

## POLICY HIGHLIGHTS



# Beyond pink-collar jobs for women and the social economy



**OECD**  
Global Action

Promoting  
Social & Solidarity  
Economy Ecosystems



This project is funded by the  
European Union

## About the OECD

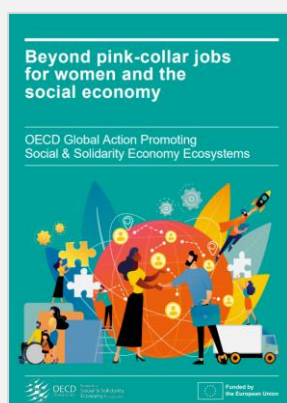
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## About the OECD Global Action “Promoting Social and Solidarity Economy Ecosystems”

In 2020, the OECD launched the Global Action “Promoting Social and Solidarity Economy Ecosystems”, funded by the European Union’s Foreign Partnership Instrument, to support the development and internationalisation of the social and solidarity economy. The Action focuses on two critical policy levers that can help unlock the potential of the SSE, namely legal frameworks and social impact measurement, while considering the entire policy ecosystem as a framework.



## Beyond pink-collar jobs for women and the social economy

The full book is accessible at

<https://doi.org/10.1787/44ba229e-en>

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# Women's participation in the social and solidarity economy: Pink-collar jobs and beyond

**Women represent a larger share of the labour force of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) relative to the share of women in the total labour force in a number of countries.** This share is estimated to exceed 60% in countries such as Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Women who work in SSE entities are mostly active in the services sector, reflecting the SSE's specialisation in social sectors, in particular in health, care services, education and social work, sectors and occupations that are often categorised as feminised and also referred to as "pink-collar jobs". For example, in France, the share of women in SSE personal and household services occupations is almost 96%.

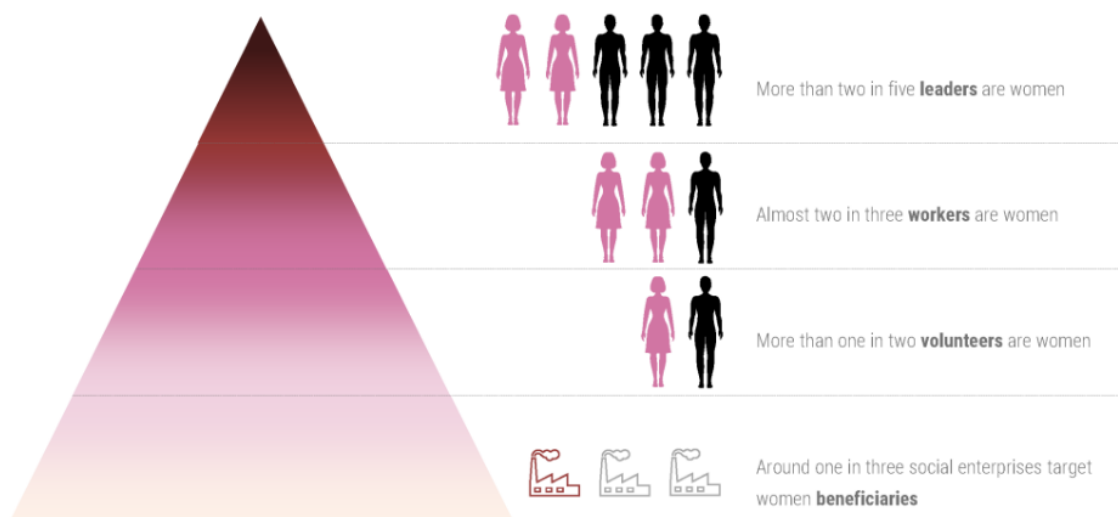
**Motivational factors might also explain why women are attracted to SSE entities as workers, founders and volunteers.** SSE entities have a social purpose, following practices and governance models based on principles such as solidarity, mutuality, the primacy of people over capital, and co-operation, which may also help motivate high female participation. SSE entities typically include associations and non-profits, co-operatives, mutual societies, foundations, and, more recently, social enterprises. Community-based, grassroots and spontaneous initiatives can also be part of the SSE.

**In many countries, SSE entities also offer flexible and often better working conditions, including part-time work.** These work arrangements can support a better work-life balance for all employees, particularly women, as care responsibilities in the personal sphere are often performed by women as unpaid labour. For example, in Spain, co-operatives and worker-owned companies (*sociedades laborales*) show higher levels of flexibility and job stability compared with other types of firms. More broadly, policies enabling part-time work can promote equal opportunities for men and women to contribute at home and at work by encouraging fathers to take more parental leave and do more caregiving throughout the life course. This could change societal expectations that mothers "should" be the parent who works part-time.

**Gender gaps in pay and leadership are often lower in the SSE, offering lessons for the rest of economy.** For example, in Türkiye, the share of women with managerial roles in social enterprises is reported at 65%, more than triple the rate in the total labour force (18%). In Spain, the gender gap in pay in the SSE are 8 percentage points smaller than in the private sector.

**SSE entities also support women's employment in the wider economy and the quality of employment for women.** SSE providers of care services help increase access to paid employment for women with caregiving responsibilities (for children, older individuals and others in need). For example, in the province of Québec, Canada, the vast majority of early childhood centres are run by SSE entities. In Sweden, around 10% of childcare is provided by co-operatives (Coompanion Sweden). Many SSE entities also address issues linked to women's health and employment quality, such as the provision of menstrual products (e.g. the Pad Project in the United States) or working conditions of foreign care workers (e.g. FairCare by Diakonie Württemberg, Germany).

## The social economy holds promising lessons to advance gender equality



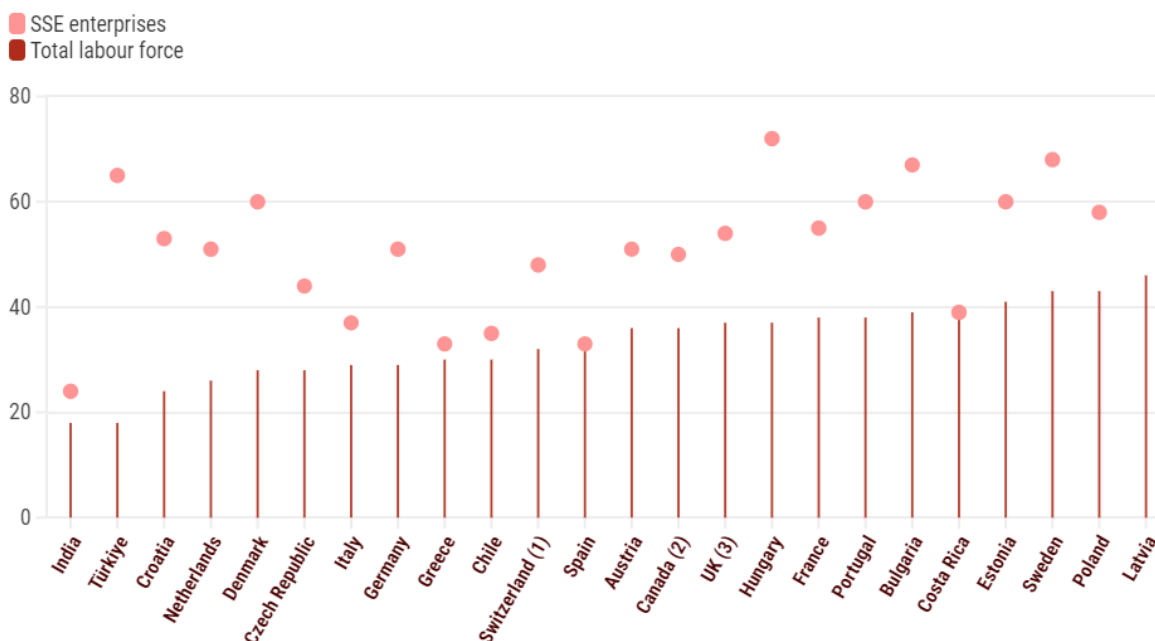
**The SSE may hold important lessons on reducing gender pay gaps and discrimination that policy makers could leverage.** Gender gaps in pay and leadership in the SSE tend to be lower than in the wider economy. More broadly, the values of the SSE, i.e. solidarity, the primacy of people over capital, and democratic and participative governance, can be strong drivers for tackling discrimination and achieving gender equality. For example, democratic and participative governance can empower women within entities and foster their promotion to decision-making positions. Further insights into the decision-making mechanisms of SSE entities and their respective influence on gender equality outcomes in labour force participation, leadership and pay, as well as the increased visibility of “women’s” issues, can help replicate the advancements of the SSE in the wider economy.

### However, it is not all rosy for women’s employment in the social and solidarity economy

“Pink-collar jobs” refer to historically feminised sectors/occupations (e.g., care, health, education), experiencing horizontal (into sectors) and vertical (into hierarchical roles) segregation. While pink-collar roles are essential, as shown by the COVID-19 crisis, the high concentration of women in these occupations tends to propagate and/or reinforce discriminating stereotypes around the jobs themselves and people that hold them. Societal conditioning and bias play a major role in perpetuating the general assumption that women are more suited for pink-collar occupations than men (e.g., women are depicted to be more caring, therefore they are better suited to work in the care economy and education). Pink-collar jobs are often paid less, devalued and lack clear opportunities for career advancement, making them less attractive for men. Ultimately, these factors reinforce obstacles for women to enter male-dominated jobs and discourage men’s participation in female-dominated jobs.

## Women typically represent a larger share of managers in social economy enterprises than in the wider economy

Share of management positions held by women, %



Source: Total labour force: OECD and key partners: (OECD.Stat 2022) 2021 or most recently available; other countries: (World Bank/ILOSTAT 2021) 2019 or most recently available. • (1) SSE entities: data for Geneva; (2) SSE entities: data for Québec. (3) SSE entities: Data for Scotland.

Made with Flourish

**Salaries are lower in the SSE than in the wider economy on average for all employees, regardless of gender.** For example, in France and Spain, pay in the SSE has been reported to be 19% lower than in the wider economy. The sectors where the SSE is most active partly explain the lower salaries. Pay can also be lower because SSE entities often grapple with funding and revenue pressures. As such, salaries and long-term positions appear particularly challenging and require SSE entities to manage and balance their staffing needs with financial sustainability. There are other socio-cultural factors about expectations that the (social) services where the SSE is active should limit wages. Boundaries between employment and volunteer work within the SSE may sometimes be blurred as people may be willing to lower their expectations for pay in exchange for other non-monetary factors.

**While gender gaps in the SSE are lower, and show promising results, in particular in pay, important gender gaps remain in access to leadership positions.** A disproportionate share of part-time and temporary work affects women's prospects in leadership and pay. Women are still under-represented at the highest level of management in particular types of SSE entities, such as associations (e.g., France) or foundations (e.g., Portugal).

**There is considerable scope for the SSE to diversify to digital and green sectors.** The digital and green transitions offer levers to increase women's participation in traditionally male-dominated, high-growth sectors. For example, in the digital transition, emerging forms of SSE structures such as platform co-operatives could offer new opportunities for women and with greater job quality than other platforms. In the green transition, while currently only 28% of green jobs are held by women (compared with 51% of non-green jobs), research shows that including more women in decision-making and leadership positions around the environment could bring more sustainable decisions and action.

## Policy makers can help advance gender equality in and through the social and solidarity economy

A number of actions could help drive gender equality in the SSE and beyond:

- **Increase awareness around gender issues and women's roles in the SSE**, including through improving the evidence base to measure progress. Acknowledging women's work and leadership in the SSE can reinforce women's empowerment more broadly. A first step is to mainstream gender equality into SSE policy frameworks. In France, Spain and the city of Medellín in Colombia, for example, women and gender equality considerations have been included in policy and legal frameworks.
- **Improve the evidence base on the SSE to be able to better transfer learnings to the wider economy**. Through the provision of more flexible working arrangements such as part-time or flexible working hours as well as potentially better career advancement prospects, the SSE can help increase women's participation in the labour force. Many SSE entities provide childcare services to their employees and members, for example in India and Brazil. Evidence on gender equality in the SSE can also be used to support transferable lessons to the wider economy. Many national-level initiatives in the SSE already include gender dimensions. Dedicated assessments on gender equality are being produced in some countries, e.g., France (triennial reports by the High Council on the Social and Solidarity Economy on gender equality). More internationally comparable data, for example on specific sectoral composition and job quality, could spur further progress.
- **Reinforce the SSE's capacity to support work-life balance and integration of women into the labour force more generally**, such as through the provision of care services or solutions that improve women's health. It can also serve the needs of any person with care responsibilities (including men). Public authorities can also partner with the SSE to provide more affordable childcare services, as is the case of early childcare centres in the province of Québec, Canada. Women's health is also a topic that many SSE entities try to tackle, improving labour market participation opportunities.
- **Improve job quality and reduce gender gaps further in leadership and pay in the SSE**, through increased valorisation of the essential services where they operate more generally, public procurement and data to track progress. Given the importance of the SSE as an employer, its concentration in essential sectors and the high prevalence of women in the SSE, improving the quality of work within the SSE can have wide-reaching effects, in particular on women. Policy makers can support the reduction of remaining gender gaps in employment, pay and leadership in the SSE by better understanding the drivers and barriers for gender equality. Engaging with women's self-help groups and unions can also help to improve job quality and women's bargaining power. For example, in India, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the largest trade union, provides social and legal protection, local networks and support groups as well as additional support services to over 21.1 million women across 18 Indian states.
- **Foster men's participation in health, care, education and social services** to promote greater gender equality where the SSE is highly present. Many initiatives for gender equality focus on attracting women into STEM (science, technology, engineering or mathematics) related fields; however, efforts to attract men to female-dominated jobs are less common and not well-developed. Campaigns such as those used by the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom to increase the share of male nurses can help attract more men to these jobs. Recent research into gender-specific strategies could provide insights to address gender disparities in career choices. More broadly, moving beyond categorisations such as pink and blue collar can help break invisible barriers for both men and women.

- **Diversify the SSE and women’s participation into green and digital sectors**, to contribute to solutions for other social challenges and promote gender equality. Dedicated women’s networks can support women’s involvement in these sectors. In the province of Ontario, Canada, the Women in Renewable Energy Network runs a job board, capacity-building programmes, mentoring and meetups to increase women’s participation in the sector and support the creation of more inclusive workplaces. Sectoral strategies and the promotion of women-led business in public contracting can also address the sectoral segregation of women into female-dominated jobs. The state of Victoria, in Australia, for example has mainstreamed gender equality into its procurement strategy with the explicit goal to foster women- and minority-led (social) businesses.
- **Increase access to finance and tailored training for women social entrepreneurs** to boost women’s leadership as well as diversification of the SSE. Providing education and training on specific skills where women show greater gaps can help them to overcome barriers to employment and leadership, such as for increasingly important digital skills. Projects such as the EU3Digital project can help the specific needs of women in the SSE. Furthermore, capacity-building measures conducted by women social entrepreneur networks such as Empow’Her support women seeking to enter social entrepreneurship and obtain funding. The Women Entrepreneurship Initiative in Atlanta, Georgia, United States, also brings together specific incubation efforts, including access to financing and funding, tailored for women (social) entrepreneurs.

## How to move beyond pink-collar jobs for women and the social economy

