

# How can we support career advancement for women in Kenya?

## Women often face challenges as they balance careers with family

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In Kenya, we have seen a growing push by companies, the government, and other ecosystem players to increase gender equality in teams, investment decisions, and board representation. Shortlist has partnered with Open Capital to develop practical ways for employers to use new approaches to increase diversity in their workforces. Over the coming 12 months, we will be sharing insights, ideas, and toolkits to support this joint effort. Here, we summarise the key dimensions related to career advancement for women in Kenya.

The evidence continues to grow that more diverse firms are associated with better business outcomes and there is wide acceptance that gender equality is not only a moral imperative but also a business one. An expanding pipeline of female talent resulting from gains in educational attainment, combined with an increasing base of knowledge for how to reduce bias in hiring through tools such as work-based assessments, has enabled companies to work towards gender parity within their teams. In 2007 only [20.8% of permanent, full-time workers in Kenyan firms were women,](#)

[but by 2018 this had shot up to 31.6%](#) with many of these gains being seen at the entry level. However, women remain significantly underrepresented at higher levels; less than [10% of firms with more than 20 employees have a senior female manager.](#)

**Enabling SMEs to increase female representation in their workforce presents a significant opportunity.** SMEs create [30% of Kenyan jobs](#) and [77% of SMEs expect to hire more workers in 2020.](#) For example, the rapidly growing off-grid energy sector, driven by SMEs, is expecting to sustain [350,000 jobs in East Africa by 2022.](#) However, only [27% of full-time off-grid energy jobs are currently held by women.](#)

There is an incredibly strong business case for SMEs to increase female advancement and retention to ensure greater gender parity at leadership levels. A study by Calvert Impact Capital on their private market portfolio found that [SMEs with a higher percentage of women in leadership positions outperformed companies with lower percentages on a range of metrics](#) such as return on sales, return on equity, and return on assets. Similarly, multiple studies have

[estimated the cost of replacing an employee at 1.5 the annual salary of that individual, highlighting the importance of investing in retention.](#)

Many SMEs want to hire and retain talented women and Kenyan women want to work. A study undertaken by the ILO and Gallup asked people in 142 countries whether they preferred for women to work paid jobs, care for their families and homes, or do both. Globally, close to 30% of people preferred women to stay home and in other countries such as India over 40% of women said they preferred to stay home. However, in Kenya [<15% of people said they preferred for women to stay home with just 12% of women preferring to stay home](#), highlighting that the vast majority of Kenyan women would like to be employed.

**Despite an interest both by SMEs and women to increase gender parity at all levels, both parties face a complex web of gender norms.** [Women are less likely to self-promote, face “potential bias”, and fit the stereotypes of an “effective leader”.](#) There is strong evidence globally that women are less likely than men to apply to jobs for which they do not meet all the selection criteria or ask to be considered for a promotion. In analyses we conducted on Shortlist data from SMEs in India, men apply to more jobs; [being a woman is associated with >25% fewer applications submitted, controlling for all observable factors.](#)

Additionally, [women are often penalized when they do self-promote or exhibit leadership-related behaviors that are considered “masculine” and incongruous with what is expected of a woman.](#) SMEs working in STEM-related fields face additional challenges of gendered stereotypes and occupational segregation; [while >13%](#)

When Kenyans were asked whether they preferred for women to work paid jobs, care for their families and homes, or do both, [<15% felt they should stay home.](#)

[of Kenyan male graduates get a degree in natural science, mathematics, and statistics fields, <9% of female graduates study those subjects; this disparity is even greater in fields such as engineering, manufacturing, and construction.](#) Given these complex factors at play, companies cannot sit back and expect gender gaps in retention and advancement to change without action.

**Cultural and societal norms related to family obligations often impede women’s career advancement.** **Women, especially in their late 20s and early 30s, often face constraints in finding employment with structures and a culture accommodating to those obligations.** The time frame in which many employees are beginning to establish themselves in their careers, take on more responsibility, and move into the first-time manager role that sets them up for further advancement corresponds with when most women are having their first child. [Over 74% of women in Kenya have their first child between 20 and 30 years old, with 50% of women having their first child in their early 20s.](#) Due to widespread beliefs around the mother’s role in caregiving, women are more likely—relative to men—to choose not to be employed or looking for a job.

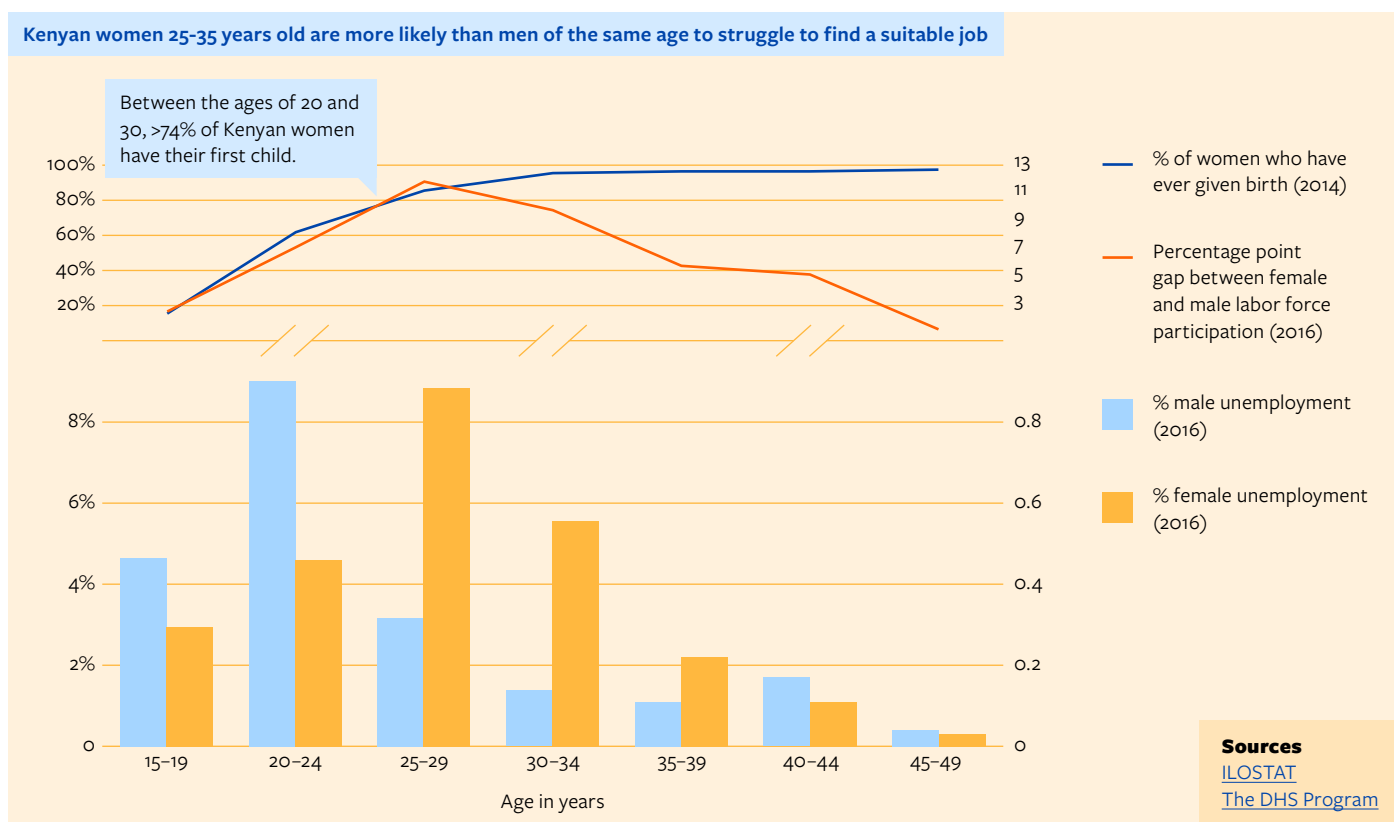
[Between the ages of 25 and 35, female unemployment is ~5 percentage points higher than male unemployment,](#) indicating there are a lot of women with young chil-

dren who want or need to work but can't find jobs that accommodate their needs<sup>[1]</sup>. The data reflects sentiments we heard in conversations with professional women with family obligations: that Kenyan women want to return to the workforce after having children (or tending to other family obligations), and it's typically encouraged by their families, but often struggle to find formal employment that works with their on-going obligations and career aspirations<sup>[2]</sup>.

**For SMEs to achieve and reap the benefits of gender parity in management, we must understand and accommodate the different family obligations and aspirations of women while working within the resource constraints many SMEs face<sup>[3]</sup>.** Kenya has important protections under the law such as mandatory three-month

paid maternity leave, breaks for expressing or breastfeeding, and well-equipped lactation stations. Government regulation can help establish important rights, yet in fast growing, resource constrained SMEs, these basic provisions can be difficult to meet. Even so, we've seen globally that these provisions are often not enough to retain women in the workforce. While Safaricom's on-site crèche or Ernst and Young's 4-person dedicated "Flexibility Strategy Team" have been effective solutions for those companies in retaining great women (and men) and improving their bottom line, for SMEs these solutions may be aspirational but not realistic.

To design solutions that work within the constraints of SMEs, we must also understand the challenges women with



[1] Importantly, the gap in unemployment is significantly lower or flips (more men unemployed than women) in all other age groups. Also in all other age groups labor force participation between men and women is approximately at the same level.

[2] Significant work has done been globally to quantify the financial penalties to women who take time out of the workforce. One study found that on average, women lose 18% of earning power when they take time out, which is on average 2.2 years (Hewlett, 2007).

[3] While this blog post is specifically about women, we'd be remiss to not mention that the same point holds true for other underrepresented groups such as people living with disabilities. We also find it critical to state that while we speak here of women as a homogeneous group, of course this is not necessarily representative of each individual.

family obligations face in remaining in the workforce. In conversations with professional Kenyan women who had a variety of family obligations, and from a review of the global literature, there are four common themes we saw in challenges Kenyan women face in aligning their needs with their job:

**1. Rigidity of hours and inflexibility with working location makes it hard to tend to family issues.** Over and over we heard that women struggle to balance their familial commitments into a typical workday at the office even if they are willing to work a full day. They need to be at home when a parent is sick. Their most productive hours are after 7pm when the child goes to bed. One woman we spoke to had a job in a field office and when her mother got sick she had to resign her position after her company was unwilling to provide her with additional work-remote flexibility or a transfer to a team based in the Nairobi office. Another woman said she immediately rules out a job that states “long hours” in the JD even if the position is a good fit in all other ways. However, women also don’t want to don’t want to feel like the employer is giving them “favors” to deal with family issues but rather have flexibility built

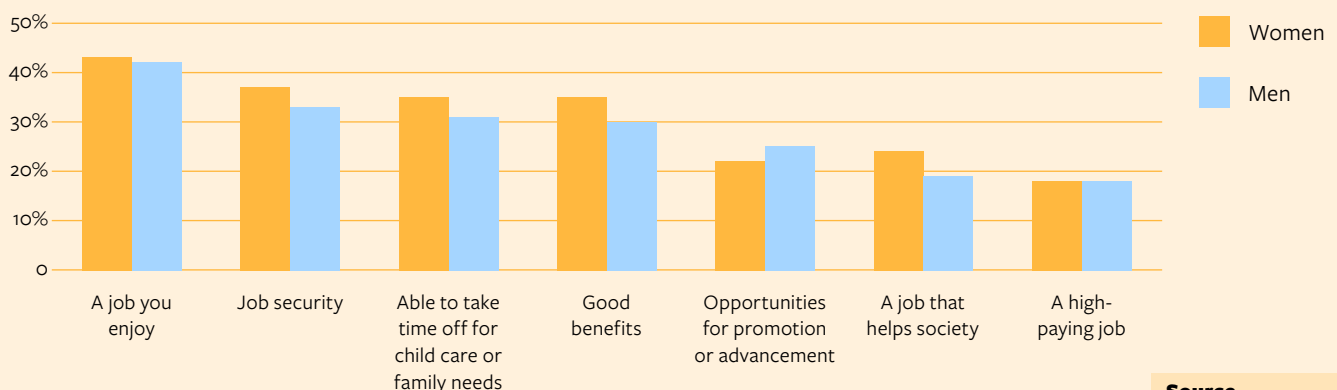
into the core of the company culture.

**2. Inadequate child and elderly care can make employees distracted and less productive.** As women tend to be the primary caregivers for families in Kenya, child (and elder) care falls on their shoulders and can act as a barrier to working. [A study in an informal settlement in Nairobi found that providing vouchers for subsidized daycare drastically increased employment; women who had received the voucher were 17% more likely to be employed than women in the control group.](#) Even in households who can afford a full time nanny, as is often the case among the professional class, women still struggle, especially with concerns about the quality of care the nanny provides. For example, one woman we talked to who works as a logistics associate for an SME had gone through seven nannies over the course of 12 months and said she found herself often struggling to focus at work because she was worried about the care the child was receiving. This was a sentiment shared by others as well.

**3. A focus on maternal obligations means that employers often overlook considerations for other family obligations.** The discussion in Kenya around employers being

Women want more from a job than power & money

% saying each job characteristic is “extremely important” to them



Source  
Pew Research Centre

accommodating of family obligations centers almost solely around mothers (importantly now both biological and adoptive). However this excludes fathers as well as women who are responsible for other types of care such as elder care or care of a disabled or sick relative. This narrow conceptualization for the types of obligations employers should accommodate ends up pushing great employees out of the workforce. One woman said that she gave up her dream job working in nonprofit administration because her husband was dealing with a mental illness and she was not comfortable discussing the issue with her employer who might have otherwise allowed her more flexibility. A common feeling among the women we spoke to was they wanted their employer to see them as a whole human rather than a worker; a survey of professional women in the United States found that of things women look for in a workplace [79% wanted to “Be myself” at work compared to 42% who said “high income”](#).

4. **Aspirations and values change for women and yet the structure of compensation and standard career trajectories often don’t account for that.** As shown in the figure above, a [survey of women in the United States found six things came before “high income” in their career goals](#). This varies from men’s aspirations; a global study found that [male executives highlighted power and money as main motivators at work while female executives highlight connection and quality](#). While many Kenyan women’s motivation to go back to work after family leave is driven by financial considerations, they are also typically factoring in time and non-cash benefits—flexibility, pension, medical cover, staff meals— in the choice of a role.

### Watch this space

As Kenya continues to focus on reducing high youth unemployment alongside increasing gender equality, we will see more and more young Kenya women enter the professional workforce; SMEs that are proactive and forward thinking in how to retain and advance those talents will be able to most effectively leverage their teams over the long-run. Over the next year, we will be working to develop tools and case studies of solutions that high-growth SMEs operating in Kenya have found to be effective for retaining and advancing women in their workforces. Our goal is to support companies in addressing these complex challenges. We would love to hear from you. ■

“(In considering career moves) it’s not usually about the salary...there are other things that add value. However, for my husband, cash is the main motivator.”

—Kenyan female professional