

# Unpacking Gender Gaps and Data Gaps in Public Sector Employment and Pay

**Ugonma Nwankwo, Megan O'Donnell,  
and Charles Kenny**

## Abstract

We look at available sources to ask (i) Where is data available on employment and wages allowing for comparisons between women and men, and the public and private sectors? (ii) How do women's employment, compensation, and seniority compare with men's in the public and private sectors? (iii) How do gender gaps vary by countries' income level, education levels, and other factors? What are the policy implications of the data we analyze? (iv) Which countries' efforts can be modeled by others, and how else can global gender gaps in employment and compensation be narrowed? We suggest the Open Government Partnership as a promising platform through which governments can commit to increased transparency around disaggregated employment and wage data, in turn improving policy decision-making aimed at closing gender gaps (or those rooted in other forms of inequality and discrimination).

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## Introduction

The public sector is a significant source of paid formal sector employment for women, but little is known about how women are paid relative to men in public sector jobs, let alone how policymakers can seek to eliminate gender pay gaps where they exist.

Using data from the World Bank’s Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators (WWBI) database, we unpack gender gaps in public sector employment, senior leadership, and pay across countries, with a focus on low- and middle-income country (LIC and MIC) contexts.<sup>1</sup> WWBI data allows us to map employment, advancement, and compensation between women and men,<sup>2</sup> pinpointing countries where gender gaps are exceptional as a means of identifying contexts to be prioritized for policy intervention or potential models of success to emulate.

We also note where gaps in data preclude analysis and, as a result, hinder data-driven decision-making to address potential gender inequities. We suggest that increased data transparency—and in particular governments publishing gender-disaggregated data through their administrative databases—would shed light on pay gaps and conditions in public sector employment. This would in turn allow governments to draw upon this data to make necessary reforms as part of a broader effort to improve wages and employment. As we turn to explore the policy implications of the data we analyze, we suggest the Open Government Partnership as a promising platform through which governments can commit to increased transparency around disaggregated employment and wage data, in turn improving policy decision-making aimed at closing gender gaps (or those rooted in other forms of inequality and discrimination).

Our analysis emphasizes trends in LICs and MICs. Although most work in these contexts remains concentrated in the informal sector, we argue that a focus on the public sector is both worthwhile and comparatively straightforward. Governments should be able to compile public sector employment and compensation data without considerable cost given that such data reflects information about governments’ own employees. Public sector employment also comprises a significant share of ‘quality’ jobs—those that offer a living wage, benefits, and labor protections—especially in the world’s poorest countries.<sup>3</sup> In short, after introducing our underlying data source, we turn to answer the following questions:

- Where is data available on employment and wages allowing for comparisons between women and men, and the public and private sectors?

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the database see the [WWBI’s explanatory note](#).

<sup>2</sup> Data does not allow for analysis of gaps in employment, leadership, and pay for those who do not identify as a woman or a man (e.g., nonbinary individuals). WWBI data conflates biological sex (female/male) with gender (woman/man).

<sup>3</sup> Of 132 countries in the WWBI, only 51 have any information on benefits, including only 15 low- and lower-middle-income countries. That said, available evidence suggests more generous benefits in the public than private sector in developing countries, see the World Bank’s [Are public sector workers in developing countries overpaid? Evidence from a new global data set](#).

- How do women’s employment, compensation, and seniority compare with men’s in the public and private sectors?
- How do gender gaps vary by countries’ income level, education levels, and other factors?
- What are the policy implications of the data we analyze? Which countries’ efforts can be modeled by others, and how else can global gender gaps in employment and compensation be narrowed?

## **Data**

The WWBI provides information on both public and private sector employment and disaggregates some of its employment data by gender. The data it uses is primarily drawn from the World Bank’s International Income Distribution Database with additional information from the Luxembourg Income Study and the International Comparisons Program wage survey. All of these are general survey-based instruments. Notably, the WWBI does not use administrative data of the type that we argue governments should begin to collect and publish. But at this stage, the WWBI offers the best data available; the WWBI authors point out that currently many countries do not have the administrative and information technology systems in place to regularly produce accurate data on their public sector employees (a major concern not only for those hoping to improve gender equality in the public sector workforce).

The dataset covers 132 countries ranging from low to high income. This excludes a number of economies worldwide (there are 193 member states of the UN). Tables 1 and 2 list some relevant data for this exercise. Table 1 provides observation counts (effectively, the number of countries with at least one observation for that piece of data over the 2010–2015 period). The numbers in the first row of the table report the total number of countries and economies the World Bank collects data on in each classification. Table 2 reports the average of available observations from 2010–2015 for all countries with data over that period (Annex 1 clarifies some of the definitions used).

Availability of gender-disaggregated data over this period is limited: there are 132 countries globally with data on employment but fewer than 80 with any kind of disaggregated wage data. That means that we know what women versus men are earning in less than half of the world’s countries—this is a significant gap to fill. Only about a third of low-income countries have survey data on public sector wage ratios, for example.

**Table 1. Availability of select WWBI indicators**

	Global (218)	High Income (83)	Upper Middle Income (56)	Lower Middle Income (50)	Low Income (29)
Public sector employment as a share of total employment	101	32	22	29	17
Public sector employment as a share of formal employment	77	28	17	19	12
Public sector employment as a share of paid employment	102	33	22	29	17
Public sector wage premium (compared to all private employees)	79	30	18	19	12
Public sector employment as a share of total female employment	99	30	22	29	17
Public sector employment as a share of female paid employment	99	30	22	28	18
Women, as a share of public paid employees	94	30	21	28	14
Women as a share of private paid employees	91	27	21	28	14
Women as a share of public paid senior officials	68	27	15	17	8
Women as a share of private paid senior officials	66	27	14	16	8
Female to male wage ratio in the public sector	78	27	19	20	12
Female to male wage ratio in the private sector	75	27	19	18	11
Public sector wage premiums, female (compared to all private employees)	76	27	18	19	11

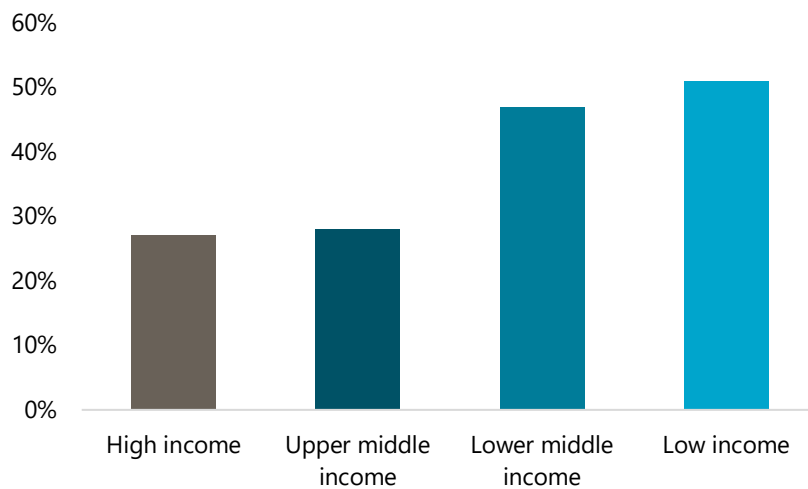
**Table 2. Select WWBI indicators on women (%)**

	Global	High Income	Upper Middle Income	Lower Middle Income	Low Income
Public sector employment as a share of total employment	15	23	16	14	5
Public sector employment as a share of formal employment	36	27	28	47	51
Public sector employment as a share of paid employment	28	27	24	32	30
Public sector wage premium (compared to all private employees)	16	10	20	25	12
Public sector employment as a share of total female employment	19	33	19	14	3
Public sector employment as a share of female paid employment	35	37	28	37	39
Women, as a share of public paid employees	47	64	47	38	27
Women as a share of private paid employees	34	40	37	30	26
Women as a share of public paid senior officials	34	42	40	27	12
Women as a share of private paid senior officials	30	30	34	27	28
Female to male wage ratio in the public sector	87	78	91	93	89
Female to male wage ratio in the private sector	74	73	81	70	68
Public sector wage premiums, female (compared to all private employees)	27	13	26	44	33

## The global context

It is clear that the public sector is a considerable employer, especially when it comes to formal sector jobs. Across all countries with data, it accounts for 15 percent of total employment (including informal and self-employment) but 36 percent of paid, formal sector employment. Figure 1 looks at the share of formal sector employment in the public sector against country income group: in the poorest countries, the public sector frequently accounts for half of formal sector jobs. Among women working in formal employment in lower middle income countries, nearly half (48 percent) work in the public sector. These are not only formal jobs; they are comparatively well-paying, with a ‘wage premium’ (the difference in public sector wages controlling for education, gender, age, and location over the private sector) of about 13 percent.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. Public sector employment as a share of formal employment**



The available data also allows for some analysis of gender gaps in employment, seniority, and pay. First, women are under-represented in public sector employment, but less so than in the private sector.

Second, on average, women are under-represented (compared to men) in public sector leadership, accounting for 47 percent of public paid employees but only 34 percent of senior

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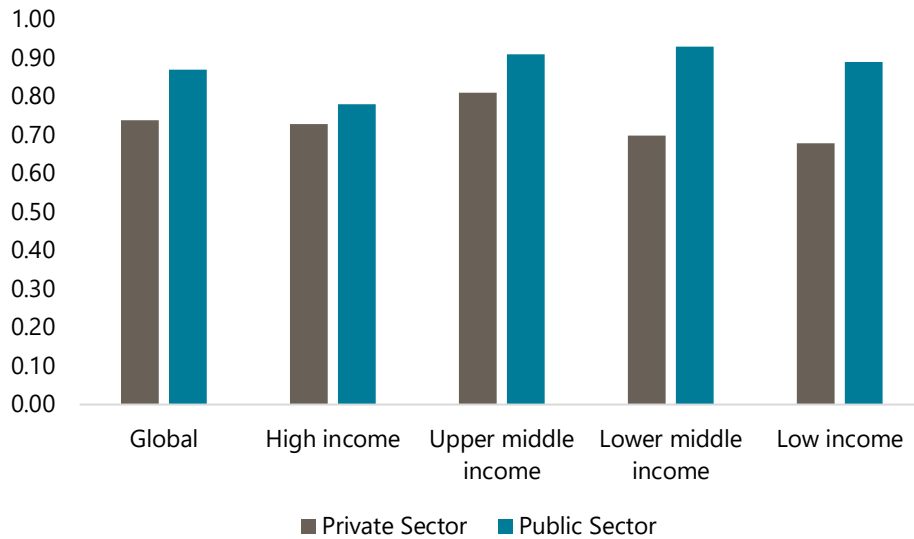
<sup>4</sup> Wage premium is fully defined by WWBI as the percentage difference in public sector wages compared to private sector wages (in local currency units) controlling for education, age, gender, and location. Incomes within the data are also limited to self-reported wages, and do not include bonuses, allowances, and in-kind payments, which can be significant in the public sector. The public sector wage premium is higher for women and low-skilled workers. In contrast, high-skilled public sector employees may even pay a penalty for working in the public sector. For more information, see: [Are public sector workers in developing countries overpaid? Evidence from a new global data set.](#)



officials across all countries in the data (In the private sector women comprise 34 percent of private paid employees and 30 percent of senior officials).

Third, the wage ratio (calculated using the median) in the public sector (87 percent) is better than in the private sector (74 percent) and the public sector wage ratio is slightly higher for women than it is for men, though this varies by country income level, as shown in Figure 2.<sup>5</sup> The reported female to male wage ratio in the public sector of lower-middle-income, and upper-middle-income countries appears to outperform the wage ratio of the public sector for high-income countries.<sup>6</sup> Several low- and lower-middle-income countries, including the Philippines, Malawi, and Sierra Leone, have wage ratios that show women out-earning men in the public sector. In the case of the Philippines, which reports administrative data on civil service employment by gender, it appears that this is because first-level career service positions (clerical, trade, crafts, and custodial) are primarily occupied by men while second level professional, technical, and scientific positions (which require at least a four-year college degree) are dominated by women. Note higher levels of the civil service in the Philippines are still primarily occupied by men.<sup>7</sup> Such findings suggest the importance of more fine-grain data that allow for comparisons within similar jobs and similarly educated and experienced men and women to fully understand the scale of wage and employment gaps. The data also suggest the role, albeit limited, that higher-level education can play in some contexts in allowing women to advance within the public sector and increase their earnings.

**Figure 2. Female to male wage ratio (median)**



<sup>5</sup> Since the median index is often smaller than the mean, this reflects a greater dispersion between the compensations of women and men.

<sup>6</sup> There is evidence of a similar result in Thailand, see: [Is Thailand’s Labor Market Really Woman Friendly? Revisiting the Declining Gender Wage Gap.](#)

<sup>7</sup> David, C., Albert, & Vizmanos. *Sustainable Development Goal 5: How Does the Philippines Fare on Gender Equality?*. 2018.

Figure 3 breaks up wage ranges into five equally populated segments at the country level and looks at the average proportion of women’s and men’s representation in each segment across countries by private and public sector. Globally, women account for 57 percent of the lowest-paying public sector jobs across countries compared to 38 percent of the highest paid public sector jobs. That said, the same numbers for the private sector are 50 percent and 22 percent, suggesting the public sector may see comparatively limited inequality across countries. When the data is disaggregated by country income classification, this pattern remains consistent. However, the data also reflects that for low and lower middle-income countries there are fewer women in paid employment across both sectors, and they are underrepresented in every quintile of the wage distribution.

**Figure 3. Women as a share of paid employees by wage quintile**

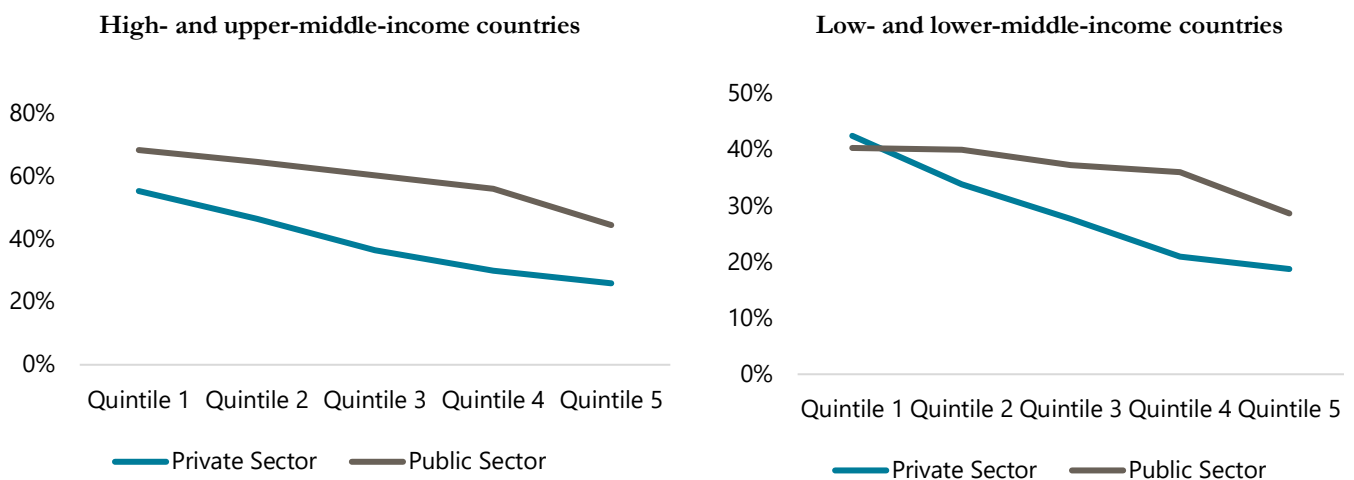
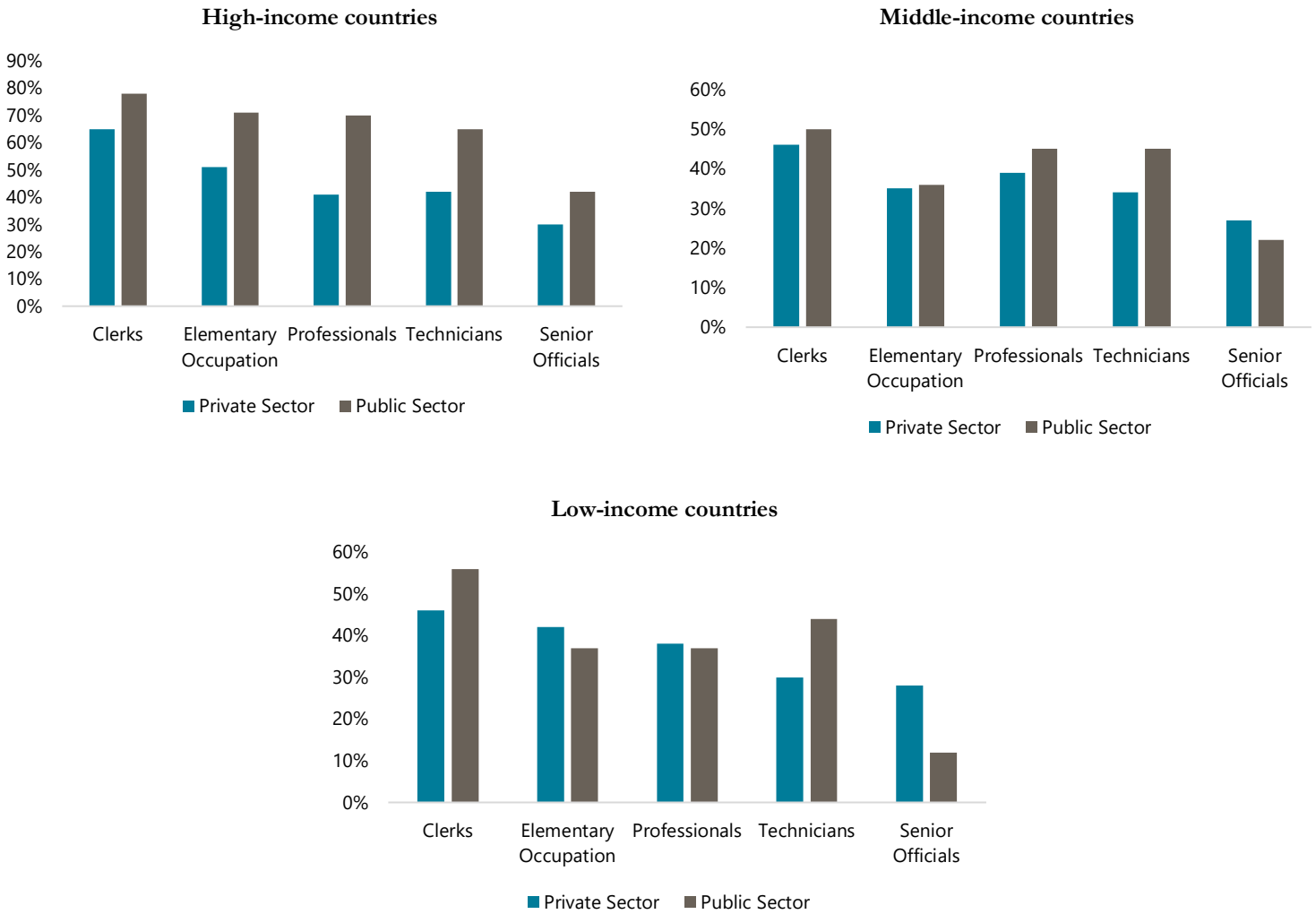


Figure 4 shows the gender distributions of public and private employment within major occupational groups.<sup>8</sup> In both sectors, women are overrepresented in lower-level positions such as clerical support workers. There is also a noticeable decline in women’s representation in higher-paying positions as senior officials and managers. Women who are senior officials in the public sector in low-income countries experience a sharp decline of 44 points when compared to the number of women who are clerks. The higher presence of women in lower-paying occupations contributes to gender differences in wages.

<sup>8</sup> The occupation classification is based on the [International Standard Classification of Occupations \(ISCO\) 88](#). Clerks (e.g., customer services), perform clerical duties including recording, organizing, storing, and retrieving information. Elementary occupations (e.g., agricultural labor) involve the performance of simple and routine tasks which may require using tools and considerable physical effort. Professionals (e.g., health, teaching, and business professionals) increase the existing stock of knowledge; apply scientific or artistic concepts and theories; teach about the foregoing in a systematic manner. Technicians perform technical and related tasks connected with research, the application of scientific or artistic concepts, operational methods, and regulations. Senior officials (e.g., managers), plan, direct, and coordinate the overall activities of enterprises, governments, and other organizations.

**Figure 4. Women as a share of paid employment by major occupation groups**

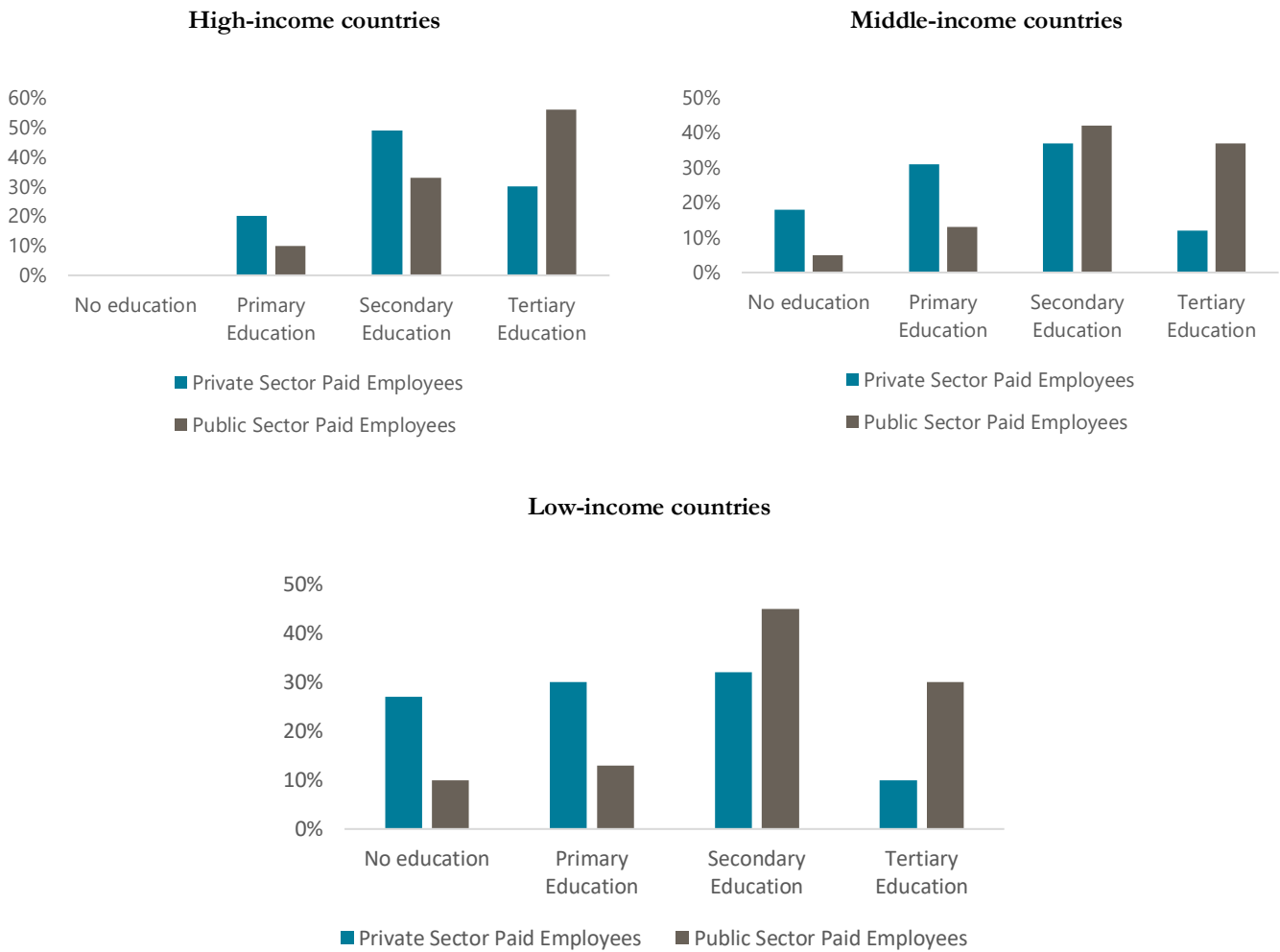


Given women in paid employment tend to be more highly educated than men within similar occupational groups,<sup>9</sup> other factors may be hindering women from progressing into higher paying roles (e.g., bias in hiring and promotion; long hours required for some of the highest-paid occupations, combined with women’s time constraints due to disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities).

It is important to note that a significant number of countries are missing gender-disaggregated data on paid employment by major occupation groups. For example, of all 74 middle-income countries in the dataset, only 27 have gender-disaggregated data for all the major occupation groups across the private and public sectors. In Annex 2, we note the countries for which WWBI data is unavailable, as well as the countries that lack gender-disaggregated employment and wage data.

<sup>9</sup> International Labour Organization. *Global Wage Report: What lies behind gender pay gaps*. 2019.

**Figure 5. Individuals as a share of paid employees by education level**

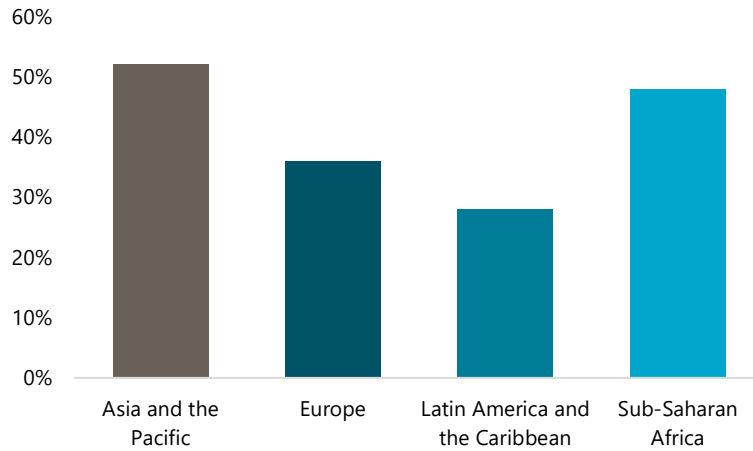


## Regional patterns in low- and middle-income countries

In this section, we further unpack regional patterns across low- and middle-income countries. Overall, these remain consistent with global patterns, though variations exist due to ‘outlier’ countries. It is important to note that there is a significant data gap for countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), resulting in insufficient data to include the region in most of the comparative analysis to follow.

Figure 6 looks at the share of formal employment in the public sector across regions. In Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and the Pacific, the public sector makes up about half of formal paid jobs. However, this varies significantly among the countries in the respective regions. For instance, employment in the public sector comprises only 23 percent of all paid, formal employment in South Africa, whereas the amount increases to 70 percent in Sierra Leone.

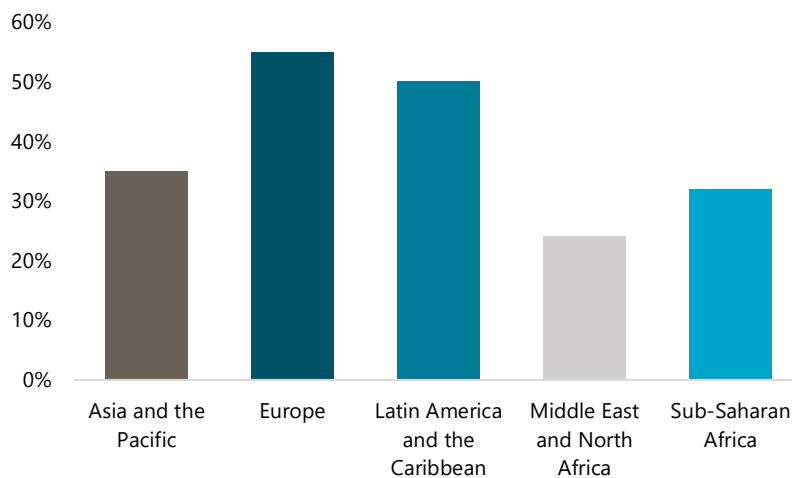
**Figure 6. Public sector employment as a share of formal employment, by region**



Across regions, representation of women in the public sector differs significantly. While women in Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA, and the Asia-Pacific comprise less than 40 percent of employees in the paid public sector, women in Europe, specifically Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine, and Latin America and the Caribbean make up roughly half of all public sector paid employees as shown in Figure 7.

Despite this variation, there are fewer women in positions as senior officials across all regions on average. In Ethiopia and Tanzania, women in the public sector only make up 17 and 20 percent, respectively, of people in positions as senior officials, among the lowest levels of any country with available data.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 7. Women as a share of public paid employment, by region**

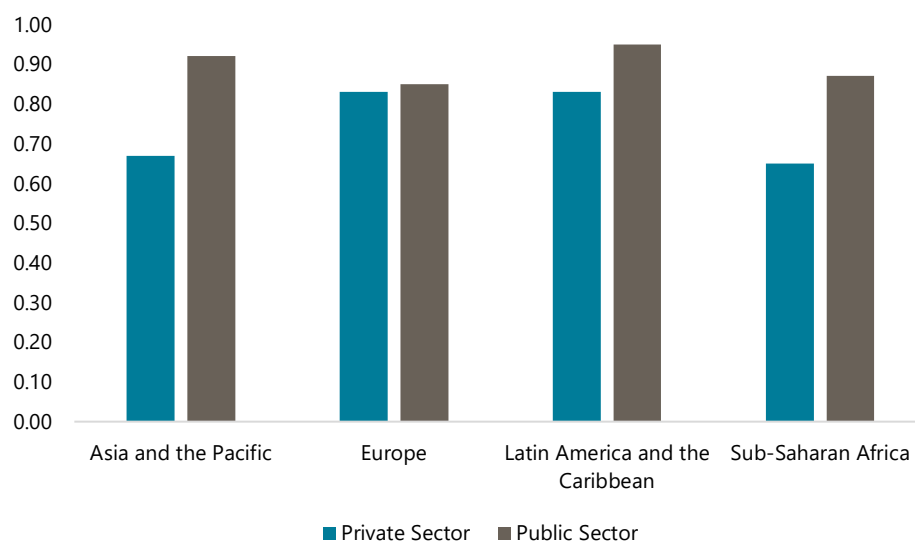


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<sup>10</sup> See footnote 6 or the Appendix for definitions of the occupation groups.

Figure 8 shows that the public sector’s wage ratio is better than that of the private sector in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, this varies considerably by country, with Tajikistan and India having among the lowest public wage ratios. On the other hand, in Rwanda and the Philippines, the public sector’s wage ratio exceeds that of the private sector by over 50 points. Rwanda, which boasts a mean wage ratio of 1.01, presents an interesting example given the government’s focus on promoting gender equality and women’s political leadership, resulting in women holding 61 percent of seats in the lower house of Rwanda’s national legislature.<sup>11</sup> Rwanda also published a civil service census in 2010 with gender-disaggregated data.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 8. Female to male wage ratio, by region**

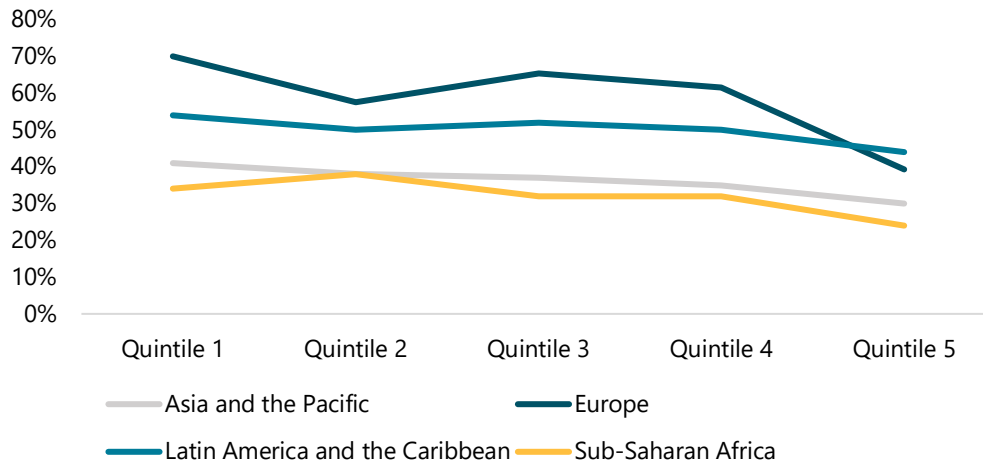


When wages are broken into five quintile groups by region, the data shows that women are underrepresented in higher-paying jobs across regions, as shown in Figure 9. Women in paid public sector employment in the Gambia, in particular, comprise only 9 percent of the highest earners, positioning it among the countries with the largest gender gaps in public sector senior leadership. That said, similar to global trends, public sector employment has comparatively limited inequality compared to the private sector, which, on average, observes large differences between women in the lowest-paid versus women in the highest-paid positions across regions.

<sup>11</sup> UN Women. *Women in Politics*. 2017

<sup>12</sup> National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. *Civil Servant Census Report*. 2010.

**Figure 9. Women as a share of public paid employees by wage quintile**



## Policy implications

Government is a major employer for women in low- and middle-income countries, especially in terms of quality jobs. Eliminating gender pay and employment gaps in the public sector would allow for meaningful progress towards the elimination of overall gender pay gaps, both directly and through modelling to private sector firms how to take effective actions in this regard.

With just half of the world’s countries represented in the data we analyzed, there is still much to understand about the precise nature of gender gaps in employment, leadership, and compensation across countries’ public sector workforces. In Annex 2, we note the countries for which WWBI data is unavailable, as well as the countries that lack gender-disaggregated data. Filling these gaps would be an important first step in providing a clearer and more comprehensive picture of gender gaps in public sector employment and pay across and within countries.

The available cross-country data is geographically limited, survey rather than administrative, and dated, but it suggests that women in low- and middle-income countries are concentrated in public sector jobs and paid less than men within them. Current data does not allow for within-country comparison across levels or departments of government, neither does it include information on part-time work. More fine-grained and timely gender-disaggregated data on wages and employment in the public sector could be the basis for considerable learning, as well as a spur to action: there is some evidence that transparency regarding wages and employment at a granular enough level can help improve gender equality outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

Countries including Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama can serve as potential models for others to follow, both in terms of available survey data and (comparatively) small gender gaps in areas such as pay and senior leadership. But for truly

<sup>13</sup> Baker, M., Halberstam, Kroft, Mas & Messacar. *Pay Transparency and the Gender Gap*. 2019.

actionable information on government employment inequality, regular civil service censuses that provide administrative data will be important (in the past few years such censuses have been carried out in countries including Haiti and Mali).<sup>14</sup> Governments including the Philippines that publicly report gender-disaggregated civil service employment data based on administrative records set the current best practice in lower-income countries, but regular publishing of department level data on government employment and pay by gender should be the global standard.<sup>15</sup> This should also go hand in hand with collection of other data related to workforce composition to better understand intersectional vulnerabilities.

To promote wider progress on this agenda, the Open Government Partnership can serve as a platform for countries and cities to make commitments to better understand and work to narrow gender pay gaps, including those in the public sector. Founded in 2011, OGP promotes accountable, responsive, and inclusive governance and, to date, has been largely untapped to promote increased data transparency around gender gaps in the workforce. Open government commitments are an opportunity for member countries and localities, many of which are low- and middle-income, to advance the policy agenda by collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data on gender pay disparities. To date, there have been few commitments around greater transparency in government employment data.<sup>16</sup>

New commitments might include progress towards a ‘gold standard’ of regular (yearly or every few years) publication of administrative employment data in government at all levels and including state owned enterprises. This data would include:

- Type of employment (part time, full time, consultant, regular), professional classification and employment grade
- Comparable wage data (hourly/pro-rated yearly), comparable benefits data
- Age, years of experience and education

This data would be disaggregated by gender and any applicable ethnic/race and disability status classifications to the lowest institutional level (department, for example) to preserve anonymity where this is the relative norm, or at the individual level where norms allow. Note that these commitments should be seen as the first step towards broader coverage, with the second most straightforward addition being a regulatory requirement for similar data release by large formal private sector companies. A third step might involve regular survey approaches to capture data about gender wage disparities in small and informal companies.

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<sup>14</sup> For more information, see [World Bank Supports Mali Recovery and Governance Reform](#) and [The Haitian Public Service in figures](#).

<sup>15</sup> David, C., Albert, & Vizmanos. [Sustainable Development Goal 5: How Does the Philippines Fare on Gender Equality?](#). 2018.

<sup>16</sup> A search under employment and wages found only one commitment that specifically related to the issue: in 2016, Sri Lanka committed to “Publishing information on gender discrimination in selected thematic areas in formal and informal sector employment for greater transparency and reporting data.” See the [Open Government Partnership’s Explorer](#) page for more information.



# Annex 1

## Variable Definitions

Source: [WWBI Codebook and Explanatory Note](#)

- **Public sector** includes central government, non-governmental organizations, armed forces and state-owned company.
- **Private sector** is that part of the economy which is both run for private profit and is not controlled by the state.
- **Public sector employment** as a share of total employment: Number of public sector paid employees/Number of all employed individuals (including: paid employee, non-paid employee, employer, self-employment and other workers)
- **Paid employee** includes anyone whose basic remuneration is not directly dependent on the revenue of the unit they work for, typically remunerated by wages and salaries but may be paid for piece work or in-kind.
- **Public sector wage premium:** Percentage differences in public sector wages compared to private sector wages (in local currency units) controlling for education, age, gender, and location. Incomes within the data are also limited to self-reported wages, and do not include bonuses, allowances, and in-kind payments, which can be significant in the public sector.
- **Wage information** in the surveys are reported in each country's local currencies (Local Currency Units, LCU) and a diverse array of periodicity.
- **Occupations**
  - **Elementary occupations** involve the performance of simple and routine tasks which may require the use of hand-held tools and considerable physical effort. This classification includes cleaners, agricultural labor, labors in mining, construction, manufacturing and transport etc.
  - **Clerks** record, organize, store, compute and retrieve information, and perform clerical duties in connection with money-handling operations, travel arrangements, requests for information, and appointments. This classification includes general and keyboard clerks, customer services, and other clerical support workers.
  - **Technicians** perform technical and related tasks connected with research and the application of scientific or artistic concepts and operational methods, and government or business regulations.

- **Professionals** increase the existing stock of knowledge; apply scientific or artistic concepts and theories; teach about the foregoing in a systematic manner; or engage in any combination of these activities. This classification includes health, teaching, business professionals etc.
- **Senior officials** plan, direct, coordinate and evaluate the overall activities of enterprises, governments and other organizations. This classification includes chief executives, legislators and managers of any kind.
- **Female to male wage ratio in public (private) sector using mean (median):**  
Mean (Median) weekly wage of female public (private) paid employees / Mean (Median) weekly wage of male public (private) paid employees.
- **Relative wage of Senior Officials (Professionals, Technicians) in public (private) sector:** Average weekly wage of Senior Officials (Professionals, Technicians) in public (private) sector/ Average weekly wage of clerk in public (private) sector.

## Annex 2

Countries with no data included in the WWBI dataset		
Algeria	Guyana	Oman
Andorra	Iran	Qatar
Antigua and Barbuda	Iraq	St. Kitts and Nevis
Armenia	Israel	St. Lucia
Australia	Japan	St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Azerbaijan	Kiribati	Samoa
Bahamas	Korea, North	San Marino
Bahrain	Korea, South	Saudi Arabia
Barbados	Kuwait	Singapore
Belarus	Kyrgyzstan	Somalia
Belize	Laos	South Sudan
Brunei	Libya	Sudan
Burma (Myanmar)	Liechtenstein	Suriname
Burundi	Macedonia	Sweden
Côte d'Ivoire	Malaysia	Syria
Cuba	Marshall Islands	Tonga
Dominica	Micronesia	Trinidad and Tobago
Equatorial Guinea	Monaco	Turkmenistan
Eritrea	Nauru	Tuvalu
Fiji	Netherlands	United Arab Emirates
Grenada	New Zealand	Vanuatu
		Yemen

Count: 64

## Breakdown of countries and territories in the WWBI dataset missing gender disaggregated data

Missing gender disaggregated employment data		
Bhutan	Jamaica	Palau
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kenya	Papua New Guinea
Botswana	Maldives	Puerto Rico
Cabo Verde	Mali	Russian Federation
Central African Republic	Mauritius	Senegal
Congo, Rep.	Montenegro	Seychelles
Denmark	Morocco	Slovenia
Eswatini	Namibia	Solomon Islands
Gabon	Nepal	Uzbekistan
Haiti	Nigeria	Venezuela, RB
Indonesia	Norway	West Bank and Gaza
Count: 33		

Missing gender disaggregated wage data		
Afghanistan	Haiti	Papua New Guinea
Angola	Indonesia	Puerto Rico
Bhutan	Jamaica	Russian Federation
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kenya	Senegal
Botswana	Lebanon	Seychelles
Cabo Verde	Lesotho	Slovenia
Canada	Liberia	Solomon Islands
Central African Republic	Maldives	South Africa
Comoros	Mali	Togo
Congo, Rep.	Mauritius	Tunisia
Denmark	Montenegro	Turkey
Djibouti	Morocco	United States
Egypt, Arab Rep.	Namibia	Uzbekistan
Eswatini	Nepal	Venezuela, RB
Gabon	Niger	Vietnam
Germany	Nigeria	West Bank and Gaza
Guinea	Norway	Zambia
Guinea-Bissau	Palau	Zimbabwe
Count: 54		