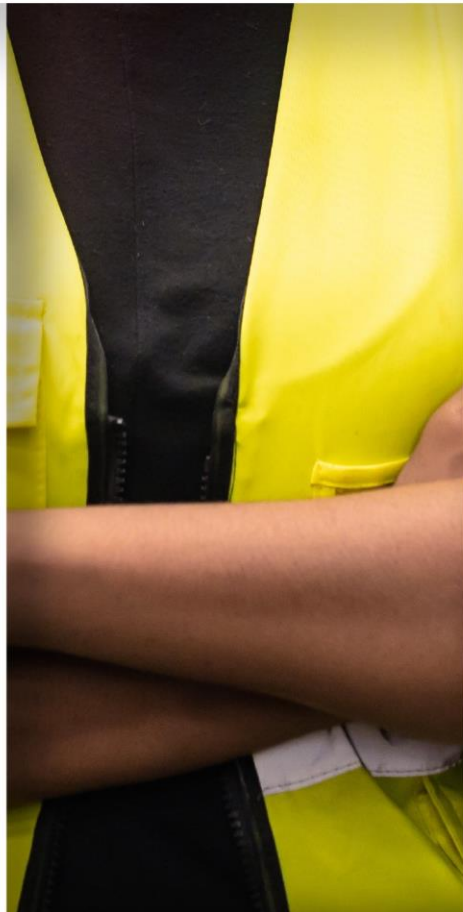


**Gender Equality in South Africa's Labour Market:**  
Comparing Men and Women's Prospects,  
Pre-Covid and Now



## Foreword by the CEO

Women's month is a time for celebration of what has been achieved, reflection on the current state of gender equality, and commitments to priorities that structure the way forward.

This Research Note looks at the circumstances of women and men in South Africa's labour market and compares the present to the months just before Covid hit.

Although there has been some overall recovery, women are still more likely to be left behind.

It is of particular concern that even now there are some 250 000 less jobs for the most vulnerable South African women than pre-Covid.

For me, the overall conclusion is inescapable: we need to do our utmost to attain higher overall growth to create jobs, but we also need targeted measures to support vulnerable women, young women, women starting small businesses, and to ensure that we bring down the large numbers of women who are not in employment, education, or training.

We need to turn this around, urgently, and I call on all of us to do our utmost, so that next year, come women's month, we can celebrate successes and a decisive shift in the labour market circumstances of women.

Dr Precious Moloi-Motsepe

Co-Founder and CEO

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# 1. Introduction

Covid had a disproportionate impact on women's labour market participation in South Africa, as well as in many other countries.

This was the case mainly because women were and are more likely than men to be employed in vulnerable jobs.

Job losses associated with Covid meant that some of the gains towards gender equality in the economy, achieved over the preceding decade, were reversed.

In South Africa, furthermore, Covid impacted on a labour market that was already failing to create the volume of jobs needed to bring down the unemployment rate. Indeed, in the two years before Covid, overall unemployment decreased, an alarming trend given that even modest job *increases* would not have stemmed the rise of the unemployment rate.

As the world emerges from Covid, it is important to take assertive, targeted steps to ensure women regain lost ground, and to complete the journey to equality in labour market participation and business ownership. It is also essential to provide for labour intensive growth, in general.

This Research Note provides a descriptive sense of 'where we are at', by looking at labour market data from the first quarter of 2020 to the most recent results for the second quarter of 2023.

The aim is to gauge the extent to which labour market participation, by gender, has re-attained pre-Covid levels.

Using Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) data, our starting point is the last 'normal' quarter (Jan-March 2020) before the 'hard lockdown' quarter April-June 2020, and our endpoint is simply the most recent available data, that for April-June 2023.

We provide a comparative perspective throughout, comparing the circumstances of men and women over a range of labour market categories, such as age and educational attainment, that create further degrees of potential vulnerability.

## 2. Job Trends for Men and Women

Total employment in the second quarter of 2023 was effectively back to pre-Covid levels, at 16 346 000 jobs.

However, it is important to note that this is still about 900 000 less than the highest employment level date, towards the end of 2018. At the same time, in the roughly three years since the start of Covid, the labour force increased by about 800 000. As a result, the overall narrow unemployment rate in Q 2 2023 stands at 32.6%, compared to 30.1% before Covid, with 850 000 more narrowly unemployed.

Within this challenging labour market, women have lost further ground. As Table 1 shows, current women's jobs are about 1% less than pre-Covid, and men's jobs are about 0.4 % more than pre-Covid. More compelling is the much larger increase in unemployed women than men, about 500 000 compared to 300 000. In other words, over the three years since Covid started, women, when they look for work, are substantially *less likely* to find work than men. To come at the same point from a different perspective: the women's narrow unemployment rate is now almost 6 percentage points higher than that for men, at 35.7% compared to 30.0%.

**Table 1: Men and Women in the SA Labour Market, Q1 2020 and Q2 2023**

		Q1 2020	Q2 2023	Change (%)
<b>Women</b>	Employed	7 234	7 160	-1.0
	Unemployed	3 463	3 980	15.0
	Unemployment Rate	32.4	35.7	/
<b>Men</b>	Employed	9 149	9 186	0.4
	Unemployed	3 607	3 939	9.2
	Unemployment Rate	28.3	30.0	/

### 3. Jobs for Men and Women by Educational Attainment

For both men and women, job losses were concentrated amongst those with lower educational attainments, and we find that, even now, jobs for those with only primary education completed as a highest qualification are almost 400 000 *less* than before Covid, whilst there has been recovery and job growth on the other side of the spectrum, i.e., for tertiary graduates. Although ‘graduate unemployment’ remains a serious challenge we explored in a previous Note, jobs for those with a tertiary qualification have increased by about 320 000 since the quarter before Covid.

On the other hand, jobs for those with only a primary education completed are still about 360 000 *less* now than before Covid. And women with only a primary education completed were more severely impacted, proportionately, than men, with 23% less jobs now for these women compared to 18% less for men.

**Table 2: Jobs for Men and Women, Educational Attainment, Now and Before Covid**

	Primary Completed	Secondary Completed	Tertiary
<b>Absolute change</b>			
<b>M</b>	-196 160	27 688	188 274
<b>F</b>	-172 930	-38 292	151 393
<b>% Change</b>			
<b>M</b>	-18.4	0.4	10.9
<b>F</b>	-23.3	-0.8	8.2

## 4. Jobs for Younger Men and Women

As Table 3 shows, the narrow unemployment rate for both young men and women has increased, by 1.4 percentage points for young men and 3 percentage points for young women.

Although overall jobs are back to pre-Covid levels, as we have noted, youth jobs are still about 165 000 less than at the start of 2020, and the number of unemployed youths on the narrow definition is now around 4.7 million.

Proportionately, young women were more harshly affected, with young women's jobs still 3.6% less than before Covid, compared to 2.2% for men, and with the number of unemployed young women increasing by 8.7%, compared to 3.5% for young men.

**Table 3: Labour Market Status, Younger Men and Women, Now and Before Covid**

		Employed	Unemployed	UR
<b>Q1 2020</b>	M	3 401 069	2 258 646	39.9
	F	2 489 649	2 216 049	47.1
		Employed	Unemployed	UR
<b>Q2 2023</b>	M	3 325 224	2 338 323	41.3
	F	2 398 851	2 408 196	50.1
	M	-75 845	79 677	/
	F	-90 798	192 147	/
<b>% Change</b>	M	-2.2	3.5	/
	F	-3.6	8.7	/



## 5. Business Ownership by Men and Women

There are still more men who own businesses in SA than women (1.7 million compared to 0.9 million) and the general rate of business ownership remains low.

However, the rate of increase of business ownership over the last three years in absolute terms has broadly similar, and women-owned businesses have grown proportionately more, at 3% compared to 1.6% for men-owned businesses.

**Table 4: Business Ownership by Men and Women, Now and Before Covid**

	Own business	Yes	No
<b>Q1 2020</b>	Male	1 667 961	18 84 6173
	Female	903 574	20 946 096
<b>Q2 2023</b>	Male	1 695 109	19 956 702
	Female	931 110	22 129 244
<b>Absolute Change</b>	M	27 148	
	F	27 535	
<b>%Change</b>	M	1.6	
	F	3.0	

In principle, this may reflect progress in the inclusivity of the economy when it comes to ownership, or it may reflect desperation, with many of newer women-owned businesses essentially being survivalist enterprises established by those who have lost their jobs or given up on finding a job, or of course a combination of these factors.

Diving deeper into the data, we find thought that by far the largest growth category, for women -owned business, has been those with one employee: there are now about 23 000 more women-owned businesses of this sort, micro-enterprises in other words, than before Covid, with women ownership for larger business more moderate.



## 6. Labour Market Status by Occupation Level

There are now some 300 000 more high occupation-level jobs than three years ago, with, in fact, women’s jobs at this level growing at a faster rate than men’s (9.4% vs 6.9%).

There are generally substantially more mid-level men in employment than women, and here we find that job losses were concentrated amongst men: there are almost 6% less mid-level men’s jobs now than pre-Covid, compared to 1% less mid-level women’s jobs.

On the other hand, the most devastating impact of these years is clearly on women in low-level occupations (elementary occupations and domestic workers), where there are still 255 000 less women’s jobs than three years ago, or almost 10% less.

**Table 5: Jobs by Occupation Level, Men and Women, Now and Before Covid**

		High-Level	Mid-Level	Low-Level
<b>Q1 2020</b>	M	2 111 598	4 919 962	2 239 057
	F	1 717 098	2 976 280	2 630 586
<b>Q1 2023</b>	M	2 257 337	4 641 014	2 310 795
	F	1 878 595	2 946 574	2 374 990
<b>Absolute Change</b>	M	145 739	-278 948	71 738
	F	161 497	-29 706	-255 596
<b>% Change</b>	M	6.9	-5.7	3.2
	F	9.4	-1.0	-9.7

## 7. NEETs, Men and Women, Now and before Covid

The number of South Africans older than 15 not in employment, education or training (NEETs) has increased by 2.5 million over these three years; although there are more women who are NEETs, male NEETS increased at a faster rate, 15.1% compared to 11.4%.

SA now has a total of slightly more than 22 million people older than fifteen who are NEETS, roughly half of the population older than 15, with women more likely to be NEETs than men: currently, 56% of women are NEETs, compared to 44% of men.

**Table 6: NEETs, Men and Women, Now and Before Covid**

		NEET	Not-NEET	Total
<b>Q1 2020</b>	Male	8 224 092	12 290 042	20 514 134
	Female	11 449 745	10 399 925	21 849 670
<b>Q2 2023</b>	Male	9 462 888	12 101 439	21 564 327
	Female	12 754 292	10 211 793	22 966 085
<b>Absolute Change</b>	M	1 238 796	-188 602	
	F	1 304 547	-188 133	
<b>% Change</b>	M	15.1	-1.5	
	F	11.4	-1.8	

Not being in employment, education or training is not inherently a bad thing; it may reflect, for example, a decision to focus on making a home and raising children and may imply the economic means to do so. Cultural assumptions around the role of men and women in home making account for a large share of the difference between male and female NEETs.

On the other hand, a large and / or growing number of young people who are NEETs is ground for concern since it points to an absence of opportunity for self-development and learning, which has negative effects both on the person and ultimately also on the productivity of the society. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See our Research Note 4 for an exploration of NEETs and age.

## 8. Discouragement, Men and Women, Now and Before Covid

Since the beginning of 2020, the number of discouraged work-seekers has increased by about 265 000, to approximately 3.2 million.

Although there are still more discouraged work-seekers who are men than women, discouraged women have increased at a faster rate than men, an increase of 13% in total compared to about 6% for men.

**Table 7: Discouraged Men and Women Work-Seekers, Now and Before Covid**

	Q1 2020	Q 2023	Absolute	%
<b>Women</b>	1567 000	1 657 000	89 000	5.7
<b>Men</b>	1351 000	1 526 000	175 000	12.9

## 9. Informal Economy Participation

Breaking jobs down into formal and non-formal jobs, a distressing result emerges that echoes that of the section on jobs by occupation: informal jobs held by women have not recovered and were still 267 000 less now than three years ago, or 12% less. On the other hand, formal employment for women has increased by about 145000, or just under 3%.

**Table 8: Informal Economy Jobs, Men and Women, Now and Before Covid**

		Formal employment	Informal employment
<b>Q1 2020</b>	Male	5 912 567	2 748 156
	Female	4 925 53	2 192 864
<b>Q2 2023</b>	Male	5 921 323	2 777 975
	Female	5 070 721	1 925 923
<b>Absolute Change</b>	M	8 756	29 819
	F	145 189	-266 941
<b>% Change</b>	M	0.1	1.1
	F	2.9	-12.2

## 10. Long-Term Unemployment

Over this time, the share of the unemployed who are long-term unemployed (a year or more) has increased for both men and women, from 68% to 76% for men and from 75% to 79% for women.

There are some 1.1 million more south Africans in long-term unemployment now than in early 2022, and the total long-term unemployed is around 6.1 million.

The number of men in long-term unemployment increased by 24%, and of women by 18%.

**Table 9: Long-Term Unemployment, Men and Women, Now and Before Covid**

		Long-Term	Short-Term	Long-Term Share of Total
<b>Q1 2020</b>	M	2 459 018	1 153 234	68.1
	F	2 615 347	852 496	75.4
<b>Q2 2023</b>	M	3 054 198	984 996	75.6
	F	3 075 655	828 474	78.8
<b>Absolute Change</b>	M	595 180	- 168 238	
	F	460 308	-24 023	
<b>% Change</b>	M	24.2	-14.6	
	F	17.6	-2.8	

## 11. Concluding Comments

The data we have looked at in this Note provides a differentiated general picture between the circumstances of more qualified, higher occupation parts of the workforce and less qualified, lower occupation parts.

The former has gone a significant way towards recovery from the immediate impact of Covid than the latter, though it is important to recall that 'recovery from Covid' is not, as such, the goal: the labour market had been extremely stagnant since 2018, and, indeed, has not experienced sustainable robust growth since the global financial crisis of 2008 to 2010. With Covid receding, the priority must be to complete the journey towards an inclusive, fast-growing, job-creating economy.

These general comments are even more relevant if we look at the circumstances of women: in most categories we have explored, women's labour market participation has recovered less than men's, a worrying fact given the labour market inequality that existed already before Covid.

It is important to recognize that there has been insufficient recovery in jobs held by women with low educational attainment, in low occupations bands, and in the informal economy. Often, of course, these three categories overlap. There are still between 250 000 and 300 000 less jobs of this kind than in the first quarter of 2020. The loss of these vulnerable, low-income jobs has meant significant increases in poverty and extreme poverty amongst women.

The data on increases in micro-enterprises owned by women as a survivalist response prompts the question of how the sector can be better supported.

Finally, as we have noted before, the high number of young people who are not in employment, education or training remains serious cause for concern.