

OECD FORUM BACKGROUND NOTE:**GENDER: EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP****■ GENERAL INTRODUCTION FOR SESSION**

The gender gap is a sad reality worldwide: women are still treated differently from men in the workplace and whatever their responsibilities outside the family home they are often expected to still shoulder as many family burdens as before. The reasons for this persisting inequality are multiple, starting with countries' history and culture, national policy attitudes towards families, legal settings and economic factors and the role of government within the respective society.

Things are changing slowly. First, by reinventing modern fathers' and mothers' roles. An increasing number of men in developed countries reckon they spend quite a few hours a week on childcare. This modern fatherhood is a real break with the past, and governments are contributing to it by introducing parental leave for fathers. However, for the moment women still do a lot more unpaid work than men, because they do more housework and take care of elderly parents.

Things are also changing for women in the workplace. On average, across OECD countries, the proportion of women in paid work is high (62%). But pay gaps still exist: women earn 18% less than men on average and hold only one-third of managerial posts. Women are also more likely to have temporary contracts than men and to work part-time (25% of women work in part-time jobs, while only 6% of men do so).

Young women are now equally or better educated than young men in both the OECD and major emerging economies (except India). Employment and wage differentials are smallest for younger women, but on average across the OECD, female employment is still 13% less than for men, and median earnings are 16% below those of men.

In many developing countries, the challenges are even bigger. Gender-related disadvantage starts early. Girls often receive less schooling than boys. Women have less access to the labour market and there is little public support to combine family and work responsibilities.

Achieving gender equality in the economy remains a huge challenge. Enabling women and men to participate fully in work, economic development as well as family life will promote prosperity and stability, reduce child poverty and help address the pressures of population ageing.

■ PANEL 1: BABIES AND BOSSES

Juggling work and family commitments is a major challenge for women. Women looking for a work-life balance have to decide whether to have children, when, how many, and who looks after them – and whether to work full- or part-time.

At the same time, declining fertility rates are a concern in most OECD countries, particularly in Japan, where birth rates are dropping as more women put jobs before childbearing. In Switzerland, as many as 40% of women at age 40 with university degrees are childless. Strong economies and manageable pension systems depend on both higher fertility rates and higher employment rates.

Many governments are investing in family-friendly policies to reconcile work and family responsibilities, help parents to have the number of children they desire, mobilise female labour supply, promote gender equality, combat child and family poverty, and enhance child well-being from an early age. These policies have societal benefits for the next generation. Helping working mothers will reduce the poverty which impacts negatively on child development. Support for pre-school care outside the home can better prepare children for formal schooling. Policies contributing to gender equality and child development include: low effective tax rates which ensure that being in work is financially rewarding for all parents and public investment in childcare and out-of-school-hours care to make it easier for mothers to take paid jobs.

Career-wise, women are probably best advised to return to work at an early stage after childbirth, as prolonged periods out of work can permanently damage their prospects. On the other hand, evidence suggests that a return to paid work by mothers within 6 months of childbirth may have negative effects on child cognitive outcomes, particularly when employment is on a full-time basis. The effects are, however, small, not universally observed and, in certain circumstances balanced by positive effects related to having extra family income.

In most countries, women's employment greatly improves families' resilience to economic shocks. Female employment has generally suffered much less than that of men in the recent crisis. This is largely due to output losses in sectors with a predominantly male workforce, such as manufacturing and construction. But cuts in public-sector employment announced or already implemented in several countries are likely to change this balance, since female employment is concentrated in the public sector in many countries.

Employers are often reluctant to invest in women's career development when they anticipate women will take time off for caring. The under-representation of women in senior positions also helps explain their difficulties in advancing to the highest levels. Even when women do reach decision-making positions, they tend to occupy functional roles, such as human resources, legal and public relations, rather than strategic management roles. As a remedy, some governments are adopting quotas to increase women's presence on boards (e.g. Norway, France). Evidence-based reports show that companies with more women on the board are much more efficient. If women cannot fulfill their labour market aspirations and have to settle for second-rate jobs, they may withdraw altogether from the labour market. Even if they remain in work, their potential might not be fully realised.

Questions:

1. How to reconcile and better balance work and family life for women and men?
2. What was the impact of the crisis on women's employment?
3. Are quotas a solution to the economic gender gap and the breaking of the glass ceiling?

■ PANEL 2: WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development, pro-poor growth and the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Higher female earnings and bargaining power mean greater investment in children's education, health and nutrition, raising human capital and labour productivity which leads to stronger, more inclusive and sustainable growth. In India, for example, if the female/male ratio of workers went up to 10%, GDP could rise by 8%. In Africa, if women's access to agricultural inputs was equal to men's, total agricultural outputs could increase by up to 20%.

Achieving women's economic empowerment needs sound public policies, a holistic approach and long-term commitment from all development actors. Education is the first absolutely indispensable and powerful tool for women's empowerment. Educating girls provides women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence they need to seek out economic opportunities. Removing school fees and providing financial incentives for girls to attend school have proven to be effective for increasing girls' enrolment and completion rates. Public policies' key measures include building schools close to remote communities, ensuring that schools have quality teachers – both female and male – and adequate sanitary facilities, and that they are safe places for girls. Well-designed vocational training leads to better paid work, and does not concentrate women in low-wage and low-skill work or reinforce occupational segregation between women and men. One example amidst many is the Indian Barefoot College which since 1972 has trained rural semi-literate middle-aged women to install solar electricity in their own villages. This approach has been replicated in nearly 25 countries including Afghanistan, Mali, Russia, Bhutan and Namibia, in collaboration with the Government of India.

Today, women-owned businesses comprise up to 38% of all registered small businesses worldwide and their number is growing rapidly in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Evidence suggests that women's entrepreneurship tends towards approaches such as micro-credit schemes or supporting women entrepreneurs who would have been successful anyway. The challenge is to reach poor women who are landless labourers, smallholder agricultural producers, cross-border traders and factory and domestic workers and ensure that these women have access to the opportunities and benefits of economic growth and trade. There are specific challenges when working with the poorest women such as: lower levels of literacy, lower levels of access to and control over resources, lower levels of access to networks and people who can assist and support, greater vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse at the community level, if not the household level. Such constraints require taking account of the specific needs of the poorest women in the design of programmes, including investments in infrastructure, such as roads and telecommunications. Also, women's economic rights can be further strengthened by improving national administrative and legal frameworks relating to land, inheritance and property rights.

Investing in gender equality yields some of the highest returns of all development efforts, with a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth. Aid statistics reported by the OECD show that in the years 2007 to 2009, gender-equality-focussed aid to the economic and productive sectors amounted to an average of USD 5.4 billion per year. The largest proportion (USD 2.4 billion or 44% of the total) went to agriculture and rural development, followed by banking/business, public financial management and urban development.

Questions:

1. *How to promote efficiently female entrepreneurship?*
2. *Are women central to the aid provided by governments to the economic and productive sectors*
3. *Is post-industrial society better adapted to women than to men?*