



## Role of Women in Sustainable Economic Development

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### ABSTRACT

*Sustainable development can only be achieved through long-term investments in economic, human and environmental capital. At present, the female half of the world's human capital is undervalued and underutilized the world over. As a group, women – and their potential contributions to economic advances, social progress and environmental protection – have been marginalized. Better use of the world's female population could increase economic growth, reduce poverty, enhance societal well-being, and help ensure sustainable development in all countries. Enhancing women's participation in development is essential not only for achieving social justice but also for reducing poverty. Worldwide experience shows clearly that supporting a stronger role for women contributes to economic growth, it improves child survival and overall family health, and it reduces fertility, thus helping to slow population growth rates. In short, investing in women is central to sustainable development yet, despite these known returns, women still face many barriers in contributing to and benefiting from closing the gender gap depends on enlightened government policies which take gender dimensions into account. This paper deals with the role of women in sustainable economic development and actions that can help to turn around this inequitable situation. Evidence of what works is particularly strong in five areas: education, health, wage labor, agriculture and natural resource management, and financial services. The paper also suggests a broadening of the women in development approach toward a gender in development strategy that takes into account the relative roles and responsibilities of women and men and recognizes that, to effect long-term change in the conditions of women, the actions and attitudes of men must change.*

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A discussion about sustainable development is not complete without a conversation on gender equality. Since women account for half of any country's talent base, empowering their participation in the workforce greatly enhances productivity and fosters economic growth on Reuters) In fact, World Bank studies show that development strategies focusing on gender equality see stronger economic growth than gender-neutral strategies. Throughout the world, women represent a substantial, underutilized force for sustainable development. In Asia, for example, women are responsible for 50% of agricultural output, while nearly 80% of the agricultural labor in Africa market is female. Unfortunately, many of these women lack access to necessary agricultural resources, which, if freely accessible, could decrease global hunger by 12-17%.

Extreme poverty presents a large obstacle, as women and girls comprise 70% of the 1.3 billion people living on less than a dollar per day. Empowering women to take part in the workforce is not a simple problem to solve. For many women, there are physical and psychological consequences for entering the workplace – harassment, discrimination, violence and shame. Moreover, women across the globe still require investment in basic health and education. A crucial part of the solution is getting resources for these working women to access to these working women to access, allowing them to thrive in their economic environments so that they may, in turn, foster the success of local communities. However, the solution must fit both the lifestyles of women and their cultures. For example, in indigenous societies women are custodians of traditional knowledge relating to resource management; providing access to modern technology presents a perfect opportunity for

both empowering local women and encouraging sustainable development.

The strategy for economic empowerment, according to the World Bank is twofold: (1) making the market work for women and (2) empowering women in the market. Supporting the economic empowerment of women is not just good company policy; it actually benefits the corporate world. Firms that employ women in leadership positions have better performance and higher profits. And, contrary to what might be believed, supporting female employment actually has a positive impact on family life and encourages women to have more children. Countries with family-oriented practices and government funded healthcare have both more working women and higher birth rates than those without gender equality policies, an important consideration for countries with aging populations.

Gender equality is not just a lofty aspiration anymore; it is the necessary missing link for sustainable development. Women, on average, reinvest up to 90% of income into their households. Reducing gender inequality gives women more money to spend on food, housing and education – crucial components for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. The corporate world increasingly realizes the importance of gender equality policies, with more firms looking for guidance on voluntarily reporting and improving their gender equality policies in the workplace, the supply chain and the community. The consensus is growing: getting more women into the workforce is the cure to many economic ills and imperative to sustainable development.

NOT long ago women faced tremendous barriers as they sought opportunities that would set them on an equal footing with men. Going back a mere quarter century, inequality between women and men was widely apparent—in university classrooms, in the workplace, and even in homes. Since then, the lives of women and girls around the world have improved dramatically in many respects. In most countries—rich and developing—they are going to school more, living longer, getting better jobs, and acquiring legal rights and protections.

But large gender gaps remain. Women and girls are more likely to die, relative to men and boys, in many low- and middle-income countries than their counterparts in rich countries. Women earn less and are less economically productive than men almost everywhere across the world. And women have less opportunity to shape their lives and make decisions than do men.

#### **World Bank's 2012 World Development Report:**

Gender Equality and Development, closing these gender gaps matters for development and policymaking. Greater gender equality can enhance economic productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation, and make institutions and policies more representative. Many gender disparities remain even as countries develop, which calls for sustained and focused public action. Corrective policies will yield substantial development payoffs if they focus on persistent gender inequalities that matter most for welfare. To be effective, these measures must target the root causes of inequality without ignoring the domestic political economy.

#### **Mixed progress**

Every aspect of gender equality—access to education and health, economic opportunities, and voice within households and society—has experienced a mixed pattern of change over the past quarter century. In some areas, such as education, the gender gap has closed for almost all women; but progress has been slower for those who are poor and face other disadvantages, such as ethnicity. In other areas, the gap has been slow to close—even among well-off women and in countries that have otherwise developed rapidly.

In primary education, the gender gap has closed in almost all countries, and it is shrinking quickly in secondary education. Indeed, in almost one-third of developing countries, girls now outnumber boys in secondary schools. Gender equality is a key factor in contributing to the economic growth of a nation. The United Nations Population Fund believe that economic growth and social equality should go hand in hand, arguing that “gender inequality holds back growth of individuals, development of countries, and the evolution of societies, to the disadvantage of men and women” (“Women” 1). The discrimination against women remains a common occurrence in today’s society and serves to hinder economic prosperity. The empowerment of women through such things as the promotion of women’s rights and an increase in the access of women to resources and education proves to be key to the advancement of economic development. Namely, gender equality in the work force and in social relationships is the two primary factors that instill economic growth.

The participation of women in the labor force allows for changing social relationships that bring about economic progress. In their article, “Does gender equality spur growth?” Roger Mortvik and Roland Spant argue that “the birth rate trend is positive and the demographic structure more balanced in countries where gender equality in the workplace is more developed. For these countries, that points to higher labor activity and a more robust economy” (Mortvik 14). Entering the work force, women will be preoccupied with their jobs, and there will be less time to devote to caring for a family. Consequently, women will display positive birth trends in that they will restrict themselves from having too many children, creating a constant population growth rate and structuring the population in such a way that a constant working-age population will exist. Through their participation in the workforce,

women display the demographic trends needed for economic growth to occur.

#### **Women Promote India's Economic Development**

India has been developing fast, but not always equitably or inclusively. Our development model is very much a work in progress and deep-rooted challenges remain. The biggest issue we face is the empowerment of women across the world, educating and empowering women has proven time and again to be the catalyst for rapid socio-economic growth. Conversely, societies where women are repressed are among the most backward. Women in India make up 7.5% of the world’s total population. While certain development indicators show their quality of life is improving – maternal mortality rates declining; literacy rates increasing; more women gaining access to healthcare and education – the pace of change is heartbreaking slow.

India ranks 113 out of 135 on the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index. According to India’s 2011 census, the sex ratio for children under six was 914 females to 1,000 males, a disturbing decline from 927 in 2001. The ranking of Indian women in economic empowerment is 0.3, where 1.0 means equality. This is a dangerous state of affairs for any society. Denying women opportunities to realize their potential is a waste of human capital and bar to economic progress.

Women are undoubtedly the foundation of the basic unit of society – the family. Even in traditional roles they demonstrate great innovation, skill, intelligence, hard work and commitment. If we can harness these attributes effectively, India’s growth can be more inclusive and equitable. But in a country where nearly 70% of the population lives in rural areas, access to educational opportunities is limited. Moreover, poverty puts the girl child at a greater disadvantage. Add to this the social attitudes towards women, and it is obvious that we need a multi-pronged approach if we are to achieve education for women worldwide. When we educate and empower one woman, we set off a chain reaction that transforms the life of her family and the community she lives in. An exemplary model is the network of trained Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), created under the National Rural Health Mission, who has played a crucial role in improving the health of women and children across India.

#### **Women and Technology**

Women workers with a science and technology (S&T) background are a key resource in today’s knowledge-based economies. There is rising demand for S&T workers, and job growth in this area is being driven by increases in female employment. But women remain vastly underrepresented in S&T studies at both secondary and tertiary levels of education and in the overall technical workforce. Greater female participation in computer science, engineering and technology-oriented jobs would spur innovation and economic advances in all countries (OECD, 2007). Lesser involvement of young girls in science and technology can be observed as early as the secondary school level, where less than one-third of students in advanced chemistry, physics or biology classes are women in most OECD countries. Despite growing computer literacy among all students, the gender digital divide is also evident in high school.

#### **Women and Economic Growth**

Women, which constitute half of the world’s human capital, are one of its most underutilized resources. Sustainable economic growth at national and global levels depends on women joining the labour force and fuller use being made of their skills and qualifications. More working women would also help offset the negative effects of declining fertility rates and ageing populations in many OECD countries. In recent decades, a large share of economic growth in the OECD area has come from employing more women. Since 1995, narrowing the gap between male and female employment rates has accounted for half of the increase in Europe’s overall employment rate and a quarter of annual economic growth. It is es-

estimated that if female employment were raised to the male rate, growth in gross domestic product (GDP) would be substantial, particularly in countries such as Japan (CSR, 2007). Similarly, a study in the United Kingdom found that the country could gain 2% of GDP by better harnessing women's skills (WWC, 2006).

The rate of female participation in the labour force is significantly lower than that of men in all countries. On average in OECD countries, about 60% of women are employed. However, there are wide variations stemming from social and economic factors as well as public policies. The employment gender gap is most pronounced in countries such as Turkey, Mexico, Italy and Greece, where less than 50% of women work. Female employment rates are highest at over 70%

Women represent more than 70% of the world's poor due to unequal access to economic opportunities in both developed and developing countries. In OECD countries, increasing female participation in the workforce would reduce the number of people living in poverty since women and children account for most of the poor even in the richest countries. In developing countries, the failure to value women's work is a significant barrier to reducing poverty and fostering economic growth. Internationally, there is a link between poverty alleviation in countries and the development of their female human capital.

### Women and reduction in Poverty

Poverty reduction in poorer countries depends in large part on women, whose work tends to go unremunerated. In addition to their key role in household management and caring for children, the sick and the elderly, women are responsible for essential tasks such as fetching increasingly scarce firewood and water. In many regions, women spend up to five hours a day collecting fuel and water and up to four hours a day preparing food. Women's productivity in these home-based roles is low due to their more limited access to education, health care and other services. Women and girls in developing countries and poor environments are often the last to receive health care. They suffer from lack of nutrition, often

eating last and least. They suffer more from the effects of second-hand smoke and indoor air pollution due to burning traditional biomass fuels for cooking and heating. Poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water lead to millions of children, particularly girls, being kept off school. Due to discrimination in food intake and medical care, women's life expectancies in many countries are often lower than men's despite the fact that statistically women should live longer.

Women in the labour force in developing countries, including services, agriculture and manufacturing, do not fare much better. Female workers around the world fill the majority of paid domestic service jobs and are growing more important to the agricultural sector. In Southeast Asia, for example, women provide up to 90% of the labour for rice cultivation, and in Africa, women are two-thirds of the workforce in the horticultural sector. In manufacturing, female workers are heavily concentrated in low-wage, labour-intensive sectors such as clothing, processed food products and household goods.

### Conclusion

Women's contribution to sustainable development must be recognized. Women have a strong role in education and socializing their children, including teaching them care and responsibility with regard to the use and protection of natural resources. More should be done to increase women's voice in environmental decision making and to enable women to seize opportunities in the "green economy". More capacity building programmes and training tailored to the needs of women are needed. In order to build women as catalyst for sustainable development, their role in family, community and society at large has to free from socio-cultural and religious traditions that prevent women participation. Vocational training is equally important to women's economic independence. The inspirational efforts of the Self-Employed Women's Association, founded by Ela Bhatt, and other successful self-help groups, have sowed the spirit of entrepreneurship in hundreds of women. There is need for change of mindset, especially of the males who dominate the scene.

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