

Key Points

- Although women make up half the world's population, only four in every 10 workers are women. Closing the gender gap in the global labor force could result in significant economic gains.
- In Asia and the Pacific, women work mainly in the service sector. Most work in jobs lacking formal arrangements—that is, vulnerable employment. In managerial positions as well, there is still a glass ceiling for women.
- Legislation and concrete plans of action are required to address gender discrimination in the workplace and promote women's participation at work.
- Governments should direct their efforts into implementing legal frameworks, programs, and policies to help overcome social norms and cultural gender biases and achieve gender equality in the workforce.

Toward Gender-Focused Governance Reform in Asia

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The global population is composed of an almost equal proportion of men and women. In contrast, the global labor force is disproportionately male. Only four in every 10 workers in the global labor force are women.¹ Similar discrepancies between the women's share in the population and the labor force are reported in Asia and the Pacific, specifically in Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea (Figure 1). India has the widest gap (about 23 percentage points) between the population and labor force shares, which are 48% and 25% female, respectively.

The gender labor force participation rate shows the contribution of each gender to the labor force, expressed as a percentage of the total population of each gender (aged 15+) in the country (Figure 2). The male labor participation rate in Asia and the Pacific is about 71%–89%. The female labor force participation rate varies widely, from a high of 81% in Cambodia to a very low rate of only 27% in India. The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Viet Nam recorded high female participation rates of 77% and 73%, respectively. In Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea, only 50% of the female population is part of the labor force.

These discrepancies—in the women's share in the population and labor force (Figure 1) and the relatively low female participation in the labor force (Figure 2)—point to untapped human resources potential. Therefore, the presence of conditions that hinder the ability of women to realize their full abilities has economic consequences.

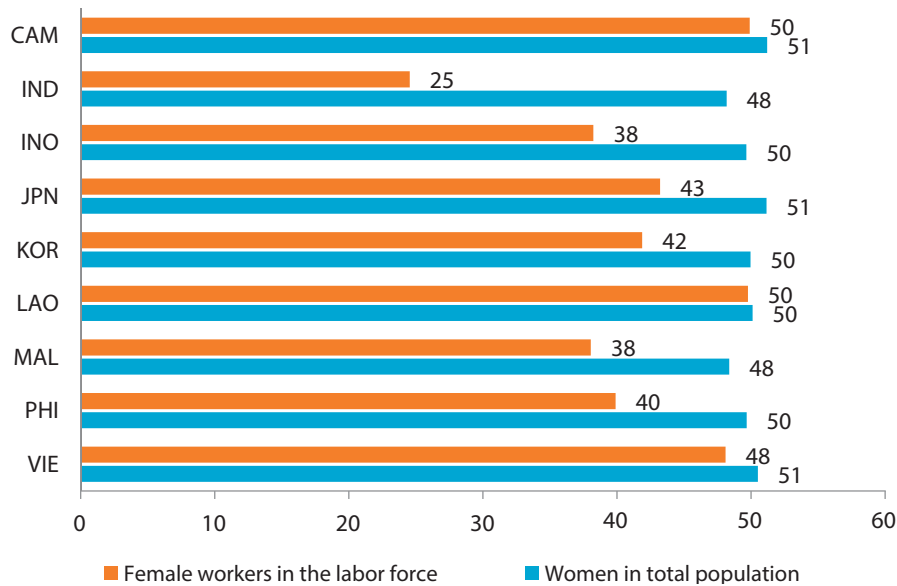
As defined by the United Nations (UN) Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, UN Women, “gender equality” means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural, and political development.² The absence of equality between men and women is a pressing global issue. Gender bias—denying women

1 Statistics on the female population are from World Bank staff estimates based on the age and sex distributions of the United Nations Population Division's *World Population Prospects*. Global labor force data are from the International Labour Organization ILOSTAT database, and World Bank population estimates are available at <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/source/gender-statistics#>.

2 For concepts and definitions with a gender perspective, see UN Women. Gender Equality Glossary.

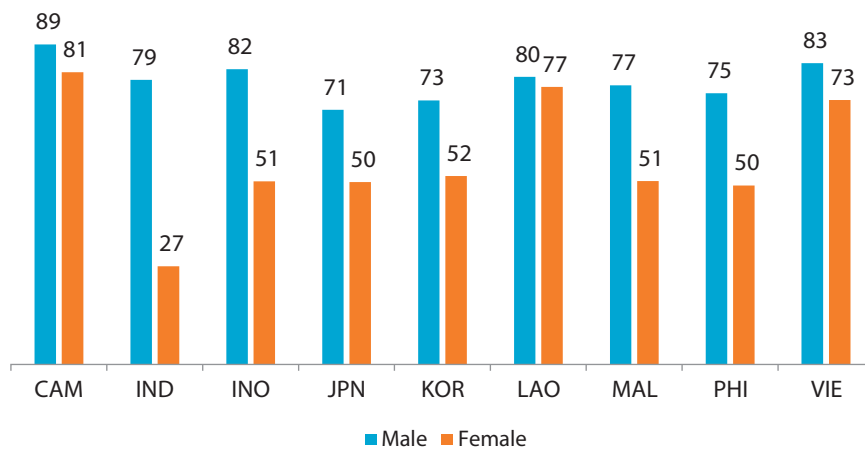


Figure 1 Share of Women in the Labor Force and Total Population, 2017 (%)



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT, and World Bank population estimates.

Figure 2 Labor Participation Rate by Gender, 2017 (%)



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT, and World Bank population estimates.

the opportunity to live life at its fullest—is tantamount to throwing away half of the world’s human potential, leading to the stagnation of social and economic progress.³ Consequently, the UN declared gender equality as goal 5 among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals for a better world by 2030.⁴

Women20 (W20), an official G20 engagement group, is tasked with formulating concrete recommendations to advance gender equality in G20 negotiations. W20 advocates women’s economic empowerment as fundamental for a prosperous world. Women’s inclusion in the labor market can be improved by increasing

³ See the Global Goals for Sustainable Development. Goal 5: Gender Equality.
⁴ See United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2016).

their participation rate and counting the value of work traditionally done by women in gross domestic product (GDP) measurements.

In 2015, the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI 2015) estimated the global economic potential from achieving gender parity at \$12 trillion–\$25 trillion of additional annual GDP in 2025. Closing the global gender gap in work could double the contribution of women to global GDP growth between 2014 and 2025. The MGI further narrowed its scope to the Asia and Pacific region in its 2018 gender parity report. It concluded that advancing women’s equality could result in an estimated \$4.5 trillion of additional annual GDP in 2025 for the countries in the region (MGI 2018). India, where only 27% of the female population is in the labor force, stands to reap the most from improving gender equality, estimated at 17.6% above the country’s business-as-usual GDP. This translates to \$770 billion of additional annual GDP in 2025 (Figure 3).

Women at Work

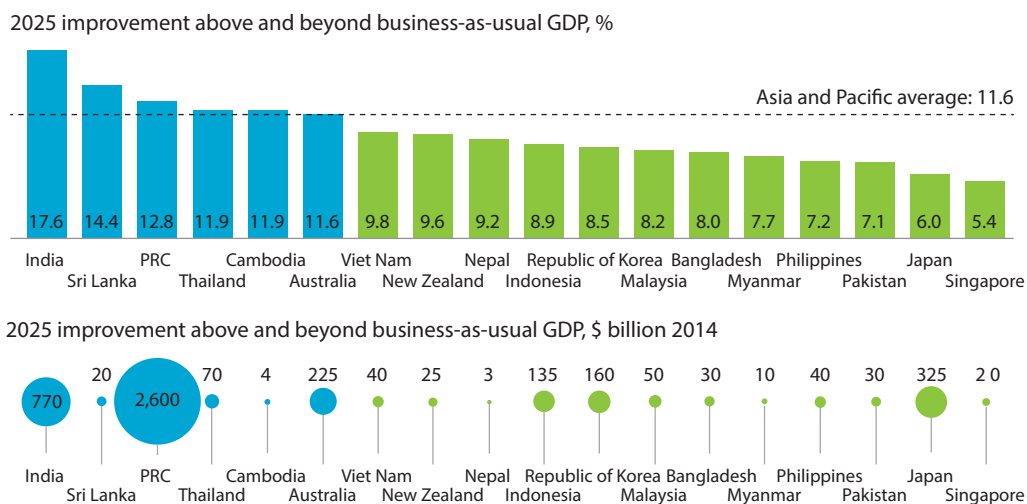
Globally, working women are predominantly employed in the service sector—about 57% of the female labor force. The service sector is also the dominant employer in Asia and the Pacific (Figure 4). Even in agricultural economies, such as Indonesia, the Lao PDR, and Viet Nam, a large proportion of women are also employed in the

service sector. In contrast, the industry sector, which is characterized as providing better-quality jobs (David, Albert, and Vizmanos 2017a), hires a small portion of the female labor force.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) describes “vulnerable employment” as jobs that are less likely to have formal work arrangements. These occupations are more likely to lack decent working conditions, adequate social security, and effective representation by trade unions and similar organizations. Inadequate earnings, low productivity, and difficult work conditions that undermine workers’ fundamental rights are characteristics of such employment (ILO 2010). It is alarming that a larger percentage of women than men in the labor force is exposed to vulnerable employment (Figure 5). Moreover, most women work in vulnerable employment occupations in Cambodia, Indonesia, India, the Lao PDR, and Viet Nam.

Labor data from the Philippines show that industry groups can be classified as either male dominated or female dominated (Figure 6). Certain positions seem to be filled based on gender, either because of physical requirements or social norms. Household, education, and human health and social work activities are female-dominated industries; domestic workers, teachers, and nurses are usually women. In contrast, male-dominated industries include construction, transportation and storage, fishing, and mining and quarrying.

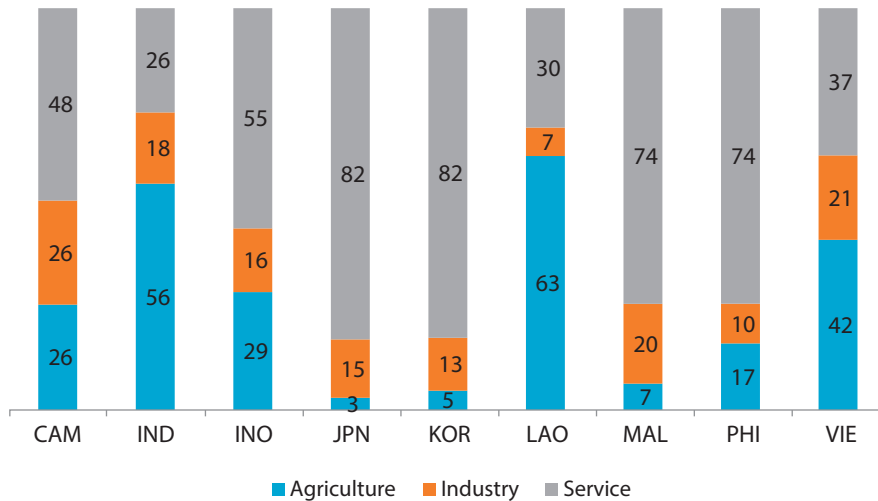
Figure 3 Incremental 2025 GDP from Improving Gender Equality



GDP = gross domestic product, PRC = People’s Republic of China.

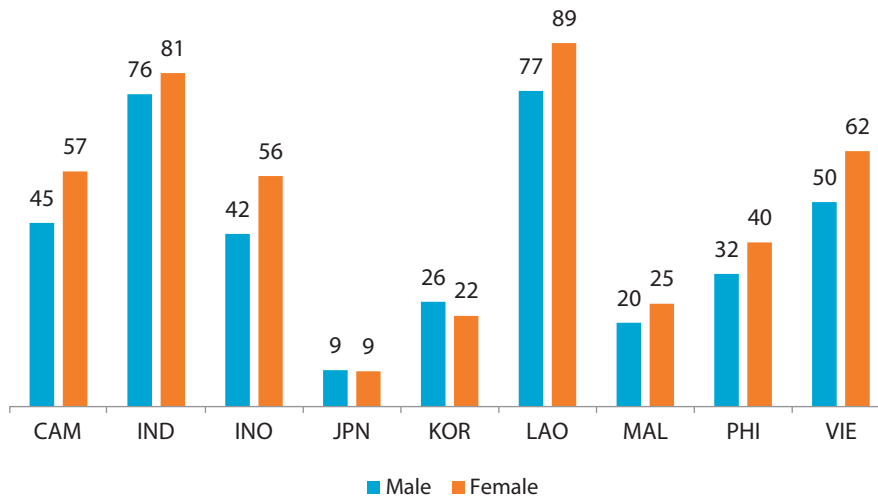
Source: McKinsey Global Institute.

Figure 4 Female Employment by Sector, 2017 (%)



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT, and World Bank population estimates.

Figure 5 Vulnerable Employment by Gender, 2017 (%)

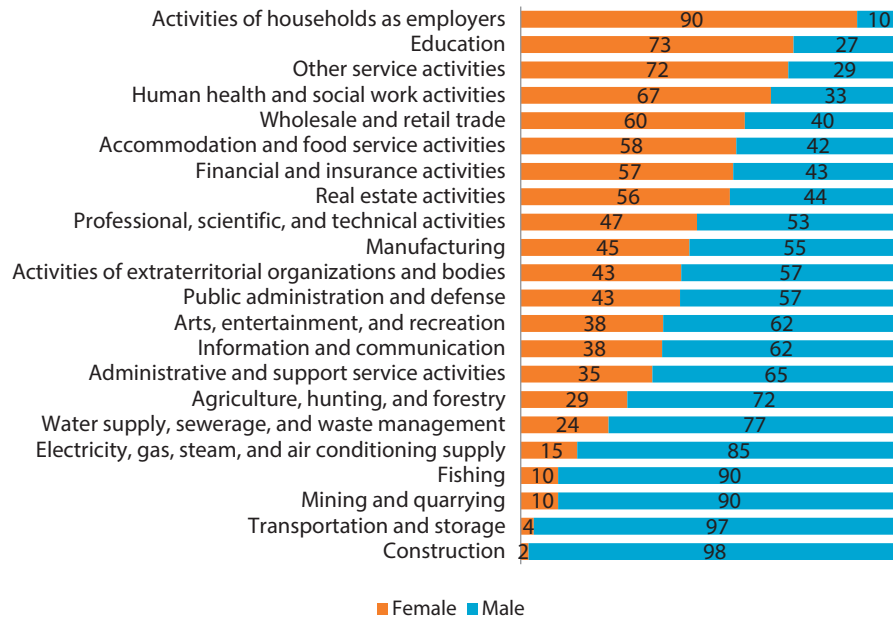


Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT, and World Bank population estimates.

Data show that there is still a glass ceiling in various labor markets. ILO data for the Philippines show a decreasing percentage of women in senior and middle management levels. In 2003, women made up 59% of senior and middle managers. This was cut almost in half to 33% in 2016 (Figure 7). Moreover, only 30% of firms had female top managers in 2016 (ILO 2016). Women’s ability to be part of the decision-making process is an important

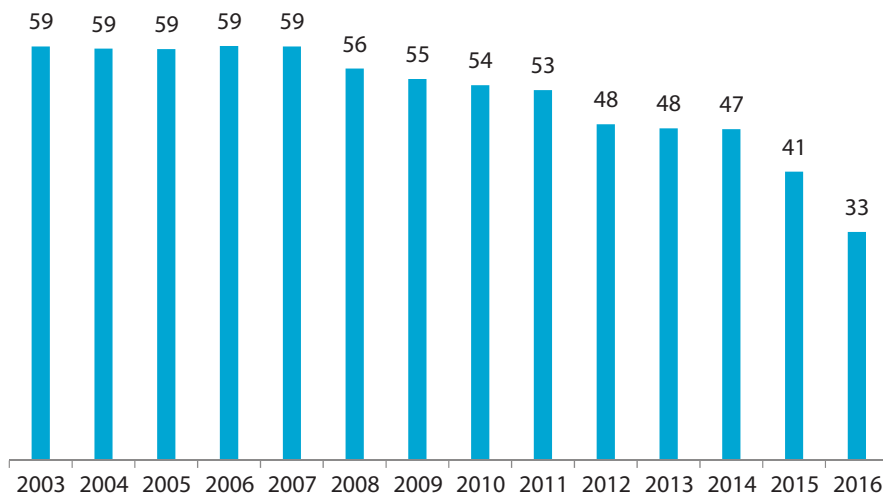
component in narrowing the gender gap. However, the societal expectations for wives and mothers to prioritize their family responsibilities over their careers have led working women to voluntarily opt out of promotions, transfer positions, change industries, and scale back working hours (David, Albert, and Vizmanos 2017b). In the Republic of Korea and Japan, the M-curve of labor supply over the life cycle illustrates women

Figure 6 Distribution of Labor Force by Industry Group in the Philippines, 2017 (%)



Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (2016).

Figure 7 Share of Women in Senior and Middle Management in the Philippines, 2003–2016 (%)



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT.

leaving the labor market to focus on child-rearing (Kim, Lee, and Shin 2016; Nishimura 2016). In contrast, men are not restricted to make this prioritization and are unencumbered to pursue career advancements (David,

Albert, and Vizmanos 2017a). Women’s childcare and home management responsibilities are critical issues for women in the labor force in most countries, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam.

Policies for Women Empowerment and Gender Equality

The persistence of gender bias and gender gaps in economic opportunities most often stems from patriarchal attitudes and related social norms (UN DESA 2018). Government intervention, through the legislation and execution of concrete plans of action, is a crucial component in addressing deeply rooted gender discrimination and achieving gender equality.

Legal Framework

Governments enact laws to uphold women's rights and prevent discrimination and violence against women. In 2014, the UN reported that 143 countries had guaranteed the equality of men and women in their respective constitutions. However, 52 countries had not yet made this commitment (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2016).

The Philippines enacted the Magna Carta of Women (MCW) in 2008. The law aims to eliminate discrimination against women through the recognition, protection, fulfillment, and promotion of the rights of Filipino women. Further, the MCW promotes the empowerment of women, pursues equal opportunities for women and men, and ensures equal access to resources and to development results and outcomes. Among the salient features of the law are (i) an increase in the number of women in third-level (or director-level) positions in government to achieve gender balance within 5 years, while the composition of women in all levels of development planning and program implementation will be increased to at least 40%; (ii) equal access and elimination of discrimination in education, scholarships, and training; (iii) nondiscrimination in employment, promotion, and other opportunities in the field of military, police, and similar services; and (d) the nondiscriminatory and nonderogatory portrayal of women in media and film to raise the consciousness of the general public in recognizing the dignity of women as well as the role and contribution of women in the family, community, and society through the strategic use of mass media. The MCW mandates all levels of government to adopt gender mainstreaming as a strategy for implementing the law and attaining its objectives (Philippine Commission on Women 2010).

Various countries have enacted laws similar to the MCW that guarantee gender equality in the eyes of the state. The Republic of Korea passed the Act on Gender Equality,

which addresses the issues of (i) gender mainstreaming; (ii) the participation of women in government and leadership positions; (iii) antidiscrimination, sexual harassment, and violence; and (iv) gender equality in the media, education, and family. Cambodia's 5-year strategic plan (2014–2018) for gender equality and women's empowerment, *Neary Rattanak IV*, provides economic empowerment to women by increasing their access to skills training, employment, productive resources, social protection, and decision making in the economic sector.

The Lao PDR's Law on the Development and Protection of Women promulgates the promotion and protection of gender equality in the family. To protect women from arranged marriages, the law grants adult women the freedom to choose their partner to build their families with. Daughters and sons are granted equal inheritance rights to property and education. Husband and wives are given equal rights to decision making within the family and in matrimonial properties.

An important component of the legal framework for the promotion of women empowerment is the protection of women against violence. In the Philippines, the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act was promulgated in 2004, which defines violence to include physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. The law provides protective measures for victims and prescribes penalties for the abusers and liable persons. Cambodia has a similar legislature referred to as the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women.

Concrete Action Plans

Concrete plans of action create programs and establish targets to monitor the progress of these programs toward improving the gender divide. The UN published a set of indicators to evaluate each nation's accomplishments toward the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with goal 5 being gender equality. Discussed below are national plans of action incorporated into laws that are geared toward closing the gender gap and mobilizing women to join the labor force.

The Lao PDR integrated gender equality in the National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2016–2020. Gender budgeting in the 5-year plan includes increasing women membership in parliament to 30%, in management positions at provincial and district levels to 20%, and at the village level to 10%.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan believes that activating women to join the workforce will promote the country's economic growth. The Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace came into force on 1 April 2016. The law promotes women in the labor force by (i) providing opportunities to hire and promote women, (ii) improving the environment so that women and men can balance work and family life, and (iii) respecting a woman's choice regarding her work and family life balance. The law obliges large employers to report (i) the ratio of women among its employees, (ii) the differences in years of service between men and women, (iii) working hours, and (iv) the ratio of women among management-level employees. Companies are required to establish and publish key performance indicators to promote women's career activities, including those relating to recruitment, continuing employment, working hours and systems, the ratios of manager positions, and the variation of career paths of female employees. Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare will issue a certification to companies that meet the criteria for proactively promoting women's career activities.

A prerequisite for mobilizing the female labor force is an environment that allows for work and family life balance. The Republic of Korea enacted the Act on Equal Employment and Support for Work–Family Reconciliation to address (i) equal opportunity and equal pay at work, (ii) protection against discrimination and harassment in the workplace, and (iii) maternity protection and the promotion of work and family life balance. The Republic of Korea also gives out family-friendly work environment certification to firms through the Act on the Promotion of Creation of Family-Friendly Social Environment. This stamp of approval of a firm's work environment may be displayed on the company's products or advertisements for its services.

Such certification of family-friendly work environments used in Japan and the Republic of Korea is critical in today's social media and market-driven economy. Errant companies that harbor work environments hostile to women are quickly punished by the market. In Japan, the cosmetics company Shiseido received backlash in 2014 when the company required its beauty consultants with small children to work late and weekend shifts. Referred to as the "Shiseido shock," the company was deeply criticized on social media for what netizens perceived as a backward step for working women, calling for a boycott of the company's products.

Policy Challenges and Recommendations

While the female labor force participants in different countries face varying circumstances and challenges, common threads nevertheless exist. Among the common hurdles that working women in Asia face are (i) child-rearing and family responsibilities, (ii) employment in vulnerable sectors, (iii) the existence of the glass ceiling that promotes the gender divide in education and occupations, and (iv) inadequate implementation of existing legislation.

Child-Rearing and Family Responsibilities

Patriarchy is deeply ingrained in most Asian countries. Mothers are the primary child caregivers and household managers. Working mothers are required to prioritize their family responsibilities over work. In the worst-case scenario, irrespective of their educational background or human development potential, mothers resign from their jobs to focus on child-rearing and family responsibilities. Coupled with the high fertility rates in most Asian countries, Asian women will spend a longer period outside the workforce or at scaled-down working hours. On the other hand, working fathers are not required to perform the same balancing act and are given more freedom to focus on their career development.

Women's work and family life balance may be addressed using a three-pronged approach: equal burden sharing, childcare provisions, and family-friendly work environments.

Equal burden sharing. Laws mandating gender-equal provisions for parental leave will promote the equal burden sharing of home and childcare between mothers and fathers. Governments should also encourage fathers to take active roles in rearing their children by creating father–children programs and events.

Childcare provisions. Governments need to establish programs that will expand the accessibility of childcare services. They can (i) create affordable and quality childcare facilities and after-school day care programs or (ii) provide financial assistance to subsidize the cost of childcare. In the Philippines, low-income families rely on unpaid family members to provide childcare. These carers in turn are untapped human resources who could potentially contribute to economic growth.

Family-friendly work environments. Governments should encourage the establishment of family-friendly work environments. Japan and the Republic of Korea reward firms with certifications for establishing a healthy work environment for parents. There are also different family-friendly schemes, such as offering flexible working hours and telecommuting. The flextime system allows employees to define their own 8-hour working day. This permits both parents to structure their workday around their family responsibilities. In a telecommuting system, employees work from home by connecting their computers to the company's internet network. By working at home, employees bypass the rush hour traffic and public commute, allowing them to spend more time with their families.

Employment in Vulnerable Sectors

The share of women working in informal sectors and vulnerable employment is larger than that of the male labor force. These jobs are more likely to be characterized by inadequate compensation, low productivity, difficult working conditions, and insufficient representation. Governments need to create laws that will promote the rights of those in vulnerable employment. There must be mechanisms for workers to report abuses and institutions where abused workers can seek protection.

It is critical to equip workers in vulnerable employment with valuable skills to allow them to take advantage of opportunities in sectors with better pay and better work environments. Governments should provide access to affordable skills development training courses so that these workers can develop their skills to be in alignment with the requirements of jobs outside the vulnerable employment sector. For instance, scholarships for bachelor degree programs could lead to career opportunities and improved earnings potential.

The Women's Center of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority of the Philippines, for example, offers training programs to women, including those geared toward traditionally male-dominated skilled occupations, such as automotive servicing, consumer electronics servicing, and metal welding.

Existence of the Glass Ceiling

The gender divide in education and labor is crucial to gender equality because it influences labor market outcomes, such as wages and positions. This divide can lead to the thickening of the glass ceiling, specifically in male-dominated fields. The observed gender divide

may be caused by the physical requirements of the job (e.g., construction), religious associations, and cultural gender biases. The most difficult of these to overcome is cultural gender bias because social norms are engrained in people's consciousness.

A way to liberate women from cultural biases is education. One critical element is to revise the school curricula to eliminate cultural gender biases. Younger generations should be given the opportunity to choose their career paths based on their intellect, talent, skills, and other considerations—not solely on their gender. Taken differently, gender should not dictate their career choices.

Female students should be encouraged to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics, or STEAM. Traditionally male-dominated governments should support the affirmative actions that are needed to expand female participation in these fields of study, such as by providing scholarship programs.

In the Philippines, the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act was implemented in 2018. This law provides a full tuition fee subsidy for students enrolled in 190 universities and colleges financially supported by the national, provincial, and local governments. This freedom from matriculation will allow female students to choose degree programs based on their interests and academic proficiency.

Women's participation in decision making, both in government and at the corporate level, is a critical component for achieving gender equality. Their participation allows their voices to be heard and gives them a platform to influence decisions that will directly and indirectly affect them. To achieve this end, governments should initiate proactive national programs to help women break the glass ceiling. Such programs may include scholarships for graduate degrees, training middle and senior managers, and implementing a quota system such as a (30% female policy) to increase the number of female executives and lawmakers.

Governments need to strengthen legal mechanisms to address the gender wage gap, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment. They should all be geared toward piercing the glass ceiling. Governments should encourage employers to create programs to address gender awareness and sensitivity in the workplace. Finally, incentives can be given to media companies to help promote awareness for gender sensitivity and correct cultural gender stereotypes.

Inadequate Implementation of Existing Legislation

Despite the legal frameworks and the various plans of actions that promote gender equality and provide protection to women, the poor implementation of these laws and initiatives remains a common problem among countries. The biggest challenges to the effective implementation of gender equality laws are a lack of consequences for failure to meet targets, deficiencies in the law, limited budget, and lack of interest.

Conclusion

While the gender gap has narrowed greatly in recent years, there is still a lot of work to be done to fully close the gap. Societal norms and cultural gender biases may be the biggest hurdle for women to overcome. These are deeply rooted in social consciousness and, therefore, affect both the home and the work environments. Governments must continue to take a lead role in advancing the cause of gender equality. Moreover, governments should move beyond writing laws and signing global gender accords. Instead, they should direct their efforts toward implementing existing legislature, establishing programs that will deliver the committed goals, and creating ways to address cultural biases.

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