

Why is gender still an issue?

Is gender becoming just one factor among many that divides society, or is it the main division? Women live longer than men and female students are now outperforming males in many areas of education. The unemployment surge during the recession that followed the 2007 crisis affected men more than women. On the other hand, women are underrepresented in positions of economic and political power and bear a greater share of family burdens.

“Women ... conform to the dominant code and way of working, they learn that challenging women are likely to find themselves excluded, marginalized and labelled difficult, weak or incompetent ... This is especially the case for women who are innovative in their field.”

Su Maddock, “Gender Still Matters and Impacts on Public Value and Innovation and the Public Reform Process”, *Public Policy and Administration*, 2009, 24/2
<http://ppa.sagepub.com>

“... the 134 countries covered in the report, representing over 90% of the world’s population, have closed almost 96% of the gap on health outcomes between women and men and almost 93% of the gap on educational attainment. However, ... only 59% of the economic outcomes gap and only 18% of the political outcomes gap has been closed.”

The Global Gender Gap Report 2010, World Economic Forum, Geneva
www3.weforum.org

“It does appear that on many, many different human attributes—height, weight, propensity for criminality, overall IQ, mathematical ability, scientific ability ... there is a difference in the standard deviation, and variability of a male and a female population. And that is true with respect to attributes that are and are not plausibly, culturally determined.”

Lawrence H. Summers, “Remarks at NBER Conference on Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce”, 14 January 2005
www.harvard.edu



New times, old perspectives?

» The long road towards gender equality has arrived at greater educational attainment, higher female labour force participation, and advances in politics and business, but we haven't reached the end yet.

Even though in OECD countries 40% of women versus 31% of men obtain a tertiary degree, only 65% of women versus 79% of men participate in the labour force, and they earn 16% less than men and face a higher risk of poverty in old age. With few exceptions, women's representation on corporate boards is under 15% and in parliaments it is rarely above 35%.

Why do the old challenges persist? Partly because the "new" role of women in the economy has not translated into a change at the family level. Women devote over two hours a day more to unpaid work than men in OECD countries (and up to five hours more in other countries).

Although it is hard to disentangle the influence of family, social attitudes, institutions or the working environment on choices, allowing equal economic opportunities is an important long-term investment for individuals and society alike. Indeed, as well as the moral imperative, women's active contribution to the economy results in better use of human resources

and greater potential growth. It also helps to address growing demographic concerns and to promote innovation and competitiveness in business.

In that regard though, the number of women enrolled in science courses is still higher than the number of women actually employed in research or other technical fields, partly because of the organisational structure of the workplace. Male-dominated environments can be an obstacle for a woman, especially if as a mother she has to put in long hours and travel at short notice.

That said, men might be under pressure too. What does your average employer think when his male employee takes sick leave because his children are ill or says no to a business trip because of an upcoming birthday?

It is clear that equality does not take care of itself and that policy interventions are required. But this should be complemented by men and women joining forces and sharing responsibilities. Dad can cook the dinner and let Mum take the kids to the football game.

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"At the moment I want to be a dancer or a doctor. When I grow up I'm going to have two babies and work part-time in the shop." 11-year-old Scottish girl in a study of attitudes to violence against women.

Lucy Adams, "Children 'Find Violence Acceptable'", *The Herald*, 15 February 2010
www.heraldscotland.com

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