What Women’s Economic Empowerment Means for Companies & Actions for Companies to Advance Women’s Economic Empowerment: A Brief

Women’s economic empowerment is the right thing to do and the smart thing to do. The case for women’s economic empowerment has several interlinked pillars, each integral to progress. First is the universal case for basic human rights. Second is the growth and human development case. And third is the business case. Mounting evidence about the persistence of gaps and the costs of inaction for individuals, communities, businesses and nations underscores the urgency of accelerating progress.

Wage and salary employment make up a rising share of women’s paid work, and worldwide, women are at least as likely to have wage jobs as men. Just over half of women in paid work have wage and salary jobs and the shares in some regions are much lower. About 16 percent of such employees work for the public sector, and the rest work in a variety of diverse private sector organizations from large corporations to small informal firms. The cultures and practices of these private sector businesses have significant impacts on women’s economic opportunities.

This brief focuses on the implications of women’s economic empowerment agenda for the business sector and how to change business culture and practice to move forward women’s economic empowerment. Changing business culture and practice is one of seven key drivers identified in the report to move forward the agenda for women’s economic empowerment.

Figure 1. The seven drivers of change for women’s economic empowerment
Why Gender Equality is Good for Business

**Gender equality is linked to national competitiveness, income & economic growth.** Across countries, gender equality is associated with stronger national competitiveness and higher income levels (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the effect of gender equality on economic growth is positive (see Figure 2). Several recent studies examine how women’s economic empowerment can boost economic growth and consistently find that the potential income gains from women’s economic empowerment are substantial, ranging up to the McKinsey Global Institute’s estimated 26 percent boost to annual global GDP in 2025. The gains are especially large for countries with low fertility rates like Japan, the Republic of Korea, Germany, Italy and Singapore and for countries where women’s labour force participation rates are very low like those in the Gulf region. A similar study that incorporates female entrepreneurship finds the largest gains—approaching 40 percent of GDP—in the Middle East and North Africa.

Given the projected sharp slowdown in the growth of the global labour supply as a result of demographic trends, reducing gender gaps in the labour market will become increasingly important to economic growth.

**Figure 1: Gender Equality is Associated with Higher Income per Capita**

![Figure 1: Gender Equality is Associated with Higher Income per Capita](chart.png)

**Women’s economic empowerment contributes to the value chain.** The incentives for businesses to support women’s economic empowerment are strong—a smart strategy, indeed. A growing body of research from around the world documents and measures the many ways that women contribute value to each link of the business value chain—as suppliers, leaders, employees, suppliers, customers, brand creators, and community members (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Women in a Value Chain Approach to the Business Case**
Companies with greater gender equality in their workforce and top management can reap a whole range of benefits. Such companies are better able to attract and retain female talent, to motivate their female workers, to understand and respond to the needs of female customers, and to better address complex problems by incorporating more diverse views. Businesses with more women in top leadership and board positions enjoy stronger financial performance. And gender-diverse teams are correlated with higher financial returns and higher innovation potential and outcomes.

Changing Business Culture and Practice: Proven & Promising Actions

Businesses can take many actions to realize gender equality at work and accelerate women’s economic empowerment (summarized in box 1). Despite differences in size, type of work, composition of stakeholders and place of operations, all businesses have the capacity to make changes in their culture and practices to increase economic opportunities and improve economic outcomes for women, though the specific changes will vary by company.

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<tr>
<th>Box 1. Eliminating gender gaps and accelerating women’s economic empowerment: Actions for Companies</th>
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<td>Commit visible business leaders to gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.</td>
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<td>Improve pay, conditions and prospects for employees:</td>
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<td>Change human resources policies and processes to eliminate implicit bias in recruitment, hiring, promotion and pay.</td>
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<td>Establish measures of impact and targets to monitor progress on reducing gender gaps and increasing gender diversity—and hold managers accountable for the realization of targets.</td>
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<td>Conduct regular reviews of pay equity with avenues of recourse.</td>
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<td>Offer internal training and mentorship for women to develop hard and soft skills and sponsorship for advancement opportunities.</td>
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<td>Offer flexible work options.</td>
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<td>Offer family-friendly policies including paid maternity/paternity leave and support for childcare and elderly care.</td>
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<td>Ensure equity and enhance opportunities for women’s economic empowerment in the supply chain:</td>
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<td>Ensure that workers in company supply chains have safe and healthy working conditions, are not subject to exploitative conditions and human rights violations, are paid decent wages and have basic labour rights.</td>
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<td>Increase the share of trade and procurement for women-owned enterprises (WOEs)</td>
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Design and offer products that meet women’s needs and that can reduce the unpaid work and care burden women face.

Support campaigns and initiatives that promote gender equality and women’s economic empowerment in the workplace, in value chains and in communities more broadly.

Organize and fund socially responsible activities that empower women economically—for example, company-financed programmes for STEM education for women.

Indeed, businesses can act on a number of fronts simultaneously to make progress on gender equality and women’s economic empowerment, within their own organizations and in their relationships with suppliers, customers, investors, communities and governments.

First, businesses should identify and commit high-profile leaders to champion gender equality. Sustained and successful efforts require active engagement of company leaders and top management. Corporate and public leaders can be champions of gender equality agendas to influence norms within their company and beyond, raising awareness and inspiring change. One example is the recent book by Melanne Verveer and Kim Azzarelli, Fast Forward, which interviews more than 70 trailblazing women in global leadership, public service and the corporate world to inspire women and promote new norms. The Male Champions of Change in Australia aims to increase women’s representation in leadership (box 2). Corporate champions can create cascading effects that can incite other firms to follow suit.

**Box 2. Male champions of change influence gender norms and practice in Australia**

Male Champions of Change, established by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2011, works with influential leaders to redefine the role men play in taking action to reduce gender inequality. The initiative activates peer groups of influential male leaders to step up beside women and act as advocates for gender equality. It contributes to media coverage of gender equality. And it facilitates adoption of high-impact actions across major firms and government agencies.

The coalition has grown from a group of eight of Australia’s largest corporations to five peer groups of around 90 CEOs, government department heads and board directors. These leaders’ organizations employ around 600,000 people (5 percent of Australia’s workforce). Members are selected based on their ability to influence and effect change. Women from the private sector, government and civil society engage in the peer groups by sharing experience and expertise. Each peer group develops, tests and shares actions that leaders can adopt to realize gender equality.

The initiative has led to more than 15 concrete actions implemented in organizations headed by the male champions. One example is the Panel Pledge, in which male champions, when asked to speak or participate in forums, ask how and whether gender balance of speakers, panelists or participants will be achieved. More than 130 leaders have committed to this pledge, and the number of all-male forums in Australia has been dramatically reduced.
Another action is Targets with Teeth, which sets female recruitment and retention targets or quotas in elite sport businesses. Tennis Australia has adopted this policy so that when shortlisting candidates for new roles, two of the five must be female.

More broadly, all employees can support gender equality. Organizations in which male workers support diversity and inclusion have higher female representation than those in which men are not personally engaged. The #LeanInTogether Initiative, which has more than 500 corporate partners globally, engages men and gives them an opportunity to advocate for gender equality in the workplace, family and society.

**Improving pay, conditions and prospects for employees**

Businesses should tackle adverse norms and implicit biases in the workplace. New insights into the human mind can help organizations of all types design practices that combat biases in hiring, promotion and pay processes that discriminate against women. Many companies, among them Ernst and Young, Facebook, Google and IKEA Group, have introduced mandatory training for their employees to recognize and counter implicit biases. Governments and civil society actors in Europe have developed guides and checklists to make it easier for firms to eliminate bias from their job evaluations. The General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers has developed the Revalue Work to Promote Gender Equality project, so that industry can better identify unequal pay practices and prevent devaluation of female-dominated occupations.

Some key lessons on how to design processes to eliminate implicit gender biases in human resource practices are brought together in a recent book by Iris Bohnet. Several of the main findings of her extensive research are summarized in box 3. Recommended practices to combat gender biases in the workplace include design thinking and “behavioural nudging,” supported by data analytics and digital technologies. New tech start-ups are developing digital platforms to help organizations eliminate implicit biases in human resource functions—an example of how digital technologies can change the future of work, a trend with both positive and negative implications for women’s economic opportunities.

In conjunction with combatting implicit biases, companies should set targets or other measures of impact to monitor progress on increasing gender diversity and reducing the hiring, promotion and pay gender gaps. Within this, managers should be held accountable for achieving results. A protocol for pay equity processes (including explicit, objective criteria for initial pay and promotions in addition to regular reviews of pay equity) should be developed to drive gender equality, with the greatest potential in processes that rely on statistical analyses and include formal remediation. Not anchoring salary decisions to prior salaries can overcome bias and inertia in pay decisions (additional actions specific to pay are on page 89 of the main report).

**Box 3. Gender equality by design in the workplace**
In her book, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, Iris Bohnet, a behavioural economist and professor at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government provides evidence and practical tools to redesign how we live, learn and work to eliminate gender bias. Here’s a selection of her recommended approaches for recruiting and managing talent.

**Apply data to people decisions.** This requires several elements, beginning with collecting, tracking and analyzing data to understand patterns and trends. It is important to measure in order to detect what is broken, inform interventions and experiment to learn what works. Calling its human resource department “People Operations,” Google has been at the forefront of “people analytics.” The data revealed to Google, for example, that an apparent gender gap in quit rates—women were twice as likely to quit as the average Google employee—was in fact a “parent gap.” Young mothers were twice as likely to quit. So Google introduced a new maternity and paternity leave plan. Instead of the industry standard of 12 weeks, Google offered new mothers 5 months off and new parents 7 weeks. The impact of this change was significant: new mothers at Google are now no more likely to quit than the average employee.

**Attract the right people.** It is increasingly well recognized that employers need to purge gendered language from job advertisements and other company communications. Companies like Microsoft, Starbucks, Square and Twitter use predictive language processing technology to de-bias their job advertisements and to use inclusive language to attract a large pool of diverse job applicants.

**Create smarter hiring procedures.** Among the elements that make a difference are “blind” hiring practices that remove demographic information from job applications, evaluate candidates comparatively, hire in batches and use predictive tests and structured interviews to evaluate candidates—rather than unstructured interviews and panel interviews that tend to reinforce bias.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics introduced blind hiring practices in 2015, withholding names and other identifying information from evaluation committees. The new practices contributed to an immediate increase in the fraction of female senior executives, from 21 to 43 percent. In April 2016, the British Civil Service, along with entities including HSBC, Deloitte, the BBC and the National Health Service (collectively responsible for employing 1.8 million people in the UK) introduced blind hiring practices. In the United States, an increasing number of employers do away with applicant names, and some employers go even further: Compose Inc., a cloud-storage firm in California, no longer asks job applicants for their resumes but instead has them complete tasks relevant to the job.

**Create smarter promotion procedures.** Needed changes in promotion practices include the use of both long-term targets and specific short-term, achievable goals, instead of self-evaluations with managers, and holding managers accountable for their assessments. In 2016, Credit Suisse started changing its performance appraisal practices and no longer shares employee self-evaluations with managers in advance of employee appraisals. Self-evaluation processes tend to disadvantage women because they tend to be more self-critical and less confident than men.

Training and mentorship help female employees to develop their hard and soft skills, as do sponsorship programmes to build their advancement opportunities. Sponsorship programmes in particular have been shown to be important in the
promotion of women and the development of a strong pipeline of female talent, in
companies and among their suppliers.¹⁹

Companies should offer flexible work options and other family-friendly policies
including paid maternity and paternity leave benefits (as discussed in the main report
on pages 65-69). Motherhood wage penalties and fatherhood wage premiums and
the factors behind them (discussed in the main report on page 34) attest to the
importance of leave policies in addressing gender gaps in paid work. In addition,
many jobs and occupations in businesses, large and small, remain structured to meet
the schedules of a stereotypical male who is expected to work long hours on a set
schedule and to leave a large share of unpaid work and care to a family partner or
paid caregiver. Creating more flexible work options reduces gender inequality in both
paid and unpaid work.²⁰ The need or the preference for “temporal flexibility” in work
shapes women’s choices of occupations, jobs and places of work and is a significant
cause of the gender pay gap.²¹

EDGE, a foundation and private consulting company started in 2011, provides an
evaluation and certification tool that companies and organizations can use to assess
their policies and practices (box 4). Based on a detailed audit of their performance on
several measures of gender equality, companies and organizations qualify for one of
three levels of EDGE certification. IKEA Switzerland, a panel member, is the first
company to have reached the highest level of EDGE certification, and the World
Bank, another panel member, has reached the first level of certification. EDGE is
rapidly becoming a globally recognized standard certifying best company practices to
achieve gender equality; roughly 110 companies from more than 40 countries and 22
industries are engaged in the EDGE assessment and certification process.²²

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<th>Box 4. EDGE certification establishes benchmarks and informs organizations on gender equality</th>
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<td>EDGE defines and assesses gender equality in a company on four pillars:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Gender balance at all levels, as measured by comparing the percentages of women in junior management positions and the executive-level, examining the gender composition of profit and loss responsibility roles, and requiring 30 percent representation by women at the nonexecutive board level.</td>
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<td>2. A statistically insignificant unexplained gender wage gap, controlling for observed variables like level of responsibility, seniority and education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. A solid framework of effective policies and practices, including equal pay for equivalent work, recruitment and promotion, leadership development and mentoring, flexible working, and company culture.</td>
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<td>4. An inclusive culture reflected in high employee ratings of career development opportunities.²³</td>
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To be certified, companies complete an online assessment and then undergo an independent audit, which explores the four pillars by drawing information from organizational data,
implemented policies and practices, and employee surveys. After the audit, one of three EDGE certification levels may be awarded to an organization.24

The EDGE process and results can inform an organization’s gender diversity strategy and priorities, and serve as a benchmarking tool across industries and locations. It can also provide a global stamp that gives visibility and credibility to certified companies.

Using the same methodology, EDGE has extended its certification work to public sector organizations, including the Federal Economic Competition Commission in Mexico.

**Ensuring equity and enhancing opportunities for women’s economic empowerment in the supply chain**

Alongside changes in their workplace culture and practices, businesses should take actions to achieve gender equality and empower women in their relationships with suppliers. A first step is assessing and addressing the risks of possible exploitation of women in business supply chains. Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, all businesses are advised to exercise due diligence on issues of gender and discrimination. These principles acknowledge that “businesses with large numbers of entities in their value chains” may find it difficult to conduct due diligence of adverse human rights impacts in all of them. If so, businesses should “identify general areas where risk of adverse human rights impacts is most significant.”25

Industrial outworkers (homeworkers) who produce for global supply chains from their own homes tend to be paid less than factory workers in the same supply chains and have to cover many of the nonwage costs of production including workspace, equipment, electricity and transport. Actions for businesses to consider: recognizing the rights of all of the workers in their supply chains, including industrial outworkers in manufacturing chains and casual day labourers in commodity chains; respecting freedom of association; ensuring safe and healthy working conditions and hours; paying living wages; and engaging with collective organizations.

Some companies are partnering with the public sector or with civil society organizations to protect and empower female workers in their global supply chains. The Better Work programme (box 5) brings together global companies, factories in their supply chains, governments and worker organizations to improve factory conditions and safeguard the rights of workers in the garment industry. She Works, a public–private partnership organized by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), is working with private companies to improve gender equality and enhance employment opportunities for 300,000 women in company supply chains through mentorship programmes, flexible working arrangements and leadership training to increase diversity in management.26

**Box 5. Better Work improves quality of garment factory jobs—and business outcomes**27

The Better Work Programme is a partnership of the IFC and the ILO, established in 2007. Based on an initial assessment of the operations of its partner factories, Better Work provides tailored advisory services and training. The programme is active in 1,300 factories across eight countries.28
Since 2009, Tufts University has been independently evaluating the impact of Better Work. The programme has improved labour conditions in participating factories, particularly for their female employees. Factories in Vietnam saw reduced gender wage gaps three years after the programme started, and in Haiti the gaps started closing soon after the first year. Workers in Haiti also reported having benefited from improved health outcomes, including less frequent headaches and less severe fatigue and thirst.

Better Work was also found to improve workers’ well-being outside the factory. Workers in Lesotho who received Better Work workplace cooperation and financial literacy training stated that they could use what they learned to reduce stress and conflict within their households. Similarly, workers who took part in occupational safety and health training reported using the training to improve their families’ health.

The evaluation also indicated that improving the quality of jobs can increase worker productivity and factory competitiveness. Vietnamese factories offering their workers markedly better working conditions were 6–8 percent more profitable than comparable factories with inferior working conditions.

To encourage global companies to address problems of poverty, gender inequality and poor working conditions in their supply chains, Oxfam runs the Behind the Brands campaign (box 6), calling for stronger laws to support women workers.

**Box 6. Behind the Brands influences companies to address gender inequities in supply chains**

Behind the Brands, launched in 2013, scores and ranks the world’s 10 largest food and beverage companies on their agricultural sourcing policies on seven dimensions: land, farmers, water, women, transparency, workers and climate. The companies—Associated British Foods (ABF), Coca Cola, Danone, General Mills, Kellogg, Mars, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo and Unilever—collectively generate revenues of more than US$1.1 billion a day and employ millions of people directly and indirectly.

Scorecards for each company, reviewed and updated annually, are based on publicly available information related to company policies on their sourcing of agricultural commodities from developing countries. More than 700,000 campaign actions have been taken by supporters—from signing petitions to targeted online social media to offline mobilizations—and the companies have responded. All but one of the companies have improved their score by at least 10 percent.

While no company has achieved a high score on women’s empowerment—the highest in this category is shared by four companies with a 6 (“fair”)—most companies have made some gains.

Eight of the 10 companies have signed the UN’s Women’s Empowerment Principles, and 8 of the 10 have assessed the impact of women producers and workers in their supply chains. Mars, Mondelez and Nestlé have publicly committed to “Look, Listen and Act”—agreeing to carry out and publish assessments to identify and report on the condition of women in their cocoa supply chains, and to develop and publish plans of action to address problems.

Oxfam has also organized a multi-stakeholder process—with Mars, Mondelez and Nestlé, and with certifiers, NGOs, farmer organizations and traders—to identify good practices for empowering women farmers.
With nine cocoa companies, including Mars, Mondelez and Nestlé, the World Cocoa Foundation launched a multiyear Cocoa Action strategy in 2014 to foster sustainability in cocoa production and improve the lives of cocoa producers in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. As part of the strategy, the Jacobs Foundation, headquartered in Switzerland, is coordinating a plan for child and youth education and for women’s empowerment.36

The potential is large for significant increases in the share of company (and government) spending on goods and services going to women-owned enterprises (WOEs). Comprehensive data are lacking, but anecdotal evidence suggests that most large corporations spend less than 2 percent of their procurement budget with WOEs.37 Increasing gender diversity in supply chains generates economic returns. In 50 companies from the service and manufacturing sectors, companies with established supplier diversity programmes with SMEs and minority-controlled businesses generated a 133 percent higher return on their buying operations than the average comparable company. Companies working with smaller and more diverse suppliers spent 20 percent less on average on their buying operations.38

A growing number of large companies, driven by business, community impact and reputation interests, are working to build economic opportunities for women in their supply chains and to provide market-specific training and other support to women often in partnership with the public sector. Some of these companies are members of WeConnect International, a nonprofit organization that identifies, certifies and provides training to WOEs and connects them to qualified local and multinational companies. To join, companies commit to having a global supplier diversity programme.

WeConnect International has a “gold standard” checklist39 to help multinational companies and multinational organizations evaluate their supplier diversity and inclusion programmes, and to track results. Since its 2009 launch, it has directly supported supplier readiness and business development programmes for over 6,000 WOEs in 100 countries. Corporations work together to make commitments on procurement from WOEs. In 2013, a five-year goal was set to track and measure at least US$1.5 billion in combined total new money spent by commitment makers on WOEs, and by the end of 2014, spending exceeded US$3 billion. A related objective was to implement supplier readiness initiatives, including mentoring by the commitment partners. By the end of 2014, more than 40,000 women had been trained.40

Another example of procurement from WOEs is the Empowering Peruvian Women Business Enterprises project, supported by the International Trade Centre, which connects WOE producing alpaca garments to the US market through promotional activities and trains women in market requirements.41

Companies can also do more to source from women’s collective enterprises in their supply chains. When SABMiller’s Nile Breweries in Uganda created a new beer designed to give small-scale subsistence farmers opportunities to participate in the
value chain, it worked with farmer associations led by women and these associations came to account for 5 of their top 10 suppliers.42

Women’s organizations and collective enterprises can benefit from training in business and leadership skills, technical advice and assistance (such as how to link to markets and supply chains), and access to enterprise finance. Companies can also benefit from including women in their supply chains as distributors and retailers. Unilever’s Shakti programme in India, launched in 2000, relies on women and their family members to distribute Unilever products in hard-to-reach rural villages. At last count, some 70,000 women and their 48,000 husbands and brothers were working as “Shakti entrepreneurs,” reaching more than 4 million households in 162,000 villages.44 These women generate an income of US$41–US$59 per month—double or triple the typical village income they would likely have earned without Shakti.45 The programme accounts for about 5 percent of Unilever’s total revenues in India.46

Outside of efforts to support and enhance the economic empowerment of women as employees and supply chain actors, companies can support and enhance the economic empowerment of women as customers and women in communities. This includes designing and offering products that meet women’s needs or that can reduce the unpaid work and care burden women face. Secondly, it includes supporting or launching campaigns and initiatives that promote gender equality and women’s economic empowerment (such as the aforementioned #LeanInTogether campaign). Ground-breaking campaigns launched by companies include “Like A Girl,” which was launched by Procter & Gamble in 2013 and opened up a mass-media dialogue for women to talk about everyday sexism. Another example is the #SharetheLoad television campaign in India, which in 2015 drew attention to the belief that laundry is exclusively a woman’s job. Third, companies can organize and fund socially responsible activities that empower women economically. For example, a number of tech companies support STEM education, including Google, IBM, and Mozilla. Cisco has a Women’s Action Network that organizes information technology events for young women, and has pledged that by 2020, 20 percent of its US staff will volunteer at least 20 hours annually to inspire students in STEM education.47 Initiatives elsewhere include the India-based education company, Robotix, which has a free programme called Indian Girls Code, focused on disadvantaged girls, and the US-based nonprofit Girls Who Code, which has enrolled more than 40,000 high-school girls in its summer immersion programme.49

Endnotes

1 Goldman Sachs, Japan: Portfolio Strategy, Womenomics 4.0: Time to Walk the Talk, May 2014.


14 http://www.cgtp.pt/cgtp-in/381


16 For more information on Unitive, please see http://www.unitive.works. For more information on Gapsquare, please see https://gapsquare.com.


19 European Trade Union Confederation. Working Time, Gender Equality, And Reconciling Work And Family Life. 2010.


21 Unguresan, A. (2016, August 5). Personal communication.

22 Unguresan, A. (2016, June 10). Personal communication.

23 EDGE generic presentation. EDGE Strategy.


26 Source: Better Work contribution to HLP Brown, Drusilla, Laura Babbitt, Elysee Voegeli, Rajeek Dehejia, Nitya Agrawal, Dirayati Djaya, Ana Antolin, Claire Sleigh, Tarek Makawi, Gabriel Rondon Ichikawa, Claire Schupmann, Shulin Jiang, Dana Kaufman, Janet Rubin, Avni

28 Bangladesh, Cambodia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Lesotho, Nicaragua and Vietnam

29 For more information on Behind the Brands, see http://www.behindthebrands.org/en-us.


37 Ernst & Young (2009). Scaling up: Why women-owned businesses can recharge the global economy. EY.


39 The checklist can be found at: https://weconnectinternational.org/images/supplier-inclusion/GoldStandard_Checklist_v1.pdf.


42 DFID case

43 Collective enterprises are enterprises with some links in the production-distribution cycle undertaken collectively: collective marketing of goods produced independently, collective production in joint workplaces with jointly owned equipment, collective purchasing of inputs, and/or collective negotiating of work orders.

44 Enhancing livelihoods through Project Shakti. HUL. Retrieved on August 21, 2016 from https://www.hul.co.in/sustainable-living/case-studies/enhancing-livelihoods-through-project-shakti.html; Unilever.


48 Please see http://www.robotixedu.com/socialinitiatives.aspx#igl

49 Please see https://girlswhocode.com/