



PERCEPTIONS OF PRECARIOUSNESS

A Qualitative Study of Constraints
Underlying Gender Disparities in
Mongolia's Labor Market

Executive Summary

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Acknowledgements

This report is a product of the World Bank's Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice. It was written by Achim Schmillen (World Bank) and Nina Weimann-Sandig (Evangelische Hochschule Dresden) with guidance from James Anderson and Jehan Arulpragasam and inputs from Wendy Cunningham and Tungalag Chuluun. The report was peer-reviewed by Helle Buchhave and Matteo Morgandi. Erdene Ochir Badarch and Obert Pimhidzai gave helpful comments and suggestions. Angar Enkhtur, Corinne Bernaldez and Maya Razat provided excellent administrative support.

The authors thank the entire team from the Mongolia Center for Development Studies (MCDS) and in particular B. Bayasgalan for the implementation of the focus group discussions, Ts. Erdenechimeg for conducting key informant interviews, Sarah Iqbal and Alena Sakhonchik for help with the data on the number of legal gender differences by economy, Marc DeFrancis for substantive and copy-editing and B. Temuulen for translations.

The authors also thank the various key contact persons who supported the recruitment of focus group participants. Very special thanks are due to all participants in focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and biographical interviews who graciously shared their knowledge and experiences. Financial support from the World Bank's East Asia and Pacific Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality is gratefully acknowledged.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction, Context and Methodological Approach

As compared to the majority of countries in the East Asia and Pacific Region, gender disparities in Mongolia are relatively muted. At the same time, a number of important gender disparities do exist. In particular, several studies have documented gender disparities in access to economic opportunities, earnings, and productivity. Such gender disparities in the labor market are problematic for at least three reasons. First, the use of women's full potential in the labor market is likely to result in greater macroeconomic efficiency, everything else equal. Second, jobs can be direct instruments of women's development and empowerment. Third, expanding women's labor market opportunities has potentially large positive spillover effects on women's overall agency, control, and power.

Nevertheless, the constraints underlying gender disparities in the labor market remain largely unclear, providing little guidance for program design. Moreover, there is little empirical evidence for Mongolia or beyond on the type of support that men and women typically seek in active labor market policies—particularly labor market intermediation services—or for the effectiveness of this support in addressing gender-specific constraints.

To contribute to filling these knowledge gaps, this study uses methods of qualitative social science research, mainly focus group discussions (but including expert interviews and biographic interviews as well) to analyze the mechanisms underlying gender disparities in the Mongolian labor market. The study addresses three interrelated questions: (i) What gender disparities can be identified or confirmed through qualitative research? (ii) What are the reasons underlying the gender disparities? and (iii) Are current government policies, including active labor market policies, effective in addressing gender disparities and, if not, how can their effectiveness be improved? In addition, this study also reviews the relevant economic, institutional, and legal environment, the available quantitative evidence, and existing labor market policies and programs, and makes a number of policy recommendations. Given the importance of the issue of gender disparities in the labor market, some efforts have already been made to quantify the problem in Mongolia. This study reviews the existing, largely quantitative evidence, which shows that as compared to men, women on average are better equipped with income-generating characteristics in general and a high level of education in particular. This holds true irrespective of whether the education level is measured by enrolment in primary or secondary school, by graduation from higher education, by the education level among adults, or by other indicators. At the same time, women are less likely to make use of their educational attainment by actively participating in the labor market.

With the exception of a short period of time around the year 2006, labor force participation rates in Mongolia have generally been much higher among men than among women. Between 1996 and 2015, the gender gap in labor force participation rates more than doubled from 4.8 percentage points to 12.6 percentage points. In addition, employed women have consistently had lower average earnings than employed men.

In 2015, men on average earned 856,000 MNT per month and women 760,700 MNT. (In early 2017, one US dollar was worth about 2,450 MNT.) As a result, the relative gender earnings gap stood at 12.5 percent. Marked differences also exist in the types of jobs typically pursued by men and women. A relatively large share of women—particularly in rural areas—is employed in precarious informal

work and unpaid family work, women's participation in entrepreneurial work is far lower than that of men, and the prevalence of men and women in different sectors of activity also differs.

This study complements the existing, largely quantitative literature on gender disparities in Mongolia's labor market with the help of established methods of qualitative social science research, namely focus group discussions, expert interviews, and a small number of biographical interviews.

While quantitative research tests standardized hypotheses with the help of statistical parameters and aims to achieve a representative and random sample, qualitative research has different objectives and relies on very different assumptions. In particular, qualitative research aims to reconstruct typical cases by identifying contrasts and common issues in individual experiences and perceptions.

Moreover, qualitative research relies on a range of empirically appropriate methodologies, such as focus group discussions (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967).

For the focus group discussions conducted as part of this study, a professional survey research firm was hired that prepared, implemented, and documented 22 distinct focus group discussions with a minimum of six participants and a maximum of nine participants each.

Most focus group discussions lasted between two and three hours. Thirteen focus group discussions were conducted in Ulaanbaatar, seven in aimag centers (provincial capitals) and two in soum centers (county seats).

Findings

The study's qualitative approach confirms the range of gender disparities in Mongolia's labor market that had been identified by existing, largely quantitative research, and it paints a picture of widespread precarious employment situations. More specifically, in focus group discussions women of various age groups and levels of education speak of pronounced gender-specific difficulties in accessing jobs and career opportunities.

Again, according to the perceptions of participants in focus group discussions, many women that do hold jobs frequently feel trapped in precarious working conditions. Many employees perceive their workplaces to be dependent on norms and values that could be characterized as traditional, hierarchic, and at times even authoritarian. Open mistrust and even fear of managers and employers is widespread. Many workers complain of a lack of long-term job security and an absence of secure wage payments and access to health insurances and pension systems.

Precarious employment situations are perceived as particularly common in the private sector. As documented in World Bank (2016b), wage arrears are considered common, as is the lack of labor contracts and obligations of unpaid overtime. These problems are said to be especially common in the construction sector and in the informal sector generally. Many participants in focus group discussions, and especially those in the informal or semiformal sector, characterize employment relationships by employers' hire-and-fire mentality. While in general not only women but also men are affected by precarious employment situations, some issues are very gender-specific. Importantly, among female workers there is a widespread perception that working hours are insufficiently flexible. According to the discussion participants, this makes it difficult for many women to participate in the labor market and is also perceived as a sign of employers' disregard for the concerns of female workers.

Findings from focus group discussions indicate that the important reasons perceived to underlie the gender disparities in the labor market include both norms, such as prevailing views on men's and women's roles with respect to marriage, household and care duties, and suitable career choices and jobs, and deficiencies in the political environment and the relatively unavailable government support services and programs. Three contributing causes were considered salient: (i) prevailing societal expectations see women as devoting the majority of their adult lives to supporting their husbands and raising their children; (ii) while some women manage to combine fulfilling those expectations with maintaining a successful career, by many others the quality and quantity of childcare facilities is perceived as inadequate to make this possible; and (iii) some differential legal treatments of men and women appear to cement the acceptance of traditional gender roles. In addition to that, incomplete information is a major constraint.

Especially among students, graduates of higher education, and job seekers (especially young and female ones) there is widespread uncertainty about the skills demanded in the labor market and how to find a job without the right personal connections. Job seekers overwhelmingly rely on informal, personal networks for securing positions. While such networks can be quite effective in matching labor supply and demand, they usually work best for job seekers who are already well established in the labor market and thus endowed with a large and tight-knit network. With regard to policies that could address some of the constraints underlying gender disparities in Mongolia's labor market, the overall legal environment is of course important. In addition to that, a number of interventions targeted at individual job seekers can address specific constraints. Internationally, it is best practice to address job-search constraints related to incomplete information through the establishment of labor market intermediation services (public or private employment services that ideally work in partnership with employers). These services can be particularly effective for women and other groups with relatively little attachment to the labor market. In Mongolia, a central and integrated Employment Registry and Information Database holds records of job vacancies, registered job seekers, and beneficiaries of active labor market policies and is the basis of Mongolia's labor market information system. In addition, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection (MLSP) has a comprehensive network of local offices that provide public employment services.

However, the information that is available is scattered across different agencies, not systematically analyzed and not presented and disseminated in a user-friendly way targeted at specific segments of the labor market. Younger focus group participants' lack of knowledge about career opportunities also indicates that the MLSP's offices are comparatively difficult to access – at least for some groups, such as secondary school and university students. In addition, certain barriers apparently limit the effectiveness of the MLSP's local offices in addressing job-search constraints related to incomplete information: according to the focus group participants, the experiences with labor and social welfare offices are often largely negative.

Registration forms are seen more as an administrative burden than as a useful tool to match labor supply and demand. The number of job vacancies that are publicly listed is perceived as insufficient, in particular for job seekers with somewhat higher education levels. Job councilors are frequently regarded as overwhelmed, uninterested, or unable to find suitable vacancies. Many countries implement other active labor market policies in addition to public employment services, such as training programs, wage subsidies, and support for entrepreneurship. Mongolia's MLSP also organizes a range of such

programs, locally called employment promotion programs. Focus group discussions with job seekers document that awareness of and experience with the employment promotion programs is often limited.

Moreover, in the perception of most participants in focus groups who have experience with these programs, they are often an ineffective tool for addressing gender disparities. This is partly because they lack a focus on gender-specific constraints (such as the need to provide child care for beneficiaries of employment training) but also because they are generally seen as insufficiently client-focused and demand-driven.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study improve our understanding of constraints underlying gender disparities in Mongolia's labor market and how labor market intermediation services and other active labor market policies, as well as other interventions and policies, can be improved to better address the constraints.

The findings from focus group discussions, which are generally very robust and consistent with findings from existing, largely quantitative research, make it possible to draw out several direct policy implications. These are laid out in Table 1, and may be summarized thus: (i) Reform Mongolia's legal environment and the implementation and enforcement of antidiscrimination policies with an emphasis on legally mandating nondiscrimination based on gender in hiring and strengthening monitoring of gender-specific indicators and enforcement of the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and other anti-discrimination policies; (ii) Strengthen the client orientation of labor market intermediation services and labor market monitoring and analysis; (iii) Foster employment promotion programs and improve their responsiveness to gender-specific constraints; (iv) Strengthen micro-entrepreneurship support to realize the full potential of women as micro-entrepreneurs including through the provision of finance and training for women-owned and -operated micro-businesses.; (v) Expand the quality and quantity of available childcare services to ensure the continuous and productive labor market participation of a larger number of women; and (vi) Influence gender norms and attitudes among employers and the wider population with a focus on implementing awareness campaigns, discussions, and trainings for employers and human resource managers on modern strategies of human resource development and gender-sensitive and age-related work planning.

Table 1. Policy Recommendations Derived from Qualitative Research

General policy direction	Specific policy recommendations (key recommendations in bold)	Implementing agencies and partners
(i) Reform Mongolia's legal environment and the implementation and enforcement of antidiscrimination policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Abolish the remaining legal differences between men and women. ➤ Legally mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value ➤ Legally mandate nondiscrimination based on gender in hiring. ➤ Strengthen monitoring of gender-specific indicators and enforcement of the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and other anti-discrimination policies. ➤ Facilitate flexible forms of work such as part-time or home-based work and jobs with flexible working hours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ National Cabinet and Parliament ➤ National Committee on Gender Equality ➤ Ministry of Labor and Social Protection
(ii) Strengthen the client orientation of labor market intermediation services and labor market monitoring and analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Improve the profiling of job seekers and the matching of job seekers with vacancies. ➤ Introduce more systematic procedures for deciding which employment promotion program would be most appropriate for a specific job seeker's profile and needs. ➤ Strengthen the relevant training of placement officers and other staff of public employment services and of the MLSP's system for staff learning and development. ➤ Develop operational protocols and necessary tools for MLSP staff to improve the efficiency and impact of MLSP's services to employers. ➤ Strengthen career guidance activities, such as through consultation sessions in secondary schools targeted at both students and their parents. ➤ Enhance the scope, quality, and availability of labor market information for job seekers and other users to allow them to make informed decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ministry of Labor and Social Protection ➤ Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports
(iii) Foster employment promotion programs and improve their responsiveness to gender-specific constraints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Make employment promotion programs more client-focused and demand-driven. ➤ Increase outreach activities to hard-to-reach women (as well as to other groups with relatively poor labor market outcomes). ➤ Make the selection of beneficiaries more transparent and consciously select the most qualified or needy beneficiaries (or a combination thereof) based on a systematic assessment of applicants' actual labor market constraints and the appropriate employment promotion programs for addressing them. ➤ Consider strengthened investments in job-relevant skill building opportunities for female youth that reduce gender sorting in the labor market. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ministry of Labor and Social Protection

<p>(iv) Strengthen micro-entrepreneurship support so as to realize the full potential of women as micro-entrepreneurs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Address the unpaid care and domestic work burdens of women in self-employment or micro-businesses. ➤ Adopt a gender-sensitive approach to entrepreneurship support programs (for instance by taking into account that a relatively large share of female beneficiaries of these programs aim to work from home). ➤ Expand the provision of finance and training for women-owned and -operated micro-businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ministry of Labor and Social Protection ➤ Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Light Industry
<p>(v) Expand the quality and quantity of available child care services to assure the continuous and productive labor market participation of a larger number of women.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Strengthen efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education services, especially in rural areas. ➤ Improve access to early childhood education services through an approach targeted to the most underserved rural areas. ➤ Explore childcare modalities that target the household environment, such as in-home daycare provision, and evaluate the costs and benefits of <i>ger</i> kindergartens.¹ ➤ Expand and improve fixed kindergarten services and daycare facilities for children in urban areas (especially Ulaanbaatar). ➤ Improve the training of childcare provider personnel and evaluate the need for expanding childcare services for children ages 6 to 12. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports
<p>(vi) Address gender norms and attitudes among employers and the wider population.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Foster a public discussion about the norms and values underlying the widespread gender disparities in the labor market. ➤ Intensify the dialogue on gender issues between the government, labor unions, employers' associations, and other stakeholders. ➤ Highlight the importance of gender equality in the labor market and of flexible forms of work, and showcase modern female role models. ➤ Implement awareness campaigns, discussions, and trainings for employers and human resource managers on modern strategies of human resource development and gender-sensitive and age-related work planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ National Cabinet and Parliament ➤ National Committee on Gender Equality ➤ Labor unions ➤ Employers' associations ➤ NGOs

¹ Ger kindergartens are kindergartens that operate in gers (portable felt dwelling structures, also known as a yurts) mostly during the summer. Ger kindergartens are dominantly used as mobile kindergartens in rural areas for the purpose of reaching out to nomadic herder population.

There remains room for improvement in Mongolia's legal environment and the implementation and enforcement of existing laws. Mongolia's laws do not mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value, do not mandate nondiscrimination based on gender in hiring (even though a planned revision to the Labor Law will likely change this) and do not entitle parents to flexible or part-time schedules.

Moreover, while women can retire with full pension benefits at age 55, the corresponding age for men is 60. Overall, the World Bank ranks Mongolia ninth out of 18 countries in the East Asia and Pacific Region in terms of the number of legal differences between men and women (World Bank 2016c). Moreover, even though the Law on Gender Equality and the Labor Law set out various parameters with regard to non-discrimination in the labor market and in spite of the existence of a relatively elaborate structure for monitoring the implementation of these laws, implementation and enforcement on the ground are often relatively weak. Consequently, it is recommended that the implementation of existing policies be strengthened.

This would entail more and smarter investments in the technical and professional capacity of relevant factors such as the subcommittees, subcouncils, and focal points of the National Committee on Gender Equality. Also warranted are measures that facilitate flexible forms of work such as part-time or home-based work and jobs with flexible working hours and a legal mandate of equal remuneration for work of equal value. Though complex to enforce in practice such a mandate would send a strong signal about the importance placed on gender equality and nondiscrimination. In terms of labor market intermediation services, improvements in the profiling of jobs seekers and the matching of job seekers with vacancies are recommended. Also recommended are more systematic procedures for placing job seekers into employment promotion programs. Implementing these recommendations would require that placement officers and other staff of public employment services be trained and that the MLSP's system for staff learning and development be strengthened. Training activities could include mandatory on-line training courses for all staff and voluntary courses for those willing to expand their knowledge and approaches. The system for staff learning and development could also be expanded to include electronic platforms to share experiences in a systematic way. Focused training sessions to strengthen counseling capacity should ensure a greater linkage of training content with operational and practical issues.

Putting these recommendations into practice would also require the development, piloting, and implementation of appropriate procedures and protocols and of handbooks and guidelines. Based on findings from the focus group discussions with employers, it is also recommended that the MLSP develop operational protocols and necessary tools for its staff to improve the efficiency and impact of its services for employers. This point was also highlighted in Mongolmaa (2016). Finally, it is recommended that career guidance activities be strengthened, for instance through consultation sessions in secondary schools targeted at both students and their parents. These consultation sessions, which should ideally be based on an enhanced scope of data on labor demand and supply, could also be used to raise awareness of the returns to education as well as the problem of skills mismatches across different occupations or sectors. Even if labor market intermediation is strengthened in a way that is generally gender-neutral, the expectation is that the impact will be particularly significant for women. This is because compared to men women on average have less access to informal networks that can be used for finding jobs and are therefore relatively more likely to benefit from a strengthening of formal channels.

As detailed in Gassmann, Francois and Trindade (2015), Mongolia's employment promotion programs hold immense potential for improving labor market outcomes across the country. Women's participation in most of the programs is also relatively high, which means they have the potential to address gender disparities in the labor market and successfully strengthen women's opportunities and outcomes. However, to realize the programs' full potential, a number of reforms are needed. Generally speaking, it is recommended to make the programs more client-focused, demand-driven, and appropriate for addressing specific job seekers' actual labor market constraints (also see Mongolmaa 2016). With regard to more specifically addressing constraints underlying gender disparities, recommended reforms include increased outreach to hard-to-reach women. In addition, it is recommended that the selection of beneficiaries of employment promotion programs become more transparent and be based on the conscious selection of the most qualified or neediest persons (or a combination thereof) based on a systematic assessment of applicants' actual labor market constraints and the appropriate employment promotion program for addressing them. At labor and social welfare offices, moving away from the first-come, first-served approach would be particularly beneficial for female job seekers, many of whom do not have the flexibility their male counterparts have to appear at the labor and social welfare office to register for programs at fixed times and queue for long hours. Finally, it is worthwhile to strengthen investments in job-relevant skill building opportunities for female youth to reduce gender sorting in the labor market and create pathways to stable careers.

Given the large proportion of women in the labor market who are active in micro-entrepreneurship, it is recommended that female micro-enterprises be strengthened. Osborne (2017) collects best-practice policy recommendations in the fields of gender and micro-entrepreneurship from the relevant literature. She addresses three interrelated areas: (i) outdated norms; (ii) reforms to the policy framework; and (iii) improvements in access to factors of production and markets. In the area of norms, Osborne's recommendations focus on addressing the inequitable distribution of household or family responsibilities. Policy action is central to creating an enabling policy and legal and regulatory frameworks for female microenterprise access and performance. Improving access to factors of production and markets can make the labor market more conducive to advancing women's prospects in micro-entrepreneurship. A combination of financial support for micro-entrepreneurs with nonfinancial interventions such as business skills development and training, mentoring, and the facilitation of market linkages has been demonstrated to have a particularly positive impact on women.

For Mongolia's country context, a number of recommendations appear particularly crucial. In light of the findings from focus group discussions, these include the importance of addressing the burdens of unpaid care and domestic work, adopting a gender-sensitive approach to entrepreneurship support programs (for instance by taking into account that a relatively large share of female beneficiaries of these programs aim to work from home), and expanding financial and nonfinancial support for women-owned businesses.

To assure the continuous and productive labor market participation of a larger percentage of women in Mongolia, it is further recommended to improve the quality and quantity of available elderly care and, in particular, childcare and early childhood education services. Largely following World Bank (2016a), a number of action areas are of particular importance. First, it is recommended that the insufficient access to early childhood education services be addressed through an approach targeted

to the most underserved rural areas of the country. To foster the inclusion of hard-to-reach populations such as nomadic herders, community- or home-based modalities targeting the household environment should be explored, and the costs and benefits of ger kindergartens should be evaluated. Second, in urban areas-especially Ulaanbaatar-investments to expand fixed kindergarten services in the public or private sectors could improve access.

Third, in order to improve the equity and effectiveness of current public investments in early childhood education, efforts to improve quality should be paramount. Quality improvement efforts should target rural areas, where quality issues are most acute. Fourth, further efforts should be made to improve the education and training of the staff of childcare providers. Fifth, further analytical work on early childhood education is needed, including to better understand gender differences in certain dimensions of early childhood development and whether there is a need for an expansion of childcare services for children ages 6 to 12.

Finally, it is recommended that a public discussion be fostered across Mongolia's society about the norms and values underlying the widespread gender disparities in the labor market, including through more intensive dialogue on gender issues between the government, labor unions, employers' associations and other stakeholders. In the process of this public discussion, awareness of the importance of gender equality in the labor market could be highlighted, and modern female role models who combine family responsibilities and a professional career could be showcased.

In the context of addressing norms and values, employers' concerns with respect to hiring and supporting female staff would also be crucial. Not all of these concerns are based on direct discrimination. Instead, employers often perceive disadvantages when hiring female workers that could in fact be addressed by the employers themselves if they relied on more modern strategies of human resource development, starting with simple changes like granting more flexible working hours or allowing work from home.

As even in the absence of a legal mandate it will often be in the employer's interest to grant more flexible working hours or allow work from, it is recommended to raise employers' and human resource managers' awareness about how modern strategies of human resource development and gender-sensitive and age-related work planning can both improve gender equality and increase firm productivity and profits. In practice, this can be implemented through awareness campaigns, discussions, and trainings for employers and human resource managers.

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