Gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals

by
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The push for policies to improve gender equality at the global level is getting new impetus through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG No. 5 is devoted to gender equality and aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. The goal’s detailed targets refer to a range of challenges, such as discrimination of women, violence against women, reproductive health, ownership rights and technology. Global progress in reaching these targets has been uneven. Despite impressive progress in enrolling girls in primary education, for example, gender equality in many other domains is still in far reach in the developing world.

This does not mean, however, that advanced economies can lean back and close the file. No single OECD country can claim to have achieved full gender equality. Women are now as well or even better educated than men in most countries and their participation in the labour market has increased, but they still spend fewer hours in paid work per week than their partners. And even the most advanced countries, such as the Nordics, where women are well integrated in the labour markets, are faced with stubbornly high gender wage gaps and a continued lack of women in senior management positions, for example.

The consensus is growing that traditional gender stereotypes and roles are standing in the way of further progress in closing the gender gaps. In literally all countries for which data exist women do more unpaid work than men. As a result they have less time for paid work and fewer opportunities to develop their careers. Policy makers are thus starting to focus more on a better sharing of caring responsibilities and domestic work. This new policy direction is also reflected in one of the targets under SDG 5 which calls upon governments to “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate”.

New evidence from the OECD shows that countries with the smallest gender gaps in caring responsibilities also have the smallest gender gaps in employment rates. On average, female partners spend twice as much time in unpaid work at home than their partners. Couples where women participate more in the labour
market, also appear to have a better gender balance in their cooking, caring and cleaning chores. But sadly this is not due to men doing more at home. The reason is that partnered women and dual-earner couples overall do less unpaid work.

Parenthood marks a turning point in the way couples share household and caring tasks. When a child arrives couples often revert to more traditional gender roles. Mothers may spend more time with their children than fathers, but fathers spend a larger proportion of their childcare time with “quality” interactive activities such as reading, playing and talking with the child than mothers.

The reasons why women do more unpaid work are manifold; some women prefer fewer hours in paid work or to not work in a paid job at all, particularly when they have young children. But many other women would like to be in paid work and/or work more hours. But they struggle to reconcile work and family life due to constraints such as limited access to affordable and good quality childcare or flexible working hours. OECD analysis has also revealed several other factors that may influence the sharing of unpaid work among partners, such as family size, education and/or the relative earnings potential of partners. Gender inequality in the public sphere, societal attitudes, and policies, in particular parental leave arrangements, are also associated with different levels of sharing across countries.

In 2014, G20 leaders adopted a common goal of reducing the gender gap in labour force participation by 25% by 2025. Better sharing of unpaid and paid work will be an important element of any strategy to reach this ambitious target. But change will not happen if gender equality is only pushed by women and for women. Men need to be champions as well if barriers and gender stereotypes are to be broken down. And there is a lot in it for men too. They will be able to spend more time with their family without harming their careers, if this becomes more of a shared norm. There will be more freedom to choose one’s role in society and less pressure for men to be the sole or main breadwinner of the family. Having more income from women’s work will provide greater financial security for their households and reduce overall income inequality. Men, like women, will benefit equally from broader effects of more gender equality, such as stronger economic growth, higher productivity, and
improved sustainability of social protection systems. And children will not only be happier to spend more time with both of their parents, but as they grow up, they will find it normal for fathers to spend more time at home and mothers to spend more time at work. More gender equality is thus a win-win proposition, everyone has to gain from it.

Useful links


OECD work on gender equality: www.oecd.org/gender