

# United Nations Global Compact Leaders Summit 2020

## Breakout session: Target gender equality

The breakout session “#TargetGenderEquality - Pathways to Parity” took place on the first day of the two-day UN Global Compact Leaders Summit. The session specifically focused on the roles of women in businesses and the distribution of positions of power between genders. In many companies, the higher positions of influence and power have significantly fewer women employed. This phenomenon is not regional but in fact, can be found globally, thus speakers from all over the globe were invited to discuss the issue. Especially when it comes to positions on boards, there are barely any women placed in most companies. The session further aimed to set a light on the issue of female employment in the context of the Covid 19 crisis. The speakers discussed possible learning effects the situation could encourage for the future. It lastly also targeted female entrepreneurship and possible improvements of support systems for women in innovation.

As an opening statement speaker Nahla Valji, the Senior Gender Adviser to the UN Secretary-General, made very strong points concerning women in the Covid 19 crisis. She pointed out how especially in many key professions, female leadership in response to the difficult situation has been showcased. She emphasized the need for transformative leadership, in which power relations are being restructured. This includes the creation of policies that encourage positive change. She further emphasized the importance of keeping in mind the significance of sustainability and diversity. This diversity should not only be concerned with gender but should also consider other roots of discrimination.

In the session, it was emphasized that the outbreak of the coronavirus, while it has also shown female leadership in some fields, has on the big picture worsened current societal and financial disparities, particularly for women. While regardless of gender many are suffering from the economic consequences of the virus, pre-existing differences worsen the severity of the crisis' impact on women. Statistically, even before the crisis, women were generally more likely to suffer under poverty, made less money due to gender pay gaps and unpaid labour and were more likely to have temporary employment contracts.

Covid 19 demonstrates holes in our system. There has been an immense rise in domestic violence cases globally throughout this crisis. Additionally, working from home can have an impact on women's leadership positions. Women's unemployment has significantly risen since the beginning of the pandemic. Businesses need to make usage of this situation by learning to recognize and work on deficiencies.

Speaker Nabila Freidji, Leader of the AWLN Steering Committee and chair of AWLN Morocco addressed the issues concerning women during this difficult time and stated that: "The rate of women's unemployment has skyrocketed due to #COVID19: we are losing ground on gender equality. When businesses have to close or severely restrict their operations, it's women who have to leave first. This must change." Her strong and clear words underlined the severity of the matter. Many improvements that were made throughout the last years are now being lost in the turmoil of a global crisis and it is important to consciously work against this spiral.

On the panel, female entrepreneurs were another vital topic of discussion. In comparison to men, women are way less likely to start businesses and even if they do so, the businesses tend to be smaller and mainly focused on trade, rather than new innovations. It was pointed out that this is not based on women's disinterest in these fields but lacking support systems. Nobuo Tanaka, Chair of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation from Japan commented on this subject.

According to him women's potential and innovative ideas have long been ignored due to a lack of opportunities but also ignorance. He further emphasized that the world must have missed out on possible great discoveries, due to the obliviousness regarding females involvement in the past. The investment in women's high-level education and consideration of their inventions is efficient for our societies as a whole. For the future, it is thus important to ensure that everyone's potential is used to the fullest. As these types of measures are not just beneficial for the individual, Mr Tanaka highlighted how important male support in these issues is.

A factor that was underlined regarding firms that already have a good gender balance in their structures, was the importance of choosing business partners that are also trying to make a positive impact. Firms should ensure when cooperating with other firms, that those work on goals such as equality and diverse representation of people of different genders, as well as other factors such as being accessible for people with disabilities or being safe working environments for people of colour. Having these standards not only for the own business but instead also holding collaboration partners to high standards could motivate and encourage longlasting improvements.

When it comes to the issue of power positions, boards in companies should think about having maximum terms and age limits to help the cause of equality both concerning gender and young professionals. Women are often not asked to become board members or are significantly underrepresented. Statistically, women tend to become CEOs in their firms but are less likely to reach high positions when joining a company. It was stressed that not including women and young people in high-level positions is inefficient for businesses as diversity opens doors for different perspectives. There is a systematic underrepresentation of women in organizational structures. Businesses, therefore, must work through all layers of their structures. It will not be enough to just cause a change on the top nor just the bottom stages of a company. This topic was especially discussed in the comment section of the session, with many addressing the problem of the “unconscious bias”. The term describes the favouritism towards men in higher positions that doesn’t happen intentionally but instead is not deliberate. People in power position should therefore consciously try to work against their bias but also call out peers if unfair behaviour is observed.

Melsa Ararat, a professor at the Sabanci University in Turkey further held governments accountable. The key according to her is to tie businesses and governments in their goals to encourage action and policies in favour of gender equality. Participation by businesses in policymaking can balance a governments unwillingness or unawareness of gender matters. Further than businesses also educational institutions such as universities can take such actions, going one step ahead of their respective governments.

The general conclusion of the session was that men must be a part of the movement towards equality. The solution and advocacy on women’s rights issues will work most influentially with support and involvement from the whole of society. Women’s rights advocacy does not encourage the division between genders but instead walks towards a more equal and fair society. Companies need to have a strategy for employment, as well as management that is inclusive and efficient. The journey to achieve a balance between the genders needs more support. Leaders should invest more to tackle inequality, which will eventually pay off in favour of their businesses.

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