

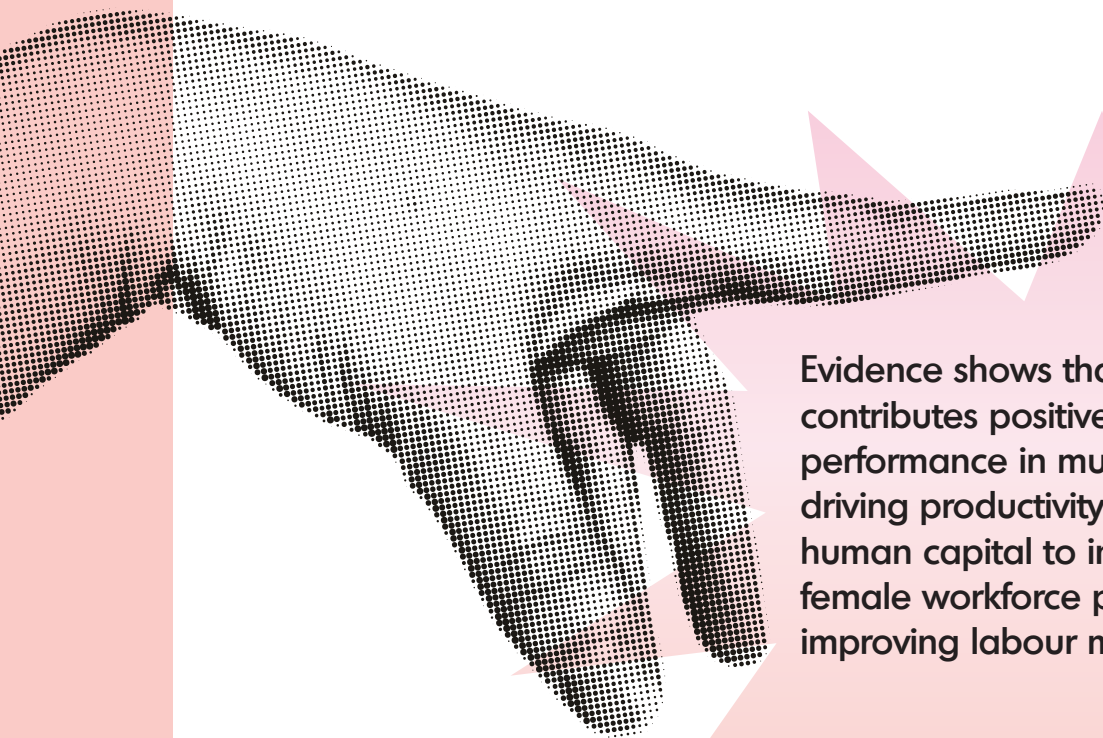
DEBUNKING MYTHS TO BREAK BARRIERS

Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge in the global labour market, limiting opportunities for women and holding back progress. Despite making up half the world's population, women remain an underutilised workforce with vast potential. A fair, green and digital transition can only succeed with targeted skills development to prepare people for the changing world of work. However, progress will be hindered if cultural, legal, and institutional barriers — particularly those restricting women's participation — are not addressed.

The European Training Foundation (ETF) is the European Union agency that supports human capital development in countries neighbouring the EU as part of its external relations policies. By reforming education, training and labour market systems, the ETF supports countries in implementing strategies and programmes that enhance employability, skills, and job opportunities. Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) play a key role in tackling unemployment and breaking down barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the workforce.

MYTH# 1:

WOMEN DON'T MATTER TO ECONOMIC GROWTH:

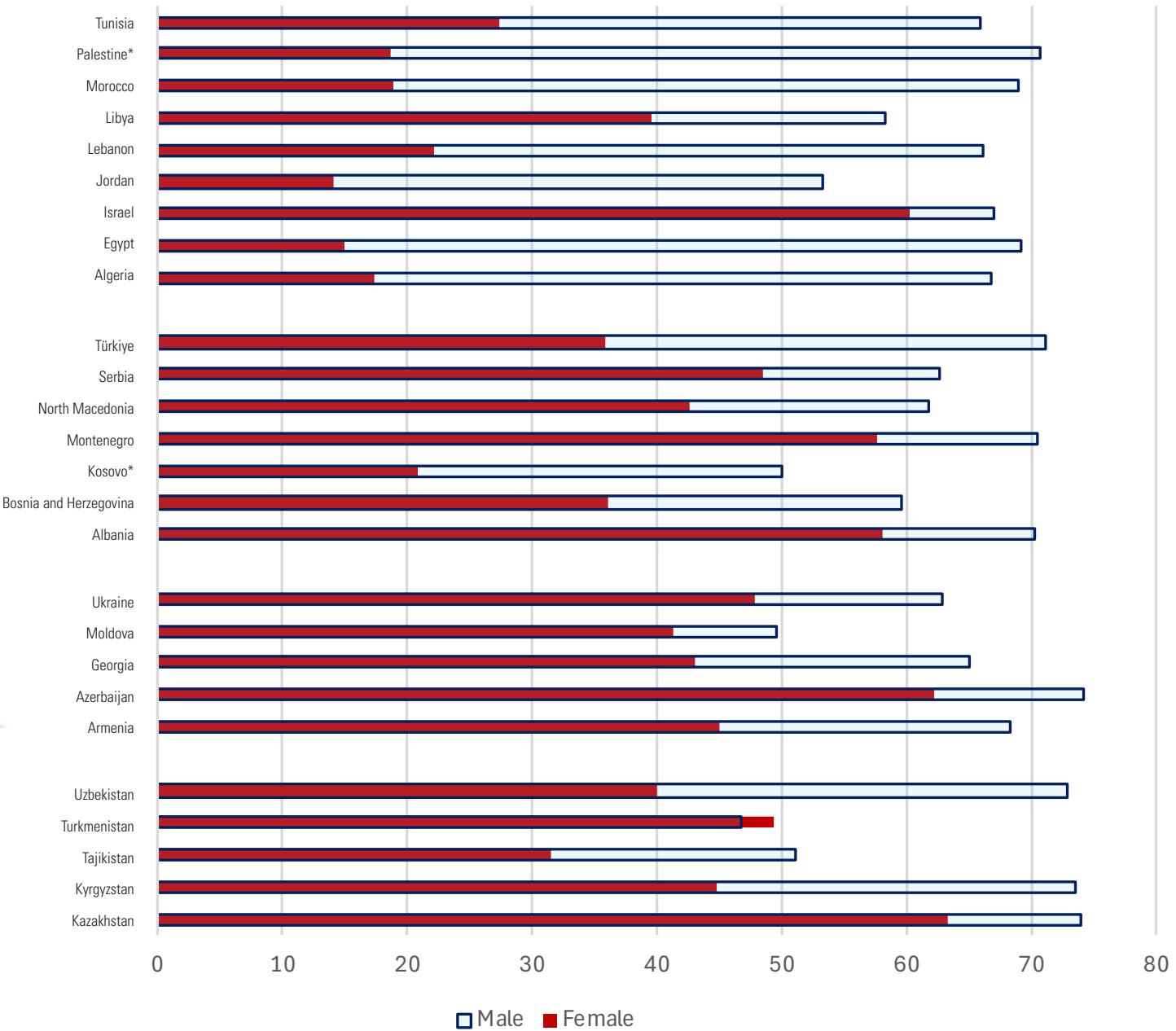


FALSE!

Evidence shows that gender equality contributes positively to economic performance in multiple ways, from driving productivity and developing human capital to increasing female workforce participation and improving labour market efficiency.

Women’s labour force participation is a key driver of economic empowerment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the global labour force participation rate for individuals aged 15 and above revealed a 25 percentage-point gender gap in 2022, with 47% of women in the workforce compared to 72% of men. In ETF partner countries, this gap varies widely — from just 7 percentage points in Israel to around 50 percentage points in Algeria, Egypt and Palestine*.

* This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of EU Member States on this issue.



Source: LFS data of respective countries, except for Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (ILO estimates)
Year: 2023, except for: Armenia, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine* (2022), Ukraine (2021), Algeria (2019)

MYTH# 1:

WOMEN DON'T MATTER TO ECONOMIC GROWTH:

The gender gap in labour market outcomes

has economic costs. Decades of research shows that women's economic empowerment drives economic growth and sustainable development.

Closing both the labour force participation and working hours gaps has the potential to increase GDP per capita by 8.8% in OECD countries by 2060¹. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), eliminating gender disparities could raise GDP in lower-income countries by an average of 23%². The largest projected long-term GDP per capita gains — 40% to 50% — are expected in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, while Europe and Central Asia have the lowest estimates at around 10%³.

Women in industry, particularly in textiles and electronics, workers often match or exceed male productivity⁴. Globally women own one third of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) despite facing greater difficulties in accessing credit. Companies with more gender diverse leadership are 25% more likely to achieve above-average profitability⁵.

Studies show that women reinvest 90% of their earnings into their families and communities, compared to men's 30-40%⁶. This economic empowerment results in better educated and healthier future generations, driving long-term development. Investing in women's opportunities creates a beneficial "multiplier effect" for society.

Nevertheless, despite increased access to and success in education and training, including participation in lifelong learning, women often remain under-represented in the labour market. Women and girls are more likely to work in lower-paid and part-time work. On average, women earn 20% less than men⁷. Additionally, women perform three-quarters of all unpaid work⁸.

In EU neighbouring countries, men spend considerably more time on paid employment. However, when unpaid household and care work is included, men work 92 hours a week compared to 113 hours for women, according to a Eurofound-ETF survey⁹.

1 Gender Equality and Economic Growth: Past progress and future potential, OECD, 2024

2 Badel, Alejandro, and Rishi Goyal, "When will Global Gender Gaps Close?" IMF Working Paper 23/189. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2023

3 Pennings, Steven Michael, "A Gender Employment Gap Index (GEGI): A Simple Measure of the Economic Gains from Closing Gender Employment Gaps, with an Application to the Pacific Islands." WB Policy Research Working Paper 9942, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2022

4 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment; ILO, 2012; Global Employment Trends for Women, World Bank, 2012; Gender Equality and Development, Asian Development Bank, 2015

5 Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters, McKinsey, 2020; MSME Finance Gap: Assessment of the Shortfalls and Opportunities in Financing Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises in Emerging Markets, IFC, 2017

6 Facts and figures: Economic empowerment, UN Women

7 Women in Business and Management: Understanding the Pay Gap, ILO, 2020

8 Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work, ILO (2018)

9 Living, working and COVID-19 in the European Union and 10 EU neighbouring countries, ETF and Eurofound, 2022



"The economic empowerment of women [by significantly increasing their labour market participation] could lead to an increase of up to 25% in GDP. We need to harness all of our resources."

Ambassador John Paul Grech, Deputy Secretary General for Social and Civil Affairs Division, at the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

"Women are concentrated in sectors and occupations that pay less."

Ana Varela Mateos, Director of the Spanish Institute of Women

MYTH#2:

VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL JOBS ARE FOR MEN

FALSE!

Evidence indicates that vocational and technical jobs are not just for men, but labour market structures often still favour male candidates.

myth... myth... myth...

“Among the root causes for gender inequalities stand social norms and family norms. These influence greatly the choices of women as regards the studies they should undertake.”

Nicola Duell, International expert in labour market policies

Women play an significant role in technical healthcare professions, including lab technicians, radiologists, and medical equipment operators. Globally, they make up about 70% of the healthcare workforce, with many working in specialised technical fields.

Beyond healthcare, women’s participation in vocational education and training (VET) programmes for renewable energy and green jobs is increasing. According to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)¹, women represent around 32% of the global renewable energy workforce, with growing numbers training as solar panel technicians, wind turbine engineers, and energy efficiency specialists.

In education, female enrolment in vocational programmes varies widely. UNESCO-UIS data from 2017 estimated that 43% of

students in upper secondary vocational education worldwide were female. More recent data across 146 countries shows that female participation in technical-vocational training for ages 15-24 ranges from as low as 0% to a maximum of 36%².

Gender stereotypes continue to influence career choices, discouraging women from pursuing VET courses in fields like electrical work, carpentry, or plumbing — professions often perceived as male-dominated. Instead they are steered towards traditional female roles such as hairdressing or beauty therapy. Many VET programmes reinforce these biases rather than challenge them, which can undermine women’s confidence. In STEM-related VET courses women are also more likely to drop out than men, a phenomenon known as “pipeline leaking”³.

1 Renewable Energy: A Gender Perspective, International Renewable Energy Agency, 2019

2 Global Education Monitoring Report, Gender Report: Technology on Her Terms, UNESCO, 2024

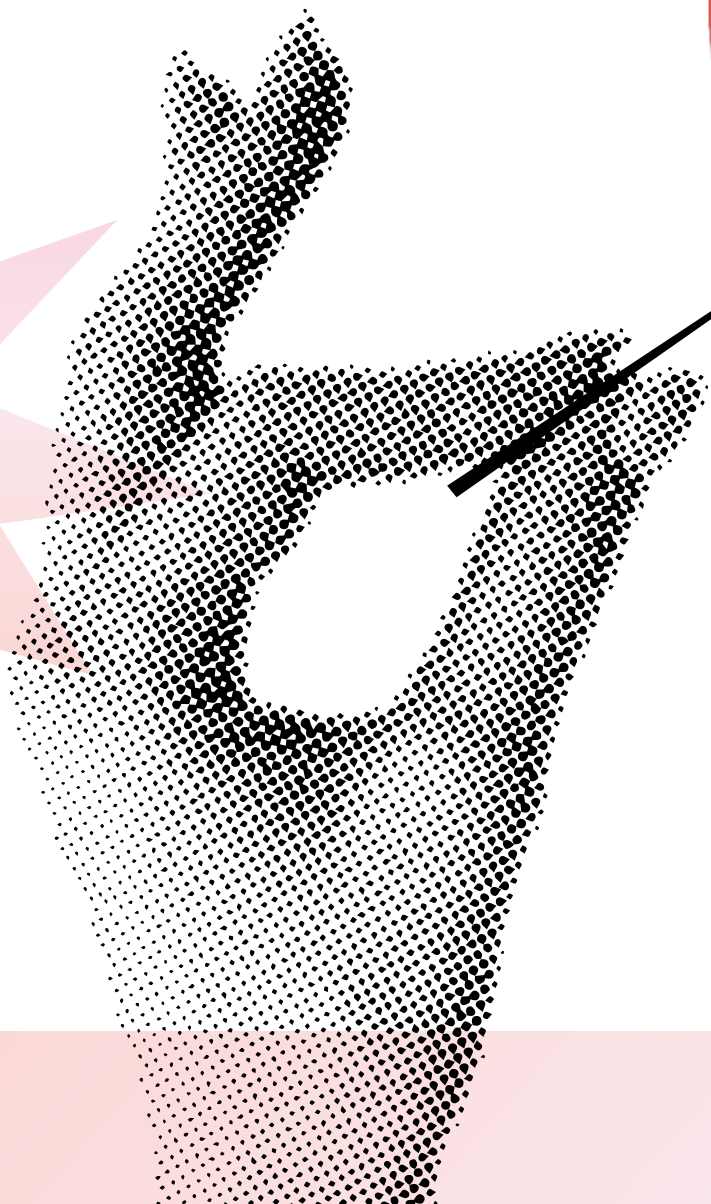
3 Boosting gender equality in science and technology: A challenge for TVET programmes and careers, UNESCO-UNEVOC, Bonn, 2020

MYTH#3:

WOMEN PREFER TO STAY AT HOME AND RAISE KIDS

FALSE!

Evidence indicates that social and cultural norms, combined with inflexible labour markets, shape women's decisions about work and family life.



While some women choose to stay at home to care for their families, many are constrained by external factors, such as limited labour market flexibility and a lack of affordable childcare.



MYTH

Research highlights that most women want to continue working after childbirth. However, balancing career and family responsibilities remains a challenge. A Harvard Business Review study¹ found that workplace policies — such as paid maternity leave, on-site childcare, and flexible working hours — play an important part in whether women can remain in the workforce. Companies with strong family-friendly policies see higher retention rates among working mothers.

Some women choose to leave the workforce, particularly during their children's early years, but re-entering later often proves difficult. Many struggle to find high-quality employment that matches their skills, a challenge known as the 'motherhood penalty'. In contrast, men tend to experience a 'paternity premium', where fatherhood is linked to increased workplace stability and career progression.

¹ The Mom Project: What Companies Can Do to Keep Women in the Workforce After Maternity Leave, Harvard Business Review, 2019

"Often women prefer to stay with their children after they are born. Childcare poses problems. Due to security concerns, transportation is another concern."

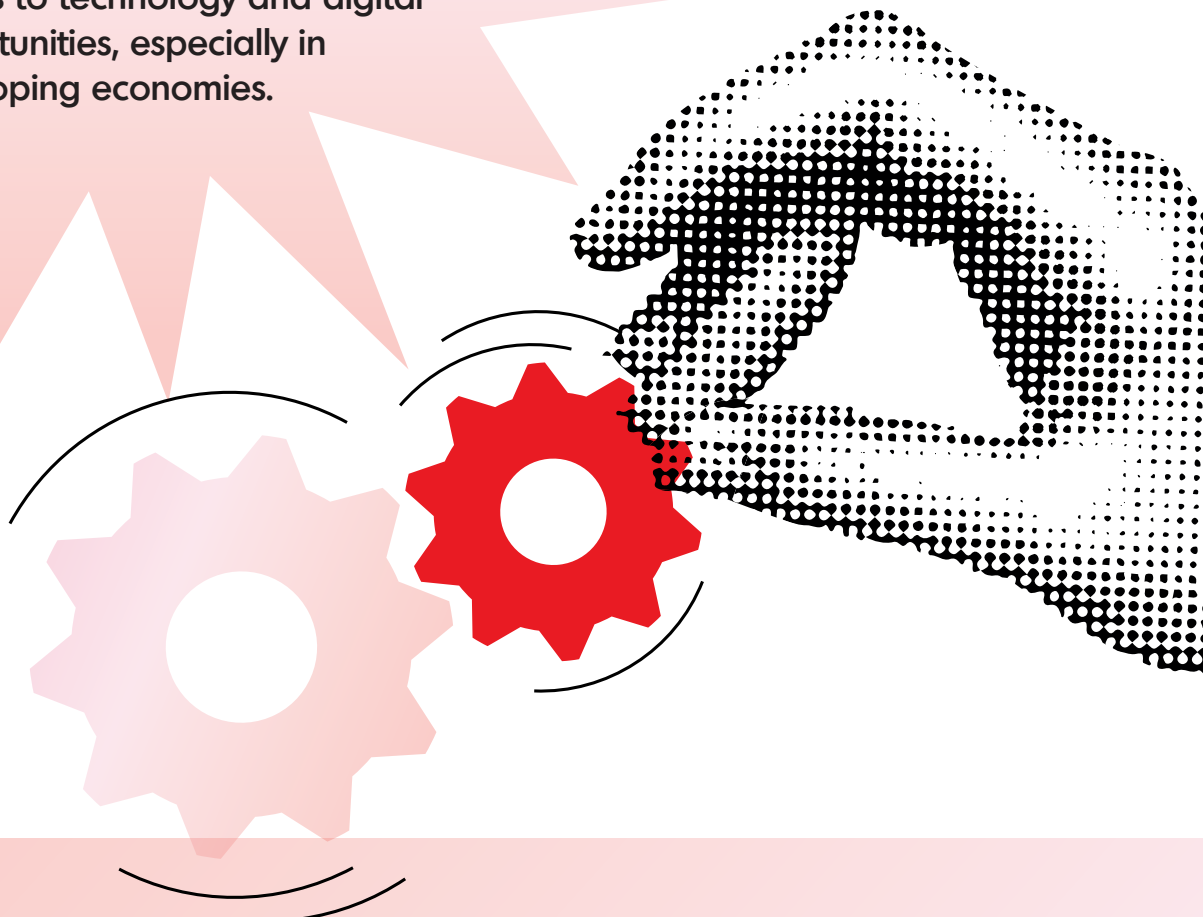
Touile Khadija, Director at Ministry of Economic Inclusion, Small Enterprises, Employment and Skills of Morocco

MYTH# 4:

THE DIGITAL ECONOMY IS MORE GENDER-INCLUSIVE

FALSE!

Evidence shows that digital gender divides exist everywhere, limiting girls' and women's access to technology and digital opportunities, especially in developing economies.



"Women are challenging stereotypes, especially in the STEM fields."

Samia Ghmimed, entrepreneur and founder of Consultancy 212

The under-representation of women in STEM fields contributes to gender imbalances in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) job market. According to UNESCO, fewer than 30% of ICT students globally are women. In 2022, women held less than 25% of jobs in science, engineering, and ICT¹, and only 22% of professionals in artificial intelligence (AI) were women².

While the digital transition is expected to expand remote and flexible work opportunities, reducing barriers for women, reality tells a different story. ETF research on platform work shows that the gig economy often mirrors inequalities found in traditional labour markets³. In the Middle East and North Africa, 80% of platform workers are men,

with a significant gender pay gap. Women are over-represented in lower-paid sectors such as writing, translation, and clerical work, while men dominate higher-paying roles like software development. In regions like the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, women receive fewer job offers and lower pay for the same services, leading some to adopt male pseudonyms to secure work.

The tech industry itself can be unwelcoming to women. A dominant 'bro culture' often leads to exclusion, gender-based harassment, and workplace environments that hinder women's career progression. Studies show that women in tech frequently feel excluded from decision-making, networking, and mentorship opportunities, which are key factors for professional growth. As a result, women tend to leave the industry at higher rates than men.

1 Global Education Monitoring Report, Gender Report: Technology on Her Terms, UNESCO, Paris, 2024

2 #HerEducationOurFuture Innovation and technology for gender equality, Factsheet International Women's Day 2023, UNESCO, Paris 2023a

3 New Forms of Work and Platform Work in The Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, ETF, Turin, 2024; Embracing the Digital Age: The future of Work in Western Balkans: New Forms of Work and Platform Employment, ETF, Turin, 2023); Future of Work - New forms of employment in the EaP countries: Platform Work, ETF, Turin, 2021

MYTH# 5:

THE GREEN TRANSITION IS GENDER-NEUTRAL



FALSE!

Evidence shows that existing inequalities, skills gaps and barriers are putting women at a disadvantage, particularly in accessing green jobs and decision-making roles.



"For the green transition to happen fast, women must be involved."

Economist in the Human Capital and Employment Unit of the JRC
Directorate for Growth and Innovation

Women are disproportionately affected by climate change due to factors such as higher poverty rates and limited access to key resources, including land rights, credit, agricultural tools, decision-making bodies, technology, social insurance and training. Women and girls make up 80% of those displaced by climate-related disasters¹.

The shift to a green economy will bring significant changes to the labour market. However, research suggests that women may be at a disadvantage, as growth sectors such as renewable energy, manufacturing, and construction remain male-dominated. Despite the global increase in green jobs, data from OECD countries shows that 72% of these positions are held by men². The share is likely to be even higher in emerging and developing countries.

A persistent gender gap in STEM education remains a major barrier to an inclusive and sustainable transition. According to the International Monetary Fund, increasing women's participation in STEM and green jobs not only promotes equality but also

enhances environmental outcomes. Economies with a strong supply of STEM-educated workers and better gender inclusion transition to a green economy more efficiently and at a lower cost. They generate more green innovations and encounter fewer obstacles in expanding their sustainable workforce. Climate policies — particularly energy taxes — are also more effective in reducing greenhouse gas emissions (by 2 to 4 percentage points) with a more educated and gender-inclusive workforce³.

Gender diversity in managerial roles brings additional environmental benefits. Female executives and business owners are more likely to invest in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and recycling initiatives. Women-led banks lend less to high-polluting industries, and companies with more women on corporate boards are more transparent about their greenhouse gas emissions. Research from the European Investment Fund⁴ shows that businesses with strong female representation at board level are more likely to commit to and advance global climate goals.

¹ Gender and Climate Change, UNDP, 2017

² Job Creation and Local Economic Development 2023: Bridging the Great Green Divide, OECD Publishing, OECD, Paris, 2023

³ Green Jobs and the Future of Work for Women and Men, SDN/2024/003 IMF, 2024

⁴ Female access to finance: a survey of literature, EIF Working Paper 2023/87, European Investment Fund, Luxembourg, 2023

WHAT IS THE ETF DOING?

By combining evidence, research, policy advice and collaboration with stakeholders and partners, the ETF highlights the gender dimension of labour market transitions. The goal is to reduce inequality and ensure that skills development and employment transition programmes are inclusive, particularly in sectors shaped by the green and digital transition.

An ETF report on the *Gender Dimension of Labour Market Transitions in the EU Neighbouring Countries* provided the foundation for a Peer Learning Seminar on Gender & Inclusiveness in Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) in November 2023. Representatives from 18 Euro-Mediterranean countries examined the main barriers and explored policy solutions to help women access the labour market. The ETF continues working with Public Employment Services, national authorities, EU institutions, and international partners to ensure that future education, training and employment policies prioritise inclusion.

The way forward

A combination of Active Labour Market Policies is needed to support women and vulnerable groups with weak labour market attachment. Despite commitments to equality, ALMPs often fail to address specific barriers women face. Public Employment Services frequently lack dedicated support for women and vulnerable groups, and the challenges have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

To improve outcomes, key success factors include:

- establishing a government body dedicated to women's employment policies;
- expanding women's access to IT infrastructure and digital skills
- aligning education with labour market needs and increasing STEM participation for women;
- creating funding opportunities for women-led businesses and promoting successful female entrepreneurs

ETF recommendations to close the gender gap:

Comprehensive measures are needed to address the various barriers that women face in employment. These should include:

- Expanding training programmes for women in under-represented fields, such as STEM and skilled trades. These should include internships, placement counselling, and scholarships to ensure practical experience.
- Providing financial incentives for employers to promote gender diversity and equality, such as tax breaks or subsidies for hiring and retaining women in non-traditional roles.
- Strengthening gender-focused career guidance by:
 - encouraging women to enter male-dominated professions and men to explore female-dominated ones.
- Promoting interest in STEM careers for girls and young women, particularly in technology, engineering, and ICT.
- Engaging parents, teachers and other key influencers to challenge stereotypes.


- Supporting workforce reintegration for women returning after career breaks.
- Embedding gender mainstreaming in Public Employment Services, including training staff in gender-sensitive policies.
- Developing mentorship and networking programmes to connect women with successful senior professionals.
- Encouraging female entrepreneurship through better access to capital, training, and business mentorship.


These measures should be accompanied by:


- Public awareness campaigns on the benefits of gender equality.
- Flexible work policies to improve work-life balance.
- Affordable, high-quality childcare to remove care giving barriers.
- Stronger anti-discrimination and equal pay measures to promote fairness in the workplace.




European Training Foundation


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