

Twenty-five years after the Beijing Conference, achievements and persisting gaps

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Over the past 25 years, undeniable achievements have been made in the field of gender equality and the promotion of women’s rights and opportunities. But this progress is still far too slow: at the current rate, it would take more than 100 years globally to close the gender gap, according to the World Economic Forum. Gender equality is everyone’s business and as such, private sector actors have a key role to play.

2020 is a pivotal year for gender equality. It is marked by the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), which is considered by many as the most progressive roadmap for the advancement of women’s rights. It is both a year of stocktaking on what has been achieved for women and girls since then but also a year of further bold call to action and commitment that will effectively close the remaining gender gap worldwide.

The world has indeed made undeniable progress in advancing the rights and opportunities for women in the past 25 years. According to Women, Business and the Law Index¹, in the past 10 years alone, 131 economies have made 274 reforms to laws and regulations increasing women’s equality of opportunity and economic empowerment such as introducing sexual harassment laws or mandating nondiscrimination in access to credit. In parallel, we have also witnessed women’s entrepreneurial activity rising² and the number of CEOs and women in leadership positions steadily growing all over the world. In 2019, 33 of the highest-grossing companies were led by female CEOs for the first time

ever and 29% of senior management roles, globally, were held by women, the highest number ever on record.³

Ces vingt-cinq dernières années, notre monde a incontestablement accompli des progrès en matière de droits et opportunités pour les femmes. Selon l'indice Women, Business and the Law¹, au cours des dix dernières années, 131 pays ont voté pas moins de 274 réformes de leurs lois ou réglementations, pour accroître l'égalité des chances et assurer l'autonomisation économique des femmes (lois sur le harcèlement sexuel ou obligations de non-discrimination dans l'accès au crédit, par exemple). En parallèle, on a vu augmenter l'entrepreneuriat chez les femmes², ainsi que le nombre de femmes PDG ou cadres dirigeantes dans le monde. Pour la première fois en 2019, 33 des entreprises figurant au classement des entreprises les plus prospères étaient dirigées par des femmes, et 29 % des principaux postes d'encadrement étaient occupés par des femmes - la proportion la plus élevée jamais enregistrée³.

MORE THAN 100 YEARS TO CLOSE THE GLOBAL GENDER GAP

Despite these achievements, progress has been far too slow. According to the World Economic Forum, and at the current pace of change, it would take 108 years for the world to close the global gender gap.⁴ The 2018 Global Gender Gap Index⁵ highlights that women have only reached 68% of parity, leaving a whopping 32% gap to be filled. In most societies, women continue to be poorly represented in political leadership. They also own less, earn less, have limited access to essential products and services, and spend double the time men do on housework and other unpaid activities, which hinders their economic participation. In addition, women often suffer from intersectional discrimination, thereby accumulating multiple layers of discrimination (related for example to social status, ethnic background, religion, sexuality, etc.) which makes them disproportionately vulnerable to abuse and systemic inequality.

Coupled with agency, women's participation in the economy is critical for breaking the vicious circle of discrimination - yet both well-known and emerging barriers are jeopardizing women's ability to fully partake in the economy.

In addition to persisting discriminatory laws, adverse social norms, the gap in access to digital, financial and property assets are structural barriers that prevent women from attaining parity. Around the world, women's overrepresentation in the informal sector continues to be a major barrier to their economic empowerment as these workers are often not covered by labor laws; work for lower wages and in poor and unsafe working conditions. Globally, women represent 63%⁶ of informal workers. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 74% of female employment (non-agricultural) is informal.⁷

Emerging gaps are now also being highlighted as women only represent 22% of artificial intelligence (AI) professionals worldwide. In a world where technology and innovation are increasingly becoming paramount, skills gaps related to artificial intelligence are likely to worsen existing and future unequal work opportunities for women if unaddressed.⁸

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THE PRIVATE SECTOR'S ROLE IN ACHIEVING GENDER-EQUAL WORKPLACES AND SOCIETIES

The private sector plays a key role in respecting and promoting women's rights. Today, addressing gender equality concerns has become more important than ever for businesses as the absence of

intervention is likely to result in both significant risks (including legal and reputational) and missed opportunities.

In June 2019, multilateral organizations reminded the private sector, more strongly than ever, that gender equality is everyone's business. In its report « Gender Dimensions of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights », ⁹ the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights re-enforced businesses' obligations to proactively identify, prevent and remediate women's related human rights violations within their operations, supply chains and the communities they operate in. In parallel, the newly adopted ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (C190) recognizes for the first time that violence and harassment (including sexual) is no any longer solely a matter of the domestic sphere and that businesses have a duty to prevent and address it. Moreover, the surge in employee activism related to sexual harassment such as the Google walk outs in late 2018 has confirmed the reputational damage that can come from inadequate handling of such abuse. In recent years, investors and finance institutions have started asking businesses to more systematically account for and report on gender disaggregated data related to businesses' direct and indirect workforce, and 2020 will see the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) launching its open source company benchmark that evaluates and ranks companies' gender equality performance. ¹⁰

Beyond managing reputational risks, responding to the latest gender responsive due diligence and legal requirements, the private sector has much to gain in proactively providing fairer opportunities for women. In fact, parts of the business community have already harnessed this opportunity by joining the chorus of government, multilateral and civil society leaders and signing up to the Women's Empowerment Principles, ¹¹ committing to empowering women in the marketplace, workplace, and community.

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Across industries and regardless of their size, businesses can spur progress for the women that cross their path: women as employees, women as entrepreneurs, women as supply chain workers, women as customers, and women as community members. And they can do this by generating greater benefits too. Research has shown that the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment is linked to increased innovation, returns on investment, enhanced productivity, cost savings and market growth. ¹² From private equity companies ¹³ to SMEs in the manufacturing industry, ¹⁴ everyone wins from promoting gender diversity and enabling women to thrive in the workplace.

But just as there is no unique solution to achieving gender equality, there is no unique strategy that companies can devise to advance women's empowerment. On the one hand, strategies need to be carefully informed by good gender data providing detailed insights on issues women face if they are to deliver truly transformative change for women. On the other hand, the responses to the identified issues will also be influenced by a company's specific assets and levers, and these will vary depending on the industry and the company's size. However, every single company has a critical role to play to make gender equality a reality and can take various steps along a three-pronged approach to empower women by:

- ⇒ Acting directly on areas where it has direct control is an essential starting point and may include designing, reviewing and adjusting company policies, practices, and investments to ensure they positively impact women in their own operations, supply chain, marketplace and community.
- ⇒ Enabling others to drive change by incentivizing and partnering with stakeholders such as

business partners but also NGOs and local community organizations. Partnerships and investments are pivotal to building the engagement of other value chain actors, including developing their own capacity to promote women's empowerment.

⇒ Influencing the wider ecosystem to raise awareness about gender equality and collaboratively address issues women are facing. This includes research, advocacy and collective action efforts that aim to deliver transformative change for women, also at societal level.

CONCLUSION

25 years after the adoption of this major blueprint for women's advancement, it is time for companies worldwide to prioritize this agenda thereby accelerating the pace of change which is desperately needed to achieve more truly gender-equal societies and workplaces.

1 <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/31327/WBL2019.pdf>

2 <https://www.gemconsortium.org/report/gem-20162017-womens-entrepreneurship-report>

3 Grant Thornton, Women in Business: Building a Blueprint for Action, page 5, 2019

4 <https://www.weforum.org/projects/closing-the-gender-gap-accelerators>

5 The Index measures the gender gap in four main areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

6 <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/changingworldofwork/en/index.html>

7 https://www.ilo.org/africa/whats-new/WCMS_377286/lang-en/index.htm

8 <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/03/global-gender-gap-report-infographic-wef-picture.htm>

9 https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/41/43

10 <https://www.worldbenchmarkingalliance.org/gender-equality-and-empowerment-benchmark/>

11 <https://weps.org/>

12 https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/gender+at+ifc/priorities/entrepreneurship/investing+in+women_new+evidence+for+the+business+case

13 https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/gender+at+ifc/resources/gender-balance-in-emergingmarkets

14 <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/ac8fca18-6586-48cc-bfba-832b41d6af68/IFC+Invest+in+Women+October+2017.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=IYLVAcA>

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