

OECD Forum 2011: Narrowing the Gender Gap



Generally, more women complete higher education than men in OECD countries and have longer life expectancy. But men earn more and hold positions of power.

Why is this happening, and what is the economic and social cost of not making the most of women's potential? Are girls' educational subject choices likely to maximise their career opportunities? Do quotas work in getting qualified women into decision-making positions? How to ensure equal access for women entrepreneurs to finance and funding?

Men earn 18% more than women on average in OECD countries, and only about a third of managerial posts are held by women. Many more women are in part-time jobs, and having children still impacts women's work choices far more than men's. Is the trend towards part-time work making matters worse?

While childcare is perceived as a women's issue – maternity leave, rather than parental leave, for example – employers may see women as less committed to the workplace, perpetuating poor career opportunities and lower pay.

But how to explain the fact that the gender pay gap is highest among high earners - are women selling themselves short?

Is the trend to part-time work among women in many countries undermining efforts to realise women's potential? Can quotas help kick-start the process of boosting women's participation on equal terms in business and finance, as has been tried in politics in some countries? How successful have such efforts been in countries that have used quotas?

Greater empowerment for women is also key to progress in the developing world. Education of girls is one of the most powerful tools for women's empowerment, but discrimination continues to keep girls out of school. Without a great leap forward towards achieving greater equality between women and men and increased empowerment of women and girls, none of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will be achieved. It is time to back up political promises with the investments and resources needed to do the job. Investing in women and girls has a powerful impact. It will make the world a better place for all – both women and men.

Government policies cannot be 'gender-blind'. If governments wish to create growth, employment and a better standard of living, policy advice which reflects gender differences is needed.

For example, women who go through higher education do not study the same subjects as men and this may contribute to them ending up in lower-paid jobs. On the other hand, taxation, childcare and parental leave policies can make it possible to have a career and look after a family.