

United Nations Women's Council

Background Guide



Women in the Labor Force

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Table of Contents

Committee Background.....	3
History of the Problem.....	3
Current Situation.....	5
Bloc Positions.....	8
Possible Solutions.....	9
Quest. Resolution Must Answer.....	11
Conclusion.....	11
Sources.....	13

Committee Background

UN Women is a UN branch that was established in July 2010 dedicated to the empowerment of women and the enhancement of gender equality. It is the organization which sets global standards for laws in programmes in order to achieve a vision in equal participation for females. For several years, establishing a global accord promoting gender equality has always been difficult. With the establishment of UN Women, however, there has been incredible progress in the empowerment of women and the overcoming of challenges on gender equality. This branch has effectively joined other units in the United Nations focusing on women's rights. These are the, Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

The UN Women's main roles are to support inter-governmental bodies, for example: the Commission on the Status of Women, to assist member-states implement standards and be ready to provide both financial and technical aid, and to guide and coordinate UN system's service in gender equality as well as to promote accountability. This organization highlights the concept and fact that gender equality is a basic human right that should not be stripped from any woman, and thus also works towards making the UN Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and promoting equal participation in all aspects of life.

History of Problem

The role of women in the labor force has changed greatly throughout the years. There has been an increase of women participation in the labor force in certain countries. In Spain, for instance, this has shown to be occurring throughout the years. Women's participation in the labor force contains a variety of conflicts due to the lack

of protection of women's rights and gender inequality. These conflicts include matters such as unhealthy working conditions or an unfair gender pay gap. Fortunately, there have been several female figures who have inspired women to participate more in the area of fighting for their rights. The role of Feminism, in this sense, has strongly impacted the labor force and the world today. Feminism is defined by a wide range of actions that strongly encourage the establishment of equality between genders. In the labor force, Feminism is a key point that defends women's rights and the gender equality that may often be broken due to sexist circumstances. The growth of Feminism in society, however, has contributed greatly as a factor that often eliminates such inequality. Thus, it is of high importance that Feminism keeps growing worldwide in order to keep such unfair actions towards women in check.

Sexism has played a role in society that has defined jobs or activities and connected them to a specific gender—often creating a barrier. In the workforce, there are still jobs “designated” to be for men, meaning, women who choose careers such as those are often criticized. Fortunately,

there have been careers that have evolved over time and have enabled a more wide and open-minded view. For instance, before World War I, the idea of working at home or playing housewife was a role that most women considered to instinctively be theirs. World War I, however, left an impact—especially in American society—that encouraged women to take further action and part in the workforce. It was not easy, however, to immediately adopt careers that were long seen as jobs for men. Engineers, for instance, were represented by mainly a group of men; it was seen as a job that “only men” could do. Therefore, to have women choose paths such as those and adapt them as their own marked a new start. Thankfully, new actions have shown progress throughout the years, encouraging women to take on more diverse jobs than they did before.

Current Situation

The topic of women in the labor force is highly debatable due to the fact that cultures view the roles of females differently. In countries located in the Middle East, culture is a factor that impedes women from participating in the labor force.

Strict religious beliefs regarding the idea that only men deserve rights stand as barriers for any sort of activity for females. As a result, the clash between ideas regarding the role of women and how they establish their presence in the labor force occurs, minimizing any possible global laws or solutions.

Countries in Asia, such as South Korea and China still continue to hold these traditional norms regarding women. Although these cases are not as extreme as a vast amount of Middle Eastern countries, traditional opinions regarding gender roles continue to restrict females from pursuing certain dreams or performing specific actions. Generally Asian countries are the ones to hold a big gap in regards to the topic of the gender pay gap. In contrast to this, several nations in Europe have altered laws and cultural customs in order to grow into what they are today.

Although the world is moving towards greater gender representation in the workplace, there are still views towards women that prevent them from taking action in major roles such as the government or company leaders. Feminist movements have created a big impact in raising awareness of

this issue, as well as promoting female participation at a global scale.

A. Maternity Leave

Maternity leave is an undeniable right women are born with. Women play a huge role in the act of parenting—specifically in the sense that they are the ones bringing a new being into the world. Of course, maternity is not easy nor quick. Therefore, several countries provide a paid maternity leave for women. Some countries, however, do not even assure a maternity leave. The United States is a specific case that does not officially provide maternity leave—although this does not mean that they provide no maternity leave at all. In this country, women are often given a choice when it comes to deciding whether they want a paid maternity leave. Unfortunately, the states of California, Rhode Island, and New Jersey do not provide maternity leave. Several countries in Europe, however, do not hold back in providing women a paid maternity leave. In fact, the top ten countries in the world with the greatest pay gap policies are all located in Europe. Bulgaria comes in first, with up to 59 weeks of paid maternity leave. There

are conflicts, however, in the pay rate of an expecting mother's maternity leave. This takes a toll on Bulgaria as well, showing a narrowing process to nearly 46 weeks of paid maternity leave (instead of 59). This conflict in the pay rate was not only present in Bulgaria, but also in most of the countries that had already been analyzed. (This analysis was done in 42 countries by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).)

B. Gender Pay Gap

In countless countries, women and men are given different salaries primarily due to their gender. This conflict is often caused by the belief that women lack certain factors or qualities in comparison to men. One of the main factors that employers consider when looking to hire or set salaries is the possibility the worker has for long-term employment as well as future promotions. A woman of a young age has a disadvantage in this situation because there is an assumption made that at one point during her employment the woman may have a child. An employee with a child is not beneficial for the company since it will likely involve paying maternity leave or

losing an employee and everything that has been invested in her. Although this is a form of discrimination rooted in stereotypes, in the world of business it is difficult to avoid.

An interesting case on this is South Korea, which is capable of providing the education needed to countries, yet lacks to transcend that participation to the workforce. In this country, both females and males participate strongly in the aspect of attending school are receiving the knowledge needed. In fact, it is even seen today that females in South Korea tend to receive higher grade percentages in certain areas, but in the workforce, it is completely the opposite. Despite the fact that both females and males are encouraged to pursue their dreams through education, the gender pay gap in the country has yet to decrease. The participation rates are also unchanged, seen as they are undeniably similar to those seen about 20 years ago. Gender pay gap in South Korea is up to 39%, while female participation in the workforce is 55%, the average (based on the OECD) being 65%.

C. Religious Beliefs Regarding Women and Their Role in Society

Numerous Middle Eastern countries have proven to show a low workforce participation percentage, due partially to their Islamic beliefs and the role of religion in legislation. Of course, religious beliefs are not the only reason restraining women from participating in the workforce. Other causes may be the undeniably harsh working conditions or the gender pay gap. Many of these Middle Eastern countries, however, involve the importance and strict loyalty to a religious belief stating that women's jobs should not involve leaving the house. Syria, for instance, is the country with the lowest percentage of women in the workforce out of the Middle Eastern countries. In 2017, it was as low as only 15%. Follow-up countries after Syria have also shown very low percentages, all varying by a value of 1% or 2%. The presence of these religious beliefs strictly include the need for a woman to always have a male by her side- playing the role of a chaperone whenever they are out of the house. Thus, they restrict women from being employed by any formal markets. The role of religious beliefs, in this sense, play a key role in the representation of women in the workforce, specifically in Middle Eastern countries.

One such specific example is Saudi Arabia, which expands its religious beliefs into the governance and legislation of the country through Sharia law. This has severe implications with regard to what rights women have under the law and how they are treated in the nation, since traditional Islamic beliefs emphasise the superiority of men over women and sets out opposing roles for each gender to play in society. The oppression of women presents itself in Sharia law primarily in the way in which women are believed to be less capable at achieving things than men and also since it is believed that women must be protected and shielded from disgraceful things. This leads to a situation where basic individual rights such as the right to hold an ID or the right to vote have only been granted in recent decades, and it is understood how women currently only comprise 22% of the country's workforce. This number has greatly increased in the last decade, primarily due to various efforts at gender reform by the royal family in an attempt to gain greater support in the international community. In many ways, it is political motives that is driving the slow change in women's rights that is taking place in Saudi

Arabia, but progress is being achieved to some extent.

D. The Role of Feminist Figures and Movements in the World Today

Countless female figures have come up with different political movements and ideologies that have impacted the world today. They have spoken up—arguing and fighting for the leaders of the world to pay more attention to women’s rights as well as inspire other young girls to spark the change that is necessary. These figures have shared their stories about gender pay gaps, stories of sexual harassment, the different views of society towards women, and the lack of protection in terms of women’s rights. Jo Cribb, for instance, has spoken up about the injustice of the gender pay gap, strongly expressing the despair women feel in the presence of such discriminatory actions. “Angry, betrayed, and foolish- that’s how I felt when I learned I’d been paid $\frac{1}{3}$ less than the rest of the team for doing the same job.” (Jo Cribb, 2017) Figures like Cribb have revealed the truth about unfair working conditions, and have shown that most victims are not even aware of the difference in salary between them and their coworkers.

As a result, the tales and voices of these inspiring figures have increased awareness about gender inequality, encouraging the elimination of these inequitable conditions.

Social Media has also been an incredible source for feminist figures to express the unfairness of the situation. Globalization has also been a crucial factor that has aided these women in spreading their concerns at a universal scale, where other residents from varying countries can empathize and contribute to several movements. Social media has also had the role of encouraging people all over the globe to act upon what they can do to contribute, especially in their local areas. The #MeToo movement is an example of what feminist movements and the Internet can do to encourage women to speak up about gender inequality and highlight the fact that they are not alone. In fact, movements such as these have brought light to unaddressed issues in the past, such as sexual harassment in the workplace.

Another movement that has sprouted in recent years is visible in the women’s march that happened in Washington DC and hundreds of other cities all around the world on January 21st, 2017. It took place the day

after the inauguration of current United States president Donald Trump as a way for women to rise up and show the new administration how they were capable of fighting for their rights. It was in many ways a show of power from American women, as well as a consolation to anyone who was displeased with the election results. The march in Washington was attended by many celebrities, such as Madonna or Amy Schumer which helped draw attention. Many prominent feminist figures also attended and gave speeches, such as Gloria Steinem and Cecile Richards. Marches in other countries on this same day were often to protest the oppression of women's rights and advocate against specific issues that were plaguing the women of their country, such as domestic violence. The movement has been very powerful and served to inspire many young girls around the world as well as encourage women to join the political sphere.

E. Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Sexual harassment is defined by the United Nations as an unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature. It is an issue that women have faced in the workplace for as long as they have been working and it is estimated

that 1 in 3 women today experience some sort of sexual harassment at their work. Given the psychological effects of this behavior on women, as well as the usual ineffectiveness for the woman to receive justice, approximately 71% of cases go unreported. A lack of national policies to address the problem, since a considerable amount of countries have no legislation against sexual harassment, also contributes to its perpetuation and discourages women to report their experiences. Behaviors of sexual harassment towards women arise when there is a feeling of superiority towards women as well as the belief that there will be no consequences for the actions.

The issue lived primarily in the backlines, not spoken about or addressed much openly, until the MeToo movement broke out in October of 2017 that pushed the topic into the light. The movement consisted of millions of women from around the globe turning to social media platforms speaking up for the first time to say that they had been victims of sexual harassment. The sheer size of the movement brought about the global realization of how extensive the problem of sexual harassment is and sparked women all

over the world to demand that something be done to address it. The movement also brought about a general social change that began to normalize women speaking up and telling their stories.

In the workplace, a woman who is a victim of sexual harassment has little motivation to report the situation, given that it could mean that she will be fired from her job, overlooked for a future promotion or simply branded a liar. Women who are working in a top level competitive job could tarnish their entire career if they chose to speak up. Overall, it is so likely that nothing will be done about a reported situation that most women simply choose to remain silent.

Bloc Positions

Yemen

Yemen is one of the countries with the highest gender inequality rank in the world. Many factors contribute towards this, such as lack of education for girls, difficult access to health care, a discriminatory legislation and overall strict gender roles that are rooted in traditional and religious beliefs. Despite all of this, many of these issues are very difficult to address right now due to the fact that Yemen has been a

war-torn country since 2011 and is currently in a humanitarian crisis.

Saudi Arabia

As a country that is notorious for disregarding women's rights, which is primarily due to religious beliefs and traditional societal values, Saudi Arabia had many issues with allowing women into the workforce as well as providing fair work conditions. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), women's employment age above the age of 15 is around 22%, which has risen considerably since 1990 when it was 14%.

India

In India, many women have joined the labor force in the last several decades than were ever allowed to before. Now, most women who work do so for low wage jobs that require minimum skill. The ILO reports that only 28% of women are currently employed, and with such a large population, this translates to millions of women who do not work. Not only is this number one of the lowest in the world, but it has actually begun to decline in the last decade. This could be attributed to an increase in competition for jobs amongst the

population, many of which are being given to men rather than women. Gender discrimination is still very much present and there is much to improve in a country where the economy is growing as fast as it is.

Iceland

Iceland ranks first in the world in terms of gender equality, which translates to strong representation in the workforce, and as such serves as an example to many nations who are further behind. A lot of their success can be attributed to a long process of cultural change and an increase in representation in government that took many years to achieve. The country has also implemented specific measures of government interference in order to decrease gender pay gap, which as seen today, has been proved effective.

United States of America

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States of America does not provide a guarantee for paid maternity leave. Other countries worldwide, especially developed countries establish paid maternity leave as a general law. Despite the fact that

it is one of the most developed countries in the world, the U.S. does not provide such maternity rights to women, making it more difficult for women to work. United States is one of the countries that is progressing from major gender inequality to a more Feminist society. Several movements have encouraged society to create new job opportunities for women, as well as accepting greater gender diversity in the government. In fact, for 130 years, the Senate was entirely comprised of males. Today, however, there has been a significant increase in the amount of female members within.

Possible Solutions

A. Governmental Interference

In the case of Iceland, for instance, gender pay equality has been achieved. One of the main reasons as to why this was achievable is because Iceland was the first country to ever accept a law that demanded a certificate on gender pay equality. This law specifically addressed and required companies with more than 25 workers to present a certificate that demonstrated equality between its female and male staff. As a result, this country has significantly

achieved something that is almost insanely difficult to see in other countries.

Implementing a law like this one is a considerable solution that would ideally involve the government and the law.

B. Enforce Paternity Leave

Due to the fact that maternity leave has become one of the main reasons why females are hired less and less by certain companies, enforcing paternity leave and laws regarding shared parental leave is also an option that could benefit women as well as men. In the case of Sweden, shared parental leave has been in practice since 1974. Considerably, this has decreased the gender pay gap in this country. Results are seen in 2014, for instance, where 25% of fathers took parental leave. The country also entitled parents to a total of 480 days of parental leave. In many workplaces, companies do not hire women or pay them less due to the fact that maternity leave is often considered a problem when finding long term workers. If paternity leave were to be enforced, such scenario would not be considered as ‘troublesome’ as it is now.

C. Eliminate Negotiation

The act of negotiating is often considered a ‘man’s job’ and is assumed to be a weakness for women. Several companies in the marketplace seek workers who can negotiate businesses in search of better income. Due to the idea that women are bad negotiators, however, gender pay gap increases in business companies specifically. This idea of negotiating is a cultural and social factor that is often valued more in countries such as the United States of America or Europe. In the United States, for instance, women are expected to be terrible negotiators and are therefore paid much less.

D. Transparency in Salary

Social Media Management Platform, ‘BUFFER’, made employee pay public in 2013. As a result, in the year 2014, applications increased by up to 50%. This is a possible solution that informs women and men on what their salaries are, focusing on making women aware if they are earning less than males. By establishing laws that encourage companies to share the information about their employee salaries, gender pay gap could decrease at an incredible rate. This is also a solution that

encourages companies to take action on their own and alter salaries for women and men accordingly.

Questions to Consider

How can gender pay equality be achieved in countries that present pay gaps upon ideals built from culture?

What factors have prevented gender pay equality from being achieved in the past?

What type of possible solutions can we build from them?

How have gender roles shaped the role of women in the labor force? How can we alter this for the better?

What kinds of movements or feminist actions have contributed to the decrease of the gender pay gap and how can we apply this knowledge to the resolution?

Conclusion

Over the course of this conference, we hope all delegates are able to learn a lot about the topic that is women in the labor force as well as the overarching rights given

to women all over the world. Understanding how women live in different socio-cultural contexts in each individual country, as well as which religious and cultural factors contribute to these, are key towards creating solutions. We expect to have a flowing debate that is primarily focused on cooperation and solutions with everyone working together towards trying to improve the problem while all accurately portraying their positions.

In terms of possible solutions that delegates propose, we are going to emphasize the need for very realistic solutions that are specific and true to the ideals of the United Nations. Solutions that are not feasible and would not actually happen in the real world are discouraged, since the goal is to create a realistic international relations conference. Realistic solutions must be highly specific and detailed and explain as many aspects of the plan as possible.

Delegates are strongly reminded to remain in role, as it is to discuss different cultural factors that need to be addressed properly in the resolution.

As chairs, we are very passionate about this topic and understand how

essential it is in today's world. We look forward to having a successful conference and we are here to help if there are any questions.

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