

Introduction

Peace, prosperity and social justice depend on the achievement of substantive equality between women and men. This is both an issue of fundamental human rights and a key driving force for global progress. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing culminated with the adoption of a Declaration and Platform for Action, which set out a bold agenda for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. In 2015, the adoption by the United Nations of 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. Accordingly, all the new goals articulate gender-responsive targets and, among them, Goal 5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", remains a stand-alone priority. In this way, the new UN development blueprint places gender equality and women's economic empowerment at the core of this transformative sustainable development agenda, aiming to reduce poverty (Goal 1) and inequalities (Goal 10) and to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (Goal 8).

This global commitment reinforces the importance of the ILO mandate in achieving gender equality as reflected in the ILO Constitution, the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (2008) and the rich body of international labour standards adopted by ILO constituents – governments, workers' organizations and employers' organizations – which contain specific guidance to member States to give effect to this mandate and realize genuine equality of opportunity and treatment between women and men in the world of work.

The last twenty years have been marked by significant progress in gender equality at work and in society. A woman's risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes has nearly halved since 1990. Now more than ever, women are educated, have access to the labour market, sit in parliaments, lead governments and enterprises. Despite these significant advances, however, the world has fallen short in bringing women's employment, earnings and working conditions into line with those of men. As indicated by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recently adopted by the UN, much more needs to be done. Often – and particularly in the context of the economic crisis – decreasing gaps are the result of a deterioration of the situation of men at work rather than of genuine improvements for all. In assessing progress, it is therefore important to examine gender gaps in the context of broader trends.

Globally, the labour force participation rate for women is 50 per cent, compared to 76 per cent for men. While gender gaps in participation rates have been declining in some regions, merely having more women in the labour market is not enough. The quality of jobs is paramount and remains a major challenge. More women are in paid work today, although they continue to be primarily responsible for household chores and care responsibilities, and this predisposition contributes to a wide array of labour market inequalities. Women are overrepresented among the unemployed and contributing family workers, and remain segregated in sectors and occupations which reflect gender stereotypes at work, in the family and in societies. They hold the majority of non-standard, informal, temporary, part-time and low-paid jobs. While in some countries the gender wage gap has decreased over time, it is estimated that, worldwide, women's wages are approximately 77 per cent of those earned by men. At the current rate, pay equity between women and men will not be achieved before 2086 (ILO, 2011a). While 45 per cent of ILO member States provide at least 14 weeks of maternity leave, paid at the level of at least two thirds of previous earnings, this still leaves millions of women without the fundamental right to adequate maternity protection and other essential social protection measures, including maternal and child health care.

Millions also suffer from discrimination or other disadvantages for the simple fact of being a woman or a mother. Women are underrepresented in decision-making positions at work and, while women own and manage over 30 per cent of all businesses, they tend to be concentrated in micro and small enterprises. Only 5 per cent or fewer of the chief executive officers of the world's largest corporations are women. Similar gaps are also found in women's representation in trade unions and business organisations' leadership positions. There is still much to be done to achieve the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals.