

I. Background

One of the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is, by 2030, to achieve “full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value” (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, target 8.5). The 20-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing + 20) has brought renewed attention to the situation of women in the world of work, and to the need to accelerate the closing of gender gaps therein.

Despite some advances, women continue to face significant obstacles in entering the labour market and progressing in their careers. Barriers to participation, persistent occupational and sectoral segregation and a disproportionate share of unpaid household and care work prevent them from enjoying equal access to opportunities, and to opportunities that are in line with their significant progress in educational achievement over the past decades. This limits their economic choices, weighs on their social status and ultimately curbs growth and social development. Measures to raise the participation of women in the labour force and to improve their employment opportunities are therefore important to enhancing women’s status, achieving higher output levels and reducing poverty and income inequality.

A rise in female employment could significantly boost growth and per capita income.² Increasing women’s participation in the labour force has become a key policy issue, particularly in developed economies that face a rapidly ageing and shrinking workforce (Steinberg and Nakane, 2012). Moreover, increasing female employment rates may be a key step in those economies that continue to suffer from significantly lower medium-term growth expectations (Elborgh-Woytek et al., 2013; Cuberes and Teignier, 2012 and 2014; Esteve-Volart, 2004; Klasen and Lamanna, 2009, Heintz, 2006).

In a recent McKinsey study, 15 gender equality indicators were tracked for 95 countries. The study found that, if women participated in the economy at a level identical to that of men, it would add up to US\$ 28 trillion or 26 per cent of annual global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025, assuming a business-as-usual scenario. This impact is roughly equivalent to the size of the combined United States and Chinese economies today (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015).

With more women in the labour market, an economy makes greater use of its productive potential. Since women account for one half of a country’s potential talent base, a nation’s competitiveness in the long term also depends considerably on whether and how it educates and makes use of its women (WEF, 2015). The higher participation of women in the labour force and their increased employment rates do not necessarily translate into greater gender equality. In some Asian regions, the relatively low female unemployment rate might be attributable to the persisting high demand for low-wage female labour in export-oriented manufacturing (ILO and ADB, 2011). Promoting gender equality in labour markets involves creating an enabling environment of equal opportunity and treatment in the labour market for both women and men.

Part One of the present report sets out a broad overview of global and regional labour market trends and gender gaps, including gaps in labour force participation rates, employment-to-population ratios and unemployment rates, along with differences in labour market status and the type of activities that men and women perform in the labour market, hours spent in paid and unpaid work and sectoral and occupational segregation. Part One then discusses the extent to which these factors account for gender gaps in wages and social protection.

2. See ILO (2015a) and ILO (2014a). Similarly, Booz and Co. (2012) estimate that, if female employment rates were to match male rates, the GDP of the United States would increase by 5 per cent, of Japan by 9 per cent, of the United Arab Emirates by 12 per cent, of India by 27 per cent, and of Egypt by 34 per cent. Globally, 812 million of the 865 million women who have the potential to contribute to their national economies through employment live in emerging and developing countries.