

## Part 2:

# Women's Employment, Wage Gaps and Social Insurance



## Employment of Women in the Greater Mekong Subregion: New Insights from the Gallup-ILO World Poll

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In this paper, we use a new and non-traditional data source, the 2016 Gallup World Poll (GWP), to describe the labour force status of women in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and to examine the barriers women face in participating in the labour force. As other data show, the GWP confirms that, compared to men, participation rates of women in the GMS are lower, unemployment rates are generally higher, and employment is more likely to be in family work and other informal forms than in formal waged employment. What makes the 2016 version of the GWP unique is a series of questions added by the ILO about the attitudes of women and men towards women and work. The vast majority of women expressed a preference to work outside the home and only a minority of men indicated that their preference would be for women in their household to stay at home. The survey data also offered no evidence that women (or men) saw limited opportunities in the labour market as a barrier to female employment. Barriers to women accessing employment that were raised most frequently concerned balancing work and family, lack of affordable care, factors related to abuse and transport. These calls for policy interventions are well outside the traditional sorts of interventions considered by policymakers in the employment area and they suggest that maximising job opportunities for GMS women will require a broad approach to public policy.

## 5.1 Introduction

Women in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) face labour market challenges faced by women elsewhere in Southeast Asia and the Pacific and globally. Compared to men, labour force participation rates (although high by international standards) are lower, unemployment rates are higher, employment is more likely to be in family work and other informal forms than in formal waged employment, and earnings are lower.

International research has shown that these relatively unfavourable labour market outcomes for women are due to a number of (often interrelated) factors (ILO 2017). Women may suffer from human capital disadvantages in education, training and experience. Gender roles can affect whether women participate in the labour force and, if they do, what types of work are seen as appropriate. Discrimination and sexual harassment can discourage women from participating in the workforce and, more generally, reduce their employment possibilities. Limited ownership of productive assets and access to financing and transport can also be constraints. The extent to which women are disadvantaged in the workforce and the relative importance of these and other barriers varies considerably from country to country and with the characteristics of women within countries.

In any case, women, their families and their societies bear the costs of labour market disadvantages in terms of living standards, economic growth and social cohesion.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, improving women's employment is important on the international development agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG 10 on reduced inequality.

Achieving these development goals and improving female labour market prospects more generally depends on understanding the employment-related barriers women face. Traditional data sources, like labour force surveys, censuses and administrative data, can describe the outcomes of women in the labour market but they are not designed to generate evidence on the behaviours, norms and expectations that are critical to understanding why those outcomes occur and what their individual and social implications are. This is important for identifying what policy interventions could improve female employment outcomes.

In this paper, we rely on a non-traditional source of data for labour economists: the Gallup World Poll (GWP). In the 2016 version of the GWP, the survey's standard questions were supplemented by a series of questions

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the individual and social costs of the current female employment situation in Asia, see Asian Development Bank 2015.

sponsored by the ILO on women and work.<sup>2</sup> The GWP-ILO data are of interest to us for three reasons. First, the survey asks a series of questions about how men and women think and feel about women and work. Second, with these individual data on values, norms and preferences, we can analyse their relationship to female participation in the workforce. Third, the GWP-ILO data include information on a wide set of “hard” and “soft” challenges women face in employment. The 2016 GWP-ILO data were collected in 142 countries, including four in the GMS: Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Unfortunately, Laos was not included in the 2016 survey; however, we are able to use data from the 2013 World Gallup Poll, when it was last surveyed, though without the women-and-work questions added by the ILO. The poll is not representative at the subnational level, so Yunnan (China) cannot be included in our analysis.

In the next section, we provide more detail on the Gallup World Poll and the 2016 Gallup-ILO version. In Section 3, we describe the labour force status of women in the GMS according to the GWP data and provide some comparison with standard ILO data reported in the Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM). Section 4 examines the barriers women face in participating in the labour market, focusing in particular on the results of the special questions in the GWP-ILO survey concerning the attitudes of women and men towards work. A summary is provided in Section 5.

## 5.2 Gallup-ILO World Poll

The GWP surveys adults around the world on a wide range of important social and economic issues. The GWP covers more than 160 countries and samples about 1,000 adults per country in order to generate nationally representative data.<sup>3</sup> It asks respondents everywhere a standardised set of questions about their personal situation (e.g. employment, income, housing, access to food, health, daily experience, life satisfaction) as well as their views on aspects of society (e.g. leadership, environment, infrastructure, governance and corruption, institutions). Many of these variables are aggregated into indexes that span various social and economic topics.<sup>4</sup>

The 2016 GWP included a set of questions developed by the ILO to provide insights into the perceptions and attitudes of women and men towards women and their work. About 149,000 adults in 142 countries responded to these questions. This included four GMS countries: Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand

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<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the results and the methodology of the survey, see Gallup and ILO 2017.

<sup>3</sup> In large countries such as China and Russia, the sample may be around 2,000.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of GWP methodology, see [www.gallup.com/178667/gallup-world-poll-work.aspx?g\\_source=link\\_wwwv9&g\\_campaign=item\\_178685&g\\_medium=copy](http://www.gallup.com/178667/gallup-world-poll-work.aspx?g_source=link_wwwv9&g_campaign=item_178685&g_medium=copy).

and Vietnam. As mentioned in the introduction, Laos was not included in the 2016 GWP, so these attitudinal data are not available for that country.

The questions added by the ILO to the 2016 GWP cover the following topics: (1) preferences of women and men regarding female employment relative to household activities; (2) acceptability of women working outside the home; (3) challenges women face in working; (4) opportunities for women; and (5) contribution of female earnings to household income. The actual questions are included in Section 4, where we analyse the data on these topics in terms of how attitudes and preferences relate to the labour market outcomes of women in the GMS.

### **5.3 Labour force status of women in the GMS**

In this section, we present summary statistics on the labour force status of adults in the GMS. We include GWP estimates of the labour force participation rate, employment rate and unemployment rate for the adult population (15 years and over) in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam (all for 2015) and Laos (2012).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, to consider the representativeness of the GWP, we compare these estimates with the ILO Key Indicators of the Labour Market (ILO-KILM), which are based on national surveys adjusted to meet international standards.<sup>6</sup> In the second part of this section, more detailed data from the GWP are presented which summarise the survey's estimates of female labour force status by various characteristics.

#### **5.3.1 Labour force status in the GMS**

The GWP asks respondents about their labour force status, according to the following metrics:

- Employed full time (at least 30 hours) for an employer
- Self-employed full time (at least 30 hours)
- Employed part time, either for an employer or self, and not wanting to work full time
- Employed part time, either for an employer or self, and wanting to work full time
- Unemployed<sup>7</sup>
- Out of the workforce.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Laos figures are based on the last GWP administered in that country.

<sup>6</sup> The KILM data and methodology are available at [www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/research-and-databases/kilm/lang—en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/research-and-databases/kilm/lang—en/index.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Not employed in the past seven days and actively looking and available for work in the past four weeks.

<sup>8</sup> Not employed in the past seven days and not actively looking or available for work.

The basic categories of labour force participation, employment and unemployment, and their definitions, are aligned with international standards used by the ILO. This is also the case for the classification of full-time and part-time employment. However, the way that part time is classified renders it impossible to get national estimates of employment status (e.g. waged and salaried vs self-employed).

The following three tables show the GWP summary statistics overall, and by sex for the adult population (15 years and over) in the GMS countries, along with the comparable figures from the ILO-KILM.<sup>9</sup> According to GWP data, female labour force participation (Table 5.1) is in the 60–70 percent range, with Cambodia and Laos at the lower end and Myanmar and Thailand at the higher end. Male-female differences are substantial in Cambodia (19 percentage points), Laos (12 points) and Myanmar (12 points), while female participation in Vietnam is only slightly lower than the male rate (4 points).

Table 5.1: Labour force participation rate, 15 years and over (percent), 2015

	GWP-ILO			ILO-KILM		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Cambodia	67.7	78.0	59.2	84.5	88.5	80.8
Laos (2012)	66.5	72.5	60.9	78.1	79.4	76.8
Myanmar	73.8	80.3	68.0	65.6	80.5	51.8
Thailand	74.0	78.1	70.3	69.1	77.8	61.0
Vietnam	66.9	69.0	65.0	78.5	83.9	73.4

Source: GWP calculations by authors; ILO-KILM

Table 5.1 shows that some significant differences exist between the participation rates generated by the GWP survey and the ILO-KILM figures. The ILO-KILM rates, based on national labour force surveys (except in Cambodia, where estimates seem to be derived from the 2014 Household Income and Expenditure Survey), are much higher in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam than the GWP-ILO rates, but lower in Thailand and Myanmar.<sup>10</sup> According to the ILO-KILM data, male participation rates are higher than female rates in all countries, most strikingly in Myanmar, but the magnitudes of the differentials do not follow the same national patterns as the GWP-ILO figures.

<sup>9</sup> GWP data are weighted to be representative at the national level.

<sup>10</sup> The Labour Force Surveys are for 2015 in Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, and 2010 for Laos. The most recent LFS in Cambodia is 2012. The participation rates in that survey are much lower than in the 2014 HIES and are quite close to the GWP estimates for 2015.

As measured by international standards, unemployment is generally very low in the GMS (Table 5.2). However, the GWP data give a somewhat different picture than do national surveys, as reflected in the ILO-KILM. First, the GWP suggests there is more unemployment than does the ILO-KILM, particularly in Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, where rates are 3–6 percentage points higher according to the GWP. Second, in contrast to the ILO-KILM figures, which indicate little if any difference by sex, the GWP data show higher unemployment rates for women than men in all countries except Laos. In Myanmar and Thailand, the female unemployment rate was in the neighbourhood of 7 percent, compared to less than 1 percent according to the ILO-KILM.

Table 5.2: Unemployment rate, 15 years and over, total and by sex in four GMS countries (percent), 2015

	GWP-ILO			ILO-KILM		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Cambodia	1.7	1.4	2.1	0.2	0.2	0.2
Laos (2012)	4.2	4.7	3.7	0.7	0.8	0.6
Myanmar	4.0	1.2	6.9	0.8	0.7	0.9
Thailand	6.6	5.8	7.3	0.6	0.6	0.6
Vietnam	1.7	1.5	1.9	2.1	2.2	2.0

Source: GWP calculations by authors; ILO-KILM

Given the generally low unemployment rates in the GMS, for the most part, employment rates (Table 5.3) look very similar to labour force participation rates. According to the GWP, there is relatively minor variation across the GMS in employment rates overall and by sex. Fewer than two-thirds of adult women are employed in all countries, with rates in Cambodia and Laos below 60 percent. Note that national surveys, reflected in the ILO-KILM figures, show a much wider variation. The differences in the two sets of estimates overall and for women are particularly large for Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, with ILO-KILM rates much higher than GWP ones.

Table 5.3: Employment rate, 15 years and over, total and by sex in GMS countries (percent), 2015

	GWP-ILO			ILO-KILM		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Cambodia	66.5	76.9	57.9	84.3	88.3	80.7
Laos (2012)	63.7	69.1	58.6	77.6	78.8	76.3
Myanmar	70.8	79.4	63.3	65.1	80.0	51.3
Thailand	69.1	73.5	65.2	68.7	77.3	60.6
Vietnam	65.8	67.9	63.7	76.8	82.0	71.9

Source: GWP calculations by authors; ILO-KILM



Overall, the GWP-ILO data indicate that a substantial portion of the female population in the GMS is not active in the labour force. Female participation rates are lowest – around 60 percent – in Cambodia and Laos. These two countries also have the widest differential between men and women in labour force participation. Although unemployment is generally low throughout the GMS, women are more likely to be unemployed in all countries except Laos. In Myanmar and Thailand, the female unemployment rate is in the 7 percent range, according to the GMS data.

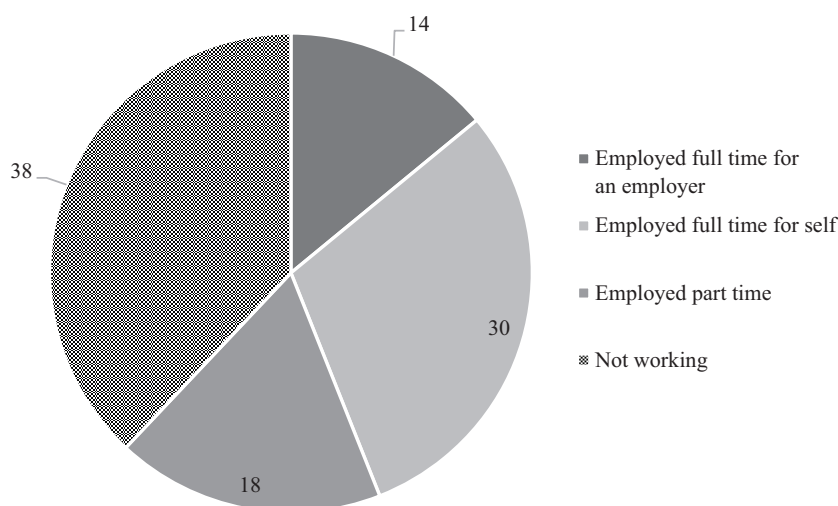
Having made these observations, it should be noted that, while they are claimed to be nationally representative and follow ILO standards of labour force status definitions, the Gallup World Polls are not ideally suited to generate accurate labour force estimates. This is primarily due to the relatively small sample sizes (around 1,000 per country). National labour force surveys and the ILO-KILM database presumably produce more accurate results. Accordingly, the differences in the labour force status estimates between the two sources, as summarised in the above tables should be kept in mind.

### ***5.3.2 Correlates of female labour force status***

This subsection presents GWP results on the labour force status of women in the GMS by age, education and location. Here, we disaggregate employment into three categories: full time for an employer, full time for self, and part time. Since unemployment is a minor status for the survey respondents, it has been combined with the “out of the labour force” category into a “not working” category.

This categorisation for women in the five GMS countries combined is shown in Figure 5.1. The largest group is not working – 38 percent. It is noteworthy that women employed full time are more than twice as likely to be working for themselves as for an employer. This reflects the high level of informality in the subregion. Part-time work (for either an employer or self) accounts for 18 percent. This overall pattern roughly describes the individual countries in the subregion, with minor variations. For example, Vietnam has less part-time and more full-time employment: Thailand’s full-time workers are more likely to work for an employer than to be self-employed; and Cambodia has more part-time employment (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Labour force status, women 15 years and over, five GMS countries combined (percent), 2015 and 2012 (Laos)



Source: GWP calculations by authors

*Age.* Female labour force activity differs substantially by age group, with largely similar patterns throughout the GMS countries (Table 5.4). For both younger (below 25) and older (55 and over) women, the most prevalent status is not working. This accounts for the majority of younger women in all countries except Myanmar and older women except in Thailand. In the prime-age group (25–54), some differences exist within the subregion. For example, full-time self-employment is the dominant status for employed women in that age group in Vietnam and Laos. In Thailand, where the waged sector is the most developed in the GMS, full-time employment for an employer is more important. A significant share of prime-age women in Cambodia and Myanmar work part time. According to the GWP data, most of these women would prefer to be working full time.

*Education.* Labour force status by educational attainment is shown for the GMS countries in Table 5.5. Three observations should be noted. First, full-time employment for an employer (i.e. in a wage/salary job) rises significantly with education. This status accounts for nearly half of post-secondary graduates in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. In Myanmar, the share is lower but still much higher than is the case for less educated women.<sup>11</sup> While postsecondary women are much more likely to be wage/salary employees

<sup>11</sup> Cambodia is not included in this part of the analysis because of very low sample sizes of well-educated women.

than self-employed, the reverse is true for less educated women. Second, the prevalence of part-time work declines with education in all countries but Laos. Third, while the table does not distinguish between unemployment and being out of the labour force, the nature of non-employment differs by education. Non-working postsecondary graduates are much more likely to be unemployed than their less educated counterparts, who tend to be out of the labour force. Since unemployment as a labour market state is associated with waged workers, this is consistent with the observation that wage/salary work is much more common among post-secondary graduates than among the less educated.

Table 5.4: Labour force status, women 15 years and over, by country and age group, 2015

	Age group	Employed full time for an employer	Employed full time for self	Employed part time	Not working	Total
Percent distribution						
Vietnam	Below 25	16	18	15	50	100
	25–54	22	48	8	22	100
	55+	4	30	4	62	100
	Total	17	37	9	36	100
Thailand	Below 25	21	3	14	63	100
	25–54	25	31	21	24	100
	55+	6	19	28	46	100
	Total	20	24	21	35	100
Cambodia	Below 25	13	11	23	52	100
	25–54	9	30	27	34	100
	55+	5	27	17	51	100
	Total	10	23	25	42	100
Laos (2012)	Below 25	9	30	9	53	100
	25–54	12	43	17	28	100
	55+	1	21	16	63	100
	Total	9	36	14	41	100
Myanmar	Below 25	16	26	22	37	100
	25–54	16	31	23	30	100
	55+	4	25	12	59	100

Source: GWP calculations by authors

Table 5.5: Labour force status, women 15 years and over, by country and education (percent), 2015

	Education	Employed full time for an employer	Employed full time for self	Employed part time	Not working	Total
Vietnam	Elementary or less	16	38	11	36	100
	Secondary/some tertiary	13	41	9	37	100
	Completed 4+ years tertiary	44	16	4	36	100
	Total	17	37	9	36	100
Thailand	Elementary or less	14	25	23	38	100
	Secondary/some tertiary	26	21	21	33	100
	Completed 4+ years tertiary	42	25	9	24	100
	Total	20	24	21	35	100
Cambodia	Elementary or less	9	23	25	43	100
	Secondary/some tertiary <sup>a</sup>	20	27	14	39	100
	Completed 4+ years tertiary <sup>a</sup>	20	80	0	0	100
	Total	10	24	25	42	100
Laos (2012)	Elementary or less	6	40	15	39	100
	Secondary/some tertiary	11	30	12	48	100
	Completed 4+ years tertiary <sup>a</sup>	44	13	14	29	100
	Total	9	36	14	41	100
Myanmar	Elementary or less	14	28	21	38	100
	Secondary/some tertiary	12	29	21	38	100
	Completed 4+ years tertiary	25	34	18	23	100
	Total	14	29	21	37	100

Note: Sample sizes for some cells are very small. For example, for Cambodia, completed tertiary (n=3); secondary (n=24); Laos, completed tertiary (n=24).

Source: GWP calculations by authors

Labour force status patterns also differ by location (Table 5.6). In all GMS countries, rural women are less likely than urban women to be out of the labour force. On the other hand, employed women have higher part-time employment rates in rural areas than in urban centres. Among those working full time, urban women have higher rates of waged employment than their rural counterparts, which is what would be expected given the nature of urban vs rural economies. However, in all countries, self-employment is still more common than waged employment in both urban and rural areas.

Table 5.6: Labour force status, women 15 years and over, by location (percent), 2015

		Employed full time for an employer	Employed full time for self	Employed part time	Not working	Total
Vietnam	Urban	21	33	6	41	100
	Rural	15	40	11	34	100
	Total	17	37	9	36	100
Thailand	Urban	20	24	21	36	100
	Rural	20	24	22	34	100
	Total	20	24	21	35	100
Cambodia	Urban	13	18	19	50	100
	Rural	9	25	26	40	100
	Total	10	23	25	42	100
Laos (2012)	Urban	18	22	9	51	100
	Rural	6	41	16	38	100
	Total	9	36	14	41	100
Myanmar	Urban	13	25	18	44	100
	Rural	14	30	22	33	100

Source: GWP calculations by authors

#### 5.4 Barriers to women working

The unique feature of the 2016 GWP is the series of questions sponsored by the ILO on attitudes to female employment. The responses to these questions allow us to consider a wider set of barriers to women participating in the workforce than is typically possible using traditional labour market data. The questions include:

- Would you prefer to work at a paid job, or to stay at home and take care of your family and the housework, or would you prefer to do both? (asked of women)
- Would you prefer that the women in your family work at paid jobs, or that they stay at home and take care of your family and the housework, or would you prefer that they do both? (asked of men)

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? It is perfectly acceptable for any woman in your family to have a paid job outside the home if she wants one. (asked of both men and women)
- Please think about women who work at paid jobs in [country/territory name] today. What do you think is the biggest challenge these women face? (asked of both men and women)
- If a woman has similar education and experience to a man, does she have a better opportunity, the same opportunity or a worse opportunity to find a good job in the city or area where you live? (asked of both men and women)
- Please think about what you earn at your job and how it contributes to your household's income. Would you say it is the main source, a significant source or a small source of your household's income? (asked of both men and women)

In this section, we analyse the responses to these questions to better understand the labour force activities of women in the GMS, specifically Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. As indicated in Table 5.1, the (weighted) national female labour participation rates according to the GWP data were in the 60–70 percent range, meaning that, depending on the country, 30–40 percent of adult women were not in the workforce. For the surveyed GMS countries as a whole, the out of the labour force rate was 35 percent. Among women working, only a small minority (22 percent) worked full time in an employee status. The rest were in more flexible and “non-standard” forms of work: either full time self-employed (48 percent) or part time (29 percent).

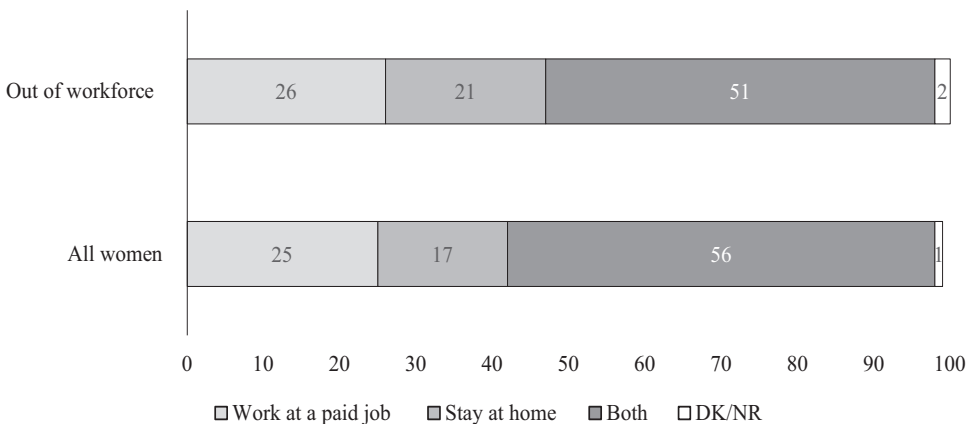
#### ***5.4.1 Preferences and attitudes regarding female participation in the workforce***

When asked whether they would prefer to work in a paid job, stay at home (to care for family, housework) or do both, the majority of women in Thailand (58 percent), Cambodia (66 percent) and Myanmar (67 percent) responded that their preference was to do both. Vietnamese women were less likely to report this preference (34 percent). In all countries, a high percentage of women would prefer to work, either in combination with household duties or not; this share ranged from 66 percent in Vietnam to 89 percent in Thailand and Myanmar. Not surprisingly, preference for working outside the home decreases for older women: 32 percent of women over 55 would prefer to stay at home, compared to 17 percent of the 25–54 age group and just 8 percent for the under 25 group. Preference for working outside the home is stronger for better educated women than for those with less schooling.

While, overall, women in the GMS express a strong preference for work outside the home, is this true for those who are not in the workforce? Figure 5.2 compares the preferences of GMS women not in the labour force with all women and shows that there is very little difference. In other words, there is no evidence that non-participation reflects the preference of those women to stay at home. Only 21 percent of women outside the workforce reported that preference, only slightly more than the 17 percent figure for all women.

Do the preferences of men explain the significant non-participation among adult women in the GMS? Men asked about their preferences were more likely to say they would prefer that women in their family stayed at home than women themselves reported (35 percent vs 17 percent). However, this was not the dominant attitude. The majority of men in all four countries indicated a preference for women to work, either in combination with household duties or not. This ranged from 70 percent in Myanmar to 57 percent in Thailand.

Figure 5.2: Work preferences of women, by labour force status in four GMS countries, 2015



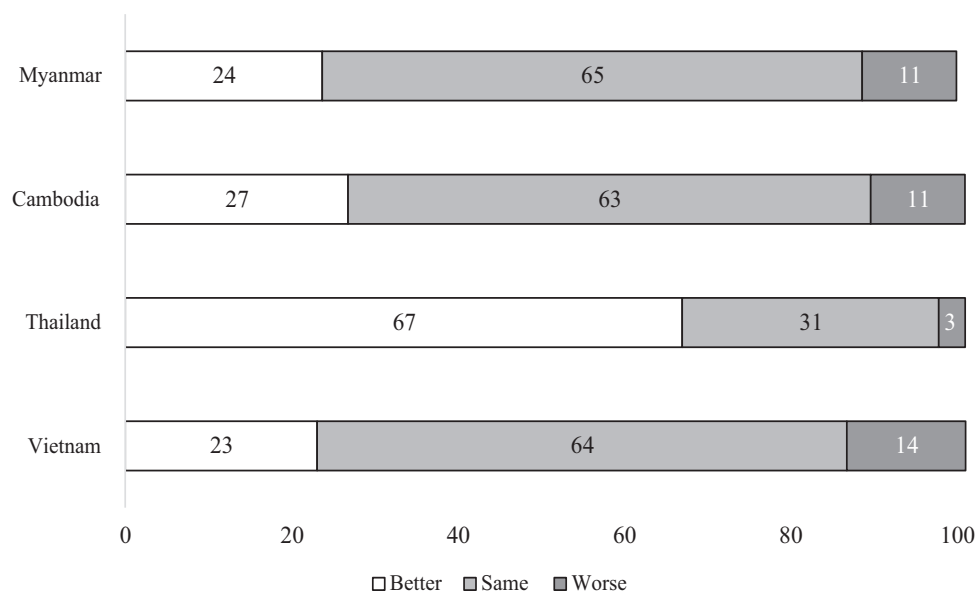
Source: GWP calculations by authors

Closely related to the issue of preferences, both female and male respondents were also asked whether it was perfectly acceptable for any woman in the family to have a paid job outside the home if she wanted one. There was strong support for this across the four GMS countries and among both women (85 percent) and men (76 percent). Higher income, better educated and younger respondents had moderately higher support levels, but the acceptability of women working was fairly strong among all types of adults in the region.

### 5.4.2 Perceived opportunities for women in the labour market

The GWP-ILO data suggest that the preferences and attitudes of women and men are not significant factors in discouraging female labour force participation in the four GMS countries where data were collected. Another possible barrier addressed in the survey is perceptions of women's employment opportunities. Is there a sense in the region that women are disadvantaged relative to men? Figure 5.3 summarises how survey respondents (male and female) assessed the relative opportunities for women to find a good job compared to men with similar levels of experience and education. The general perception in all four countries is that women have at least the same opportunities as men with similar profiles. In Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam, 85–90 percent of respondents share this view and, in fact, almost twice as many believe opportunities for women are better than for men as those who think men are favoured. The perceived advantage of women is especially marked in Thailand, where two-thirds assessed women's opportunities as better than those of men.

Figure 5.3: Perceptions of employment opportunities for women relative to men in four GMS countries (percent), 2015



Source: GWP calculations by authors

Do both women and men share this perception that women have at least as much opportunity, if not more, than men in the labour market? As Table 5.7 indicates, perceptions are almost identical between the two.



Table 5.7: Perception of opportunity for women to find a good job relative to men with similar experience and education, by gender in four GMS countries (percent), 2015

	Male	Female	Total
	Percent distribution		
Better opportunity	33	32	33
Same opportunity	52	53	53
Worse opportunity	9	10	9
DK/RF	6	5	5

Source: GWP calculations by authors

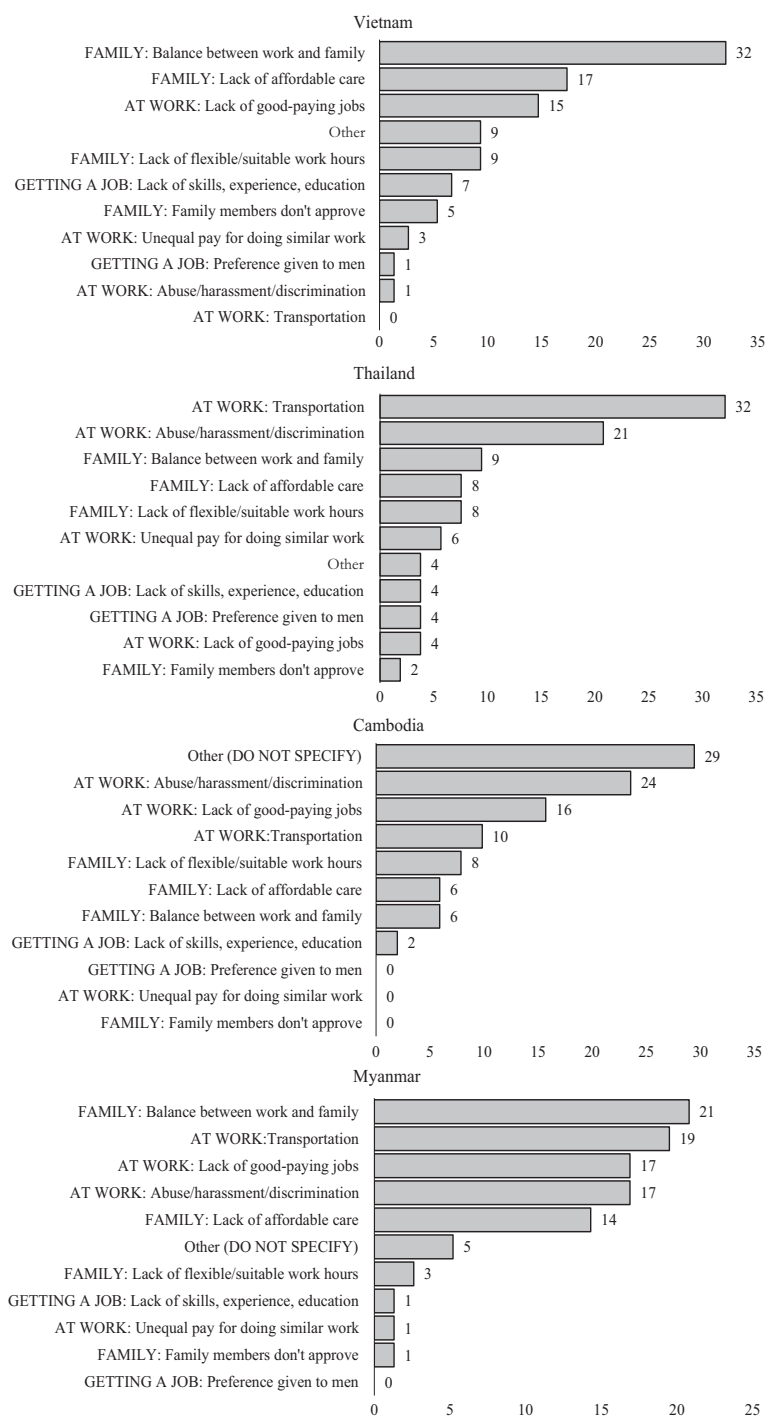
### 5.4.3 Top challenges women face in employment

The GWP-ILO questions on women and work offer little support for the argument that preferences and attitudes of men and women are important factors in explaining the labour force participation patterns of GMS women. To complete our review of the data collected, we now look at responses to the question on the challenges women face in paid work. Respondents were asked to identify the single most important challenge in an open-ended question. Responses were then coded into the following 10 categories, based on the most common themes that were mentioned by respondents (Gallup and ILO 2017):

- balance between work and family or home/no time to spend with family
- lack of affordable care for children or relatives
- unfair treatment at work/abuse/harassment/discrimination
- lack of flexible work hours/appropriate, suitable work hours
- lack of good-paying jobs
- unequal pay for doing similar work as men (or work of equal value)
- family members do not approve of women working
- lack of transport/lack of safe transport
- people prefer to hire or promote men
- lack of skills, experience or education.

Figure 5.4 presents the results for each of the four countries. These figures combine the responses for both men and women; there was very little difference between the two. Family-related challenges were most prevalent in Vietnam, with balance between work and family being significantly more likely to be cited than any other barrier. Another family-related factor, lack of affordable care, was the second most often cited. On the other hand, respondents in Thailand and Cambodia highlighted work-related factors: transport and abuse/harassment/discrimination were the top two challenges in Thailand, and transport, lack of good paying jobs and abuse/harassment/discrimination were the top three in Cambodia. Myanmar reported a combination of work- and family-related challenges.

Figure 5.4: Biggest challenge facing women in paid work, percentage distribution in four GMS countries, 2015



Source: GWP calculations by authors

It is interesting to note from Figure 5.4 that respondents almost never cited discrimination (in the form of preference given to men in hiring and promotion or unequal pay for similar work), family preferences/values (i.e. family members do not approve of women working) or lack of skills, education or experience as the biggest challenge women face in paid work.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Women in the Greater Mekong Subregion exhibit labour force patterns that are characteristic of many developing countries. Participation rates are significantly lower than they are for men. According to the Gallup World Poll, between 30 and 40 percent of women 15 years and older in the countries covered (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) were not in the labour force. It should be noted that these participation rates are somewhat different from rates generated by national surveys, where the range of participation rates is much greater, 50–80 percent. Among women who are working, only slightly more than 20 percent are in “standard” full-time wage/salary employment. The rest are working in “non-standard” jobs: almost half are full time self-employed, with the remaining 30 percent or so working part time.

Participation in the labour force and employment in a full-time waged position may not be the preference for all women in the region. Indeed, non-standard work arrangements are the preference of many women. Nonetheless, the data suggest that they face some disadvantages in their labour market situation. Removing these not only would benefit the subregion’s women by expanding the opportunities available to them but would also bring broader social benefits. Accordingly, it is important from both an analytical and a policy perspective to understand barriers that women in the GMS face in the labour market.

In this paper, we have benefited from the 2016 Gallup World Poll, augmented by a unique series of questions on women and work sponsored by the ILO, to investigate various potential challenges for women in paid employment. This analysis yielded the following findings.

First, attitudes regarding female employment do not seem to be a major barrier in the GMS. The vast majority of women in the subregion expressed a preference to work outside the home, either exclusively or in combination with household duties. This applied as well to women who were not in the labour force in 2015, almost 80 percent indicating a preference to work outside the home. Moreover, only a minority of men indicated that their preference would be for women in their household to stay at home. Consistent with this, three in four men and 85 percent of women agreed it was perfectly acceptable for women to work in a paid job outside the home.

Second, the survey data offered no evidence that women (or men) saw limited opportunities in the labour market as a barrier to female employment. In all countries, both sexes evaluated the opportunities for women relative to similarly qualified men as equal or even better; in Thailand, in particular, respondents perceived the opportunities for women as especially favourable relative to men.

Third, both men and women identified similar challenges that women face in paid employment. However, the particular challenges cited differ in the countries included in the survey. In Vietnam, family-related concerns, including balance between work and family and lack of affordable care, predominated. In Thailand and Cambodia, the top challenges were related to work, including transport and abuse/harassment/discrimination. Myanmar respondents identified both family- and work-related challenges.

What are the policy implications? To begin, it is important to recognise that the large majority of women in the GMS do want to participate in the labour force but that many would prefer flexible arrangements that would allow them to combine work outside the home with household duties. The barriers to accessing good jobs do not seem to be rooted in the attitudes of women and men regarding work – indeed, there seems to be a broad acceptance of women working outside the home. Barriers raised most frequently by respondents concerned balancing work and family, lack of affordable care, factors related to abuse and transport. It is noteworthy that these call for policy interventions that are well outside the traditional sorts of interventions considered by policymakers in the employment area. Maximising the job opportunities for GMS women will require a broad approach to public policy.

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