



Differences in opportunities and outcomes for women and men are common in all countries.

Women have lower average workplace participation rates than men, lower wages and lower retirement incomes. They hold fewer seats in national parliaments and fewer senior roles in the judiciary. They are under-represented on company boards and are less likely to be CEOs or to hold senior positions in the public sector.

Women experience poverty more often and more intensely than men, perform the majority of unpaid care work in the home and community, and are more often victims of domestic and conflict-based sexual violence than men.

Recent reports by global institutions such as the World Economic Forum, the IMF, World Bank and ILO show that progress towards gender equality has stalled on many fronts. Economic disparity between women and men is increasing due to persistent differences in wages and employment, even though in many countries women have higher educational attainment than men.

Persistent gender inequality in economic and political life is of increasing concern to the international community because of its negative impact on economic growth, productivity, stability and peace. The positive news is that gender inequality can be reduced. International research evidence points to the type of policy initiatives that can promote gender justice and fairness.

Gender equality policies + enabling institutional environment



empowerment



improved gender equality outcomes

The ILO describes gender equality as ‘a matter of human rights, social justice and sustainable development’. It defines **gender equality** as:

*The enjoyment of equal rights, opportunities and treatment by men and women and by boys and girls in all spheres of life. It asserts that people’s rights, responsibilities, social status and access to resources do not depend on whether they are born male or female. It does not mean, however, that men and women are the same or must become the same ... gender equality implies that all men and women are free to develop their personal abilities and make life choices without the limitations set by stereotypes or prejudices about gender roles or the characteristics of men and women. In the context of decent work, gender equality embraces equality of opportunity and treatment, equality of remuneration and access to safe and healthy working environments, equality in association and collective bargaining, equality in obtaining meaningful career development, maternity protection, and a balance between work and home life that is fair to both men and women.*

The pathway to **greater gender equality outcomes** is made up of three stepping stones:

- gender equality policies;
- an enabling institutional environment;
- women’s empowerment.

Achieving greater equality between women and men is possible when these three aspects of change are activated.

## Gender equality policies

Gender equality policies are measures that support fairness in the treatment of women and men. Treating women fairly means that public policy, business and human resource strategies must take account of the differences in women and men’s life experiences, and implement policies that compensate for the traditional division of labour and women’s social and historical disadvantage.

In the workplace, gender equality policies such as paid maternity leave and guaranteed employment on return to work, flexible work arrangements for employees with caring responsibilities and carers leave, allow women to remain engaged in paid work and attached to the workforce even while they provide care. A fair workplace will ensure equal pay for work of equal or comparable value and reduce workplace discrimination on the basis of gender.

Policies to support women’s retention in the workplace help to shift employer attitudes, break down gender stereotypes and support women’s fair treatment in training, promotion and leadership. In some countries legislated gender quotas (usually understood to be mandatory) and targets (usually understood to be voluntary) have been used effectively to increase the number of women employed in senior management positions. Similar policies can be applied to attracting women to ‘non-traditional’ occupations.

## Policies for gender equality in the workplace

Gender neutral job descriptions and recruitment policies	Equal pay for women and men performing work of equal or comparable value	Paid maternity and paternity leave and job guarantee on return to work	Right to flexible working hours or part-time work
No discrimination in hourly pay between full-time and part-time workers	Lactation facilities	Paid carers leave	Gender equality targets/quotas in recruitment and promotion to senior leadership roles

Gender equality initiatives in the workplace can remove many of the barriers to women’s full and equal participation in the workforce. They help create a level playing field for male and female employees in recruitment, retention, promotion and leadership, and deliver positive results for business. But to achieve gender equality outcomes such measures need to be supported by an enabling institutional environment.

### An enabling institutional environment

Gender equality policies in the workplace are essential but not sufficient for equality outcomes. Such policies must be supported by an enabling institutional environment in which women and men have equal rights.

The institutional environment is shaped by the national legislative framework, workplace cultures and normative ideas about women and men’s roles in work and society. It is within the broad institutional environment that women make choices about when to do paid work, how much and what type of paid work they should pursue.

Gender sensitive labour and discrimination laws, inclusive workplace cultures, media and public discourse about women’s positive role in society support the uptake and success of gender equality policies in the workplace. These interventions promote an institutional environment that facilitates women’s freedom to choose how they want to work, care and contribute to society. An enabling institutional environment empowers women to participate in the economy and public life in ways that improve gender equality.

### Women’s empowerment

Women’s empowerment plays a critical role in socio-economic transformation. Leading gender scholar Naila Kabeer defines empowerment as ‘the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability’.

Research on women’s empowerment points to the critical role that the broad institutional environment plays in supporting women’s freedom to choose how they live and work.

Resources and policies alone are not sufficient to affect change and achieve gender equality. It is the institutional environment that provides the context within which those resources and policies can be strategically deployed by women (or not).

Empowerment is therefore shaped by:

- a person (or group’s) subjective experience and capacity to exercise control over their lives;
- access to economic resources and other forms of social power;
- an enabling institutional environment.

This approach aligns with economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen’s influential capabilities framework. Sen draws an important distinction between ‘capabilities’ – combinations of potential doings and beings that reflect a person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another – and ‘functionings’ – what people actually do and be.

In making the distinction between capabilities and functionings, resources are located within their broad institutional context and attention is focused on the

## An institutional framework for gender equality

National gender-discrimination legislation or affirmative action legislation	Equal pay for equal and comparable work legislation	Sexual harassment in the workplace legislation	Legislated protection for workers with family and caring responsibilities
National care infrastructure – especially aged, child and disability care	Safe and affordable public transport	Positive national discourse and imagery about women and girls in education, politics and public life	

social, cultural and institutional structures that shape a person's capacity to freely deploy them to achieve a life they value. When applied to women's empowerment, this approach highlights the importance of women's agency and voice as part of the process of economic empowerment that delivers gender equality outcomes.



## Investing in women for gender equality

Gender equality demands that women and men have equal freedom to make choices about the life they want to live unhindered by gender stereotypes, roles and prejudices and that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities as citizens are not determined by whether they are born male or female.

Gender equality measures delivered within the context of an enabling institutional environment will support women's empowerment and promote gender equality outcomes. This is a long term project, but one that starts with simple, well designed interventions at the workplace and changed attitudes – such as equality of opportunity for women and men in recruitment, promotion and leadership; equal pay; equal access to union representation and collective bargaining, maternity protection; and equal access to policies that help to reconcile work and family responsibilities.

Promoting gender equality measures is a way of investing in women and improving their lives, the lives of those who they care for and the community at large. Investing in women will also lead to improved business outcomes, socio-economic security and fairer societies.

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