

CHAPTER 9

Equity and economic growth

While women's labour force participation can boost the performance of national economies, it requires substantial change in the organisation and distribution of paid and unpaid work, and the development of supportive social infrastructure.

Increasingly, the argument is put that gender equity is important for economic growth. For example, the World Bank argued in a recent report that the empowerment of women and girls is important for 'shared prosperity'. As the authors of the report state, gender equity is not 'a zero-sum game. Increasing women's agency need not curtail men's agency, and men and boys stand to gain from gender equality that improves the economic and psychological wellbeing of all household members, as many men have come to recognize'.¹³⁹

A joint paper by the OECD, International Labour Organization, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group presented to the G20 Labour and Employment Ministerial Meeting held in August 2014 concluded that stronger global growth could be achieved by promoting a more gender-balanced economy. The paper listed seven major gender imbalances that should be addressed:

- Gender stereotyping that tracks women into lower paid occupations.
- Gender differences in choice of fields of study.
- Gender differences in access to financial markets and productive resources.
- Gender differences in the use of leave arrangements for fathers and mothers.
- Constraints on public childcare supports.
- Unequal treatment of men and women in legal frameworks, including labour laws.
- Pervasive views about differential gender roles.¹⁴⁰

Following the G20 Summit in Brisbane in November 2014, the G20 leaders released a communiqué. One of their agreed goals was:

reducing the gap in [workforce] participation rates between men and women in our countries by 25 per cent by 2025 ... to bring more than 100 million women into the labour force, significantly increase global growth and reduce poverty and inequality.¹⁴¹

The G20's major concern is with economic growth, but economic growth does not necessarily equal gender equity. For example, Switzerland is one of the few Western European economies to have experienced growth in recent years. However, even with the fourth highest GDP per capita in the OECD, women in Switzerland still experience significant disadvantage. The choice of field of education is significantly gendered with men dominating in engineering, IT, architecture and construction, while women are over-represented in social work, teaching, psychology, languages and health.

While Swiss women's participation in the labour force has risen sharply, reconciliation of family life with work and professional aspirations continues to be a major issue. The incidence of poverty and unemployment is greater among women than men, and there is a persistent 7% gender pay gap in Switzerland (much lower than the gender pay gap in Australia).¹⁴²

While women's labour force participation can boost the performance of national economies, it requires substantial change in the organisation and distribution of paid and unpaid work, and the development of supportive social infrastructure. In Australia, the policy and legislative framework for gender equity remains patchy and the prospects of gender equity becoming more embedded in government policy in the near future appear small.