

Forum: ECOSOC

Issue: The question of exclusion from the labour market based on race, religion or gender

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Introduction

The exclusion from the labour market based on race, religion, or gender remains one of the most pressing human rights and equality challenges of the 21st century. While significant achievements have been made over the past decades in promoting inclusive employment policies, systemic discrimination persists across both developed and developing nations, undermining global efforts toward social and economic equality (UN, 1948; ILO, 2025). Discrimination in the labour market manifests in various forms, including limited access to employment opportunities, unequal pay, denial of promotions, and workplace harassment (Tulane Law, 2024). Minority racial and religious groups, as well as women, disproportionately bear the burden of these barriers, which in turn reinforce cycles of poverty, social marginalization, and economic vulnerability (BBC, 2022; Ortiz et al., 2025). By preventing talented individuals from participating fully in the workforce, societies suffer from a loss of productivity, innovation, and human capital (OECD, 2025). Structural inequalities such as discriminatory hiring practices, gender pay gaps, and lack of legal protections perpetuate this exclusion, while cultural norms and unconscious biases further entrench systemic barriers (EuroParl, 2025). Furthermore, restrictive legislation and weak enforcement mechanisms in certain regions exacerbate the problem, leaving marginalized groups without recourse to claim their rights (ILO, 2025).

Addressing labour market exclusion is crucial to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth, and Goal 10 on reduced inequalities (UN, 2025). Eliminating discrimination in employment not only promotes social justice and human dignity but also fosters inclusive economic growth and strengthens social cohesion (Ndiaye & Elías, 2025). As the international community continues to confront globalization, technological change, and shifting demographics, the imperative to ensure equal opportunity in the labour market remains more urgent than ever (UN Women, 2025).

Definition of Key Terms

Labour Market Exclusion

Labour market exclusion refers to the state of being shut out from employment or facing insecure and precarious work, leading to unemployment, inactive, or unstable working arrangements. Exude Human Capital, 2024).

Equality Employment Opportunity (EEO)

Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) is the legal and ethical principle that all individuals should have fair and equal access to job opportunities, employment terms, and promotions, regardless of protected characteristics such as race, gender, religion, age, disability, or national origin (EEOC, 2023).

Gender Pay Gap

The Gender pay gap is the difference in average gross hourly earnings between men and women. It reflects wage inequality but does not account for external factors such as occupation, education or working hours (EuroParl, 2025).

Informal Economy

The informal economy comprises activities, businesses, and jobs not taxed or monitored by the government, including unregistered market vendors, street hawkers, and domestic workers (Ortiz et al., 2025).

Background Information

The exclusion of individuals from the labour market on the basis of race, religion, or gender is not a modern phenomenon. Economic opportunities were often reserved for dominant groups within society, while minority populations were relegated to low-paying or informal work (Oxfam, 2022). Women globally continue to face a significant gender pay gap, with around 20% underrepresented in leadership roles (Ortiz et al., 2025). Religious minorities often encounter bias in the job market, workplace accommodations, or career progression (UN, 1948). These populations frequently face barriers linked to stereotypes and limited access to education and networks (Goldman Sachs, 2025).

International Legal Frameworks and Conventions

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) guarantees the right to equal access to work and protection against discrimination (UN, 1948). Furthermore, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) emphasizes equal pay for equal work and safe working conditions (OHCHR, 1966). Within the United Nations, the International Labour Organization (ILO)

plays a crucial role in prohibiting exclusion based on race, colour, religion, sex, political opinion, and social origin (ILO, 2025).

Challenges in Enforcement and Accountability

One major difficulty in addressing labour market exclusion is the gap between international commitments and national enforcement. Numerous countries lack effective monitoring mechanisms, independent labour courts, and strong anti-discrimination legislation (ILO, 2025; Leber, 2025). Entrenched cultural and social norms further limit the progress on enforcing existing laws (UN Women, 2025). Globalization and the rise of multinational corporations complicate accountability (OECD, 2025).

Current Trends and Manifestations

Despite progress in legal protections, significant inequalities persist in today's global workforce. According to ILO, women's global labour force participation in 2022 was 47.4%, compared to 72% for men, reflecting a persistent gender gap (ILO, 2025). The global gender pay gap remains around 20%, with women, on average, earning only 80 cents for every dollar earned by men (EuroParl, 2025). Religious discrimination continues to affect employment, with 82 countries maintaining high or very high levels of government restrictions on religious practice (UN, 2025). In Europe, Muslim women face disproportionate barriers in recruitment processes, with a callback rate for job applications at 50% compared to non-Muslim applicants with identical qualifications (Oxfam, 2022).

Marginalized communities are also overrepresented in the informal economy, which accounts for 60% of global employment (Ortiz et al., 2025). Labour workforces from the informal sector lack protections against minimum wage guarantees and benefits. In South Asia, women are three times more likely than men to work in informal labour without contracts or social protections (Goldman Sachs, 2025).

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Informal Economy

The informal labour forces often face unclear relationships between employers and employees. Since these workers are outside the protective labour law framework, they are exposed to harsh treatment, and employers are likely to ignore existing laws (Exude Human Capital, 2024). Only formal workforces have to comply with current labour law, making informal workers vulnerable to harassment and poor working conditions. Furthermore, with weak law enforcement, informal workers often work long hours for minimal wages. Undocumented migrant workers also remain highly vulnerable to exploitation (Ortiz et al., 2025; Goldman Sachs, 2025).

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United States of America

The United States has been a central actor in shaping both domestic and international approaches to workplace equality. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination, serving as one of the world's most influential anti-discrimination laws (National Archives, 2022). In addition, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 aims to address gender-based wage disparities (EEOC, 2023). Despite a strong legal framework, disparities persist. Religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Sikhs, report significant workplace discrimination (Oxfam, 2022). The U.S. remains important not only because of its domestic struggles but also due to its influence in setting global labour standards (ILO, 2025).

European Union (EU)

The European Union has developed one of the most comprehensive frameworks for addressing workplace discrimination among its member states. The Employment Equality Directive (2007) prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, disability, age, or sexual orientation, while the Racial Equality Directive (2004) targets racial and ethnic discrimination in employment and training (EUR-Lex, 2000/43). Nonetheless, migrant workers, particularly from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, often face discriminatory hiring practices, occupational segregation, and precarious working conditions (ILO, 2025). Women in the EU continue to face a notable gender gap, averaging around 12.7% (EuroParl, 2025).

India

Apart from the United States and the EU, India presents a complex picture where exclusion from the labour market is shaped by intersecting factors of social class, gender, and religion. Women's

workforce participation is among the lowest globally, with only about 25% of women formally employed (Goldman Sachs, 2025). Social norms, safety concerns, and limited access to education remain major barriers (BBC, 2022). Caste-based discrimination, though officially banned under the Indian Constitution, continues to influence workforce opportunities. Religious minorities, particularly Muslims, face high unemployment rates and underrepresentation in public and private employment (Oxfam, 2022).

Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, labour market exclusion has historically been shaped by gender and nationality. Women face severe restrictions on employment opportunities due to cultural and legal limitations. Though Vision 2030 has sought to increase female workforce participation, women still face barriers in wage equality (Leber, 2025). Migrant workers, who make up a large portion of the labour force, often face limited rights, exploitation, and exclusion from protections available to Saudi nationals. This highlights how both gender and nationality-based discrimination intersect in labour markets (ILO, 2025).

International Labour Organization (ILO)

The ILO is the primary UN agency responsible for setting international labour standards and promoting social justice. Through Convention No.100 on Equal Remuneration and Convention No.111 on Discrimination, the ILO provides a legal framework for combatting workplace discrimination (ILO, 2025). Although the ILO's "Decent Work Agenda" emphasizes equal opportunity and treatment, challenges persist in enforcement, particularly in regions with weak labour protections or large informal economies (ILO, 2025).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The OECD is an international organisation of 38 democratic countries with market economies that works to promote economic growth, prosperity, and sustainable development. Its "Gender Initiative" tracks progress in closing wage gaps and promoting women's participation in the labour force. The OECD also offers peer reviews and benchmarking, pressuring member states to align with practices that reduce workplace exclusion (OECD, 2025).

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

UN Women plays a critical role in addressing job exclusion by promoting gender equality and advocating for inclusive labor markets worldwide. It supports governments in developing gender-responsive policies, including equal pay legislation, workplace protections, and measures to balance paid and unpaid care

work. Additionally, UN Women conducts research to highlight systemic barriers, provides capacity-building programs to strengthen women's economic participation, and leads global advocacy initiatives such as HeForShe and Generation Equality (UN Women, 2025).

Viable Solutions

Addressing exclusion from the labour market requires combining international frameworks, national legislation, and effective initiatives.

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement

One major solution is the adoption and enforcement of stronger anti-discrimination legislation. Countries are encouraged to ratify and implement core ILO conventions. Independent labour courts and adequately funded labour inspectors can further bridge the gap between law and practice. Governments and corporations should adopt workplace diversity that include religious accommodation, gender-sensitive parental leave policies, recruitment practices. Pay transparency law and gender pay reporting have proven effective in revealing and addressing wage disparities.

Expanding Access to Education and Vocational Training

Long-term solutions should require equal access to education and skill training for marginalized groups. Governments can implement targeted scholarships or vocational programs for women, racial minorities, and religious minorities. In countries where social norms limit women's participation, programs combining skills training with childcare supports can increase female workforce participation significantly.

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