

The Gender Agenda in the OECD: Progress, Pending Steps and the Mexican Initiative

*La agenda de género en la OCDE: avances,
pendientes y la iniciativa mexicana*

Helena Sybel Galván Gómez

Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Mexico to the OECD

hgalvan@sre.gob.mx



Abstract

This article analyzes how the gender agenda has evolved in the OECD from its early beginnings to the present day, and looks at an initiative promoted by Mexico to include a review of the gender policies of the countries featured in OECD Economic Surveys.



Resumen

En este artículo se presenta un análisis de la evolución de la agenda de género en la OCDE, desde sus comienzos hasta la actualidad, así como una iniciativa impulsada por México para incluir dentro de los Estudios Económicos de la OCDE una revisión de las políticas de género de los países bajo estudio.



Keywords

OECD, gender equality, economic growth, development



Palabras clave

OECD, igualdad de género, crecimiento económico, desarrollo

The Gender Agenda in the OECD: Progress, Pending Steps and the Mexican Initiative

*Helena Sybel Galván Gómez*¹

Introduction

Gender equality—like any argument in favor of equality—is basically a question of justice. More than a stand for individual rights or a simple matter of tweaking public policies, it is a moral and ethical imperative that prompts us to question the power structures that have sustained centuries and centuries of inequality. It is an inalienable principle of any society based on the equality of its citizens. Thanks to the struggle waged by many, in every corner of the planet, the barriers that prevent women from fully exercising their rights are being torn down, but we still have a long way to go. Gender equality is neither a favor nor a concession; it is acknowledgment that all human beings have an intrinsic right to live their lives with dignity, respect and freedom.

On the international arena, where policies and decisions affect millions, the battle for gender equality takes on even greater importance. It is here that we need to redouble efforts and turn words into actions; our commitment to justice needs to be unwavering. Gender equality is not just another goal, but a right that needs to be guaranteed today, without excuses and without delay.

¹ I would like to thank Juan Carlos Serio for his help in writing this article.

Gender equality is a topic that ranks high on the agenda of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), both in its substantive work and the way in which it adapts to itself to meet the standards it promotes. As an entity that advocates economic cooperation and development, the OECD understands that gender equality is a driver of solid and sustainable economic growth,² and an investment with tangible long-term benefits. Experience has demonstrated that when women are afforded equal access to the labor market this creates a virtuous cycle of prosperity that permeates the entire economic structure. Thus, gender equality emerges as an essential lever of long-term economic sustainability and growth.³ In this article, I give an overview of the measures the OECD has taken in this regard and mention an initiative I proposed as Gender Ambassador to the Organisation.

The structure of the OECD and gender equality

The OECD was created in 1960, but it would be another thirty-five years before a woman held a top position within its structure. In 1995, the U.S. economist Joanna Shelton became the first woman to serve as deputy secretary-general and since then, only seven women have held this position. It should be noted that the OECD has had six secretary-generals to date and all have been men.

Another OECD official who has broken glass ceilings and whose name deserves a mention is Gabriela Ramos, a Mexican internationalist, who held a series of executive positions within the Organisation beginning in 2000: first as director of the OECD Centre in Mexico and, from 2008 to 2020, as head of the cabinet of Secretary-General Ángel Gurría, where she promoted the transformation of the OECD into a more globally relevant body by building bridges with the G20, the G7 and APEC, and turning the focus

² OECD, *Closing the Gender Gap: Act Now*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2012, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264179370-en> (date of access: December 2, 2024).

³ Paul Schultz, "Why Governments Should Invest more to Educate Girls," in *World Development*, vol. 30, no. 2, February 2002, pp. 207-225.

of her substantive work toward innovative initiatives like inclusive growth and new approaches to economic challenges. She also promoted gender equality initiatives within the structure of the Organisation.

The OECD continued to uphold its commitment to gender equality within its ranks, achieving gender equality in terms of its deputy secretary-generals and directors in 2023, a major milestone on its journey to becoming a more equitable organization. The appointment of women to top-ranking positions within the OECD has been crucial to the effective implementation of policies and the taking of decisions that reflect a perspective of inclusion and equality, while their presence in these posts has been highly conducive to the inclusion of gender equality on international political and economic agendas. This is especially important in the OECD, whose mission is to promote policies designed to improve the economic and social wellbeing of people the world over.

The history of the gender agenda in the OECD is a complex tale that interweaves institutional evolution and a growing awareness of the importance of gender equality in international spheres. Although women were virtually absent from positions of leadership at the beginning, over time, the OECD has taken concrete steps to make gender equality a central component of its policies and practices. This transformation was neither immediate nor easy, but reflects a deep-seated change in the way the OECD addresses global challenges.

The OECD and public policies committed to gender equality

The OECD has been transforming to include a gender approach in its substantive work. In 2013, it took a giant step forward with the adoption of the *Recommendation of the Council on Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship*.⁴ This framework was designed to guide member

⁴ OECD, *2013 OECD Recommendation of the Council on Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2017, at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2013-oecd-recommendation-of-the-council-on-gender-equality-in-education-employment-and-entrepreneurship_9789264279391-en.html (date of access: December 2, 2024).

countries in the creation of policies that not only promoted the participation of women in education and the job market, but that supported their entrepreneurial spirit. It was followed by the 2015 *Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life*, which underscored the need for women to be fairly represented at all decision-making levels.⁵

In 2021, the OECD adopted “Trust in Global Co-operation: The Vision for the OECD for the Next Decade”, in which it reiterated its commitment to accelerating the development of policies that help close gender gaps.⁶ This document not only recognized the importance of gender equality as a fundamental value of the OECD, but stated that it should be a strategic priority in all areas of its work. This commitment was explicit acknowledgment that gender equality is not merely a matter of social justice, but an essential component of long-term economic growth, social cohesion and wellbeing.

At the Ministerial Council Meeting of 2023 (MCM2023), the Organisation’s gender strategy entitled “The OECD’s Contribution to Promoting Gender Equality”⁷ was approved. This document expresses a renewed and strengthened commitment by the OECD to promoting gender equality as a main component of its policies and activities. The document establishes four key pillars to achieving progress on the OECD’s gender equality agenda. The first of these is better and broader gender-disaggregated data, which is essential to the effectiveness of policies in areas such as education, employment and access to technology. The second pillar focuses on incorporating the gender perspective into all areas of the OECD’s work, and ensuring that policies and economic reviews always take into consideration the implications of gender. The third pillar deals with the need to get ahead of new challenges, such as gender violence and discriminatory

⁵ OECD, “Recommendation of the Council on Gender Equality in Public Life,” OECD/LEGAL/0418, December 14, 2015, at <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0418> (date of access: December 2, 2024).

⁶ OECD, *Trust in Global Co-operation: The Vision for the OECD for the Next Decade*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2021, at <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/legal/trust-in-global-cooperation-the-vision-for-the-oecd-for-the-next-decade.html> (date of access: December 2, 2024).

⁷ OECD, “The OECD’s Contribution to Promoting Gender Equality,” C/MIN(2023)17, June 5, 2023, at [https://one.oecd.org/document/C/MIN\(2023\)17/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/C/MIN(2023)17/en/pdf) (date of access: December 2, 2024).

laws, by adopting an intersectional approach that allows for their timely identification. Finally, the fourth pillar highlights the role of the OECD as a global leader in the promotion of gender equality via the organization of international forums and cooperation with other organizations to foster inclusion and close gender gaps around the world.

Mexico's initiative to review public policies on gender equality

Within the framework of Mexico's feminist foreign policy, gender equality has been promoted as a central issue on the Organisation's agenda. The country has been a regular participant in Friends of Gender Equality Plus (FOGE+) and has managed to build consensus on gender mainstreaming in all the Organisation's substantive work.

As Gender Ambassador, I proposed the Mexican initiative to include Gender Policy Reviews in the Economic Surveys compiled by the OECD's Economic and Development Review Committee (EDRC), a proposal that relates to the second pillar of "The OECD's contribution to gender equality," approved at the MCM2023.

For ten years, from 2002 to 2012, I actively participated in the EDRC, the OECD committee whose work method consists of peer reviews of the economic performance of countries. The Economic Surveys stemming from these reviews are probably among the OECD's most important publications, and invariably end up in the hands of government ministers and heads of State. Hence the idea of including a review of the gender policies of each country as part of this exercise. It is also a way of acknowledging that well-founded political decisions depend on the inclusion of the gender perspective in economic studies. Gender equality is an economic issue; empirical data has shown the extent to which the economy depends on women and, unfortunately, how they often find themselves in conditions of vulnerability.

Mexico's proposal to include a gender policy chapter in the OECD's Economic Surveys is intended to formalize and broaden the scope of these types of studies, ensure that the proper laws and institutions are in place, and compile gender-disaggregated data with a view to designing more

comprehensive and more effective public policies. Such a chapter will allow for a grassroots diagnosis of how well the governments of member countries have integrated the gender perspective by identifying the laws they have passed, their socioeconomic impact and any good practices that can potentially be shared and replicated. Such a review will serve as a catalyst for better results and a greater impact, fostering political dialogue, transparency and capacity-building in the process, all in alignment with the OECD's mission to ensure that its studies, research and political advice include a gender equality perspective.

In January 2024, the EDRC approved a framework document establishing principles and directives for the incorporation of the gender perspective into economic studies. This framework guides OECD country study teams on how to address gender inequalities in their reports, whether via specific chapters or thematic sections within macroeconomic discussions.

The approach is not limited to labor market and skill-building aspects, but encompasses other relevant political areas, based on the extensive body of work already produced by the OECD on gender issues. This effort is part of a broader strategy to help member countries improve gender equality, in keeping with “Trust in Global Co-operation: The Vision for the OECD for the Next Decade” and the 2023 Ministerial Council Statement.⁸

Conclusions

Although the OECD has made considerable progress in terms of incorporating the gender perspective into its economic studies, there is still a great deal of work to be done. The inclusion of a chapter on gender policy in the Organisation's Economic Surveys is a decisive step toward greater equality, but it is only the beginning. The true test of these initiatives will be how well member countries are able to adopt and effectively implement recommendations based on these studies. It will also be vital

⁸ OECD, *2023 Ministerial Council Statement*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2023, at <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/2023-Ministerial-Council-Statement.pdf> (date of access: December 2, 2024).

that the OECD continue finetuning its tools and methods for the gathering of gender-disaggregated data for a more precise assessment and regular follow-up of progress in this area.

The OECD needs to continue leading by example, promoting policies that not only reduce gender gaps, but that foster equitable participation in all aspects of economic and social life. To the extent that we move forward, it is imperative that these efforts do not lose momentum, but that we step them up to ensure that gender equality becomes a tangible reality and not merely an ideal to which we aspire. The OECD, along with its member countries, has the opportunity and the responsibility to make gender equality a cornerstone of global progress in the coming decades.