

SPRING 2020

Agenda 2030

Unleashing the power of
women entrepreneurs

EVENT REPORT



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Agenda 2030: Unleashing the power of women entrepreneurs

“Build structures and create policies that allow girls to become the best versions of themselves-being female should not be a negative value”. The clarion call from the Friends of Europe Policy Insight, taking place on the eve of International Working Women’s Day, was that #EachForEqual has to go beyond broad brush strokes and superficial representation, and involve women in all sections of society. The interactive discussion, taking place under the Chatham House rule, was held at the CEPS Ideas Lab and moderated by Shada Islam, Director for Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe.

Looking at all sections of society requires a comprehensive approach, said participants from civil society, academia and business. The discussion branched out from its focus on female entrepreneurs to a wider debate on how to empower women in the world economy, and how Africa, Europe, and Asia can learn from each other.

Changing cultures, implementing new legislation, and boosting women’s networks were all well received by participants, and panellists made the point that actions were needed to prioritise women in more marginalised communities.

Taking a gender lens to policymaking, at the institutional, governmental, and private sector levels is key to changing structural norms, and challenging patriarchal corporate and institutional cultures. One participant, who had worked with the Iraqi parliament on the peace process, emphasised that to do so successfully would require engaging male stakeholders – since many women are on board with the need to have a gender focus at decision making levels.

The invisible aspects of gender inequality, ‘gender blindness’, are often so entrenched in national legislations that policymaking frequently becomes an exercise in box-ticking, and the policies that are crafted are unsuccessful in tackling inequalities. One participant made reference to Egypt, where women perform better in education, but normative barriers such as a lack of safe public transport and a diminishing public sector, hinder their access to the labour market.

In countries with weak legislation against sexual harassment, private sector jobs in particular offer no protection, and women are forced to either remain at home, work part-time (and work informally) or become trapped in jobs that maintain cultures of abuse.

Gender blindness can be exacerbated in data and algorithms, which can in turn stymie many female entrepreneurs from getting the necessary finance they need to get off the ground. One representative from the banking sector emphasised the importance of local-level banking, and the need to avoid ‘blind’ decision-making, where data is not segregated by gender, and finance is frequently denied to women-owned and women-led projects. This data bias is then coded into algorithms, leading to situations like the now infamous ‘Apple Card’, where a tech entrepreneur was offered a far higher credit limit than his wife, despite sharing assets and her higher credit score.

Changing organisational culture will require more than just legislative change, however, and new attitudes to traditional working methods will require solidarity from male staff. Policies that relate to overtime, such as part-time or flexible hours, are more likely to

be used by women (who more often have to deal with issues such as childcare), but this can also slow career development, and is one reason why boardrooms remain male-dominated.

Shifting working patterns to involve fewer late meetings, greater capacity for digitalisation, and remote meetings facilitate women's inclusion in workplaces, as well as increase productivity and reduce demands on workers. This also reduces the exclusion of women from corporate networks, which can swiftly turn into 'old boys clubs'. This 'corporate capital', or lack thereof, often forces women out of male-dominated professions, as a lack of network denies visibility to women doing the same work as men, explained one participant from the finance sector.

Of course, corporate capital is still a luxury for many women in more marginalised communities, and it was repeatedly emphasised by the moderator and participants that SDG 5 (gender equality) meant the empowerment of all women, not just women from certain communities. Women in rural areas have far lower social capital than women in cities, and are almost totally disconnected from business networks. Combined with increased social responsibility for families and a lack of mobility and support, women in rural communities are all but locked out of markets, no matter their ideas.

Participants highlighted inspiring work done in Africa to encourage greater female participation in education, but also where improvements can easily be made, such as in providing girls with better toilets and access to sanitary products needed during menstruation.

Greater access to education not only allows for greater opportunity for girls in rural areas, but it gives mothers more freedom for non-familial responsibilities.

Panellists also underlined the importance of role models and noted that the election of the first female President of the European Commission is undoubtedly historic, as are the efforts made towards gender equality in Rwanda and Ethiopia.

However, it's time to step up the fight for gender equality, and go beyond mere representation. Global issues such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic have already started shifts in patterns of work – we must ensure that new ways of working do not reinforce patriarchal norms. As the moderator made clear, "We may never go back to the way things were – and that may be no bad thing."



[Have a look at the pictures of the event here](#)

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