



► Theory of Change brief

September 2022

Theory of Change towards a transformative agenda for gender equality in the world of work

Background

Despite significant advances in gender equality at work over the past century, progress in closing gender gaps remains slow and far from being a reality for many women and men. Gender gaps have not narrowed in any meaningful way for over 20 years. As the world slowly recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic the current labour statistics still hold true:

- ▶ A total of 43.8 per cent of women are currently employed compared to 67.9 per cent of men.
- ▶ Women continue to be paid on average 20 per cent less than men with similar educational attainment.
- ▶ Women hold only 27 per cent of managerial and leadership positions.
- ▶ Only 8 per cent of working women in low-income countries are in formal employment.
- ▶ Female-dominated sectors and occupations are beset by decent work deficits and occupational segregation remains firmly intact.
- ▶ 649 million women still lack adequate maternity protection and over 1 billion men between 15-49 years live in countries with no right to paternity leave. More than 2 billion potential parents are left without adequate protection and care support.

Overall, women continue to perform over three quarters of unpaid care work and represent almost the same proportion in the paid care sectors.¹ Social norms continue to reinforce the role of women primarily as caregivers and men as the main source of household income. Women caregivers are more likely to be outside the labour force and, when employed, often work shorter hours, are often own-account workers, in informal jobs, and are less likely to be covered by social protection. Entrenched social norms relating to reproductive and care responsibilities also have a significant influence on where women work – contributing to gender-based occupational segregation – with associated impact on working conditions including remuneration. For instance, the undervaluation of care

work leads to lower average wages for women working in the care economy sectors.

Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination such as disability, ethnicity, social origin, migration status, SOGIESC characteristics, age, HIV status, underpin, reinforce and exacerbate gender inequalities and impact employment outcomes as further explained below.

Unless the present trajectory is changed and a transformative and measurable agenda for gender equality in the world of work is put at the centre of **development decision making processes**, advancing the relative position of women in the labour market will remain out of reach. Addressing gender equality in the

¹ ILO, 2018. [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#).

world of work requires meaningful and determined efforts by ILO constituents to remove the critical constraints that women and girls face and to define actionable opportunities that lead to sustained change in legislation, policy, and practice. This requires strengthening both formal and informal norms and institutions of work to advance and prioritize gender equality, equity, and inclusion and transforming those that inhibit. Redressing discrimination and disadvantage and overcoming deep-rooted societal and cultural stereotypes relating to women, and **women** from marginalized populations, the value of their work and their position in the labour market is the point of departure. Achieving this goal requires simultaneous action on different and mutually reinforcing paths where rights, access to infrastructure, social protection, care policies and services are granted together with support during life and work transitions and the exercise of voice and representation. Strong institutional transparency and accountability mechanisms have a critical role to play in ensuring that policies and practices are implemented to transform practices to advance gender equality.

Transformative Agenda for Gender Equality: A Theory of Change

A Theory of Change is essentially a comprehensive description, outline, and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. A Theory of Change focuses on mapping out and describing what an intervention does and how its actions lead to desired results and outcomes that inform change.

This Theory of Change for a transformative agenda on gender equality in the world of work is founded on international labour standards, in particular those relating to gender equality.² It is also founded on ILO commitments toward a human-centred approach to the world of work affirmed through the ILO [Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#) (2019) and confirmed in the 2021 [Global Call to Action](#) for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient. Both frameworks call for a transformative agenda for gender equality recognising the immense contributions that women in all their diversities bring to the world of work and the need to close persistent gender gaps.

The Theory of Change reflects a twin-track approach to gender equality that has been embedded in the ILO modus operandi over time. It consists of mainstreaming gender equality throughout all its Programme and Budget (P&B) outcomes while also ensuring that some work is specifically dedicated to accelerating efforts towards gender equality

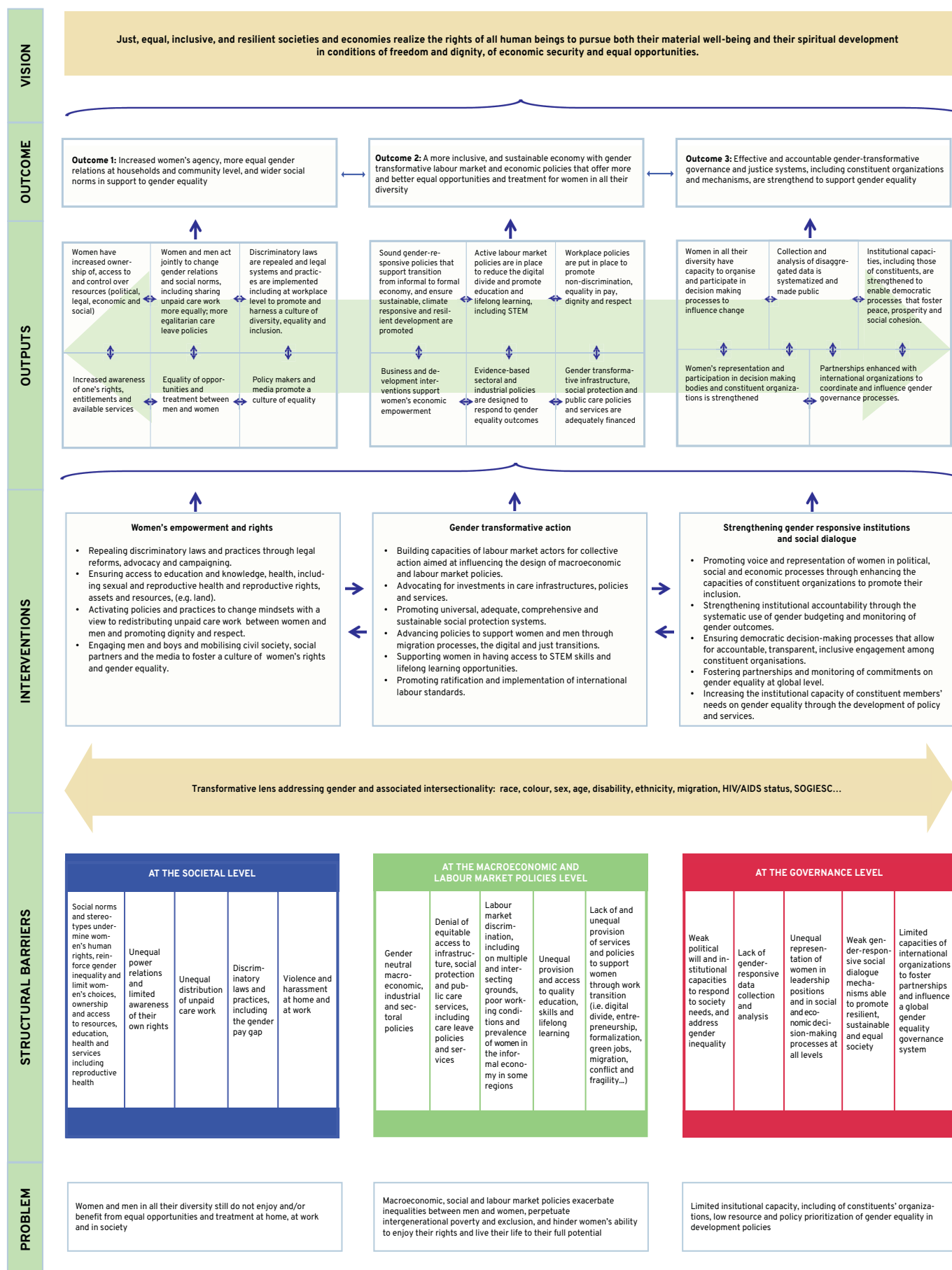
and equal opportunities and treatment for all. It is important to note that the P&B determines the course of action the ILO will take in supporting constituents. Hence, it provides guidance for engagement based on what is contained within the ILO's current and possibly future programmatic frameworks. The Theory of Change is further grounded in the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goals and other UN norms and instruments that offer a comprehensive framework for gender equality.³

This Theory of Change contributes to articulating the conditions and actions needed to progress gender equality in the world of work. It builds on extensive research and work on the ground that the ILO and its constituents - governments, employers', and workers' organizations - have been delivering over the past years. It further responds to the ILO constituents' demands to articulate a coherent framework of action that leads to durable impact. This Theory of Change has been developed to summarise the overall approach to work on gender equality of the Office and how the proposed streams of work integrate and engage with each other to produce desired outcomes. In describing the actions needed to drive the fulfilment of rights and the empowerment of **all** women in the world of work, the Theory of Change also leverages the ILO mandate, its comparative advantages and identifies strategic partnerships needed to achieve this goal.



² Including, but not limited to, Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183), Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156), Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No.190).

³ Including the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.



Interventions

The achievement of gender equality in societies and economies requires transforming unequal gender relations at societal, economic and governance levels through a combination of sound policies, legislation, and practices.

At the core of the Theory of Change is a **transformative approach** to gender equality that seeks to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and challenge unequal power relations with the view to transforming structures, institutions and norms and changing the way resources are produced and allocated. Transformative change starts where the ‘individual and the system meet’. Intersectionality therefore must be considered through a process that focuses on self-reflection, relationships, and contexts.⁴ A transformative approach to gender equality needs to responsibly embrace **intersectionality** considering its many different enablers such as for example reflexivity, dignity, choice and autonomy, accessibility and universal design, diverse knowledges, intersecting identities, and relational power.⁵ This translates into the recognition that people’s lives are formed by their identities, relationships, and social factors. These factors blend to create intersecting forms of privilege and oppression depending on a person’s context and existing power structures such as patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, imperialism, homophobia and racism.⁶ An intersectional lens to a transformative agenda for gender equality in the world of work is therefore required to identify structural barriers throughout the life cycle and better understand how individual experiences differ, even within already marginalized or underrepresented groups.⁷

► Societal level

The focus at the societal level is in securing a rights-based environment where discriminatory social and legal norms are repealed and deep-seated discriminatory practices, assumptions, cultural traditions, individual values and attitudes are addressed. It also seeks to reinforce and promote access to education, knowledge, health⁸, assets and resources, including land, pay equity, care leave policies⁹, equality of opportunity and treatment, dignity, and respect. Women’s ability to influence change is of paramount importance while men, business leaders, workers, community leaders and members, policy, and decision-makers, as well as the media and the labour

market institutions have an important role to play in supporting women in all their diversities to gain voice, be recognized for the skills and talent they contribute to economic growth and societal development and overcome long-standing stereotypes.

Shaping a more egalitarian gender contract is possible when the relationship between paid and unpaid care work is acknowledged and addressed, by recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work between women and men and families and the State and by rewarding and representing care workers.¹⁰ This is possible through ensuring a continuum of care that includes a wide range of care leave policies, services and support to workers with family responsibilities. Such measures have the potential to challenge persistent gender stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles in society. However, in this process, attention to issues relating to disability, indigeneity, colour, race, national extraction, migration, location (rural/urban), HIV status and others, need to be carefully taken into consideration otherwise the root causes of gender-based discrimination will remain unchanged.

A shift in mindsets and entrenched norms can be accelerated if societies and economies recognize not only that they depend on care work to survive and thrive, but also that work and care are closely interconnected. This mutual dependence is even more apparent in the context of the current transition towards a digital and green economy. Reconciling the worlds of “work” and “care” is one of the key challenges to actively promoting gender equality. Decreasing fertility rates, increasing migrant movements, and ageing populations, and the rising number of women in employment are today’s reality. Accelerating a new equilibrium requires bold policies and measures that end violence and harassment, and any form of discrimination against women with the underpinning aim to better distribute care responsibilities across genders. Reliable gender-disaggregated data are essential to designing such policies and monitoring outcomes to establish what works for women in all their diversity.

► Economic level

Ensuring gender-transformative macroeconomic policies that provide access to job opportunities, as well as access to infrastructure, social protection, care policies and services, particularly for those women and men disproportionately represented in the informal economy

4 UN Women, 2021. [Intersectionality Resource Guide and Tool Kit](#).

5 For more on intersectionality enablers please see: UN Women, 2021. [Intersectionality Resource Guide and Tool Kit](#).

6 UN Women, 2021. [Intersectionality Resource Guide and Tool Kit](#).

7 A UN system guidance note on intersectionality, racial discrimination and the protection of minorities will be launched in September 2022 and will be useful to the implementation of this Theory of Change.

8 Including sexual and reproductive rights.

9 Including maternity, paternity, parental leave, breastfeeding breaks and other care-related leave policies such as long-term care leave and emergency leave.

10 The ILO has put forward the globally accepted and action-oriented SR Framework for Decent Care Work to promote a high road to care work by recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid housework and family care; rewarding care workers fairly, while generating sufficient care jobs to meet care needs; and representing care workers with rights, voice and representation in decision-making, social dialogue, and collective bargaining. The SR framework implies that good-quality care requires decent work for care workers, which benefits both care providers and recipients, and society. For more info: ILO, 2018. [Care work and Care jobs for the future of decent work](#) and ILO 2022. [Care at Work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work](#).

is of critical importance. To this end, the fiscal space must be expanded to invest in care provision, services and infrastructure thus reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work and allowing more time for women to engage in lifelong learning, employment opportunities, and to help women transition into the formal economy. Supporting women through global transformation relating to technology, demographics and climate change and situations of conflict and fragility requires an approach that allows workers to keep up with demands for new skills and match the needs of employers. Lifelong learning can be instrumental in helping to prevent people migrate from rural to urban settings, from being left behind during social and economic transitions. Proactive measures encouraging young women to engage in STEM studies and occupational trajectories with training programmes aimed at facilitating the return to work for women and men either after childbirth, following a period of parental leave, or as a result of long-term unemployment due to unpaid family care responsibilities need to be an explicit policy objective. Likewise, quality and value of work in female dominated occupations and sectors need to be addressed through active labour market policies while also ensuring that these jobs have social protection, provide adequate economic security and offer upward mobility.

Closing the digital gender divide must also be a focus of gender responsive and accessible lifelong learning initiatives. More integrated, inclusive and gender-transformative approaches to entrepreneurship development policies and their implementation through the creation of enabling environments including in the context of technology, innovation, climate change, finance, and public procurement are important.

Ending violence and harassment in the world of work is also necessary to achieve equal opportunities, respect people's dignity and promote harmonious and productive relations at work, and promote sustainable enterprises that promote responsible business practices. Incentives to support women, including those in agriculture, in transitioning to formalized enterprises, including through cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy units, as well as accessing to public procurement opportunities need to gain attention. The effective promotion and implementation of international labour standards are a clear guidance in this process towards improving working conditions for all. Working women and men also benefit from flexible work arrangements to facilitate better work-life balance, which can improve the quality of working life and enterprise performance.

► Governance level

Gender transformative institutions and systems are crucial for creating the necessary enabling environment to ensure that national policies and services are in place and respond equally and equitably to the rights and needs of diverse women and men. To this end, strengthening institutional mechanisms for gender equality with a whole of government approach and enhancing data collection

and analysis, monitoring and evaluation would allow to better highlight inequalities and formulate evidence-based policies aimed at accelerating the effective prioritization of investments and interventions for gender equality, equity and inclusion. An important focus of any institutional strengthening approach is improving awareness and knowledge of gender equality and related issues within specific contexts so that targeted interventions can be developed and employed. Without awareness, understanding and capacities it is difficult for institutions to initiate transformative change and structuring of systems.

To this end, gender-responsive budgeting remains an effective tool to increase institutional accountability. However, a fundamental prerequisite is the unconditional leadership and participation of women in decision making processes to ensure that all women benefit more equally from governance systems, including access to justice.

Employers' and workers' organizations play a critical role in advancing diversity, inclusion, and equality in the world of work. The capacities of social partners need to be strengthened to respond to enterprise and workers' priorities and to advocate for the transformative agenda on gender equality through policy dialogue with government. Societies cannot afford to leave women out of these processes. Addressing issues of women's representation and participation in tripartite bodies, as well as in trade unions and employers' organizations, social dialogue, including collective bargaining has proven to have positive impact on making work decent and more remunerative, overcoming discrimination, and redefining social norms while also promoting social cohesion and peace. International organizations supporting these processes also have a role to play in ensuring their integrity in walking the talk on gender equality and in financing and providing technical advice to governments and civil society.

► Action actors

Realizing a transformative agenda for gender equality requires acting on all its multiple drivers. This can be achieved through coordinated efforts between ministries and women public bodies, and in close consultation and participation of representative employers' and workers' organizations. Civil society also plays an important role. The UN system has an important role to play in leveraging its coordination functions, building strategic alliances, and promoting social mobilization with greater participation of women in decision-making body and processes. This would strengthen overall accountability to gender equality. In this respect, the ILO is part of the UN System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (GEEW) which enables gender issues to be mainstreamed systematically and measurably into all major institutional functions of the UN system entities. In addition, the ILO has the Gender Equality Action Plan, a programmatic tool to support effective and inclusive gender-responsive delivery of the Decent Work Agenda. Internal gender related quality control mechanisms for technical cooperation projects are also in place. They

include a system of gender markers aimed at ensuring that all ILO interventions effectively address gender equality, as well as non-discrimination more broadly. Finally, International Financing Institutions have a crucial role to play in prioritizing investments that can transform gender power relations and benefit women and men more equally.

► ILO contribution

Gender equality is a universal common goal and an aspiration that passes through the world of work. As mentioned before, a transformative and measurable gender equality agenda features prominently in the ILO Centenary Declaration adopted in 2019, in the Call to Action and in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably in Sustainable Development

Goals 5 and 8. The commitment of ILO's constituents to deliver on that agenda is also reflected in the ILO's current programmatic priorities, which combine the fight against gender discrimination and bias in respect of women's access to, and progress in, labour markets; the just valuation of women's work and reduction of the gender pay gap; support for a more even distribution of unpaid care work between families and the State and between men and women; and the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work. Delivering on this agenda requires the implementation of a package of integrated, inclusive, and transformative policies and measures, informed by the relevant international labour standards. In addition, gender mainstreaming throughout all its work is a key to the success of the ILO to deliver on gender equality.



Contact details

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch (GEDI)
T: +41 22 799 6730
E: gedi@ilo.org
www.ilo.org/ged