
Preface

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Given the complexity of the world today and the economic, demographic, environmental and political transformations we face, we must commit to a new mindset, one that discards old prejudices and inertia and instead commits to new ideas and new solutions. Empowering and educating girls and women and leveraging their talent and leadership fully in the global economy, politics and society are fundamental elements of the new models required to succeed in today's challenging landscape.

The most important determinant of a country's competitiveness is its human talent—the skills, education and productivity of its workforce. Over time, a nation's competitiveness depends significantly on whether and how it utilizes its human resource pool. Furthermore, innovation requires unique ideas, and the best ideas thrive in a diverse environment. Countries and companies will thrive if women are educated and engaged as fundamental pillars of the economy, and diverse leadership is most likely to find innovative solutions to tackle the current economic challenges and to build equitable and sustainable growth. Governments play an important role in creating the right policy framework for improving women's education and economic participation. However, it is also the imperative of companies to create ecosystems where the best talent, both male and female, can flourish.

As the world population surpasses the seven billion mark, we are in the midst of history's most rapid demographic transformations. Countries are in various stages of demographic transition—while some are experiencing a youth bulge, others are rapidly shifting towards an ageing population. Women—in their multiple roles as workers, as caregivers, as mothers and as the majority of the world's older persons—are critical to making this transition a successful one. We must think with a new mindset about issues of family and fertility. We must also take into account the implications of a shrinking working-age population and consider how efficiently the female half of that population is being leveraged. Some of these issues touch upon the core of the social fabric. However, from both a rights perspective and an efficiency viewpoint, it is imperative that we address these topics.

Women have emerged as key civic leaders in the uprising that launched the Arab Spring. Their role must now be recognized by increasing gender equality in the political arena in that region and across the globe. In the world today, approximately 20 women serve as elected heads of state or government. At the ministerial and parliament levels, the global average is less than 20%. A system where women are not represented at the highest levels is both an

unequal and an inefficient system. We must design new measures to ensure that women are represented in political decision-making.

Through the *Global Gender Gap Report* series, the World Economic Forum has been quantifying the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracking their progress over time. By providing a comprehensive framework for benchmarking global gender gaps, the *Report* reveals those countries that are role models in dividing their resources equitably between women and men, regardless of the overall level of those resources. The *Report* is used by numerous universities, schools, researchers, media entities, businesses, governments and individuals as a tool for their work. In 2008, we launched our Global Gender Parity Group and Regional Gender Parity Groups in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. To date, these multi-stakeholder communities of highly influential leaders—50% women and 50% men—from business, politics, academia, media and civil society have jointly identified the biggest gaps in each region, and have collectively committed to strategies to improve and increase the use of female talent. In 2012, based on the work of this Group and to complement the gap analysis in the *Report*, we will release an online repository of information on practices that can help close economic participation gaps.

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Our research, and the network of influential leaders who work with the World Economic Forum, aim to be at the forefront of driving change in mindset and policy. The Global Gender Gap Index was created with the specific intent of being comparable across time. The 2011 *Report* aggregates six years of data and provides a snapshot of the situation today as well as the changes over time, revealing a positive trend as the majority of countries continue to make progress on closing the gender gap. It also provides unique new information on the policy frameworks that support women's economic participation. It is our hope that this *Report* will serve as a call to action to transform the pace of change on an issue that is fundamental to the growth and sustainability of the global economy and society.