

## International Women's Day: A Gender Equal World? Debate on 10 March 2020

### Summary

International Women's Day (IWD) takes place on 8 March annually. For 2020, '#EachforEqual' is IWD's chosen theme. Its aim is to create a gender equal world. The United Nations (UN) theme is 'I am Generation Equality: Realising Women's Rights'.

This briefing discusses global gender inequality. It has been prepared in advance of the debate due to take place in the House of Lords on 10 March 2020 on the motion moved by Baroness Berridge, Minister for Women, to mark International Women's Day.

The briefing's key findings are:

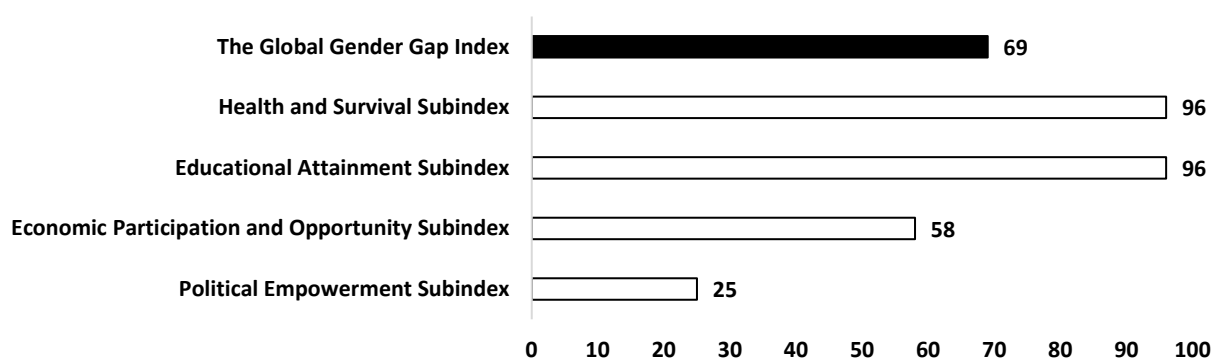
- **Average gender parity:** The World Economic Forum (WEF) has found that average gender parity of all areas has increased since 2019 and now stands at 68.6%. A further 99.5 years would be needed to close the gap, if trends continued.
- **Political empowerment:** Globally, women hold 25% of parliamentary seats and 21% of ministerial posts. Rwanda has more women than men in both its lower house of parliament (61% women) and its cabinet (52% women). In Europe, Sweden's parliament has 47.3% women MPs. Over half of Sweden's government ministers are women. In the UK Parliament, just over a third of MPs (34%) are women. Women hold 38 out of 114 UK ministerial posts (33%) and 6 out of 22 cabinet positions (27%).
- **Economic participation:** the WEF found that the number of women in senior roles had increased in 2019. However, women's participation in the labour market was "stalling". Additionally, over 40% of the wage gap and over 50% of the income gap was still to be bridged. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found the gender pay gap among all employees has decreased from 17.8% in 2018 to 17.3% in 2019. The gender pay gap remains higher for all employees (17.3%) than for each of full-time (8.9%) and part-time employees (-3.1%). The ONS attributes this to the number of women working part time. In addition, the ONS reports that from October to December 2019, the estimated employment rate for women was 72.4%, in comparison to 80.6% of men.
- **Educational attainment:** The WEF found that 96.1% of the gap in educational attainment across the world had been closed. In 35 countries gender parity had been achieved. In the UK, enrolment in primary and secondary education was about equal for both genders. Slightly more women (57%) enrol in higher education than men (43%).
- **Health and survival:** The WEF found 95.7% of the global gender gap has closed, though no country is yet to reach full parity. 48 countries have achieved near-parity, with the next 71 countries having closed at least 97% of the gap. The UK's global ranking for health and survival for 2019 was 112th in the world, falling from 63rd in 2018. The UK is 0.03% from achieving full parity in the health and survival sub index. Women in the UK have a higher life expectancy than men.

## Statistics on Global Gender Inequality

Since 2006, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has published a *Global Gender Gap Report*. This report looks at politics, economics, education and health. The WEF's 2020 report found that average gender parity of all areas had increased since 2019 and now stands at 68.6%.<sup>1</sup> It said that, if current trends continue, the overall gender gap will close in 99.5 years.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the gender gap closed at the time of the report's publication in 2019, across the four sub-indexes which comprise the Gender Gap Index 2020. They are economic participation; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment.

**Figure 1: Percentage of the Gender Gap Closed to Date, Rounded, 2020<sup>3</sup>**



### Political Empowerment

Political empowerment has furthest to go to close its gender gap. Globally, women hold 25% of parliamentary seats and 21% of ministerial posts.<sup>4</sup>

Worldwide, Rwanda has more women than men in both its lower house of parliament (61% women) and its cabinet (52% women). In Europe, Sweden has the highest number of women in its parliament (47.3%). Over half (54%) of Sweden's government ministers are women (12 out of its 22).<sup>5</sup> In the UK Parliament, there are 220 female MPs (34%).<sup>6</sup> Women hold 38 out of 114 ministerial posts (33%) and six women hold cabinet positions (27%).<sup>7</sup>

Parliaments across the world have implemented different initiatives to increase representation. These include: legislated candidate quotas; reserved seats in parliaments for women; and the voluntary introduction of quotas by parliamentary parties.

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#), 16 December 2019, p 5.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p 6.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p 10. The chart on page 10 gives the figure as 97% but throughout the report, the health and survival gap closed is listed as 95.7% (rounded to 96%).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p 5.

<sup>5</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Percentage of Women in National Parliaments](#), accessed 4 February 2020. Note: all ministers are invited to attend cabinet.

<sup>6</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, [United Kingdom–House of Commons](#), accessed 4 February 2020.

<sup>7</sup> UK Government website, [Ministers](#), accessed 4 February 2020.

## Voluntary Party Quotas

In the UK, the Labour Party uses all-women shortlists within its candidate selection process. Under this process, female candidates are selected to run on behalf of the party in half of all “winnable” seats in an election, which are seats within a 10% swing.<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the outcome of the 2017 election, researchers have directly linked Labour’s use of all-women shortlists with the increase in the party’s female MPs.<sup>9</sup>

Labour first used an all-women shortlist in the 1997 election. Prior to the election, an industrial tribunal ruled the party’s use of such lists to be illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The tribunal judged the lists to be discriminatory against men. In 2002, the Labour Government passed the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates Act) 2002, which made it legal for political parties to use positive discrimination in the selection of candidates. Initially, this policy was due to last until 2015, but it was subsequently extended up to 2030 by the Equality Act 2010. Consequently, Labour has used all-women shortlists in every election since 2005.<sup>10</sup>

Other countries with parties that have adopted voluntary quota systems include: the Australian Labor Party; the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, the Green Party, and the Moderate Party in Sweden; and Namibia’s South West Africa People’s Organisation.<sup>11</sup>

## Electoral Law

In France, electoral law specifies that parties must put forward an equal number of male and female candidates for elections to both the National Assembly, currently 40% women, and the Senate, currently 32% women. Failure to present a gender equal list results in financial sanctions for the party, in the form of reductions to its public funding. French law requires a gender balance throughout the list to prevent female candidates in Senate elections being placed at the end. This law was introduced in 1999.<sup>12</sup>

Researchers have found that whilst the introduction of the law had an impact on the number of women elected to begin with, this has since stagnated.<sup>13</sup> They also argue that the law is adhered to unequally across political parties in France. For example, smaller parties, such as the Greens or the National Front, are more likely to follow the rules as they are reliant on public funding to run their campaigns. In contrast, Les Républicains, one of the bigger parties, was sanctioned €6 million of public funding between 2012 and 2017 for failing to reach gender parity in its party candidate lists.<sup>14</sup> The researchers argue that the threat of sanctions is therefore not enough to force bigger parties to aim for gender parity.<sup>15</sup> Other countries with legislative candidate quotas include Spain, Angola and Poland.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Peter Edwards, ‘[Nearly 50 of Labour’s Top Target Seats Will Use All-Women Shortlists](#)’, 21 September 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Childs et al, ‘[Women and the 2017 Parliament: Scratching, Rather Than Smashing the Glass Ceiling](#)’, LSE British Politics and Policy Blog, 14 June 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Elliot Chappell, ‘[51% of Labour MPs Are Women. What Now for All-Women Shortlists?](#)’, LabourList, 31 December 2019.

<sup>11</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, ‘[Gender Quotas Around the World](#)’, accessed 4 February 2020.

<sup>12</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, ‘[Gender Quotas Database: France](#)’, accessed 4 February 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Ragnhild L Muriaas et al (eds), *Gendered Electoral Financing*, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, ‘[Gender Quotas Around the World](#)’, accessed 4 February 2020.

## Reserved Seats

In the unicameral Kosovan Parliament (currently made up of 33% women), 30% of seats are reserved for women. In each of the political parties' lists, at least 30% of candidates must be male and 30% female. Following the allocation of seats after an election, if 30% of a party's seats are not allocated to women, a female candidate replaces the last elected male candidate until 30% is reached.<sup>17</sup> Researchers from the Utica College Center of Public Affairs and Election Research believe the reservation of seats for women has had a limited impact on the representation of women in politics in Kosovo, as the number of women in ministerial roles is still under 10%.<sup>18</sup> Other countries with reserved seat systems include Zimbabwe, Somalia and Algeria.<sup>19</sup>

## Economic Participation

The WEF's 2020 report found that the number of women in senior roles had increased in 2019. The WEF's findings revealed that in 2019, 36% of senior private managers and public sector officials were women, which is an increase of approximately 2% higher than reported in 2018.<sup>20</sup> However, the WEF contends that women's participation in the labour market is "stalling", with financial disparities between men and women "slightly larger".<sup>21</sup> On average, only 55% of adult women are in the labour market, in comparison to 78% of men. In addition, over 40% of the wage gap (the ratio of the wage of a woman to that of a man in a similar position) and over 50% of the income gap (the ratio of the total wage and non-wage income of women to that of men) are "still to be bridged".<sup>22</sup>

In its annual benchmarking report on the number of women executive directors on the corporate boards of the UK's top 100 companies, researchers at Cranfield University found that in June 2019, 32.1% of FTSE100 directorships and 27.3% of FTSE250 directorships were held by women.<sup>23</sup>

In its latest statistical bulletin on employment in the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports that from October to December 2019, the estimated employment rate for women was a "record high" of 72.4%, in comparison to 80.6% of men.<sup>24</sup> In addition, using data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, the ONS reports on the differences in pay between women and men. In 2019, the ONS found that the gender pay gap among all employees had decreased from 17.8% in 2018 to 17.3% in 2019. Despite this, the ONS notes that the gender pay gap remains higher for all employees (17.3%) than for each of full-time (8.9%) and part-time employees (-3.1%). The ONS says this is because women fill more part-time jobs, which have lower hourly median pay compared to full-time jobs, and are more likely to be in lower-paid occupations.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, '[Gender Quotas Database: Kosovo](#)', accessed 4 February 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Rrezart Dema and Aldisa Morina, '[Kosovo Highlights Limited Impact of Mandatory Quotas for Women in Government](#)', Utica College Center of Public Affairs and Election Research, 5 September 2017.

<sup>19</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, '[Gender Quotas Around the World](#)', accessed 4 February 2020.

<sup>20</sup> World Economic Forum, '[Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#)', 3 January 2020, p 5.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Cranfield University, '[The Female FTSE Board Report 2019](#)', June 2019, p 6.

<sup>24</sup> Office for National Statistics, '[Labour Market Overview, UK: February 2020](#)', 18 February 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Office for National Statistics, '[Gender Pay Gap in the UK: 2019](#)', 29 October 2019.

## **Educational Attainment**

WEF figures show 96.1% of the gap in educational attainment across the world has been closed. Its report states that educational attainment gaps are “relatively small on average”, and in 35 countries gender parity has been achieved.<sup>26</sup> Overall, 10% of girls aged 15–24 are illiterate, and this is mainly concentrated in developing countries. Both girls and boys have low levels of literacy in these countries.<sup>27</sup>

The WEF found that the UK has a literacy rate of 99%, amongst both male and female citizens. Its report showed that enrolment in primary and secondary education was about equal for both genders (99% in primary and 97% in secondary). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics show slightly more females (57%) enrolled in higher education than men (43%) in 2018/19. This has been the case since at least academic year 2014/15.

In the Queen’s Speech of December 2019, the Government committed to help provide twelve years of quality education for all girls globally by 2030.<sup>28</sup> This commitment, referred to as the Platform for Girls’ Education, was first introduced in 2018 by then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.<sup>29</sup> The Platform is due to report on its progress at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, which will be held in Rwanda in June 2020.<sup>30</sup>

## **Health and Survival**

The WEF found that 95.7% of the global gender gap had been closed at the time of the report’s publication. Despite this, the WEF found that no country was yet to reach full parity. In addition, 48 countries had achieved near-parity, with the next 71 countries having closed at least 97% of the gap. The WEF also notes that only nine countries have yet to close more than 4% of their gap. This includes Pakistan (94.6%), India (94.4%) and China (92.6%).<sup>31</sup> In terms of life expectancy, the WEF reports that parity has also been essentially achieved in all countries, with women living longer than men in all countries, except for Bahrain, Bhutan and Kuwait, where the ratio is above 99%.<sup>32</sup>

The UK’s global ranking for health and survival for 2019 was 112th in the world, falling from 63rd in 2018. Despite this, the UK is 0.03% from achieving full parity in the health and survival sub index. The UK has achieved parity for life expectancy. Women (72.9 years) had a higher life expectancy than men (70.9 years) in 2019.<sup>33</sup>

## **International Women’s Day 2020**

International Women’s Day (IWD) takes place on 8 March annually. According to the IWD website, the day is not country, group or organisation specific and belongs to all groups collectively everywhere. The website states that IWD is a “global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women”. In addition, the day marks a “call to action for accelerating women’s equality”.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>26</sup> World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#), 3 January 2020, p 5.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p 5.

<sup>28</sup> Prime Minister's Office, [Queen's Speech December 2019: Background Briefing Notes](#), 19 December 2019, p 9.

<sup>29</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary Launches Platform for Girls' Education](#), 20 April 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary Hosts First Platform for Girls' Education Meeting](#), 27 September 2018.

<sup>31</sup> World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#), 3 January 2020, p 14.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p 15.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p 351.

<sup>34</sup> International Women’s Day website, [About International Women’s Day](#), accessed 27 February 2020.

Every year, both the UN and the IWD website adopt an annual theme for IWD. For 2020, the IWD website announced the hashtag ‘#EachforEqual’<sup>35</sup> as its theme with the aim to create a gender equal world. The IWD website states that to achieve this, individuals can:

Actively choose to challenge stereotypes, fight bias, broaden perceptions, improve situations, and celebrate women's achievements.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, the UN theme for 2020 is ‘I am Generation Equality: Realising Women’s Rights’. The theme aligns with UN Women’s new campaign, Generation Equality, which marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. The Beijing Declaration set out strategic objectives to achieve gender equality in 12 areas, including women in power and the economy.<sup>37</sup> UN Women describes the Beijing Declaration as “the most progressive roadmap for the empowerment of women and girls, everywhere”.<sup>38</sup>

### **Origins and Observance of International Women’s Day**

IWD has been observed since the early 1900s, emerging because of labour movements in both North America and Europe. In 1908, approximately 15,000 women marched through New York to demand shorter working hours, better pay and voting rights. In 1910, at the second International Conference of Working Women held in Copenhagen, Clara Zetkin (the then leader of the Women’s Office for the Social Democratic Party in Germany), proposed the idea of an IWD. Conference attendees, comprising over 100 women from 17 countries, approved the idea. In the following year, Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland honoured IWD for the first time on 19 March.<sup>39</sup>

In 1913, on the eve of World War One, Russian women campaigning for peace observed their first IWD on the last Sunday in February 1913. The decision was then made to observe IWD on 8 March, with this date remaining the global date ever since.<sup>40</sup>

In 1975, the UN celebrated IWD for the first time. Two years later, in December 1977, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 32/142 proclaiming a UN Day for Women’s Rights and International Peace to be observed on any day of the year by member states, in accordance with their historical and national traditions.

In 2001, the IWD digital hub was launched to “celebrate the successful achievements of women and to continue calls for accelerating gender parity”.<sup>41</sup> As part of this, the digital hub adopts an annual campaign theme, which provides a framework for IWD activity and events. Today, many countries across the world celebrate IWD. According to the UN website, it is a day when women are “recognised for their achievements without regard to divisions”, such as national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic or political.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> [Oxford English Dictionary](#) definition of ‘hashtag’: On social media websites and applications: a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#) and used to identify messages relating to a specific topic.

<sup>36</sup> International Women’s Day website, ‘[Theme](#)’, accessed 27 February 2020.

<sup>37</sup> European Parliament, ‘[International Women’s Day 2020: 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration](#)’, 28 February 2020.

<sup>38</sup> UN Women, ‘[International Women’s Day 2020 Theme—“I am Generation Equality: Realising Women’s Rights”](#)’, 11 December 2019.

<sup>39</sup> International Women’s Day website, ‘[About International Women’s Day](#)’, accessed 27 February 2020.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> United Nations, ‘[International Women’s Day 8 March: History of Women’s Day](#)’, accessed 2 March 2020.