



International  
Labour  
Organization



# GAME CHANGERS: WOMEN AND THE FUTURE OF WORK IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# GAME CHANGERS: WOMEN AND THE FUTURE OF WORK IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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*Closing gender gaps must remain a priority if we want to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030.*

*ILO Director-General  
Guy Ryder, International  
Women's Day, 2018*

## **GENDER EQUALITY IS A WIN-WIN FOR ALL. IT WILL USHER IN A FAIRER, MORE PROSPEROUS FUTURE FOR THE WHOLE REGION**

Since its inception in 1919 the ILO has promoted the principles of non-discrimination and equality as fundamental values. Now, as the organization looks to celebrate its centenary in 2019 it is an opportunity to look to the future, in order to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond so that the future of work upholds the promise of inclusive growth and decent work for all.

The future labour market landscape looks ever more complex as major transformations are taking place: ageing populations, technology advancements, climate change and the rise of non-standard jobs or the “uberization” of work. As the future of work is discussed around the world, in most of these debates the role of women as a primary “game changer” for the future of work is typically overlooked.

## **WOMEN HAVE BEEN A DYNAMIC FORCE IN THE REGION'S ECONOMIES BUT HAVEN'T REAPED THE FULL BENEFITS**

Globalisation and women's work, both inside and outside the home, paid and unpaid, have fuelled the rapid economic transformation in the Asia-Pacific region over the past few decades. Major progress has been made in poverty reduction, educational achievement, industrialization, household incomes and economic growth – much of which has been driven by the greater economic engagement of women. Additionally, more and more women can be found in business

and management roles, generating jobs and hiring more gender balanced teams. Yet, persistent and stubborn gender gaps in the labour markets of the region are slowing overall progress.

Countries across the region are facing significant opportunity costs associated with gender inequality. Evidence is accumulating that closing gender gaps significantly boosts gross domestic product (GDP). Closing gender gaps in labour force participation rate by 25 per cent could add as much as \$3.2 trillion to the overall Asia-Pacific GDP. However, GDP is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to gender equality-related impacts, which can be found in enterprise performance, innovation, productivity and profitability. In addition to economic returns, these gaps will impede full progress on development, women's empowerment and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Even though the labour force participation rate of women is relatively high (except in Southern Asia), in many countries it has either stagnated or declined in recent times and gender gaps persist. In Eastern Asia, for instance, the gap between men and women is 15.6 per cent in 2018 and is expected to widen over the immediate period. In South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, the average gap is at 22.8 per cent, and in Southern Asia, the gap is at 51.4 per cent and expected to widen over the immediate future.

More than 64 per cent of women who are employed in the region are in informal employment. While a sizeable proportion of men are also present in the informal economy, women tend to be concentrated in the poorest segments of informal employment. Also, the female share of

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*It is vital to hear the voices of women in Asia and the Pacific; their learnings and their challenges, and how they turn their challenges into opportunities.*

*Participant at the ILO Regional Conference on Women and the Future of Work in Asia and the Pacific*

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*We shall overcome together. We need a woman to woman connection and women to women voices from grassroots.*

*Participant at the ILO Regional Conference on Women and the Future of Work in Asia and the Pacific*

vulnerable employment remains high, especially in Southern Asia, at 79 per cent in 2017. In Eastern Asia, it dropped slightly to 32 per cent, though in South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, it has stagnated, at around 52 per cent in 2016–17.

## **WOMEN WANT TO WORK AND MEN AGREE - FAIR SHARE OF HOUSEHOLD AND CARE RESPONSIBILITIES IS KEY**

The share of women as contributing family workers decreased dramatically between 1997 and 2017, on average from 41 per cent to 13 per cent across the region. In South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, contributing family work decreased, from 40 per cent to 22 per cent, while the share of women in wage and salaried work increased, from 33 per cent in 1997 to 46 per cent in 2017. Positive long-term trends in Eastern Asia show an increased share of women in wage and salaried work by one third between 1997 (when it was 45 per cent) and 2017 (when it became 66 per cent).

Today's female workforce is more educated and more set on career progression than ever before. Despite this, women constantly confront obstacles that are similar across countries related to employment access, choice of work, working conditions, employment security, wage parity, occupational segregation, discrimination and balancing work and family responsibilities.

Across the region, the majority of women want to work outside of the home in paid jobs, and most men agree with their ambition, as a recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Gallup revealed. However women cannot do it alone and the demands on their time are likely to grow in the future, with ageing populations which will increase the need for caregiving. Fair sharing of household and care responsibilities between women and men and in society is critical for women to gain a stronger foothold in the workforce and benefit from future economic growth, which can in turn benefit families.

## **WOMEN CONTINUE TO FACE DIRECT AND INDIRECT DISCRIMINATION WHICH HINDERS THEIR ABILITY TO ACCESS HIGHER QUALITY JOBS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Discrimination results in women being concentrated in a limited number of sectors and in the lower value segments of the labour market, often in vulnerable and informal work. While trends show a decrease in some areas over the long term, discrimination remains pervasive.

Women in the region experience deeply rooted direct and indirect discrimination that prevents them from enjoying the same rights and opportunities as men. This, in turn, affects their labour market outcomes. Discrimination may be direct, such as legislation that establishes different retirement ages for men and women or legal differences in property rights based on gender. Or it can be indirect, in the form of rules and practices which appear neutral but in practice inhibit opportunities and lead to disadvantages or 'unconscious biases' that undervalue women and girls. Discrimination is even more pronounced where gender inequality intersects with other characteristics, such as ethnicity, indigenous status, caste, disability and gender identity and sexual orientation.

Age discrimination is another factor impeding women's opportunities. At both ends of the age spectrum, young women and older women are likely to experience employment discrimination. In particular, Southern Asian countries stand out for their higher rates of young women who are 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET), often due to their family responsibilities and their lower levels of access to education. Women of childbearing age are not immune either, with some employers reluctant to hire them because they perceive a lack of attachment to the labour market or because they do not want to cover maternity responsibilities.

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*Mindsets and attitudes need to change. We need to recognize that women can contribute and women can perform.*

*Participant at the ILO Regional Conference on Women and the Future of Work in Asia and the Pacific*

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*We are confronted today with evidence of a submerged iceberg of misconduct, which disfigures and contaminates the world of work and renders it all too frequently a particularly hostile and intimidating environment to women.*

*ILO Director-General Guy Ryder, 107th session of the International Labour Conference*

Important also is the undervaluing of women and girls. The practice of sex selection in favour of boys before birth has resulted in a serious gender imbalance within some country populations. The long-term impacts of this are starting to emerge. With fewer women available for marriage, the trafficking of women for marriage is increasing. The future labour markets in these countries will also have a scarcity of women workers.

The opening of new jobs, opportunities and sectors holds promise for reversing this trend and enabling more women, alongside men, to compete for jobs of the future. However this will require accelerated effort, coordination, partnerships, accountability and leadership to make this a reality for the future of work.

### **BIG CHANGES IN LAWS BUT SLOW CHANGE IN PRACTICE DUE TO INHIBITING SOCIAL NORMS AND ATTITUDES AND UNCONSCIOUS BIASES**

Progress has been made in laws and policies to eliminate discrimination, however significant gaps remain both in law and practice. In several countries across the region, prohibitive laws continue to limit the jobs and sectors where women can operate, and a few countries still enforce different mandatory retirement ages for women and men. Even where there are laws and regulations promoting gender equality, change has been slow at the levels of institutions and practices due to inhibiting social norms, attitudes, unconscious biases, limited capacities and weak accountability systems.

Gender-biased norms and attitudes in the labour market continue to constrain women's visions and opportunities. Related to this, occupational segregation, both horizontal and vertical, are endemic in the region. It generally confines women to occupations with lower pay, worse prospects for advancement and poorer working conditions. It contributes to the gender pay gap, and it hinders women from taking up jobs and occupations in sectors with job growth.

Gender-based violence and harassment, also remain prevalent despite improved

legal frameworks and many enterprise-level initiatives aiming to prevent and address them. The abuse affects girls and women disproportionately. It is evident that more work needs to be done to create a world of work that is free from violence and harassment, whether it be changing social norms and attitudes or strengthening the legal frameworks and their enforcement.

There are hopeful signs of champions pushing for progress in equality both in the public and private sectors and renewed energy from civil society in some countries to maintain calls for more accountability and transparency towards women and gender equality commitments.

With growing media attention on the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace, companies and organizations alike are also stepping up their efforts to address this issue of violence and harassment which negatively affects individuals, the workplace environment and productivity. At the global level, the ILO and its constituents are considering new standards to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work, which should be decided upon in 2019.

### **HOW WE VALUE AND DISTRIBUTE CARE WORK MUST CHANGE**

Managing work and family responsibilities are major constraints for workers, and women in the region in particular. In the ILO-Gallup report, women and men cited work-family balance, affordable care and unfair treatment as the top challenges to women in the workforce. Other recent ILO analysis from 64 countries around the world revealed that 16.4 billion hours are spent in unpaid care work every day, corresponding to 2 billion people working eight hours per day with no remuneration. **If such services were valued based on an hourly minimum wage, they would amount to 9 per cent of global GDP, which corresponds to \$11 trillion.** The average time spent on unpaid care work by women and men in Asia and the Pacific is 262 minutes and 64 minutes, respectively. This amounts to women spending fourfold the time that men do on unpaid care. According to the findings, on average, men from this

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**Acknowledge a domestic worker as a worker, as a skilled worker and also allow us to form a union.**

*Participant at the ILO Regional Conference on Women and the Future of Work in Asia and the Pacific*

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**In our countries, we rely on women, care workers and domestic workers to go out and prop our economies.**

*Participant at the ILO Regional Conference on Women and the Future of Work in Asia and the Pacific*

region performed the lowest share of unpaid care work across all regions.

By 2050, more than 46 per cent of the population in Asia will be aged 60 or older. As the region continues its ageing-population trajectory, the demand for both paid and unpaid care work will increase and it will affect future levels of stress on women and girls if care responsibilities continue to be undervalued and borne disproportionately by women and girls. This will also affect their opportunities for accessing decent work. Without changes in labour market and care policies, women will continue to face challenges in participating in labour markets. And with the ageing population and a shrinking workforce, most countries are likely to see reductions in GDP. Increasing women's labour force participation in all countries is likely to be the biggest contributor to growth and prosperity.

Ageing populations will also increase the demand for paid care services and generate new jobs and opportunities in the future. Many countries in the region have made considerable progress in valuing care work and providing quality care jobs, but much more needs to be done, especially to uphold the rights, value and ensure decent working conditions for domestic workers, whose numbers will continue to grow.

## **WOMEN CAN BENEFIT AND BE HINDERED BY THE TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES AHEAD**

Technological changes will profoundly shape future labour markets. It will be essential to ensure that women are not left behind as the region moves towards high-skilled and value-added production. Women's participation in jobs and sectors related to technology is low compared with men's participation, and women are less likely to be connected to the Internet. In Southern Asia, for instance, only 17 per cent of women had access to the Internet in 2017.

The impacts of future technological change will be both positive and negative for women. Automation, for example, will displace many low-skilled jobs in manufacturing, particularly

in the garment sector. But at the same time, technological advances may open jobs for women in industries previously dominated by men, where physical strength is no longer a prerequisite. While low-skilled jobs may become redundant, technological advances in production are likely to usher in new highly skilled and knowledge-based jobs. It is therefore important to frame this process of job reduction and job creation as an important opportunity to shift women from predominately low-skilled work to higher-skilled work.

Technology offers other potential benefits for women: from labour-saving devices in the home that may free up time for engaging in paid work to the empowerment effects of financial products, online information on legal rights, job opportunities, market opportunities and reproductive health information that may have been previously inaccessible. There is scope too, to bolster labour market entry by women, including women with a disability and women from rural areas, with a flexible work environment made possible by digitalization.

The digital platform economy is expanding rapidly in Asia and the Pacific, encompassing work ranging from taxi services and domestic services to professional, legal and creative services. While the job growth potential is enormous, and technology and innovation hold the potential to transform the workplace, there are concerns that traditional employment relationships are unclear, which could lead to legal gaps in rights and protections and widening inequalities. Moreover, there are emerging issues of gender pay gaps and concerns that the perceived flexibility of work may result in the intensification of women's care burdens rather than easing them.

The impacts of technology and the low representation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematic fields point to the urgent need for enabling women to access a range of skills-training opportunities provided by both the public and private sectors. It also underscores the need for social dialogue and social protection to address job displacements.



*Women in STEM are impassioned and inspired, but there are too few in these fields.*

*Participant at the ILO Regional Conference on Women and the Future of Work in Asia and the Pacific*

It is important to bring all efforts together to ensure that the full potential of technologies and innovation will be utilized for social good and for addressing inequalities.

## **PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK MEANS PREPARING ALL WOMEN WITH RELEVANT SKILLS**

More and more women can be found in business and management roles but the numbers are quite low, indicating the presence of glass ceilings and glass walls. Women own and manage approximately 30 per cent of the region's businesses mainly in self-employed, micro and small enterprises although some run large companies. Women are a minority in senior managerial positions in most countries and even a smaller proportion when it comes to Chief Executive Officers. Women can and are challenging stereotypical beliefs and proving they are just as capable as men to take on leadership positions in businesses and organizations.

Climate change impacts are already being felt in the region, with rising sea levels and increasing weather events, particularly in the Pacific. Green job opportunities to combat climate change will continue to grow substantially in the region, and it will be essential that women gain the skills required for these jobs. Women are over-represented among vulnerable workers, and climate change threatens to increase their unpaid care burden and widen the existing gender gaps in the world of work.

Skills shortages already present a major hurdle for the just transition to environmental sustainability, particularly for certain sectors and occupations, such as wind, wave and tidal power; renewable energies for manufacturing, construction and installation; expansion of the environmental industries; and the green building and construction sector. Women have the potential to play a role as change agents across all sectors to

transition to greener economies and jobs.

It is not only green sector jobs that will expand in the future. Job growth will be seen in the science, technology, engineering and mathematic-related fields, in services and in knowledge-based production, among others. As economies evolve rapidly and lower-skilled work decreases, it will be critical to ensure that women can make the shift from their current concentration in low-skilled work to higher-skilled and value-added work.

## **ACCELERATING PROGRESS ON EQUALITY: GAME CHANGERS FOR A BETTER FUTURE FOR ALL**

The future of work remains to be determined. Women in the region have proven their role as change agents for inclusive, fairer and more egalitarian societies. As workers, entrepreneurs, family members, migrants, grassroots leaders and business and political leaders, they have been the driving force for the profound economic transformations in the Asia-Pacific region over the past few decades. Nevertheless, persistent gender inequalities continue to constrain women's opportunities and hinder future prosperity in the region. This report identifies five game changers which have the potential to accelerate progress on equality and usher in a fairer, more inclusive world of work. These five game changers are: (i) transforming adverse gender norms and attitudes; (ii) amplifying women's voice, representation and leadership; (iii) valuing and redistributing unpaid care work; (iv) ensuring equal opportunities and treatment of women in future jobs and sectors; and (v) reinforcing accountability for progress on gender equality.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO TRANSFORM ADVERSE GENDER NORMS AND ATTITUDES



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- Undertake reforms in the legal and regulatory frameworks to remove any discriminatory laws or regulations that could impede progress for gender equality; monitor, report in a transparent manner and continue to ensure progress, including preventing and ending violence and harassment in the world of work.
- Collect more data and evidence on what works on changing adverse social norms and attitudes around women in the economy and society and for a better understanding of opportunities, trends and shifts in mindsets at the national and local levels, including measures to prevent and end violence and harassment in the world of work.
- Design and implement multipronged and time-bound strategies to shape positive social norms towards women in the world of work and to remove discrimination by, for example, promoting awareness-raising campaigns on gender roles at all levels, encouraging male champions and thought leaders to implement policies and use technologies

that encourage people to “do the right thing” and providing space to discuss adverse norms in the workplace.

- Ensure that women are well represented in decision-making and policy-making processes at all levels of world-of-work institutions; and support the organizing of women through trade unions, enterprise associations, cooperatives, self-help groups and online communities so that they can advocate for their priorities, including in the informal economy.
- Engage people who have power and influence to demand results for gender equality (such as leaders among workers’ and employers’ organizations, the government and other development and business partners, thought leaders and social cause champions); provide them with guidance to leverage their influence as change-makers.
- Engage local leaders and male champions to foster positive attitudes among men to uphold women’s rights; and provide support within communities where norms may be restrictive for women and girls, including on eliminating violence and harassment.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO AMPLIFY WOMEN'S VOICE, REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP IN THE WORLD OF WORK



GOVERNMENT



EMPLOYERS



WORKERS

OTHER STAKEHOLDERS



- Set targets and develop transitional positive-action measures and strategies to achieve gender parity at all levels in world-of-work organizations and in enterprises, including social partner organizations and in high-level meetings. Put in place transparent monitoring and accountability mechanisms and incentives; and link them to institutional and individual performance measures that can ensure progress on all levels.
- Design and implement workplace programmes for career counselling, leadership capacity building, networking, mentoring and sponsoring for women, including young women. Review systems and practices in place and ensure unbiased and transparent measures on promoting equal pay; on equal opportunity in recruitment, promotion and retention; and on support for workers to manage their work and family responsibilities, including maternity, paternity and parental leave, flexible working times and affordable childcare.
- Support the emergence of women leaders in government, employers’ organizations, trade unions, cooperatives and other relevant associations through comprehensive capacity-building measures and by fostering commitment and male and female champions among decision-makers at all levels.
- Continue to conduct research and collect data on women in leadership at all levels and on what works to close these gaps in the world of work and its institutions. Disseminate the results and utilize the findings on how gender diversity is good for businesses, economies and societies.

Promote gender diversity as a priority investment for sustainable development and a better future of work for all.

- Review workplace policies, such as for recruitment, pay, training, career progression and sexual harassment, with a view to identifying and undoing unconscious biases in processes that may be discriminatory towards women, including women with disabilities.
- Promote collective organizing, social dialogue and collective bargaining, with a view to ensure women’s full representation, voice and leadership at all levels.



- Nurture future women leaders by updating educational institutions’ curriculum to reflect positive gender role models for young women and men, setting targets and goals at the institutional level, developing gender-awareness training and coaching as well as performance indicators for teachers and trainers in educational and vocational training institutions towards achieving gender equality targets.



- Establish baselines, targets and time-bound measures across the region to track progress towards gender equality in the world of work; link them to the application of ILO Conventions on gender equality, CEDAW and the SDGs.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO RECOGNIZE AND REDISTRIBUTE CARE WORK



GOVERNMENT



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- Invest in social infrastructure that provides universal paid maternity benefits and health care, including maternity protection, paternity and other parental leave, through national social protection floors<sup>1</sup> to all workers; and implement laws, policies and incentives that contribute to redistributing and sharing care work and supporting workers with family responsibilities to manage their care and work responsibilities.
- Scale up support to the ratification and implementation of ILO Conventions and Recommendations on maternity protection and family-friendly workplace policies (Conventions No. 183 and No. 156).
- Ensure accessible, professional and affordable, public care services for workers with children and other family members, while at the same time ensuring decent working conditions of care workers.
- Implement campaigns that contribute to fostering positive norms and attitudes towards men and women engaging in care responsibilities and valuing care work.



- Develop family-friendly workplace policies and practices to enable women and men to manage their work and family responsibilities (such as providing flexible working hours and parental leave); and incentivize managers and workers to create supportive workplaces and environments through performance indicators.



- Encourage and support maternity protection and family-friendly and flexible workplace policies through collective bargaining agreements; and ensure the inclusion of trained women in collective bargaining teams.



- Collect, monitor and analyse data to assess the engagement of women and men in care work; and develop and implement policies or measures for more men to take up paid and unpaid care work.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND TREATMENT OF WOMEN



- Address discriminatory gender stereotypes in the curricula of educational institutions and vocational training; and integrate core technology, digital literacy and entrepreneurial education for all students. And encourage both girls and boys to study and train in any field, irrespective of traditional occupational segregation by gender.
- Collect, track and report sex-disaggregated and gender-specific data by sector, job level (junior, mid and senior levels) and pay scale so that gaps and progress can be measured and occupational segregation can be overturned by world-of-work institutions, enterprises, organizations and educational institutions.
- Develop and implement strategies, including targets, to secure girls' and women's access to education, technical and vocational training, networking, mentoring, sponsoring and gender-responsive skills and entrepreneurship, especially for future jobs, STEM-related fields and green jobs. Redress barriers, such as limited awareness, restrictions on mobility, care responsibilities, scholarships and limited infrastructure (toilet and hostel facilities for both women and men, transport, etc.)

and digital literacy) and job integration support that targets young women and women who face multiple obstacles in the labour market or are at risk of becoming redundant.

- Work with banks, investors and venture capitalists to encourage capital investments that contribute to decent work, gender equality and a just transition to a greener economy, including women-led businesses and businesses using technology for social good; and ensure equitable outcomes for women and men.



- Work with the private sector to ensure that qualified women can compete and be considered, based on merit, for jobs and opportunities in fields with growth potential and in leadership roles in design, artificial intelligence and robotics. Promote procurement policies that provide incentives and support to women-led businesses to compete for opportunities in supply chains.



- Eliminate discriminatory recruitment practices, pay gaps, and unfair bias against women by improving legislative frameworks and strengthening enforcement, and rectifying unfair practices across the public and private sectors, using technologies where relevant to render information transparent and visible.



- Develop active labour market policies that provide capacity-building, career guidance, mentoring, upgrading of skills (including basic technology

<sup>1</sup> Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202).



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PROGRESS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORLD OF WORK

-  **GOVERNMENT**
-  **EMPLOYERS**
-  **WORKERS**
-  **ILO**
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- Collect, analyse, share and use sex disaggregated and gender-specific data for evidence-based policy and monitoring of gender equality in the world of work.
- Carry out research on what works in advancing positive attitudes and accountability towards gender equality and reward or recognize good practices.



- Explore further the use of new technologies as tools to strengthen information sharing and accountability.



- Develop joint ministerial and tripartite national action plans that prioritize, fund and monitor the implementation of gender-equality measures, using gender auditing and gender budgeting led by the finance ministry (or its equivalent); and consider establishing "scorecards" that rate implementation against commitments.
- Develop, allocate fund and implement a national strategy and/or plans of action to promote gender equality in the world of work, and monitor them regularly for progress through a tripartite plus mechanism that includes women's machinery and other relevant development partners, and hold duty bearers accountable for effective implementation.



- Enhance the capacity of world-of-work institutions, including ministries of labour, workers' and employers' organizations and other relevant development partners, to reform discriminatory laws and regulations; and promote ratification, application and regular monitoring of progress with data to advance effective application of the ILO gender equality Conventions (Conventions No. 111, No. 100, No. 183 and No. 156) and CEDAW. Report annually on progress and planning for closing the remaining gaps (including through SDG 5 and SDG 8); and highlight good practices both nationally and regionally.
- Obtain commitment from all line ministries, tripartite partners (employers, workers and government agencies) and women's machinery when formulating any policy or programme for sustainable changes to advance gender equality in the world of work. Consult employers' and workers' organizations, relevant civil society organizations, parliamentarians, academics, United Nations entities, policy think tanks and, most importantly, women.



- Support organization of women workers and women entrepreneurs to enhance their representation and voice to advocate for their issues and demand accountability.

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