

Executive summary

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an opportunity to address persistent gender inequalities at work

Throughout their working lives, women continue to face significant obstacles in gaining access to decent work. Only marginal improvements have been achieved since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, leaving large gaps to be covered in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015. Inequality between women and men persists in global labour markets, in respect of opportunities, treatment and outcomes. Over the last two decades, women's significant progress in educational achievements has not translated into a comparable improvement in their position at work. In many regions in the world, in comparison to men, women are more likely to become and remain unemployed, have fewer chances to participate in the labour force and – when they do – often have to accept lower quality jobs. Progress in surmounting these obstacles has been slow and is limited to a few regions across the world. Even in many of those countries where gaps in labour force participation and employment have narrowed and where women are shifting away from contributing family work and moving to the services sector, the quality of women's jobs remains a matter of concern. The unequal distribution of unpaid care and household work between women and men and between families and the society is an important determinant of gender inequalities at work.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reaffirmed the universal consensus on the crucial importance of gender equality and its contribution to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. More jobs – and quality jobs – for women, universal social protection and measures to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and household work are indispensable to delivering on the new transformative sustainable development agenda, which aims to reduce poverty (Goal 1) and inequalities (Goal 10), to achieve gender equality (Goal 5) and to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (Goal 8).

Gender gaps in labour force participation and employment rates declined only marginally

Between 1995 and 2015, the global female labour force participation rate decreased from 52.4 to 49.6 per cent. The corresponding figures for men are 79.9 and 76.1 per cent, respectively. Worldwide, the chances for women to participate in the labour market remain almost 27 percentage points lower than those for men (figure I). In regions where gender gaps in participation have been high, they have remained so. In Southern Asia and Eastern Asia, the gap has grown even wider. Women's lower participation rates translate into fewer employment opportunities, with little variation over time, which negatively affects women's earning capacity and economic security. In 2015, the gender gap in the employment rate amounted to 25.5 percentage points in women's disfavour, only 0.6 percentage points less than in 1995. It is only in Northern, Southern and Western Europe that employment gaps have closed marginally as women continue to enter the labour market in higher numbers in that region – but also as a result of the reduction of men's employment rates due to the economic downturn. In addition, the global financial crisis led to a temporary reduction in gender gaps in employment in Northern America. Overall, however, change has been virtually absent.