

Under a magnifying glass: FLFP



Dr. Pricilla D. Lilly Allen, Associate Professor, Louisiana State University School of Social Work (USA).

APO Secretariat Information & Public Relations Officer Yumiko Yamashita attended the conference described below. Her regular work tasks were then accomplished after hours, a situation most working mothers are all too familiar with. First-hand experience of the issues covered lends an extra dimension to her report.

As a mother, wife, and working woman, discussions of female labor force participation (FLFP) hit close to home. Every day may feel like a battle, but I am not alone. Many women before me and many now worldwide face the same struggle. Why is FLFP still problematic? Productivity means maximizing the potential of every resource available to achieve the best outcome possible. FLFP remains an issue because half of the available resources, their energy, and talents are not being used fully as women still seek equitable labor opportunities and benefits.

Of women, for women, by women?

Attending the conference on Female Workforce Participation and Productivity Enhancement, held at the APO Secretariat, 5–7 April, was professional and personal. It was an attempt to seek assurance that my challenges as a working mother are real but not unique. The conference, supported by the

Government of Japan, brought together 25 delegates from 17 APO member economies to discuss how to empower women and use their talents in the labor force for accelerating regional development.

With three exceptions, the conference room was filled with women. It was a striking scene, not only for the riot of color provided by traditional national dress but also because APO projects often attract mainly male participants. Several delegates wondered, “Where are the men? Is FLFP only an issue of discussion for women? Do the challenges posed affect only women and their contributions to the labor market?”

Missing pieces of the puzzle

The conference was held in conjunction with the ongoing APO research project on Aging Societies and Gender Mainstreaming in Human Capital Development to examine the current status of FLFP in the region and collect best practices on empowering working women for their more active participation in the economic activities of aging societies. Chief Expert Professor Arup Mitra, Department of Economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University Enclave, introduced public policy initiatives of APO members to help women take advantage of employment opportunities. To my



Professor Arup Mitra, Department of Economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University Enclave (India).

surprise, the collection of policies, laws, and schemes to promote gender equality in the workplace is vast. Some pieces of the puzzle remain missing, however. Lack of political coordination and supervision and problems in implementation are some vital missing pieces.

Who is the breadwinner?

Our notions of gender and what is “appropriate” for each are more engrained than we realize. “Sex is a biological concept. Gender is a social construct,” noted Dr. Pricilla D. Lilly Allen, Associate Professor, Louisiana State University School of Social Work. She suggested that the ties and tangles of gender affect how labor is defined, citing how certain occupations are assigned to one or the other. Dr. Allen used examples from the USA to show how gender can create occupational segregation, resulting in wage and income gaps between working men and women. Many participants agreed that precluded notions of gender existed in their communities in divisions of labor at work and home, where women are automatically given the roles of homemaker and childcarer.

Dr. Machiko Osawa, Director, Research Institute for Women and Careers, Japan Women’s University, emphasized how gender-related concepts impact work quality. Her data

showed that a significant proportion of female university graduates left the workforce because of job dissatisfaction. Calling this “a waste of female talent,” she pointed to the reluctance of employers in Japan to maximize the talents of female employees who may leave to have children. Women are not motivated enough because their employers do not invest in their training and in the end are made to feel as if they are at a dead end at work. Is it possible that our basic notions of gender actually hinder the ability to identify the right talent in the right people for the right job?

Your time is your bond

A major difficulty for full-time working mothers/wives is meeting the demand of “being there,” at home or at work. Dr. Hiroyuki Fujimura, Hosei University Business School of Innovation Management, discussed how “membership-based appointment” remained prevalent in Japan, whereby employees gain job and income security, as well as social and family support, for being “members.” They are then expected to work long hours and be “available” at all times. Several participants noted similar social expectations of time-based work commitment. They pointed out the need to introduce more flexible styles, including part-time and work-from-home arrangements.

The issue of providing an appropriate labor environment

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Dr. Machiko Osawa, Director, Research Institute for Women and Careers, Japan Women’s University (Japan).



Dr. Ramani Sonali Gunatilaka, Consultant (Sri Lanka).

was raised by Dr. Ramani Sonali Gunatilaka, consultant and economist from Sri Lanka. She noted the surprisingly low FLFP rate in her country, despite its relatively high economic growth and high women's education levels. Both the lack of investment in skill training and absence of infrastructure to allow different working styles, such as safe nighttime transportation, appropriate telecommunications facilities for remote-work arrangements, and legislation for part-time work, were the reasons, she suggested. While these solutions would allow women to contribute more at both work and home, men would also benefit from such flexibility and support.

Making the invisible visible

Among many factors that affect females in the labor force, Dr. Lin Lean Lim, consultant from Malaysia and former ILO officer, explained that, uniquely, a high percentage of economic activities in the

region occurs in the informal sector, with no social or labor protection, where women are often dominant. Dr. Lin stressed the importance of empowering those workers, as they are often not included in national statistics and are especially vulnerable to social and economic disincentives. Many women work as street vendors, waste pickers, or domestic staff, although the informal sector includes men, especially in agriculture. Dr. Lin emphasized the importance of the creation of "decent work" in productive jobs for women, and that the issue of FLFP is not only about the quantity but also the quality of jobs done by women.

Cleaning up the mess

The two-and-a-half-day conference showed why FLFP is important for productivity. Meanwhile, I wonder whether FLFP involves basic labor, social, and economic issues previously taken for granted and whether they affect men equally. Could the challenges I face as a working woman, wife, and mother in balancing work and home not also be experienced by a working man if he had equal responsibilities of being a husband and father? Writer/screenwriter/director Nora Ephron said, "The women's movement may manage to clean up the mess in society, but I don't know if it can clean up the mess in our minds." The conference may have raised more questions than answers, but a productive journey begins with the right questions. This conference "decluttered" the FLFP discussion by showing that obstacles in work and lifestyles, social norms, and legislative limitations affect everyone. As one conference participant commented, "Perhaps the next conference on FLFP should be attended by men." 🌀



(L-R) Dr. Hiroyuki Fujimura, Hosei University Business School of Innovation Management (Japan), Dr. Lin Lean Lim, Consultant (Malaysia).