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OECD Development Centre – UNESCO  
International Workshop

# Gender Equality and Progress in Societies

## Summary Record

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75016 Paris, France

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## **Introduction**

1. Over 200 policymakers, academics, NGO and private sector representatives came together to debate and discuss how to overcome the challenges related to advancing gender equality and progress in societies at an international workshop co-organised by the OECD Development Centre and UNESCO in Paris on 12 March 2010. As reflected in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), gender equality is an important facet of progress. However, measuring its status and tracking its progress remains a difficult undertaking, and discriminatory practices and traditions frequently block the implementation of laws and policies designed to uphold women's rights. Although some positive changes are visible, not enough progress is being made to advance women's rights and gender equality in the social, political and economic spheres.
2. The main objective of this conference, organised around International Women's Day and 15 years after the 4<sup>th</sup> UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, was to examine how culture can be used as an entry point to support gender equality. Cultures are made up of many different components, from literature to art, from lifestyles, value systems to traditions and beliefs. Cultures are living things, they lend and borrow from each other and in the process they can be transformed. In this globalising world, the protection and promotion of this rich diversity presents particular challenges. This conference succeeded in demonstrating the benefits of cultural diversity and mutual borrowing through dynamic and open exchange illustrated by many fascinating local case studies and a broad range of expertise from around the world.
3. The conference saw the launch of *the Atlas of Gender and Development: How Social Norms Affect Gender Equality in Non-OECD Countries*, a new resource combining country and regional analysis with rankings based on the OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI). Participants also explored how innovative tools can be used to measure and communicate progress made in addressing gender equality, and a new data visualisation tool based on the SIGI was also launched and presented at the conference.
4. The diversity of the participants was an important factor in the conference's success. The rich discussions during the plenary and working group sessions allowed the sharing of experiences and perspectives from different backgrounds and contexts. Participants debated various aspects of gender equality and progress, and by providing a platform to link together a range of issues, disciplines and actors, the usual pitfall of working in separate silos was avoided.
5. Three main themes emerged from the discussions:
  - The role of women's empowerment in boosting economic growth
  - Using innovative approaches to data-collection and communication to create incentives and the evidence needed for institutional change
  - Creating opportunities for transforming gender roles and relations through culturally-sensitive institutional change

## **Making the economic case for empowering women**

6. The economic case for empowering women has been repeatedly made over the past three decades. The promotion of gender equality should be seen as a question of economic growth as well as being about equity and justice. Some advances have been made, but gender inequality remains pervasive and women still lag behind men in many economic measures. The potential contribution they could make is too often overlooked, and this was shown to have negative effects on national well-being and wealth.
7. Education is one of the foundation stones of women's economic empowerment. Important achievements have been made in narrowing the gap between girls and boys in primary school

attendance and completion rates, however given that education gaps account for many of the global inequalities that remain, more investment should be made in increasing accessibility and quality of education for women. Furthermore, while some countries have done well in the area of education, this has not been used to empower women economically and politically, and women are not always able to reap the benefits of their education.

8. Social institutions have a significant impact on women's economic empowerment. For example, countries with a high level of discriminatory social institutions also display lower rates of female enrollment in education and higher fertility rates, which are then linked to lower female participation in the labour force. It is possible to transform social institutions that discriminate against women, for example by reforming the laws that govern family code or property rights in ways that promote female employment, and increase women's access to credit and other resources.
9. Gender inequalities vary by region, intensity and across different dimensions, and despite the many obstacles there are examples of progress and positive change that should be built on. Women's participation in the economy has an impact from the household level up to the national and regional economic level. It also impacts on the social and political spheres, and so all dimensions should be considered together.
10. The twenty-first century has seen an increased number of women enter the labour market across the globe, including in emerging markets and developing countries. One strategy to promote women's empowerment is to package and reframe the issues in a strategic way, using innovative communication methods that reach a broader audience. For example, the 3 W's of "web, women and weather" capture and frame the links between the revolution of internet technology, the increased roles and participation of women in the global economy and the challenges of climate change in a persuasive way.
11. Another strategy to overcome women's lack of economic empowerment is to create incentives in current systems to increase women's access to credit and markets. For example, strengthening microcredit or cash transfer programs or developing networks of women entrepreneurs can leverage women's economic roles.
12. Business should not only be seen as a barrier, but can also be used to leverage change and advance gender equality. Legal reforms can be used to incentivise the behaviour of businesses and corporations, for example by providing health services to employees. Given that they have limited time or access to these types of services outside of working hours, using businesses as partners and factories as delivery mechanisms could be a powerful way to meet the needs of the many women working in the global manufacturing supply chain. This will not only empower women but will also make businesses more effective and economic growth stronger.

### **Information-sharing and innovation in measuring gender equality**

13. There was a broad consensus among conference participants that measuring progress in gender equality is a complex undertaking. Indices can be used to measure a diverse range of issues relating to gender equality such as social institutions, quality of life and societal progress. It is important that measures of economic growth go beyond GDP, and include other gender-related dimensions. There are a multitude of variables that can be used, and so when designing an index it is important to think about what is being measured and why.

14. Measuring gender equality through the use of composite indices can be controversial. Nevertheless, indices play an important role in raising awareness on gender issues and they can contribute to debates among the broader public. It is also important that indices and the information they generate also have an impact on the ground on the social realities of men and women, and do not just remain in the field of policy debate.
15. Simplicity and accessibility of the information contained within indices that measure gender equality is important so that more people engage with the data. Collaborative tools such as Wikigender and Wikiprogress can be useful in this regard, by making information available to a wider audience, and also engaging them in debates and discussions around these issues.

**Incentives for institutional change: what have we learned about gender equality and progress in society?**

16. Lessons learned and success stories from countries as diverse as Turkey, Liberia, and the Philippines as well as the regional experiences of MENA and East Africa were shared with participants, helping to identify entry points for transformation and examples of how to incentivise change at the community and national level.
17. Leadership, and particularly women's leadership, is critical at all levels for bringing about change in gender equality. Women leaders may not always be visible, but when efforts are made to see and involve them they are numerous, particularly at the community level. The example of Liberia demonstrated that leaders bring many different characteristics, and it is important that they bridge across the different groups of stakeholders, including state leaders, parliamentarians, civil society and policymakers. In all of the country-specific examples of transformation that were discussed, the leaders had clear visions of change. This is particularly important in relation to gender issues, since transformation is only possible through engaging with a broad range of stakeholders, including both women and men.
18. Adapting methods and outcomes to the context of institutional change is key. The case studies demonstrated the importance of culture and tradition, and illustrated the need to engage with cultural norms, and direct and frame them to support human rights and to achieve positive transformation in gender equality. Gender equality goals have to be expressed in forms that resonate with local communities.
19. Another key issue raised was the gap between policy and practice. While legal reforms are an important and necessary step in the process of achieving gender equality, implementation of these reforms is even more important, and difficult to achieve. Turkey experienced rapid legal reforms, and the women's movement campaigned and used the media strategically to keep the momentum going. In the MENA region, the timing of the reforms were highlighted as an important aspect of their success. Changes in these countries were brought about in the context of larger public sector reforms. This turned out to be a strategic moment to introduce issues such as improving gender responsive public budgeting and legal frameworks to create a more women-friendly environment in the public sector. However, despite great progress in education, employment remains a domain of concern. In the Philippines, the new women's rights legislation represents a significant achievement, but the challenge will be to translate the "Magna Carta for Women" into concrete action.
20. In India, when women first became involved in local village councils, many people thought that they would not be effective. However, on the contrary many women have been empowered and are having an impact on decision-making in their communities. A new bill was recently

passed by the Indian Upper House on women's reservation, setting the stage for women to take one-third of all legislative seats. This represents a huge and pivotal policy change for women, but will require political will to be implemented. Some Indian states have also adopted innovative responses to challenges such as early marriage and high fertility rates, through (a) offering cash incentives to women to delay marriage and have fewer children, (b) using the media to report on these issues and to publicise and track cases of female foeticide, and these approaches have demonstrated some success. The lesson from the Indian case is that social institutions and practices can be transformed over time, thereby reducing discrimination against women.

21. Other examples illustrated how educating women on their basic human rights can have an important impact on deeply rooted traditional practices, such as in Senegal where there has been a significant decline in the practice of female genital mutilation. Women's bodies are often perceived to belong to the family or community, and more efforts are needed to protect women's sexual and bodily integrity if gender equality is to be advanced. In Turkey, these issues were an important part of women's campaigns for reform of the penal code. In Eastern Africa, in some communities widows face stigma and victimisation because of the traditions and symbols surrounding widowhood. Ensuring legal and social protection for widows and transforming attitudes and social practices are therefore important.
22. From the case study presentations, several lessons were learned about creating the incentives for institutional change. Legal reforms should be looked at through the lens of culture. Constantly changing, culture should be used as a platform for building rights. Reforming legislation is a necessary pillar, but it is not enough, and even if it is possible to change laws quickly, it will take longer to transform social institutions, attitudes and values. Change will only be effective if it is initiated from the bottom up, and the gulf between formal and customary laws must be recognised to reflect the reality of the challenges that many women face in their daily lives.

### **Conclusions and looking forward**

23. Gender equality is non-negotiable and it is embedded in all human rights instruments. However, the reality is that it does have to be negotiated, especially at the community level. Just as stereotypes are internalised, new attitudes towards gender equality need to be internalised. We have invested in de jure equality through legal reforms, but de facto equality remains the missing piece.
24. Several actions are required if efforts to promote gender equality are to be effective. Large-scale sensitisation is needed to change public attitudes. Sex-disaggregated data is needed, so that there is evidence to support the arguments for gender equality. Training and capacity-building are needed, so that women have the skills to engage effectively in the economic and political spheres. Finally, more investment in women at the local level is needed, because the grassroots is where the most important changes have to happen.
25. Taking cultural diversity into account in gender-related policy decisions can be challenging, but this conference pointed to several key lessons learned. First, women's empowerment and gender equality drive economic growth, businesses and progress. Second, although there are many differences and divides between rich and poor countries, all countries are facing challenges to implement the internationally agreed commitments on gender equality (eg. CEDAW, the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, the MDGs, the Education For All goals) and can learn from each other. There is a need for more peer-review, and sharing of

experiences at the local, national and regional levels, and collaboration across the public and private sectors. Third, qualitative and quantitative data, statistics and new forms of measurement are important and powerful tools for creating and communicating evidence-based and context-specific policies and programmes that support gender equality. And finally, culture and technological innovation can both be drivers for transforming gender roles and relations. Web 2.0 technologies and social networking platforms such as wikigender and wikiprogress should be used to build coalitions and momentum for change.

26. This conference marked the beginning of an important collaboration between the OECD and UNESCO, and was also an opportunity to bring together a diverse range of speakers and participants from many different backgrounds. During the conference the Measuring Progress in Gender Equality (MPGE) Network was created as a platform to follow up and carry on the broad dialogue initiated by the participants. The Network already has over 100 members, and will bring together people interested in debating, discussing and advancing gender equality, particularly in relation to measuring progress. For more information on the MPGE Network and how to join, please click [here](#).
  
27. The year 2010 represents an enormous opportunity for making progress on gender equality. The review of Beijing +15 (March), the ECOSOC high-level segment (July), the MDGs summit (September) and the anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (October) are all processes that will place the spotlight on women's empowerment and gender equality. Donors can play an important role in supporting and funding these efforts, although money is not the only important factor. Most importantly, supporters of gender equality from different countries and sectors should work together and bridge their different perspectives to create a common platform for change, rooted in information-sharing, innovative new strategies for promoting gender equality and creating the incentives for institutional change. With this, we may begin to see some progress towards achieving gender equality.