualization, the higher the proportion of women in overall employment and the more vulnerable these women are to exploitative conditions. In Pakistan, women displaced from large-scale manufacturing have been pushed increasingly into informal sector subcontracting especially in clothing manufacture, unpaid family work and very poorly paid domestic service. In Indonesia, more than one-fifth of all women in the workforce are in trading, the least lucrative of the self-employment activities.