



Women's Empowerment: a driving force for economic recovery and beyond

March 2022



A powerful
and balanced
voice for business

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



**Co-funded by
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“Gender equality is imperative for both #buildingbackbetter and an opportunity to tap into our human potential. We must not return to pre-pandemic inequality. We need bold leadership to rebound from this health and economic crisis.”

Amina J. Mohammed,
Deputy Secretary-General of the UN

Overview

Mainstreaming gender empowerment policies into the core of the public-private sphere has been key to achieving better, fairer, and more competitive economies.

Since the first World Conference on Women in Mexico (1975), milestones to confront gender discrimination have been hard earned. These include the adoption and implementation of CEDAWⁱ (1979), the Beijing Declaration (1995), the Millennium Development Goals (2000) and the Sustainable Development Goalsⁱⁱ (2015). However, despite billions of dollars spent on such initiatives by governments and institutions, as well as visible improvements in the number of women in decision-making positions of public and private sectors, many countries and organisations continue to debate how best to accelerate the progress made in order to reach gender equality at all levels.

ⁱ Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women

Background

On 8 December 2020, the International Organisation of Employers (IOE), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), with support from the European Union, successfully held a joint digital conference on “How to make the COVID-19 recovery process transformative, inclusive, and equitable for all.” The event brought together the voices of multiple generations of leaders from both the private and public sectors through dialogue and common goals, to share, discuss, and establish a footprint for collaboration around three key areas, namely, *women leading in solidarity for sustainable livelihoods and shaping leadership; obstacles and opportunities to breaking through the corporate glass ceiling; and WOMENpreneurs challenging the orthodoxies on the ‘secret ingredient’, to recover and grow in the digital economy.* The event focused on the **“Women Rise for All”** initiative of the United Nations, which recognises female leadership in the fight to save lives and protect livelihoods in the wake of Covid-19 and the recovery of this.



The objective of this paper is to focus on women’s economic empowerment as key to economic recovery, building on the messages that were shared during the Womenpreneur’s conference on 8 December 2020.

Ranging from government ministers, senior management from various multinationals to CEOs of business start-ups in small communities across developing countries, regardless of their background, age, experience, or field of work, the leaders had one message to send to the world: **women should be placed at the centre of pandemic response and economic recovery.** Female leadership should be acknowledged, harnessed, and empowered at all levels of the public-private sphere by creating fair access and leveraging political, digital, and economic opportunities.

Key messages

Despite the challenges and pushbacks, women leaders discussed how to overcome social, cultural, political, and economic barriers within the work environment. More importantly, they shared their ‘secret ingredients’, practical recommendations and determination to empower, engage, and enforce women’s leadership to recover from the health crisis, build greater resilience within enterprises, and reboot female entrepreneurship.

The main issues that participants raised to tackle both conscious and unconscious gender biases that women in leadership roles face both in politics and the corporate world, with similar challenges of organisational and cultural bias vis-à-vis lack of confidence in female leadership, the digital gaps, and the preponderance of traditional male-dominated networks.

Key takeaways

- Setting ambitious targets for female representation at managerial levels
- Stimulus packages and policies to support women and girls in digital education
- Leveraging technologies, access, and capital to female start-ups to close the digital gap
- Building strong professional women’s professional networks
- Developing female mentorship programs to support women’s professional growth
- Bringing more men, in particular top decision-makers, to be part of the solution

Female leaders speaking at the digital conference echoed the **UN Women Rise All** priorities, emphasising the need for women to rise in solidarity, calling for the **inclusion of men, in particular top decision makers in this movement to create and foster networks, empower women’s potential from the grassroots to the C-suite, use the power of technology to inspire action, and mentor the young generation of female leaders.** Without well-coordinated multilateral, multi-stakeholder, and gender diverse collaborations to empower female economic and political potential, the Covid-19 aftermath threatens to push back the gains that have been achieved since the start of the movement.



COVID-19 impact on women's employment

Covid-19 exposed widespread inequalities and discrimination in the public and private sectors. In 2020, the cost of the Covid-19 pandemic to the global economy was greater than the cost of all natural disasters combined over past two decades.ⁱⁱⁱ aftermath of the pandemic will be staggering, particularly for developing countries for years to come, thus driving many economies into debt and stagnation. The pressing reality on the ground necessitates creative solutions that need to be crafted by factoring in the best response practices that were evidenced during crisis. This starts with recharging the political conversation around how female leadership should be part of the decision-making process at all levels. Why should women be at every decision-making table in Covid-19 response and beyond?

Over-represented in certain occupations and the informal sectors, women across the world can be disproportionately affected by risks brought upon by consequences of concurring waves of the pandemic. Across different sectors, women began to feel the burden of the pandemic on their employment almost immediately, with three major groups experiencing some of the largest challenges: working mothers, women in senior management positions, and women of colour, according to McKinsey research^{iv}. The UN Women survey^v found that during the pandemic, on average, women had to perform three times more unpaid care and domestic work than men. This 'double-shift' led to increased pressure, burnout, and mental health concerns for women both at home and at work, especially in developing countries^{vi}, urging companies to respond to these new challenges without delay. According to a 2021 International Labour Organization (ILO) report, 90 per cent² of women who lost their jobs in 2020 left the labour force, which suggests that their working lives are likely to be disrupted over an extended period unless appropriate measures are adopted^{vii}.

In the scenario of not taking any action to address the negative impact of the pandemic on women's employment, it is estimated that, by 2030, global GDP will be USD13 trillion less than what it would be if the pandemic impacted men and women equally in their respective areas of employment^{viii}. Addressing the impact of Covid-19 on women's employment, i.e., with gender-responsive recovery plans and with consideration to the needs and priorities specific to women, will not only add the USD13 trillion value to global Gross Domestic Product but will also accelerate inclusive economic recovery that will help to reach 2030 SDG targets.

² Disclaimer: While employers do not agree with many of the proposed ideas cited in the content of WESO 2021 report, this data on COVID-19 impact on employment is salient to note.

As women are at the centre of the crisis, they should also be at the centre of its solutions. Even though health and safety continue to be an immediate priority, Covid-19 continues to erupt with new waves, creating the need for a long-term sustainable recovery response to save livelihoods, protect business continuity, and boost economic activities. UN Women^{ix} “see an opportunity in the Covid-19 response for radical, positive action to redress long-standing inequalities in multiple areas of women’s lives, through the integration of gender equality principles into business practices” and social culture. Women’s Empowerment Principles^x, established by UN Women and the UN Global Compact, provide guidance and tools for companies that are committed to this agenda.

The gender-responsive approach will need to pay particular attention to the large leap in digitalisation and automation made by employers during the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, global internet use gender gap was 12 per cent, with wider gaps in developing countries, and the widest gap of all in the 48 UN-designated Least Developed Countries, which stood at 31 per cent^{xi}. Leveraging technologies to minimise the digital gap not only includes providing digital access and digital literacy, but also much needed access to capital for women and girls in the jobs belonging to the growing IT sector.

During her intervention at the Womenpreneur’s conference, the UN Deputy Secretary-General Ms. Amina Mohammed called for the scaling up of joint programmes to close the digital divide and develop digital literacy, capacity, and skills for women and girls. This scaling-up requires multilateral partnerships, as governments cannot do it alone. Targeted actions to connect countries and markets through networks of technological platforms would constitute an innovative approach to this end.

In addition to rapid digitalisation, with the inevitable shift to a virtual world of work, the narrative of professional networking in the context of gender empowerment is also changing. This is gaining a deeper purpose of serving as a safe and enabling space to share incredibly powerful energy, as well as professional and emotional support for female professionals. Professional women’s networks offer the opportunity to develop long-term career-supportive relationships that, in turn, can play a direct role in helping more women advance to senior management levels. Corporate offices should not be a ‘lonely place’ for women in leading positions. Male-dominated industries, including STEM and ICT fields, where female talent is often underrepresented, can benefit from strong women’s professional networks to empower young tech women’s career development. Female role models, women’s mentoring, and networking support can enable higher recruitment and retention of female talent, which is often lacking in male-dominant industries.



“The pandemic took a disproportionate toll on women in the workforce. In order to build back better, leaders across business and government must seize this opportunity to build a more sustainable and resilient post-pandemic economy by enacting recovery programs specifically targeted to address gender equality. We have all seen the research - when women are able to fully and equally participate in the workforce, economic growth follows.”

Michele Parmelee,
IOE President



Sharing of experience of EBMO interventions during COVID-19 on gender equality

Providing thought-leadership during COVID-19 with specific gender-inclusive guidelines on working from home

India

As Covid-19 forced hundreds of millions of people to work from home, IOE Indian member organisation, Standing Conference of Public Enterprises (SCOPE), developed a study on the impact of working from home on female executives. SCOPE surveyed over 1900 female executives and conducted nearly 80 key interviews. Survey results were featured in a SCOPE publication entitled, Guidelines for gender-sensitive work from home policy. The Guidelines include 6 key recommendations on arrangements for working from home. These relate to having a well-defined working from home policy to avoid ambiguity; a safe environment to work without fear or apprehensions; having critical support systems to enable the business to be run on a continual basis; having decentralised decision-making to respond faster to snags and glitches; having a robust communication with suitable digital support and having well-defined measures to assess both productivity and performance.



Partnerships established with like-minded organizations

Philippines

IOE member the Employers Confederation of the Philippines (ECOP) established a partnership in September 2020 with the Philippine Women's Economic Network (PHILWEN), through the Philippines Business Coalition for Women's Empowerment (PBCWE) to issue a "Call to Action" to set out key priorities and specific commitments for businesses, professionals, and organisations in the Philippines to promote gender equality at all levels, as well as to advocate for progressive company policies that support the business case for gender diversity. ECOP also launched a Diversity and Inclusion Committee in partnership with PHILWEN, through PBCWE. ECOP and PHILWEN also signed a partnership agreement to promote gender equality and create a safer workplace for all workers, both in policy and in practice. In addition to this, ECOP also delivers training on enhancing soft skills for women in business, which will eventually support women's advancement into leadership positions, as well as enabling better access to higher-level jobs, and therefore, higher pay.

Brazil

The Board of Directors of the Federation of Industries of the State of Mato Grosso (FIENT), in partnership with the Directors of the Faculty of Technology SENAI (FATEC SENAI), designed and implemented a new service to support female workers in the textile sector, who were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic through loss of jobs or working hours. Between March and September 2021, the "Women in Apparel Project" offered tutoring, training, and education courses that focused on the generation of small business management skills and industrial sewing, benefiting 200 women entrepreneurs, who also received guidance on how to obtain loans for entrepreneurship. During this process, more than 100 women entrepreneurs participated in the free course that specialized in industrial sewing, another 50 participated in the special classes on fundraising and obtaining business financing, and the remaining 50 female entrepreneurs received individual mentoring from FATEC SENAI professors, to support the viability of these ventures.



Making evidence-based decisions when addressing the gender pay gap

Uruguay

In 2020, the National Chamber of Commerce and Services of Uruguay (CNCS) entered into an alliance with the Organisation of Women Entrepreneurs of Uruguay (OMEU), with the aim of consolidating its institutional position to promote greater gender equity in the business world. Within the framework of this alliance, several research and advocacy activities were carried out throughout the year, including the National Assessment of Women's Entrepreneurship Development (WED) which provided a full profile of Uruguayan female entrepreneurs, analysing the limitations that exist for greater participation of women in the management of companies and business organisations, identified the main environmental restrictions that particularly affect women's entrepreneurship, as well as the needs for resources and business development services for companies founded and/or managed by women. The evidence-based WED assessment resulted in the development of a Joint Action Plan between CNCSU and OMEU.

The Action Plan contains a set of specific proposals, which were presented to the authorities of the Legislative Power and the Vice Presidency of the Republic. Following this joint presentation to the country's main authorities, the CNCSU and OMEU signed another cooperation agreement to create space for dialogue to prioritize and implement the actions included in the National Action Plan, as well as the creation of a gender brainstorm to design and disseminate appropriate tools to promote greater equality in the labour and business spheres. Similarly, any such effort by companies to address the gender pay gap should be grounded on evidence. For instance, a company could undertake a gender pay gap review within the enterprise to assess whether there is a gender pay gap and to what – extent, as conducting regular pay reviews can help a company keep on top of any discrepancies. However, companies, in particular SMEs, would need assistance with access to a gender pay gap tool that is practical, non-burdensome, and tailored to their specific industry needs.

IOE and the Gender Equality Activities

IOE has long had a strong commitment to mainstream gender equality principles into its vision “to create a sustainable economic environment worldwide and promote free enterprise that is fair and beneficial to both business and society”. The business case for gender equality in IOE lies in its comprehensive gender diversity strategy, which emphasises the shared role of governments and businesses in terms of ensuring equal access to employment, training, and the advancement of women in the workplace and the economies, with policies and practical engagements to nurture women’s potentials and build a channel for the development of female talent to assume leadership roles.

Leading by example, IOE ‘walks the talk’ in every aspect of its commitment to gender empowerment. It does so by creating access, providing support, and promoting the participation of highly accomplished women in all levels of decision-making processes. Women are well represented in IOE’s senior leadership positions, notably the IOE President, IOE Vice-President to the ILO (Spokesperson of the Employers’ Group), and the substantial number of female leaders who are members of the IOE Management Board, IOE spokespersons at the International Labour Conference (ILC), and the General Council. Since 2019, there were eight spokeswomen out of eleven main Committees at the ILC, thus representing the voice of business. The IOE Secretariat in Geneva is composed of multicultural and multilingual talent, two-thirds of whom are women. The team provides members and corporate partners with access to a wealth of experience and expertise, which is committed to inclusivity, transparency, and respect.

At the global level, IOE’s commitment to gender equality and diversity in the workplace includes the establishment of a Gender Network in 2019 (on International Women’s Day). Since its inception, the Network has been continuously growing and, as of July 2021, has registered more than 120 active members in employer organisations from all regions, including multinational companies. As of November 2021, this Gender Network was superseded by the IOE Policy Working Group on Gender Equality and Diversity. This further reinforces IOE’s firm commitment to promoting gender equality and diversity, by institutionalising the network into a Policy Working Group. This Group will offer members opportunities to:

- Promote and advocate for gender equality and diversity at the workplace.
- Build a better understanding of various gender equality and diversity legislation, policies, and programmes.
- Share best practices and robust ideas to promote gender equality and diversity at the workplace.
- Discuss what works and what doesn’t
- Participate in international gender events, webinars, and training activities

By engaging in international events with global partners to uphold the commitment to the implementation and enforcement of diversity and gender mainstreaming principles, IOE

- launched a Mentorship Programme to assist member employer organisations
- applies gender approach in its work, leading by example and when identifying spokespersons in different roles, ILO/UN/ etc.
- integrally engages with the ILO and other UN system entities, the G20, and other emerging forums, as well as contributing to the 2030 Agenda. In its Centenary Manifesto, IOE fully supported the 2030 Agenda as the most effective path to sustainable human development. IOE stressed its commitment to particularly working towards the ambitious targets of SDG 8 for “sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all,” together with SDG 17 for a revitalisation of the global partnership.
- supports the universal ratification and proper implementation of the ILO Convention on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), No. 111, and promotes the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which includes non-discrimination with regards to employment and occupation, and informs the labour principles of the UN Global Compact.
- works intensively with its members on streamlining gender lens in their work.

IOE member organisations are the national Employers’ and Business Member Organisations (EBMOs) in 148 countries. They are the representative and legitimate voice of business at the national level and are deeply involved in the policy-making process through their engagement with governments and trade unions, as well as in the development of legislative frameworks. With such extensive representation, IOE has a unique role and position in mainstreaming gender lens practices in the private sector.



“Transforming every challenge an opportunity is my motto. In that regard, the Covid-19 pandemic has taught the world a valuable lesson: from a local problem we moved to unfortunate global consequences. Similarly, I am certain that every single step and initiative taken at national level by the private sector to promote women’s participation and women entrepreneurship will create positive effects that will serve the cause on a global scale.”

Anne Vauchez,
Chair of the IOE PWG on Gender Equality and Diversity

IOE produced a position paper^{xii} with targeted recommendations to foster female talent in top management levels, with specific examples of initiatives and best practices for governments and their employer organisations. The following recommendations were crafted for the EBMOs, with different best practices from business federations from around the world:

1. **Place the topic of gender equality on the national agenda**
2. **Reinforce and update the business case for gender diversity**
3. **Partner with other organisations to leverage their strength**
4. **Provide support and new services to members who request guidance**
5. **Share best practices across the region through the IOE**

Through the IOE's **Policy Working Group on Gender Equality and Diversity**, EBMOs have access to other EBMOs within their region or with EBMOs in other parts of the world, to learn from their experiences on gender equality. EBMOs can tap into the rich resources and extensive network of IOE to share their best practices, to learn from one another. These resources help track progress and build on their work to reach the SDG5 target and demonstrate private sector engagement in promoting and supporting gender equality.

Furthermore, during November- December 2020, IOE, in close partnership with UNITAR (and with the support of the EU Commission), organised a series of e-workshop trainings on gender, women's leadership, and mentoring. The objective of the training included strengthening leadership and mentoring through building the trust and confidence of participants while including gender and diversity considerations in their leadership functions. The series aimed to celebrate, promote, and encourage women in leadership capacities, with special attention to those working in employers' and business organisations. This training provided gender-sensitive, practical, and theoretical knowledge for workplace situations. The training drew 64 participants from 33 countries, with 89% of them being women (57 female participants)^{xiii}.



“We work on creating mentoring opportunities with our federations and remain steadfast in our commitment to strengthening the gender lens approach. Women's leadership initiatives are crucial for the future of employer organisations.”

Roberto Suarez-Santos,
Secretary- General, IOE

Greater access to technology will connect people around the world, and women in leadership positions - as mentors - can guide the next generation of women on how to become financially independent and to become leaders, shifting the entire narrative of female leadership. IOE launched the **Women's Empowerment and Mentorship programme** in February 2022, for women leaders in the private sector to empower women and to pioneer positive change in organisational culture and to promote and build strong mentoring networks across borders to support female leadership that benefits society. This is possible with the support of Deloitte and the EU Commission.



In partnership with many different international stakeholders, networks, and programmes, the IOE Policy Working Group on Gender Equality and Diversity has a notable online presence. It coordinates, implements, hosts, and cohosts surveys, trainings, and digital events on pressing issues for gender empowerment and leadership. The Group plays key diverse roles in realizing IOE's commitment to gender empowerment in the world of work at the international and national policy level:

- Joined as a partner of the UN Global Compact Target Gender Equality Accelerator Programme.
- Conducted and planned **webinars and events**.
- IOE is an active member of the Steering Committee, driving the work of the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) globally to support good practices on equal pay for work of equal value. For more information, please visit: **link** and contact Ms Maria Paz Anzorreguy (**anzorreguy@ioe-emp.com**) and Ms Akustina Morni (**morni@ioe-emp.com**).
- IOE has set and practices ambitious and deliberate goals to bring visible female representation and talent to all its events.

Moving forward

Economic empowerment is a uniquely potent way for women to achieve greater control over their own lives. It is a game-changer for sustainable development, as well as being a viable and resilient recovery from COVID-19.

As European Central Bank head, Christine Lagarde, said “Empowering women remains a common denominator and a global imperative for all those who care about equality and diversity, but also the productivity and growth of societies and economies that are more inclusive.”

IOE, through its international network and global policy work, continues to emphasise the importance of equality, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace and the economy. IOE members and partners are playing their part to make a difference.

To follow the IOE gender empowerment movement, visit the **Gender Equality and Diversity section** of the website for the upcoming events and participate in “*building forward better*”.

For any additional information on IOE’s work on gender equality, please contact Maria Paz Anzorreguy, IOE Director for ILO Coordination anzorreguy@ioe-emp.com and/or Akustina Morni, IOE Senior Adviser morni@ioe-emp.com.

IOE thanks Mohira Kurbanova for her expertise and assistance in undertaking the necessary research and for her help in writing the paper.



Used Resources

ⁱ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>

ⁱⁱ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-cost-more-in-2020-than-the-worlds-combined-natural-disasters-in-any-of-the-past-20-years-156646>

^{iv} <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/five-fifty-the-pandemics-gender-effect>

^v https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/covid19/en/index.html?gclid=CjwKCAiAhreNBhAYEiwAFGGKPDz-XmNhJB2m9b9padsERfwF9NN9_qAVcB9TYN5zjeOR-umkindyORoCfm4QAvD_BwE

^{vi} <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diverse-employees-are-struggling-the-most-during-covid-19-heres-how-companies-can-respond>

^{vii} https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_795453.pdf

^{viii} <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>

^{ix} https://www2.unwomen.org/-w/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/04/200414_covid%20action_v13.pdf?la=en&vs=3628

^x <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/take-action/action/womens-principles>

^{xi} https://www.itu.int/en/itunews/Documents/2016-04/2016_ITUNews04-en.pdf

^{xii} <https://www.ioe-emp.org/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=146995&token=909fd4258b1af60eedccdaf5e79aacc14fc97540>

^{xiii} <https://www.unitar.org/about/news-stories/stories/multilateral-diplomacy-enhancing-womens-leadership-and-mentoring-capacities>



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