

# Closing the gender gap: Have we reached the tipping point?

Written by: Gabriela Ramos, OECD Chief of Staff and Sherpa to the G20

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**As we celebrate International Women’s Day and continue to increase awareness, I am pleased to say that gender issues are not issues just for a day at the OECD. All year long we promote gender equality—in our member and partner countries and inside the organisation. Indeed, if there is any real progress, it is in the level of awareness that we have to make progress on this agenda. In fact, this year’s global theme for International Women’s Day is #Press for Progress. But where are we on that?**

The OECD’s report, *The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle*, shows there’s further to go. There has been progress in some areas, for example, education, where girls in OECD countries now outperform boys and are reaching higher levels of education.

Gender gaps in employment have also narrowed, although we continue to have differences of 10 percentage points or more, with some countries like my own (Mexico) reaching 30. We have made progress in bringing this issue to the leaders’ agenda at the G20 and G7, and establishing a target of narrowing of the gap in labour force participation: the OECD helped establish at the 2014 Brisbane Summit.

Nowadays, gender is a cross-cutting issue both in the G20 and the G7, and I am proud to have contributed so that this is the case.

We are promoting inspiring role models through the *NiñasSTEM Pueden*, and have worked to increase leadership in the public sector. We are developing tools like the gender budgeting or the SIGI index of discriminatory cultural norms. But even if the effort is there, it doesn’t translate into fast change.

Even with higher levels of education, girls are not well represented in rewarding disciplines like science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). And in developing countries they are still lagging behind. The digital revolution is also opening another worrisome divide with girls lagging behind in the ICT world, in the production of software—90% of which is produced by men—on capital for their start ups, and on representation in ICT industries. The different algorithms in the

AI world may be reproducing the biases of the analogue world. While the new technologies will open up opportunities that are more flexible, they can also be linked to low-quality jobs.

We still have a wage gap of 15% in OECD countries and there are still many positions in senior management, public leadership and entrepreneurship that are unreachable for women: the private sector is really lagging behind. In 2016, women made up only 4.8% of CEOs. Women who dare to become entrepreneurs have less access to finance and networks. No wonder until last year, the Mexican Council of Businessmen was just that: only men.

Politics is better, but not much. Women held 28.7% of seats in lower houses of OECD parliaments. Progress has been slow in breaking the glass ceiling but also in cleaning the sticky floor! Some countries promote gender balance on company boards and affirmative action in public office—quotas are the only measures that seem to be effective, quickly. And while quotas need to be carefully designed, they do not come with great risks. My country now has parity in the Federal Congress and even though the quota generated doubts regarding the competencies of women that arrived in their jobs thanks to quotas, I would underline in defence that this is exactly the case for men, who not only reach high-level positions without a quota, but also without competency checks.

And then you have the really serious issue of violence against women: 35% of all women have experienced sexual violence. This happens all over the world but it is a particularly difficult problem in developing countries with weak justice institutions, or with violent practices like genital mutilation or early marriage. In Niger, 3 out of 4 girls are married before their 18th birthday. Some 36 countries do not have specific legislation to address sexual harassment. And yes, many girls are subject to exploitation and slavery.

That's why we commend the UK's initiative on Modern Slavery and the leadership of people like Nobel Prize winner Kailash Satyarthi, who is working to save hundreds of thousands of children from the slave trade. For our part, the OECD last month launched the Call to Action to protect migrant children.

### **Analysis and solutions**

So, why are we not tipping over into gender equality yet? Notwithstanding progress in public awareness and policies in many countries, lack of equality has much to do with entrenched gender-bias in cultural patterns and institutions, beliefs and behaviours. Cultural norms are especially strong in some developing countries and this concerns women and men. For example, in Afghanistan, 80% of women believe domestic violence can be justified for certain reasons.

These gender norms have enormous spillover effects on the rest of society, and purely economically speaking, they are costly: last year, the OECD estimated that

gender discrimination in laws, attitudes and practices costs the global economy close to US\$12 trillion.

Cultures and norms define gender roles, both at work and at home. The sharing of caring responsibilities—of children and the elderly—is still seen as a woman’s role. In OECD countries, women spend an average of over 1.5 hours per day on unpaid work; in Mexico it’s a staggering 4.5 hours per day.

Women’s careers are also more likely to be “non-linear” and interrupted to care for family members. These gender norms are everywhere—in the home, at school and in the workplace. And they’re hard to counter—unconscious bias is strong.

Studies have shown that while 69% of people explicitly say they believe men and women are equally effective leaders, 55% of people implicitly associate leadership with men only. And the media and social networks are not helping. In our PISA study on the well-being of students, we have found that pressure and cyberbullying is affecting boys and girls, but for girls it is always related to their image and impossible role models. Girls at age 15 rate their life satisfaction 10 points lower than boys do.

Of course, we need better policies, parental leave for fathers, flexible working arrangements and good quality childcare to enable both parents to work. We need better education and encouragement of girls at school. We need gender-blind textbooks and teachers that can deal with them. We need quotas in business and support for women entrepreneurs. But countries are doing a lot of this and we still have a gap. We need a culture change, and this is not only about women. It is about men and women who are conscious and respectful of human dignity, and who can build balanced and caring societies. The same way we have stereotypes for women, we have stereotypes for men who have to be warriors, who have to show no mercy in competition and work 18 hours a day. And, they cannot cry. It’s not a fantastic model.

Cultural change for gender equality requires system change. It is not only about women “leaning in” but, as the Australian Ambassador to France said to me, it’s about men “reaching out”. It’s about making a system that works for both men and women. This calls for sound policies, powerful role models and appropriate capacities and resources. Let’s ask ourselves: how gender-sensitive are the policies that we are putting in place—from education and employment to banking and housing? Are they good for all, or only for certain groups of the population? How do we know? Are our policies equally benefitting men and women?

We need to systematically adopt a gender lens across all policymaking and budget processes, and ensure sufficient resources, capacity and political will to see how men and women are impacted differently by our policies and systems. This is why we are launching the OECD Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality today.

This toolkit will help governments, parliaments and judiciaries design gender-sensitive public policies and services through self-assessment and help them identify what works or what is missing. It's full of examples of effective practices to support the implementation of policies and initiatives.

It considers that gender issues need to be cross-cutting and that it should be mainstream in all decisions. Five key actions are identified:

- Strategy: Gender Equality Strategies must be integrated into overall national priorities or strategies.
- Roles and responsibilities: it requires identifying who is in charge of this agenda.
- Tools and data: policymakers need to know how to implement a gender lens, including through gender impact assessment.
- Accountability: policymakers need to know if what they're doing is working.
- Parity: men and women from diverse backgrounds need to be part of decision-making on an equal basis of 50/50 across the board, spanning all leadership roles.

I hope this will help countries bridge the implementation gap.

We have made progress. I am optimistic and I believe we are reaching the tipping point: the younger generation is more gender-progressive about women's equal role in society and there is evidence that attitudes are evolving with time. This isn't just about women, it's about men, children and building more caring societies. This is why the OECD is pursuing an agenda of well-being and inclusive growth.

We are really putting the person—the women, men and children—at the centre of our policies.

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