

IMPEDIMENTS TO WOMEN'S EQUITABLE EMPLOYMENT: GLOBAL SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

The ambivalent record of progress on issues of gender equality is reflective of the impediments to women's equitable employment. This paper presents facts on global gender inequality in general, while specifically focusing on gender discrimination in the labour market and formal organisations. The Gender Mainstreaming strategy is presented as a viable option to overcome the obstacles restricting women from attaining their productive potential.

1. INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that since the 1950s the absolute status of women in most countries of the world has improved substantially. For example: gender gaps in schooling have been sharply reduced due to doubling of primary enrollment rates of girls in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Middle East and North Africa (MENA); women's life expectancy has increased by 15 to 20 years in developing countries; more women have joined the labor force, thus narrowing the gender gap in employment and in wages (World Bank, 2001); the reduction in fertility and higher use of contraceptive methods in many developing countries has both lowered maternal mortality and eased the burden of unpaid care work which usually falls upon women and girls; the presence of women in politics has also grown in most countries (Molyneux and Raravi, 2006). However, despite these positive developments, progress on gender issues has been slow and there is considerable variation among countries in the extent of progress achieved which, in turn, largely depends on the initial cultural conditions, political will and capacity of the respective governments to elevate women's status. What follows in this paper are the various aspects of gender discrimination which still exist in all regions of the world making it difficult for women to find gainful employment in line with their needs and capabilities.

2. SOCIAL IMPEDIMENTS

Unequal rights and subordinate status relative to men restricts women's empowerment, and as a result, limits their ability to influence decisions in their households, their communities and at the national level (World Bank, 2001). Women's participation in market employment has been historically constrained due to their traditional gender roles requiring them to shoulder the main responsibility of household work on a daily and generational basis (Kabeer, 2003). While women's unpaid, reproductive work is vital for household welfare and for regeneration of the labor force, socially defined inequality in intra-household division of labor makes women's entry and productivity in the labor market difficult (World Bank, 1995). The disadvantages of women in terms of their social status compared to their male counterparts are depicted in Table 1. Even in the developed countries which are part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) the index of equality is 3.3 showing that women are 25 % worse off than men in terms of human and social capital. Females in the newly industrialized region of East Asia and Pacific also suffer 40% disadvantage in basic social rights as compared to males. These figures suggest that gender inequality is proving to be highly resistant to change even in countries which have achieved or are on their way to achieving a high standard of living. The severity of gender inequality in basic rights is most pronounced in South Asia (60% inequality) even as compared to Sub-Saharan Africa (55% inequality).

Table: 1 Gender Equalities in Social Rights in Different Regions of the World

Region	Score on Index of Equality*	Percentage of Equality
East Asia and Pacific	2.80	60%
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	3.20	73%
Latin America and the Caribbean	2.75	58%
Middle East and North Africa	2.30	43%
South Asia	2.20	40%
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.35	45%
OECD	3.25	75%

Source : Tabulated from World Bank, 2001, Figure 1.

* A value of 1 indicates low gender equality in rights, a value of 4 indicates high equality

3. POLITICAL IMPEDIMENTS

Gender equity is unlikely to be achieved unless women command greater influence over affairs of the state and change the culture, practice and outcomes of politics to respond better to gender equality concerns (UNRISD, 2005). Although over the years there has been heightened presence of women in politics, in no developing region do women hold more than 8% of ministerial positions in government (World Bank, 2001). It is shown in Table 2 that the average proportion of women in national assemblies has increased significantly since 1987 in most regions. For example, North Africa has shown impressive performance, by increasing women's seats in parliament from 3% in 1987 to 8% in 2004. Similarly, two other developing regions, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, also provide the evidence of significant advancement on this front (from 7% to 13% and from 8% to 16% representation respectively between 1987 and 2004).¹ On the other hand West Asian and South Asian performance appears to be particularly abysmal, as between 1987 and 2004 the increase in women's representation was only 1.5% and 2.5% respectively. Surprisingly, the legendary speed of economic development in East and South East Asia does not appear to have been translated into gender equality while considering their women's representation in the parliament (in 17 years to 2004, the women parliamentarian occupied 17% seats, compared to a figure of 14% in 1987). The evidence from former socialist countries in Central Asia and Eastern Europe also appears to be rather retrogressive, as the women's seats in the parliament of these regions decreased by 12.5% in 17 years to 2004; from 26.5% in 1987 to 14% in 2004. Molyneux and Razavi (2006) consider this sorry trend as a poignant reminder of how quickly the impact of efforts to increase women's participation in the public sphere reverses.

Table: 2-II Representation of Women in National Parliaments in Different Regions of the World

Region	Percentage of Women's seats in Parliament		Difference in Percentage Points
	1987	2004	
West Asia	4.0%	5.2%	+1.2%
North Africa	3.0%	8.0%	+5.0%
South Asia	5.5%	8.0%	+2.5%
Sub-Saharan Africa	7.0%	13.0%	+6.0%
Central Asia and Eastern Europe	26.5%	14.0%	-12.5%
Latin America and Caribbean	8.0%	16.0%	+8.0%
East and Southeast Asia	13.0%	17.0%	+4.0%
Western Europe	14.0%	24.5%	+10.5%

Source: Tabulated from Molyneux and Razavi, 2006, Figure 2.

¹ Doubling of women's representation in the parliaments of many of the developing regions in 17 years to 2004, appears to be impressive performance. However, this achievement must be considered in the backdrop of the argument that almost all of these women belong to either the groups with vested interests or the socially advantageous groups in these societies. Therefore, they cannot be expected to effectively represent the interests of less advantaged women. Thus, despite the greater show of female hands in representative bodies, gender biases still exist in political life.

Another phenomenon to have resurged in recent years which has led to dispute and politicization of gender equality issues is that of “Identity Politics”. According to Molyneux and Razavi (2006) this term refers to forces which mobilize around ethnic, racial and religious lines; challenging mainstream institutions and cultures. Molyneux and Razavi (2006) feel that with their own visions of “the good society”, and of women’s place within it, most non-western regimes pursuing identity politics assert traditional gender roles and systems of authority that deprive women from their basic rights. Sen (2005) uses the title of “Anti-women Fundamentalism” for these movements and considers them to be a negative fall out of globalization. Sen (2005) and Molyneux and Razavi (2006) seem to agree that meaningful debate and dialogue over what constitutes as progress for women in a given society can be a positive outcome of identity politics. However, these writers also feel that as religious conservatives have systematically attempted to criticize modernity to serve their own political ends and not to genuinely voice the aspirations of underprivileged groups, there is little hope for such dialogue. It is therefore essential that public policies focus on neutralizing anti-progressive forces working against empowerment of women, so as to reduce the socio-psychological barriers restricting women from demanding equal rights.

4. LABOR MARKET IMPEDIMENTS

On the macroeconomic front neo-liberal policies and free market reforms, adopted in the 1980s and 1990s by many national governments to overcome their debt crises, may be considered as drivers of inequality, social exclusion and discrimination against women (Cagatay and Erturk, 2006; DAW, 1999). Women have had to bear the brunt of structural adjustments being “shock absorbers” and “care-givers” of last resort. As social safety nets are virtually absent in developing countries, under free market conditions poor women have had to “scramble for cash” by working on exploitive terms (Molyneux and Razavi ,2006). Privatization policies inflicted injustice on women in middle income countries as well. For example, when private insurance companies were asked to run pension programs in these countries, they gave benefits only on the basis of contributions made by the insured. As women were usually earning less money and worked for fewer years than men, their benefits were depressed in relative terms after privatization of public pension programs (UNRISD, 2005).

There has been “feminization of labor” , whereby women’s access to paid work has increased in most countries, but has corresponded with worsening in the terms and conditions of work for many women (UNRISD, 2005). Constraints on female employment prospects arising from the household division of labor increase due to discriminatory norms operating within the labor market. In general, when women enter the labor market, they earn less than men even when they match men’s educational qualifications and years of work experience. According to a World Bank (2001) report, in industrial countries women in the formal sector earn an average of 77% of what men earn while in developing countries this figure is 73%. As only about a fifth of the wage gap can be explained by gender differences in education, work experience, or job characteristics, this shows that gender discrimination exists in labor markets all over the world.

Further proof of gender discrimination in the labor market in all regions of the world is given in Table 3. The table shows that regardless of the regional variations, labor force participation rates are much higher for males as compared to females, from which it can be inferred that the employment opportunities for men far exceed similar opportunities for women. In South Asia, there were only 42 women per 100 men who were economically active in 2006. This is the second lowest figure, just minimally above Middle East and North African Region (37). The implication here is that employment conditions for women in the formal sector are beset with deep-rooted gender biases especially in regions where ultra-orthodox interpretation of religion may be influencing public policy.

In general, not only are there fewer job opportunities for women, their jobs are also much more precarious than those of men. As shown in Table 4, women around the world had a higher likelihood of being unemployed as compared to men. The female unemployment rate stood at 6.6 %, compared to a male unemployment rate of 6.1 %. In addition, employment-to-population ratios, which indicate how efficiently economies make use of the productive potential of their working-age population, were much lower for women than for men in all regions of the world.

Table: 3 Gender Comparisons of Labor Force Participation Rates (LFPR) in Different Regions of the World (2006)

Region	Female LFPR %	Male LFPR %	Gender Gap*
World	52.4	78.8	66.9
Developed Economies	52.7	68.8	81.4
Transitional Economies	49.4	68.7	81.0
East Asia	66.8	81.4	79.3
South Asia	36.0	82.2	41.8
Latin America and Caribbean	52.4	79.4	69.5
Sub-Saharan Africa	62.8	85.9	74.8
Middle East and North Africa	29.5	77.3	36.7

Source : ILO (2007), p. 14

*Economically active females per 100 males.

Table: 4 Gender Comparisons of Employment-to-Population Ratios and Unemployment Rates in Different Regions of the World (2006)

Region	Female Employment-to-population ratio (%)	Male Employment-to-population ratio (%)	Female unemployment rate (%)	Male unemployment rate (%)
World	48.9	74.0	6.6	6.1
Developed Economies	49.2	64.7	6.6	5.9
Transitional Economies	44.9	62.2	9.1	9.5
East Asia	64.9	78.1	3.0	4.1
South Asia	33.8	78.3	6.2	4.9
Latin America and Caribbean	47.0	74.3	10.4	6.4
Sub-Saharan Africa	56.8	77.4	9.6	9.9
Middle East and North Africa	24.5	69.3	17.0	10.4

Source : Adapted from ILO (2007) Table 3, p. 14

Less than half of working-age women (more than 15 years of age) actually worked for remuneration. Comparatively, the ratio was more than seven out of ten for men. It should be noted that the most successful region in terms of economic growth over the last two decades, namely East Asia, was also the region with the highest regional employment-to-population ratio for women, as well as lower unemployment rates for women than for men. It goes to show that public policy which contributes to reduction in gender inequalities, coupled with sound macroeconomic management, creates an environment in which women's potential can be fully realized.

A manifestation of the disadvantaged position of women in the labor market is the disproportionately large share of low-paid or unpaid jobs performed by women in the informal sector. In general, more men than women work as "Wage and Salaried workers" or "Employers" or "Own-account Workers", while women around the world are more prone than men to be having the status of "Contributing-family workers" (See Table 5). The first two categories represent stable employment mostly in formal sector of the labor market while the last two are representative of vulnerable employment in the informal sector.

Table: 5 Gender Comparisons of Status of Employment in different regions of the World (2006)

Region	Wage and salaried worker*		Employer*		Own-account workers*		Contributing family workers*	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
World	49.2	47.9	3.3	1.4	35.9	25.7	11.6	25.1
Developed Economies	83.1	89.5	6.9	3.0	9.3	5.4	0.7	2.1
Transitional Economies	76.2	79.0	2.9	0.8	17.5	12.4	3.4	7.8
East Asia	48.7	40.8	1.5	1.0	37.0	37.4	12.8	20.9
South Asia	27.2	15.3	1.4	0.4	55.2	21.7	16.2	62.6
Latin America and Caribbean	60.7	67.5	4.4	1.7	31.1	25.6	3.7	5.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	29.5	17.0	2.7	1.4	44.4	42.3	23.3	39.3
Middle East and North Africa	55.4	56.2	11.4	4.1	21.2	11.3	11.9	28.4

Source: Adapted from ILO (2007) Table 5, p.16.

* % of total employment of each gender

Within the informal sector employment, “Own-account Workers” are usually self-employed although they are not able to employ, on a continuous basis, others to work for them. Therefore, even though their earnings are low, they can work at will making use of their income as they want. On the other hand “Contributing-family workers” also known as “Unpaid family workers” usually work for relatives in commercial establishments with little or no pay, having hardly any control over the profit they help to generate. For poor women in this category paid work itself would represent significant advancement in terms of self-determination and economic independence. As shown in Table 5, the poorer the region the larger the informal sector and the more the employment of women in the “Contributing family workers” category. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, four out of ten working women were contributing family workers compared to two out of ten men. The situation was most perverse in South Asia where six out of ten working women were classified as contributing family workers, but only two out of ten working men had this status. Public policy in less developed regions should therefore be focused on job creation for women in the formal sector and on formalization of employment contracts to ensure that temporary jobs do not crowd out more stable forms of employment for women.

In the formal sector of the labor market, a major cause of gender discrimination is “occupational segregation”. It arises out of cultural and social attitudes towards what constitutes as male or female jobs and is a world wide phenomenon, although the extent of this problem varies from country to country, and from job to job (ILO, 2004). “Horizontal occupational segregation” is present wherever women are concentrated in (or concentrate themselves into) the “feminized” professions and jobs which have lower value in terms of career advancement and remuneration. Even in jobs where there are no barriers on entry of female workers, there can be “vertical occupational segregation” whereby men are more likely to hold more of the higher posts in the organizational hierarchy than women.

Table: 6 Vertical Occupational Segregation: Country Comparisons(2000-2002)

Country	Women working on administrative and managerial post*
Sri Lanka	22%
United States	46%
Thailand	27%
Japan	9%
Brazil	45%
Philippines	35%
Bangladesh	7%

Malaysia	21%
Pakistan	8%
Saudi Arabia	1%

Source: Tabulated from ILO (2004), Figure 3.2, p.14

* Representing middle and top management workers in the formal sector of the respective countries

Evidence of vertical occupational segregation is provided in Table 6. It shows that in most countries fewer female workers are employed on managerial positions than male workers. Among the developed countries surveyed to generate these statistics, women’s share of managerial positions was highest in the United States (46%) and lowest in Japan(9%). This is perhaps because women have been comparatively more successful in claiming their rights in the U.S. than in Japan where women are culturally bound to be obedient and subservient to men (Wei-Hsin, 2005).It is further revealed in Table 6 that vertical occupational segregation is highest among Muslim countries. In Pakistan, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia women constituted only 8%, 7% and 1% of management workers respectively. Malaysia stands out as an exception in this group where 21% women were working on managerial post. Among the developing countries, Brazil performed the best with women claiming 45% of managerial jobs. Nevertheless, even in Brazil men were found to be holding 10% more of the managerial jobs than women.

5. Organizational Impediments

Gender equitable employment in organizations is hampered by patriarchal norms and traditions of the society which are not easy to neutralize. Ely and Meyerson (2000) establish the link between the cultural norm of treating masculine and feminine attributes as opposites and organizational practices which reproduce gender inequalities. The gist of their work is presented in Table 8 which illustrates how organizations structure work in terms of activities which are masculine in nature. As a result feminine characteristics are involuntarily connected with lower ability to perform well at the job.

Table:8 Antecedents of Gender Inequities in Organizations

Masculine/ Feminine dichotomies in patriarchal societies	Attitudes perpetuating Gender Inequities	Organizational Outcomes
public-private dichotomy	1. Ideal worker perceived as someone (usually male) willing to put work first above all commitments and activities in life. 2. Crises oriented work patterns and chaotic work routines which demand that men be constantly present at work and women be relentlessly involved in household chores.	1. Women perceived as less committed and less efficient than men. 2. Failure to streamline work, inability to make use of workers’ multi-tasking abilities, reluctance to offer flexibility in work timings
individualism-collectivism dichotomy	Competence considered as heroic independence, collaborative and developmental activities seen as “nice but not necessary”. Self – promoting “stars”(usually men) given preference over “behind the scene builders”(usually women)	Discrimination in recognition and rewards for men and women performing heroic and relational activities.
Male-identity female- identity dichotomy	Sex stereotypes (For example, all women are emotional and submissive and all men are rational and aggressive)	Biased assessment of seemingly “assertive women” or apparently “sensitive men”

Source: Ely and Meyerson (2000)

According to Connell (2006), female work patterns are not considered suitable in organizational settings simply because managers have unbalanced standards of what comprises as competence and efficiency, based on inclination towards male-oriented patterns of work performance rather than achievement of organizational objectives. Despite being predisposed to the idea of male superiority, though, all organizations are not equally gender biased. Sen (1999) holds that in large organizations, some sections may be more gender biased than others. However, even in difficult conditions, managers at key posts may become initiators of change. She believes that if gender equality can take root in niches and survive there, then in due course it would spread to the larger system. The implication of Sen’s argument is that larger organizations are better poised to implement gender reform policies. Mitra (2003) on the other hand, finds that the establishment size is negatively related to gender equality. She has shown that although women working on higher managerial posts earn more in large organizations than smaller ones, still the gender wage gap significantly favors men in large establishments despite controlling for worker and human capital characteristics. Resolving the controversy, Bloom et al. (2006) conclude that whatever may be the size, purpose or structure of an organization, only a well managed organization (i.e. an organization where planning, co-ordination, monitoring and leadership is effective) offers a work conducive as well as family-friendly environment for women.

On a practical level, human resource managers in formal organizations may face the following limitations in creating a gender-equitable environment:

- Difficulty in realizing targets for women in decision-making positions due to lack of suitable candidates;
- Problem in identifying and eliminating gender-based discrimination in matters of appointments, promotions, pay, conditions of employment and disciplinary procedures;
- Convincing managers and decision makers in the public sector to allow their staff to participate in gender awareness training;
- Insufficient budgetary allocation for setting up institutional structures for the promotion, implementation and monitoring of gender reform programs;
- Challenges in monitoring, reporting and improving systems dealing with sensitive gender issues such as work place sexual harassment;
- Lack of incentives for encouraging implementation of plans for gender equality in different organizations. (Commonwealth Secretariat,1999)

6. REGIONAL ISSUES

Table 7 enlists different problems confronted by women in various regions which require action, in order to make employment conditions more gender equitable. It must be remembered though that regional assessments ignore a great deal of variation within each region and a particular country would rarely fit perfectly all of the descriptions defined for its region.

Table: 7 Specific problems for women’s equitable employment in different Regions of the world

Developed Economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Job quality, contracts, hours of work not in keeping with women’s family roles ·Dearth of measures for balancing flexibility with security ·Gender wage gaps ·Declining employment content of growth/fewer jobs for women ·Diminishing size of the welfare state/ Fewer regulations safeguarding women’s interests
Transitional Economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · High female unemployment · Discouraging social and economic trends/Political and economic collapse · Underemployment with women having jobs that do not make use of their skills · Migration of skilled women; Brain Drain ·Dearth of measures for balancing flexibility with security

East Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Job quality, social protection, social dialogue, hours of work, not in keeping with women's family roles. · Inequity in rural and urban development · Problems in managing rural to urban migration · Lack of job security in small and medium enterprises · Slow formal sector growth · Rise of informal employment and proliferation precarious jobs
Latin America and the Caribbean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Barriers to labor market entry high for young women · Low education enrolment rates among poor women · Low rate of investment and job creation. · Slow formal sector growth · Underemployment among educated women
South Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · High poverty, low human capital formation · Slow formal sector growth · Child labor · Graduate unemployment · Social barriers to labor market entry · Dependency on the agricultural sector to generate growth · Low rate of investment and job creation

Source: Adapted from Global Employment Trends for Women, ILO, 2007, Pages 17-20.

7. THE GENDER MAINSTREAMING STRATEGY: A WORKABLE SOLUTION

In order to equalize economic opportunities between women and men, there is need to create favorable conditions for women at the social, political and organizational levels. The Gender Mainstreaming strategy requires governments and other actors to actively and visibly promote a gender perspective in all policies and programs, so that the effect of decisions on women and men is analyzed before any action is taken. The Beijing Platform of Action 1995 has endorsed the Gender Mainstreaming strategy. 12 critical areas of action have been specified by the Platform of Action. Focusing on these areas of action can help to achieve the objectives of the Gender Mainstreaming Strategy which are mainly: promotion of women's empowerment, the full realization of women's rights and substantive gender equality. A summary of some of the main strategic objectives under each area is presented being presented below:

- **Women and poverty:** need for development strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty; revise laws and administrative practices to ensure women's equal rights and access to economic resources; provide women with access to savings and credit mechanisms and institutions; address the feminization of poverty.
- **Women and education and training:** ensure equal access to education; eradicate illiteracy among women, improve women's access to vocational training, science and technology, and continuing education; develop non-discriminatory education and training; allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms; promote lifelong education and training for girls and women.
- **Women and health:** increase women's access throughout the life cycle to quality health care; strengthen preventive programs that promote women's health; undertake gender-sensitive initiatives that address sexually transmitted diseases; promote research and disseminate information on women's health; increase resources and monitor follow-up for women's health.

- **Violence against women:** take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women; study the causes and consequences of violence against women and the effectiveness of preventive measures; eliminate trafficking in women and assist victims of violence due to prostitution and trafficking.
- **Women and armed conflict:** increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels and protect women living in situations of armed and other conflicts or under foreign occupation; promote women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace; provide protection, assistance and training to refugee women, other displaced women in need of international protection and internally displaced women.
- **Women and the economy:** promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources ; facilitate women's equal access to resources, employment, markets and trade; provide business services, training and access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women; strengthen women's economic capacity and commercial networks; eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination ;promote harmonization of work and family responsibilities for women and men.
- **Women in power and decision-making:** increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.
- **Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women:** create or strengthen national machineries and other governmental bodies; integrate gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programs and projects; generate and disseminate gender-disaggregated data and information for planning and evaluation.
- **Human rights of women:** promote and protect the human rights of women, through the full implementation of all human rights instruments, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- **Women and the media:** increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication; promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.
- **Women and the environment:** strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional, and international levels to assess the impact of environmental policies on women.
- **The girl child:** eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls; promote and protect the rights of the girl-child and increase awareness of her needs and potential; promote the girl-child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life; strengthen the role of the family in improving the status of the girl-child.

In the author's opinion these strategic objectives constitute the most comprehensive series of steps for mainstreaming gender in development, and their implementation can redress gender inequality in its entirety. This opinion finds credence in the fact that the above objectives are being currently used as terms of reference for international appraisals of progress on gender issues (UNDP, 2009).

8. CONCLUSION

15 years after adoption of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the goals of equality, development and peace for all women have not been fully realized. Even today most females are disadvantaged as compared to most males in terms of the resources that they are able to access and utilize in order to perform their responsibilities, in the recognition given to their work both paid and unpaid, and in their capacity to make their

own choices in life. Other than a normative concern for social justice, removal of barriers on advancement of women is also necessary for economic progress. The forces which restrict women's employment opportunities constrain half of the population from using its talent and skills for productive purposes. To hone in women's productive potential, there is need to implement the Gender Mainstreaming strategy.

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