

Foreword

Gender equality is a fundamental human right as well as a key driver for economic growth. It is therefore considered a priority on the development agenda. While there has been significant progress towards achieving gender equality, across the world many women continue to face discrimination with regard to decent employment, access to credit, property or land; their civil liberties are still limited in some parts of the world and they are often victims of violence in times of both war and peace.

Not only is full engagement in economic and social life a human right, it is also essential in combating poverty and driving development. Educated women are healthier, for example, and better able to look after the health of their children, so reducing child mortality. Women who run their own small businesses can greatly increase their families' household income. Gender equality and women's empowerment is thus a crucial Millennium Development Goal that can foster progress across the whole development spectrum.

A critical but often missing element of the debate surrounding gender equality is a better understanding of the underlying reasons behind gender inequality. Conventional indicators of gender equality capture the position of women in society in terms of outcomes – for example, how many women are in education or in high-level positions. However, the linkage between those outcomes and what drives them is rarely made.

In this regard, the “Atlas of Gender and Development: How Social Norms Affect Gender Equality in non-OECD Countries” highlights the role of important social institutions – long-lasting codes of conduct, norms, traditions and informal and formal laws – in determining gender outcomes in education, health, political representation and labour markets.

The Atlas draws on the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), which was developed by the OECD Development Centre in co-operation with Göttingen University and which was launched on International Women's Day in 2009. The SIGI provides an innovative way of measuring social institutions related to gender discrimination, looking at the root causes of gender inequality rather than their outcomes. It measures social institutions – as mirrored by societal practices and legal norms – that produce inequalities between women and men in non-OECD countries, thereby presenting a wide range of new dimensions and variables that are not considered by other indices. Like the SIGI, the Atlas provides detailed information on the roots of gender equality in 124 developing and transition countries.

The SIGI and the publication of the Atlas are part of the 2009-10 Programme of Work of the OECD Development Centre, which is committed to further analysing the role of women in development. With financial support from the Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish Ministries for Foreign Affairs, many important results have been achieved in the last couple of years: the creation of Wikigender in March 2008 (www.wikigender.org), an interactive Internet platform reaching out to new communities and engaging them in a bottom-up dialogue about gender equality issues; the release of the updated Gender, Institutions and Development Database (GID-DB) in March 2009; and the launch of the SIGI on the www.genderindex.org website, also in March 2009.

Despite these achievements, more remains to be done and it is our hope that the Atlas of Gender and Development – How Social Norms Affect Gender Equality in Non-OECD Countries will serve as the basis for a deep and wide-ranging discussion on how to make further progress. The OECD Development Centre will continue its contribution with the expected release of an updated SIGI in the course of 2011. In the meantime, we hope that the discussion will continue on our platform, www.wikigender.org. Promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment together with the creation of stable and sustainable development is critical to achieving fairer and more coherent societies. This is in the interest of both OECD and non-OECD countries and therefore of all citizens of the planet.

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