

Issue

Brief

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The ‘Smart Economics’ of Moving Women from the Private to the Public Sphere

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Abstract

Despite advancements in legislation and representation over the last decades, women continue to face barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare, legal protection against violence, and leadership roles. In the economic sphere, gender disparities persist in labour force participation, job sectors, wages, and unpaid care work. Women are constrained in participating in the labour market as their social role remains attached to domestic tasks, while the men are assigned to the administration of the public sphere and associated with production as well as decision-making. This has consolidated a sexual division of labour perpetuated and reinforced in legislation, informal rules, and habits. This brief underlines the imperative of nurturing women’s economic autonomy and outlines the key imperatives and challenges that lie ahead, even beyond the 2030 Development Agenda.

In 2015, an ambitious and holistic agenda was set to guide countries' priorities to achieve a more sustainable and egalitarian world. Different targets were established to ensure economic growth and social well-being while regarding intersectionalities between environmental protection; institutional quality; and territorial, technological, income, and gender gaps. Standing at the midpoint of the 2030 deadline, this agenda is far from being met.

The *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023* shows meagre results: the world has not made progress, or has regressed, in over 30 percent of the targets. This is true for the goal of gender equity. On SDG 5, for example—"Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"—only 15.4 percent of the indicators of the 2030 targets are on track to being fulfilled.¹

Over the past decades, the significance of achieving gender equality has firmly established itself on the public agenda due to the work of feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements across the globe. There is still a long way to go, however. This brief underlines the imperative of nurturing women's autonomy in three crucial domains, as conceptualised by the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) of the United Nations: physical, economic, and decision-making autonomy.

Addressing gender gaps and increasing women's autonomy would allow women to enjoy a life of independence and freedoms, on equal terms with their male counterparts. Narrowing and closing these gaps will foster women's rights; it is also a strategy for overall development.

This article analyses current global progress in the nurturing of the three autonomies. It explains the persisting barriers to their realisation, focusing on the economic dimension; offers recommendations to increase both women's economic autonomy and sustainable and inclusive development; and outlines the key imperatives and challenges that lie ahead, even beyond the 2030 Development Agenda.

The Three Autonomies: Progress and Enduring Challenges

Many countries have expanded the rights and the recognition of the need for women to attain physical autonomy and have passed legislation against violence and in favour of voluntary interruption of pregnancy. Moreover, according to the United Nations Population Fund's population dashboard, almost eight out of every 10 girls and women (15 to 49 years old) were users of a modern contraceptive method in 2023.² Still, there continue to be barriers in the access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, especially in developing regions where, for instance, the number of users falls by 20 percent; there are also persistent gender gaps in legal protection against gender-based violence and the many forms of discrimination. These gaps need to be addressed as, globally, women are twice as likely as men to say they have experienced discrimination based on their sex³ and 35 percent of women report having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by either intimate partners or non-partners.⁴

To be sure, progress has been achieved in certain fronts. For example, in the past decade, there has been a global increase in women's representation in parliaments: from 18.7 percent of seats in 2013 to 22.9 percent in 2022, as shown in this year's *Global Gender Gap Report*.⁵ One of the policies that some countries have applied to nurture political equity is gender quotas, which according to the UNSTATS,⁶ has translated to having up to 10 percent more women in parliament. Women's participation has also increased in local governance since 2017. Available data from 117 countries show that women account for more than 40 percent of the representation at the local level in 18 countries across different regions—examples include Bolivia, India, and France.⁷

Despite such progress, however, women continue to be underrepresented in every dimension of social life: they occupy fewer managerial positions in the private sector; and they have largely negligible roles in labour unions, educational institutions, and in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. At the current rate, it would take almost half a century to achieve equal representation in national parliaments worldwide.⁸

The situation is even more grim in the area of economic autonomy,^a where women continue to face a multitude of obstacles and achieve worse outcomes than men.

a 'Women's autonomy' refers to women's ability to possess resources, especially income, and manage them.

Gender Gaps in the Labour Market and Women's Economic Autonomy

Women participate less in the labour market compared to men. The female-to-male ratio in labour force participation rates shows that there is no gender parity in any region. According to 2021 estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO), in the vast majority of countries across the world, the male labour force participation rate is at least 10 percent more than that of females—with the exception of some countries like Laos, Nepal, Mozambique, or Sweden.⁹

Even when the female workforce has increased over the last three decades in countries of all income levels—with some exceptions such as Türkiye and Thailand—¹⁰ women work fewer hours. Furthermore, women tend to have jobs in less dynamic and low-productivity sectors, work under worse working conditions, and receive lower salaries—a phenomenon known as ‘occupation or horizontal segregation’ that is observed in both developed and developing economies. The highest female Labour Force Participation Rates can be found in three particular sectors: services, industry, and agriculture. In the first two, however, women are employed largely in specific areas associated with education, health, and other care-related services and industries.

Women are also more likely to work in the informal economy than men, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Taking into account non-agricultural employment, informality can account for anywhere from 70 percent to 90 percent of female employment in African and Southeast Asian countries, between 20 percent and 30 percent in Latin America, and below 10 percent in European countries; the exception in the latter is the UK, where the share of informality is at around 20 percent.¹¹

Another crucial gap is in pay: Women, on average, earn less than their male counterparts. As Nobel laureate in Economics, Claudia Goldin, has shown, in the third quarter of 2020, for every dollar earned by a man in the US, a woman received 0.8 dollars for the same job.¹² Such gap can also be explained by the aforementioned factors. That women do the lion's share of the most precarious jobs and do not occupy top positions cross-sectorally, render them more likely to have lower incomes.

Various factors underlie the obstacles faced by women and girls in participating in the labour market: cultural norms; gender stereotypes; and unpaid care and domestic work.

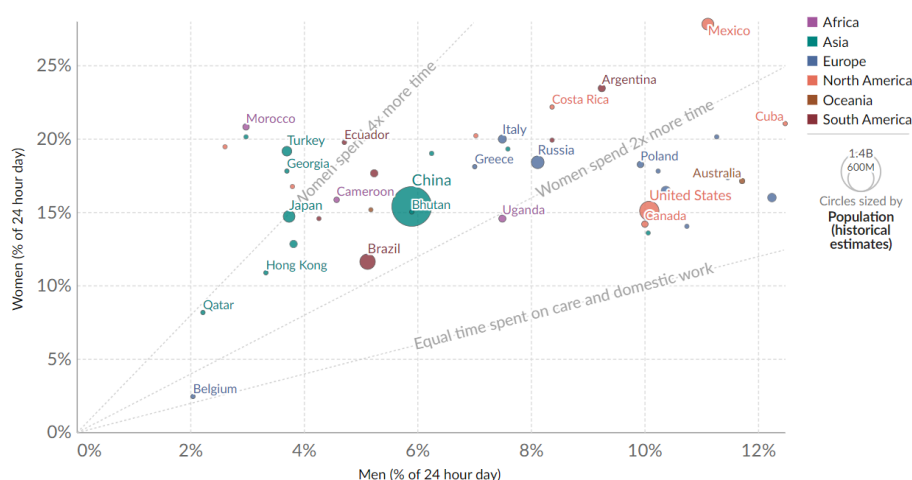
Gender Gaps in the Labour Market and Women's Economic Autonomy

From the time a person is born, they internalise social norms and gender roles embedded in societal institutions and which guide human interactions. These consist of attitudinal behaviours, emotions and predispositions towards consumptions, desires, career paths, and individual decisions. They affect men's and women's decision-making and access to opportunities throughout their lives.¹³

Historically, these norms and stereotypes have constrained women to the private sphere, with their social role being attached to familiar domestic tasks such as raising, nurturing and caring for family members; the men, meanwhile, are assigned to the administration of the public sphere and associated with production as well as decision-making. This has consolidated a sexual division of labour that has been perpetuated and reinforced in legislation, informal rules, and habits. As a result, women's agency is limited and equality is absent in the opportunities made available to men and women.¹⁴

Evidence shows that, despite cultural change, the role of women as carers and household managers is still normalised, and indeed, in vogue. Globally, women spend, on average, 3X (three times) more hours than men on unpaid domestic and care work.¹⁵ This figure hides huge differences between regions and countries. For instance, while women in Canada spend about 1.5X more hours to domestic chores than men, in India they dedicate 8X more.¹⁶

Fig. 1: Time Spent on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work, Women vs. Men, 2022



Source: Our World in Data¹⁷

Note: Unpaid care and domestic work includes: food preparation, dishwashing, upkeep of a dwelling, laundry, ironing, gardening, caring for pets, shopping, servicing and repair of personal and household goods, childcare, and care of the sick, elderly or disabled household members.

Gender Gaps in the Labour Market and Women's Economic Autonomy

Such an unequal distribution of care and domestic work results in women suffering what is known as 'time poverty': they are left with less time to offer in the labour market, or to dedicate to education, leisure, and other activities.¹⁸ Studies have also shown the impact of becoming a mother on increasing the odds of falling into poverty.^{19,20} Women who are mothers tend to earn less than women who are not (10 percent less in Argentina, and 30 percent in China and Türkiye).²¹ In contrast, men who are fathers have, on average, higher incomes than men without children. The fatherhood gap, which compares the hourly wages of non-fathers to those of fathers, indicates that the latter experience a wage premium, according to the ILO's *Global Wage Report 2018/19*.²² Simultaneously, given that women spend more time in the so-called 'economy of the shadows',²³ leading to the feminisation of poverty,²⁴ they are not only more likely to be poorer than men but their contribution to economic growth and development goes unnoticed and unaccounted for.

Yet, the care economy underpins society, production, and overall well-being. Care work includes services and activities that foster, safeguard, acquire, accumulate and restore human capabilities and social skills necessary for individuals and families to have fulfilling lives and unleash their potential; it is a precondition to thriving societies. Therefore, care work is the enabling force behind all other productive endeavours.²⁵ Even though its potential in job creation is estimated to be at nearly 300 million jobs by 2035,²⁶ care and domestic work's social and economic value remains largely invisible.

The primary reason is that domestic and care work is seen as an almost exclusive responsibility of households instead of a shared endeavour to be pursued by the State, the private sector, communities, and families. Moreover, within each household, the greatest share of these tasks is shouldered by girls and women, due to the gender stereotypes and social norms discussed above.

Adding to women's time poverty, this implies that each household has to face their care needs with its own resources and independently of their composition. At this point, education credentials and income distribution play a crucial role. Women with more resources and higher education have fewer children and tend to outsource care responsibilities, usually hiring lower-income female workers and migrants (who account for 17 percent of all care and domestic work globally²⁷). Meanwhile, as they tend to have more children and, overall, more dependents, they struggle to bear the burden of their own unpaid care and domestic chores with their jobs as carers, usually poorly paid and in precarious conditions.

Gender Gaps in the Labour Market and Women's Economic Autonomy

In recent years, a demographic transition has emerged at the convergence of decreasing fertility rates and the consolidation of adult cohorts, leading to a beneficial dependency ratio where the economically active population outnumber those in dependency. Such a transition has had implications on the resources available to families for catering to their needs. Most countries in the world are going through the demographic dividend, where the dependency ratio remains at its lowest.²⁸ Fertility rates have fallen rapidly worldwide: from the average of five children per woman in 1950 to today's rate of 2.3.²⁹ This could imply a reduction in women's care responsibilities, and an increase in their reproductive choices. It can also mean fewer school vacancies required and reorienting resources in various educational levels, less cash transfers to families with children, and a different scheme of leaves of absence.

At the same time, however, this might bring some adverse challenges, such as a proportionally higher number of single-parent families, or greater pressures on social security as the top of the population pyramid widens. There are other effects that have specific implications for public policy, strategic decisions, and planning.³⁰

Overall, considering the intersectionalities in inequalities in terms of gender, family structures, and class can help formulate more efficient policies. These, in turn, can lead to more beneficial social distribution of care.

In sum, women continue to encounter numerous obstacles that prevent them from fully engaging and benefiting from the economy. They are underrepresented in the labour market, and those who participate face elevated rates of unemployment and lower salaries, experience horizontal segregation, and have limited access to leadership roles. These persistent gender inequities—which act as predictors of poverty and barriers to women's economic autonomy—suggest a massive untapped pool of talent, resulting in the unexplored potential for economic growth.³¹ Addressing these inequities through targeted public policymaking could contribute to overcoming poverty and inequality.³²

Plenty of obstacles remain in achieving women's autonomy, especially in the economic dimension. Even as progress has been made in narrowing gender gaps, the world remains far from meeting the targets set by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); the disparities in certain goals have even widened in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.³³ Indeed, crises tend to disproportionately affect women, being the first to leave the job market when the economy contracts and the last to return during recovery. They are also more exposed to hard-hit economic sectors³⁴ and even more so compared to past crises; the outbreak of COVID-19 had a particular impact on sectors of the economy with a large share of women workers.³⁵

Additionally, groups of people who question the foundations of gender equality and resist the ongoing material and symbolic transformations are emerging in many regions, organising themselves in public spaces and disseminating anti-gender-equality discourses on social media. In the South American region, some examples are the Peruvian and Argentinian '*Con mis hijos no te metas*' (Do not mess with my children) or the Ecuadorian '*Vamos por la Vida*' (For Life)—religious and conservative reactions against the implementation of sexual education in schools and abortion legislation.³⁶ If not restrained, these pushbacks can jeopardise the progress that has been accomplished over the recent years.

The linkage between feminisation of poverty and women's economic participation has been clearly stated. There is evidence that if gender employment gaps were closed, poverty would fall, for instance in Latin America, by 1 to 14 percent,³⁷ and countries globally could increase their GDP by up to 20 percent.³⁸ As emphasised by European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde in 2016: "Getting more women into the workforce isn't just about equality, it is smart economics."³⁹

The following points outline public policies that are especially relevant to the goal of increasing women's economic participation, thereby enlarging the global workforce, reducing poverty, and boosting development.⁴⁰

- **Develop comprehensive care systems.**

The provision of comprehensive care systems would enable access to quality care services and goods, independently of the families' or individuals' incomes. Investing in affordable and accessible care infrastructure and services, especially those targeted to early childhood and adolescence, has proved to be more efficient and bring higher returns than policies implemented later in the life cycle. Such services can help fix long-dated vulnerabilities that could have been addressed in time.⁴¹

- **Implement policies that promote work-life balance.**

Provide maternity and parental leaves in accordance with ILO standards. Parental leave policies should encourage shared responsibility in caregiving. They should consider gender dynamics and family structures to mitigate the reinforcement of stereotypes that traditionally designate the mother as the primary caregiver, and adapt to different household structures (i.e., one-person, biparental without child, single-parent, extensive and composed, or biparental with children).⁴²

- **Develop gender-disaggregated data.**

Incorporating a transversal and strong gender perspective in national and international statistical systems would contribute to identifying gender gaps and formulating effective solutions to narrow them. Collecting and analysing gender- and age-disaggregated data is a precondition to designing, implementing and evaluating policies tailored to the specific individuals' and households' needs in different stages of the life cycle.

- **Design specific indicators to measure women's economic contribution.**

A step forward is developing synthetic indicators, such as the Center for Implementation of Public Policies for Equity and Growth (CIPPEC)⁴³ and Southern Voice's Basic Care Basket, which estimates the monetary value of resources needed for families to produce care without compromising women's

economic autonomy or children’s development potential. This indicator provides critical information about the goods, services, and infrastructure necessary for caregiving, household expenditure on these needs, and variations based on family configurations. Its objective is to reduce the volume of unpaid care work, informing the design of global public policies to enhance care systems.⁴⁴

- **Recognise the centrality of the care economy and value unpaid care work.**

International cooperation and multilateral platforms such as the G20 can play a crucial role by advocating for policies that promote investments in care infrastructure and services. These efforts aim to increase women’s workforce participation, ensuring access to decent jobs with fair remuneration, and ultimately contributing to narrowing gender gaps in the labour market.

- **Implement policies that target the female labour force.**

Identifying underexploited potential and setting policies such as the G20’s “25 by 25” target for the female labour force—which aims to reduce the gender gap participation by 25 percent by 2025—can help bridge the gender gaps in participation.

- **Boost the incorporation of women in dynamic sectors and reduce horizontal segregation.**

Women are underrepresented in the STEM domains (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), which generally offer better salaries and working conditions. Few women enter the scientific and technological field, and those who do, face ‘glass ceilings’ mainly because of social and cultural norms that prevent them from paving their pathways in these disciplines.⁴⁵

- **Narrow the gender digital divide.**

Women and girls experience obstacles when accessing and using digital technologies. Closing the gender digital divide and boosting women’s participation in the digital economy would result in social and economic gains and increase in livelihoods and GDP. Concrete ways to closing the

divide include: implementing policies to make technologies more affordable; increasing literacy and digital skills; promoting accessibility and online safety; and preventing the perpetuation of gender biases in data and algorithms by digital technology or artificial intelligence (AI).⁴⁶

- **Advance the implementation and operationalisation of policies that contribute to cultural change.**

There are proven effective interventions in the cultural dimension such as affirmative action policies like gender quotas that aim to break the glass-ceiling effect. A gender perspective should also be mainstreamed in communication and education, for their potential to challenge stereotypical gender norms.⁴⁷

Key Imperatives Beyond the 2030 Agenda

Closing gender gaps in the labour market is not only a question of equity but also highly beneficial in terms of economic growth and development, and the overall well-being of societies. While gender gaps are intertwined with the social fabric and the economic and cultural traits of the context they emerge from, women's lack of autonomy is a global phenomenon. It thus requires multilateral discussion and coordinated action across the globe.

Only by implementing public policy through the gender lens can the world come closer to achieving the targets embodied in the SDGs and pave the way to successfully facing the challenges beyond the 2030 Agenda. The time is now: seizing the opportunities of the demographic transition will set the basis for more developed, sustainable and inclusive economies. [ORF](#)

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