When women win, we all win

When women achieve economic empowerment, everyone benefits – so it’s time to tackle the deep structures underlying gender inequality. By Randall S Peterson

The evidence is clear: businesses that work to foster women’s success (as well as men’s) have been shown to significantly outperform those that don’t. And it’s not just organisations. When the number of women working increases, entire economies grow.

The United Nations estimates that the productivity gains, the increases in economic diversification and the enhanced income equality that come with female economic empowerment would translate into GDP growth of more than US$6 trillion (£4.77 trillion) will make the OECD countries if it could only match female employment levels in the likes of Sweden. On the flip side, gender gaps are estimated to still cost OECD economies a very significant 18% of GDP.

In these economies, populations have seen their health benefits, with women generally owning to lower life expectancy. While the very top and bottom percentiles may have benefited, some, but not so good for many.

Globalisation has been good for, and an even greater concentration of economic benefits we can reap, what other obstacles mean that they are seizing it from another. There isn’t a finite number of opportunities for which we all must compete. When one person seizes an opportunity, it doesn’t mean that they are seizing it from another. On the contrary: when we share opportunity, we grow.

Put simply, losses loom larger than gains. We’re more loss-averse than we are open to taking risks that will benefit us.

And when you feel like your prospects are under threat, or opportunities are tapering off, that can translate all too easily into a fear of losing out to others – including women.

But, in reality, the world is not a fixed pie. There isn’t a finite number of opportunities for which we all must compete. When one person seizes an opportunity, it doesn’t mean that they are seizing it from another. On the contrary: when we share opportunity, we grow.

The real risks are in not sharing the opportunities with others. Business only stands to lose in not empowering women. And if women have no skin in the game, if they are not given the same chances to grow and prosper as men, they have less opportunity to engage, lose opportunity to contribute.

The success of any economic system is contingent on the economic stability of all of its parts. And when women win, we all win.

Research by the OECD finds that boys win, men win too. And it starts early.

When women win, men’s) have been painstakingly demonstrated? Why is it that in 40% of the world’s economies, early-stage entrepreneurship among women is 50% less than men? Why are women paid at least 30% less than their male counterparts around the world? And why are only 8% of Fortune 500 CEOs women?

The answer, I think, lies in the deeply entrenched mechanisms and structures that inherently favour men through the male work cycle.

Studies have looked at the lifespan of men’s engagement with work versus the other things in their life. We know that men tend to kick off their working life on an upward trajectory, peaking in their 30s and starting to drop off by the time they hit their 50s. Women, on the other hand, peak earlier. Then they hit a trough, mainly because of a disproportionate responsibility for childcare. Women’s engagement with work goes back up again later, with their earning power peaking towards the end of their career. But the majority of promotions and leadership appointments are made when people are in their late 30s – right at women’s lowest point of engagement and when men are at their peak.

If we are serious about addressing gender inequality, we need to think very differently about these deeply entrenched systems. We need to be prepared to take risks and actively pursue concrete steps to produce outcomes that favour everyone.

Women achieve economic empowerment, everyone benefits – so it’s time to tackle the deep structures underlying gender inequality. By Randall S Peterson