

Women, work and the population puzzle

Gender-sensitive responses to demographic change

OECD Public Governance Policy Papers No. 80



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Abstract

Population ageing is transforming economies and societies across many OECD countries, including those in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe. At the same time, persistent inequalities in paid and unpaid work continue to limit women's full participation in the labour market, undermining growth, productivity, and countries' capacity to respond to demographic change. This policy paper examines how low fertility, longer life expectancy, and rising care needs intersect with gaps in employment, earnings, and caregiving. Drawing on international evidence and country experiences, the paper highlights how gender-blind demographic strategies can inadvertently reinforce inequalities, reduce policy effectiveness, and miss opportunities to strengthen care systems, labour supply, and healthy ageing. It identifies how governments can design more effective demographic responses by integrating equality considerations into labour market, care, health, and social protection reforms. It also outlines the institutional capacities needed to support whole-of-government action, from budgeting to data systems and impact assessments.

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	4
Executive summary	6
1 Introduction: Gender equality and demographic shifts	7
2 The challenges of population ageing	8
3 Policy levers and the role of government: Gender-sensitive approaches to population ageing	16
4 The Way Forward	23
References	25

Figures

Figure 2.1. Fertility rates have halved, on average across the OECD, since 1960	8
Figure 2.2. The demographic old-age to working-age ratio is increasing at a fast pace	9
Figure 2.3. Demographic trends are projected to produce a dramatic slowdown of GDP per capita growth	10
Figure 2.4. Women participate in the labour market less than men throughout the OECD	11
Figure 2.5. Gains in economic growth from closing gender participation and working hours gaps	12
Figure 2.6. Women are more likely to have completed tertiary education than men	13
Figure 2.7. Many older individuals have daily caregiving responsibilities, and the burden of caregiving largely falls on women	14
Figure 3.1. Increasing women's labour force participation, better use of technology, and more full-time work are the preferred measures to address population ageing and worker shortages	18

Boxes

Box 3.1. Australia's approach to advancing gender equality through wage reform in the care sector	20
Box 3.2. Korea's approach to tackling the challenges of low fertility and population ageing	21
Box 3.3. Chile's approach to embedding gender mainstreaming in the implementation of ageing and workforce policies	22

Executive summary

OECD and APEC economies are navigating profound demographic shifts marked by rapidly ageing populations and mounting pressures on labour markets and social protection systems. These trends threaten long-term economic growth, strain pension and health systems, and exacerbate existing workforce shortages. At the same time, persistent gender inequalities – including gaps in labour force participation, working hours, unpaid caregiving, leadership representation, and pay – limit countries' ability to mitigate demographic decline. Despite women now surpassing men in educational attainment in most OECD countries, their labour market participation lags, due to structural barriers, gender norms, and the unequal distribution of unpaid care work. Closing gender gaps could generate considerable economic gains, with OECD projections showing substantial boosts to GDP growth if women's participation and working hours converged with men's.

Harnessing women's full economic potential is therefore one of the most powerful levers available to governments confronting demographic change. Targeted policy action – including expanding access to affordable childcare, strengthening parental leave for both mothers and fathers, redesigning workplaces to support flexibility, and improving pay and conditions in the care economy – can significantly reduce barriers to women's employment. Equally essential are systemic approaches such as gender mainstreaming, gender impact assessments, and gender budgeting, which ensure that demographic policy reforms do not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. Evidence from countries including Australia, Korea, and Chile demonstrates that gender-responsive reforms in areas such as care-sector wage-setting, parental leave, and the integration of gender analysis into national ageing strategies can strengthen labour markets, improve equity, and enhance policy effectiveness.

A gender-sensitive approach to demographic policy is not only fairer, it is more effective. Aligning gender equality and demographic priorities can enable governments to address labour shortages, improve productivity, and build resilient, inclusive societies capable of thriving amidst demographic transition. This requires co-ordinated, whole-of-government action; high-quality, gender-disaggregated data; and sustained investment in care systems, workforce development, and healthy ageing. Countries can transform current challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth, and stronger, more equitable economies by embedding gender equality in demographic strategies.

1 Introduction: Gender equality and demographic shifts

OECD countries are facing simultaneous “megatrends,” including the climate transition, technological change, and demographic shifts. Although increases in life expectancy and healthy ageing represent a historic success of public health and social protection systems, population ageing has the potential to negatively affect many OECD countries, including those in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe. Population ageing is the result of relatively low (and declining or stagnant) fertility rates, delayed childbearing, and longer life expectancy – with harmful implications for economic growth, competitiveness and the sustainability of social protection programmes like pensions and healthcare systems (OECD, 2024^[1]) (OECD, forthcoming^[2]). These demographic shifts are occurring at the same time as a declining trend in productivity growth in developed economies (OECD, 2024^[3]), and reforms to encourage longer working lives do not always reach fruition.

Population ageing-induced worker shortages are worsened by persistent gender gaps in education, employment, entrepreneurship, and public life (OECD, 2023^[4]). Women are less likely to be employed, are less likely to work full-time, and earn less, on average, than men in every OECD country (OECD, 2023^[4]). Given that young women’s educational attainment now exceeds that of young men’s, women’s weaker labour force attachment – at both the intensive and extensive margins – represents serious lost potential for economies and societies (OECD, 2025^[5]). And as population ageing strains health systems, the (potential) movement of more women into typically “feminized” caregiving jobs also risks further entrenching longstanding gender gaps in pay and job quality.

Women and girls are critical to navigating the multitude of societal, economic, and environmental transitions facing APEC and OECD countries. Indeed, women’s empowerment may be the greatest lever to revitalising societies and economies. OECD estimates show that closing gender gaps in labour force participation and working hours could increase annual growth by an average of 0.23 percentage points across the OECD by 2060 (OECD, 2023^[4]).

How can governments simultaneously tackle demographics challenges while also promoting gender equality via women’s economic empowerment? The first part of the paper analyses the challenges of population ageing in the OECD and associated implications for societies and economies. It sheds light on gender equality factors that have significant potential for helping to address the challenges of population ageing.

The second part then explores the risks to economies and societies of failing to consider gender equality policy as part of demographic policy reforms. It highlights how key policy levers and implementation strategies can help tackle these pressing social and economic challenges, emphasising how targeted and combined policies and gender mainstreaming mechanisms can best support strategic, holistic and gender-sensitive responses.

2 The challenges of population ageing

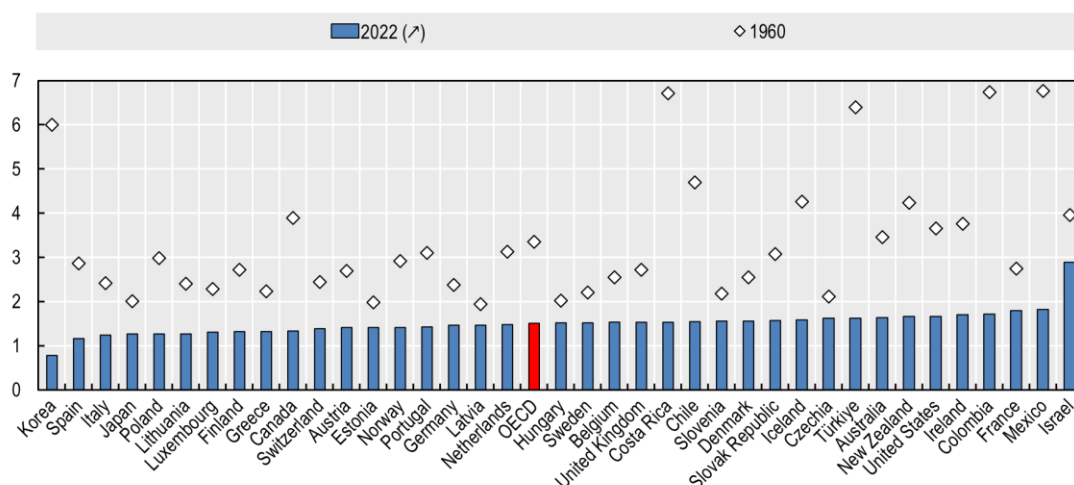
Most OECD member countries are experiencing population ageing (OECD, 2024^[1]). Population ageing is characterized by relatively low (and declining or stagnant) fertility rates; delayed childbearing in relation to historical trends; and high life expectancy.

Fertility rates have been declining across OECD countries in recent decades. In 1960, the OECD average total fertility rate was 3.3 children per woman, more than double the current level of 1.5 (Figure 2.1) (OECD, 2024^[1]). The sharpest decline occurred between 1960 and 2000, when the rate dropped from 3.3 to 1.7, followed by a slower decline to 1.59 in 2022 (OECD, 2024^[6]). Projections suggest this below-replacement level will persist for decades (OECD, 2023^[7]). These low fertility rates reflect changing lifestyle preferences, family formation patterns, and everyday constraints such as labour market insecurity, difficulties in finding housing, and lack of affordable childcare (OECD, 2024^[1]).

Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the OECD, with on average 0.8 births per women in 2022, followed by Japan and Canada, both with 1.3. Other APEC and OECD members include Australia with a rate of 1.6, and New Zealand and the United States with 1.7 each in the 2022. Mexico and Chile had fertility rates of 1.8 and 1.5, respectively, in 2021 (OECD, 2024^[6]).

Figure 2.1. Fertility rates have halved, on average across the OECD, since 1960

Total fertility rates, 1960 and 2022



Note: 2021 instead of 2022 for Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and the United Kingdom

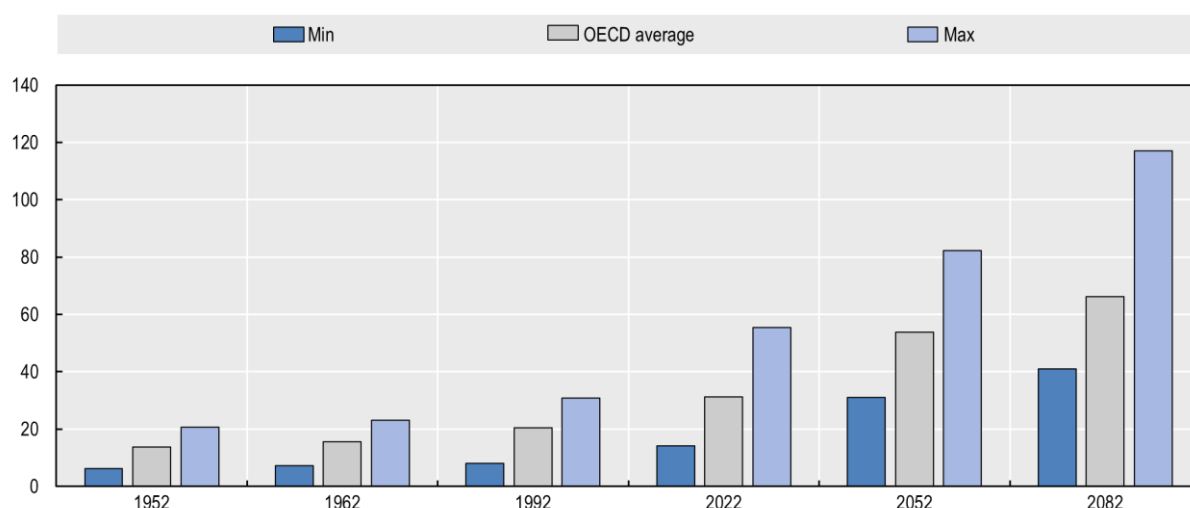
Source: (OECD, 2024^[6]), Society at a Glance: OECD Social Indicators, <https://doi.org/10.1787/918d8db3-en>.

Population ageing also implies an increase in the old-age to working-age ratios – in other words, a growing number of people in retirement relative to the number of people in work. In some countries, the rise in the old-age to working-age ratio has been quite sharp.

On average across all OECD countries, the old-age to working-age ratio increased rapidly since the early 1990s, from 20.4 people aged 65+ per 100 aged 20-64 in 1992 up to 31.3 older people per 100 aged 20-64 in 2022 (OECD, 2023^[7]). This pace is projected to accelerate, with the ratio expected to reach 53.8 by 2052 (Figure 2.2) (OECD, 2024^[1]).

Figure 2.2. The demographic old-age to working-age ratio is increasing at a fast pace

Number of individuals aged 65 and over per 100 people aged between 20 and 64



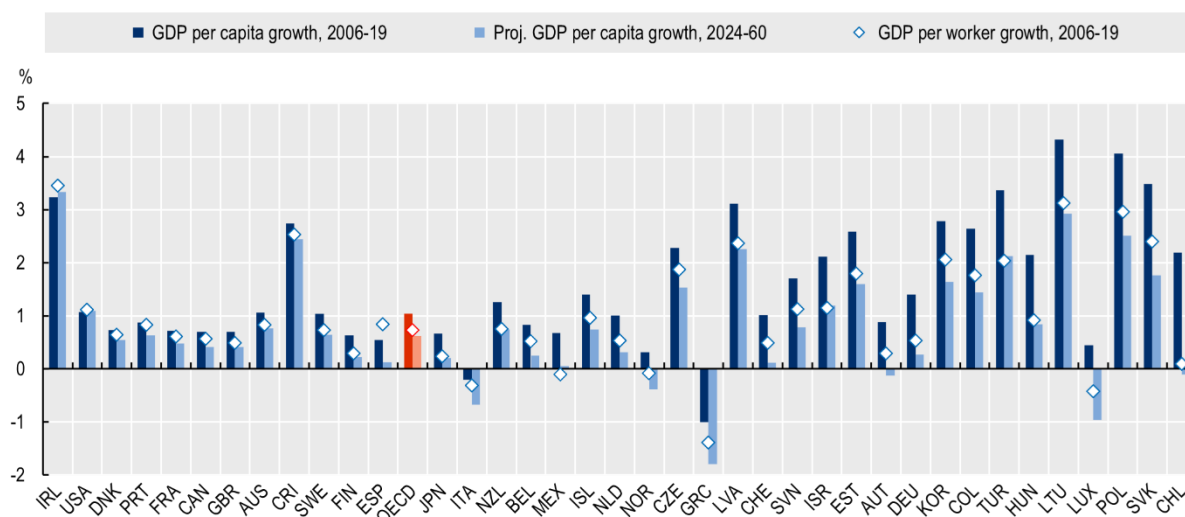
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (United Nations, 2022^[8]), *World Population Prospects 2022*, Online Edition (for future periods: medium-variant forecast).

While all countries are expected to see an increase in the proportion of individuals aged 65 and over, about two-thirds of OECD countries are projected to experience an average 11% decline in the working-age population (aged 20 to 64) over the next 40 years. Korea is expected to have the largest decrease, with a 49% decline in its working-age population (OECD, 2024^[1]). These population size declines are contributing to labour shortages in many countries, carrying serious implications for economic growth, competitiveness and the sustainability of social protection programmes like pensions and healthcare (OECD, 2024^[1]); (OECD, 2024^[6]) (OECD, 2023^[9]) (Burgalassi and Matsumoto, 2024^[10]).

If the growth rate of labour productivity (GDP per person employed) remains approximately constant¹, the contraction of the employment-to-population ratio, in percentage terms, translates into an equal percentage effect on GDP per capita. Figure 2.3 shows that if productivity growth rate over the next quarter of a century is set at the level observed in 2006-19², the baseline scenario suggests that GDP per capita growth in the OECD area will be reduced by around 40%, falling from 1.0% per year in 2006-19 to an average of 0.6% per year in the period 2024-60. In other words, by 2060, GDP per capita in the OECD will be 14% lower than what would occur if labour input continued to grow at the same rate as during the previous business cycle. Among APEC and OECD member countries, most are expected to experience a decline in GDP per capita growth from 2006-19 to 2024-60. The largest declines are projected for Chile, where the GDP per capita growth is projected to fall from 2.19% per year in 2006-19 to -0.11% per year in 2024-60, followed by Mexico (0.67% to 0.05%), Japan (0.66% to 0.20%), New Zealand (1.26% to 0.73%), Korea (2.78% to 1.64%), Canada (0.69% to 0.41%), and (Australia 1.06% to 0.77%). The United States is expected to see a slight increase from 1.07% to 1.09% (OECD, 2025^[11]).

Figure 2.3. Demographic trends are projected to produce a dramatic slowdown of GDP per capita growth

Recent and projected annual GDP per capita growth, baseline scenario, percentages



Notes: Projected real GDP per capita growth obtained assuming the same growth of GDP per worker as in 2006-19 and the baseline projection scenario for the employment-to-population ratio. Countries ordered by the size of the average projected growth slowdown between 2006-19 and 2024-60. 2006-18 for Australia, 2013-19 for Chile, 2015-19 for Colombia and 2007-19 for Korea instead of 2006-19. OECD: Weighted average of OECD countries. GDP: Gross Domestic Product.

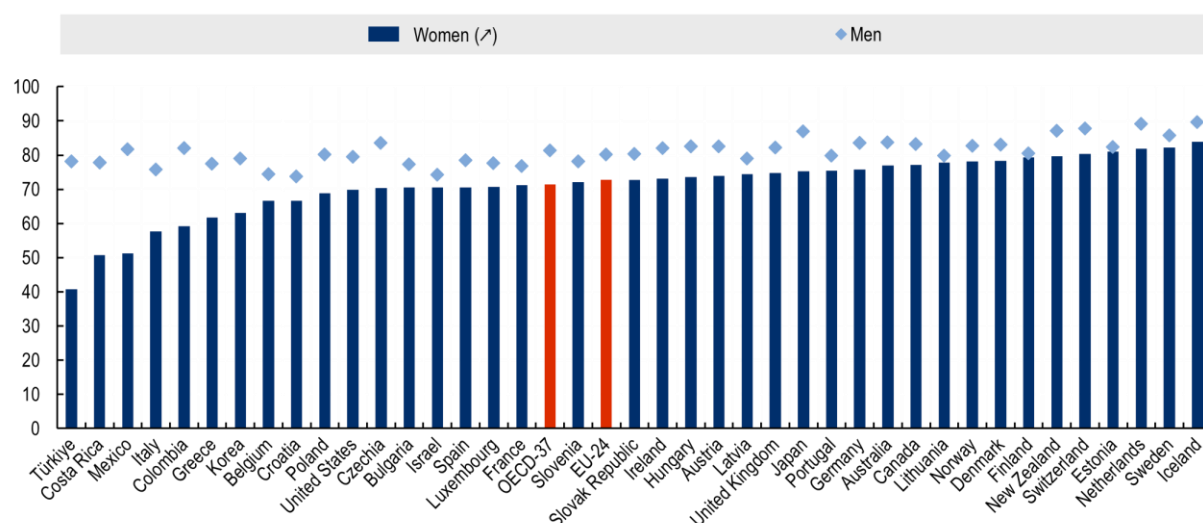
Sources: Secretariat's calculations based on OECD Data Explorer: Employment and unemployment by five-year age group and sex - levels and Productivity levels; Fluchtmann, J., M. Keese and W. Adema (2024), "Gender equality and economic growth: Past progress and future potential", <https://doi.org/10.1787/fb0a0a93-en>; and United Nations (2024), World Population Prospects 2024, <https://population.un.org/wpp/>. Gender equality opportunities as populations age.

In light of these ongoing and projected challenges, many countries are assessing how to address labour and skills shortages, including those driven by retiring workers and – importantly – longstanding gender gaps in labour markets. Gender gaps persist in labour market participation, hours worked, progression to management and earnings, and gaps generally worsen over the life course as women's unpaid workload increases (OECD, 2025^[5]); (OECD, 2024^[1]). Apart from the human rights imperatives of gender equality, women's lower engagement in the labour force represents a serious loss of potential for economies and societies.

Significant gender gaps in labour force participation (LFP) persist across OECD countries, including among countries that are members of both the APEC and OECD (Figure 2.4). The OECD average LFP rate stands at 81% for men and 71% for women – a 10-percentage point difference. In Mexico, the LFP rate is 82% for men and 51% for women (31 points gap). Korea also shows a persistent gap, with 79% for men and 63% for women (16 points). In Japan, Australia and the United States, women's LFP is relatively higher, but women are still less likely than men to work: Japan's LFP rates are 87% for men and 75% for women (12 points), Australia's are 82% and 74% (8 points), and United States 80% and 70% (10 points). In contrast, Canada (83% for men and 77% for women) and New Zealand (87% and 80%) show smaller yet persistent gender gaps of 6 to 7 percentage points.

Figure 2.4. Women participate in the labour market less than men throughout the OECD

Labour force participation rates (%), women and men (15-64), 2023



Note: EU-24 and OECD-37 refer to unweighted averages of the 24 EU and 37 OECD countries with available data for this indicator. ↗ indicates that the data is sorted according to this series in ascending order.

Source: OECD Data Explorer "Labour force participation rate" (<http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/zr>).

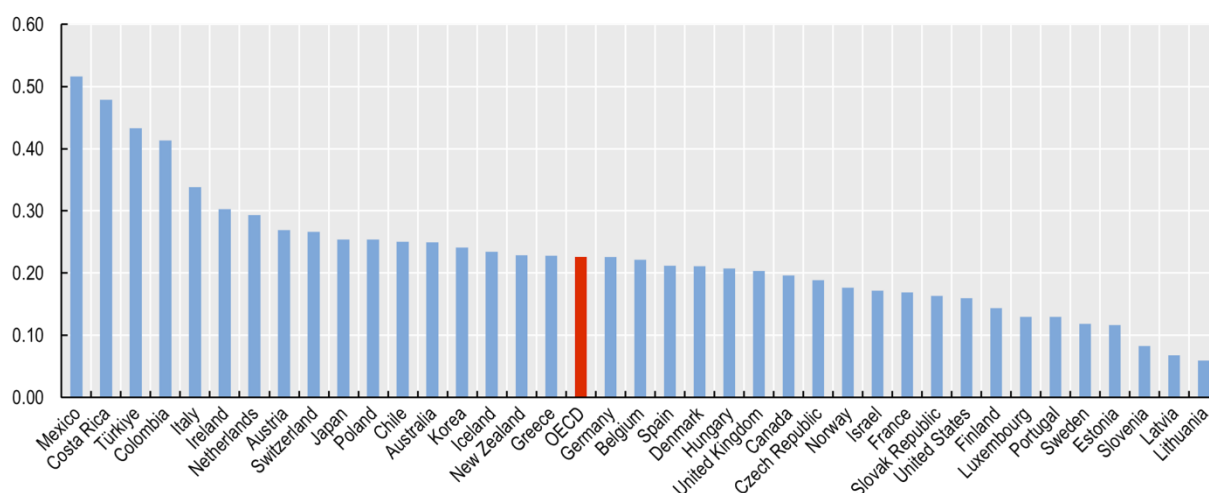
Increasing the integration of women into the labour market has the potential to boost labour input and to improve productivity by enabling a better matching of workers to jobs and making more efficient use of the available talent. Increasing women's employment will be a crucial factor in maintaining economic growth, productivity and living standards in the coming decades (OECD, 2023^[4]).

Closing gender gaps in labour force participation and working hours can have substantial effects on economic growth. On average across the OECD, closing gender gaps in labour force participation and working hours could increase annual growth by 0.23 percentage points by 2060. Figure 2.5 presents economic output projections assuming a convergence of male and female labour participation and working hours across different 5-year-age-groups by 2060, most of which implies an increase in female labour force participation and working hours to male levels. The impact varies widely across countries, depending on current gender disparities.

For example, Mexico could see an increase of 0.52 percentage points in annual growth. Japan, Chile, and Australia are projected to gain 0.25 percentage points, Korea 0.24, New Zealand 0.23, Canada 0.20, and the United States 0.16 percentage points in annual growth (OECD, 2023^[4]).

Figure 2.5. Gains in economic growth from closing gender participation and working hours gaps

Difference relative to the baseline in projected average annual rate of growth in potential GDP per capita over the period 2022-2060, assuming closure of gender gaps in labour force participation and working hours, percentage points



Note: The projections assume that labour force participation and working hours gaps close by 2060. For labour force participation, this is based on convergence of male and female levels to the highest level for each 5-year age groups in each country, following baseline labour force projections over the period 2022-2060. In the absence of future working hours forecasts, projections are based on convergence from a constant 2021 level (or latest year available). See (United Nations, 2022^[8]) for a description of the method and data used.

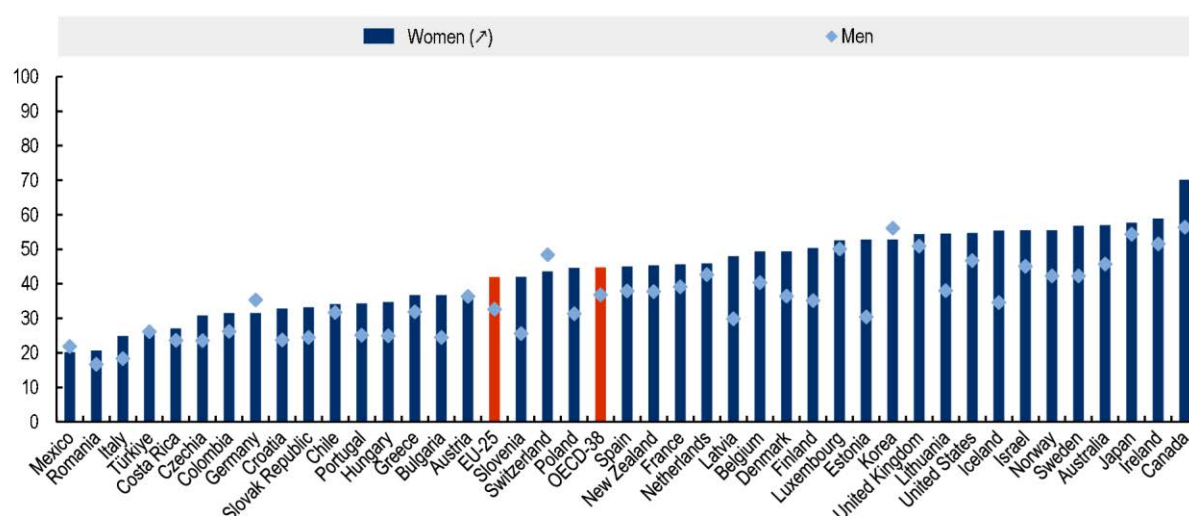
Source: OECD estimates based on OECD Population Data, the OECD Employment Database and Employment Projections and the OECD Long-Term Growth Model.

An OECD study of linked employer-employee data from ten OECD countries suggests that productivity suffers, too, when women are underrepresented. There is an inverted U-shape relationship between the share of women and productivity, peaking at productivity premia of 3% for managers and 2% for workers when women make up around 40% of workers in a firm (Criscuolo et al., 2021^[12]). Although gender diversity appears to be associated with higher performance, women face strong “headwinds” in their career progression – particularly related to childbearing/childrearing breaks – which suggest that full potential of gender diversity for productivity might be even stronger. In other words, if barriers to women (e.g. in unpaid work) were reduced or removed, the productivity premia could be even higher (Criscuolo et al., 2021^[12]).

The path to gender equality remains steep, even as young women now, on average, have higher levels of educational attainment than young men. Figure 2.6 shows that higher levels of educational attainment among women compared to men have become the norm across countries. Only five countries – Mexico, Türkiye, Germany, Switzerland and Korea – show the opposite pattern. Yet even in these countries, gender gaps are relatively small, averaging around 3 percentage points. In contrast, in other OECD countries, the average gap is around 9 percentage points in favour of women (OECD, 2025^[5]).

Figure 2.6. Women are more likely to have completed tertiary education than men

Share (%) of men and women (25-64) whose highest level of educational attainment is tertiary, 2023 or latest



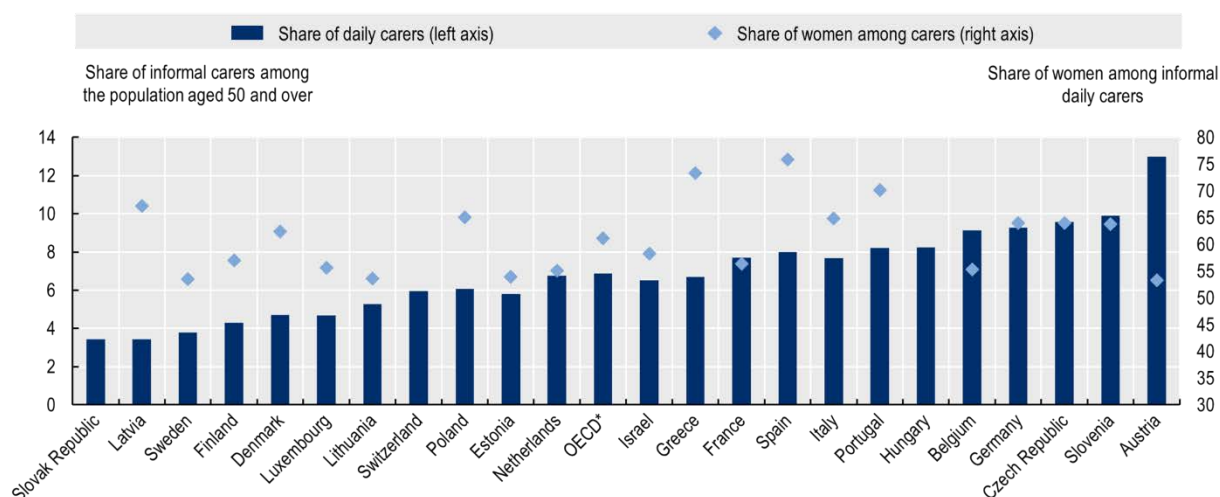
Note: EU-25 and OECD-38 averages are unweighted. Data for Chile are from 2022. Tertiary education refers to ISCED 2011 Levels 5 8, and includes short-cycle tertiary, Bachelor's or equivalent, Master's or equivalent, and Doctorate or equivalent.

Source: OECD Data Explorer (2024) "Adults' educational attainment distribution, by age group and gender", (<http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/160>).

Despite these gains, restrictive gender stereotypes and the unequal division of unpaid care work constrain the number of hours women can spend in paid work, blocking women from reaching their full potential. Parenthood is often the point where women and men's paid work outcomes diverge, with women spending more time at home and less likely to commit to, and advance in, the labour market (OECD, 2025^[5]). This so-called "child penalty" persists, but it is now compounded by rising demand for long-term care of older people, which often lands on women (Figure 2.7).

Figure 2.7. Many older individuals have daily caregiving responsibilities, and the burden of caregiving largely falls on women

Share (%) of unpaid carers among the population aged 50 and over providing daily (left axis), and share of women among unpaid daily carers aged 50 and over (right axis), 2019 or latest



Note: The definition of unpaid carers differs between surveys. See “Definition and comparability” box in OECD (2021) for more details. *No data on the share of women among unpaid carers for Switzerland, Hungary, and the Slovak Republic. OECD is the average of 23 countries for the share of daily carers, and 20 countries for the share of women.

Source: OECD (2021), Health at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ae3016b9-en>.

Unpaid long-term care is often provided by family and friends, acting both as complement to and a substitute for paid care. In 2019, around 13% of people over 50 years old provided some type of unpaid care at least weekly (OECD, 2021^[13]), and around 7% provide care every day. This estimate includes all forms of unpaid care – including childcare, care for people with a disability, and care for elderly people. As with all caregiving activities, unpaid caregiving is gendered, with women representing over 62% of people aged 50 years or over (in a comparison of 25 OECD countries) providing daily unpaid care (Figure 2.7). Over half of those providing unpaid care are providing this care to their spouse or their parents (OECD, 2024^[1]).

Gender differences in the impact of caregiving often stem from variations in both the intensity and nature of care tasks. Evidence from Canada shows that men are more likely to engage in flexible, irregular, and less time-demanding activities such as home maintenance or outdoor tasks, while women more often provide routine, time-intensive care involving personal support, managing appointments and medications, and offering emotional assistance (Statistics Canada, 2024^[14]) (OECD, 2025^[5]). These gendered patterns not only increase women’s overall care burden but also constrain their time, flexibility, and labour market participation, reinforcing gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work (OECD, 2025^[5]).

The *paid* caregiving workforce is also highly gendered. Approximately 87% of paid long-term caregivers are women, on average across the OECD (OECD, 2024^[1]). Improving pay and working conditions in this field is critical both for enabling women’s economic empowerment and supporting healthy ageing.

Unfortunately, gender segregation in the care workforce reflects deeply segregated labour markets overall. Recent OECD work suggests that gender segregation is the norm in most occupations, with only 7 out of 42 occupations in EU-27 countries in 2023 showing evidence of gender balance, defined as a workforce composed of between 40% women and 60% women (OECD, 2025^[5]). Of the remaining 35 occupations that show a gender imbalance, 13 show extreme gender segregation, with less than 20% women or more

than 80% women (OECD, 2025^[5]). Extremely segregated occupations include many occupations related to the trades, which are men-dominated, and many occupations related to care, which are women-dominated. Since the occupations in which women are concentrated are more likely to be low paid and many have poor working conditions (OECD, 2019^[15]; 2023^[16]; World Economic Forum, 2023^[17]), occupational segregation is an important factor contributing to the gender pay gap (see below) and to other gender inequities in the labour market.

3 Policy levers and the role of government: Gender-sensitive approaches to population ageing

As shown above, there is a strong economic case for making gender equality a core pillar of demographic policy responses. The dual pressures of population ageing and persistent gender inequality can benefit from coordinated, cross-sectoral policy levers and a strong government response.

Overlooking gender effects can undermine demographic goals

Gender and demographic policy intersect in ways that can either compound risks or create powerful synergies. A recent mapping exercise grouped measures to address the socioeconomic challenges of demographic shifts in China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand into four categories: measures aimed at increasing the size of the workforce; directly increasing birth rates; enhancing family-friendly workplaces; and addressing long-term care and ageing populations (UN Women, 2025^[18]). These policy measures are not mutually exclusive. However, without a gender-sensitive approach, they risk working at cross-purposes, potentially reducing their efficiency and entrenching existing inequalities without addressing the root causes of demographic challenges. More specifically, risks include:

- **Policy inefficiencies due to blind spots:** When demographic policymaking does not incorporate gender considerations, it can undermine other policy priorities. For example, fertility measures often (implicitly or explicitly) encourage women to assume most unpaid caregiving responsibilities, reinforcing traditional gender roles. This increases women's responsibilities in the home, making it harder for them to enter or re-enter full-time employment. As a result, efforts to increase birth rates may inadvertently reduce women's labour force participation, reducing the overall effectiveness of both sets of policies.
- **Reinforcement of existing inequalities:** Entrenched gender norms and stereotypes often disproportionately assign unpaid work to women and paid work to men (OECD, 2023^[19]). These disparities lead to inequalities across the life course, culminating in significant gender pension gaps and economic insecurity at retirement. For example, women aged 65+ receive 26% less retirement income than men on average in the OECD (OECD, 2023^[4]). Considering these drivers and outcomes as part of demographic, labour market and social protection policy planning can support policymakers to simultaneously address barriers to women's economic participation and avoid reinforcing existing structural inequalities.
- **Missing system-level opportunities:** High-quality, well-paid health and care systems are essential for healthy ageing and productivity. This is particularly important in the context of OECD countries and South-East Asia, where the demand for paid, formal care is forecast to grow rapidly in the short- and long-term (OECD, 2024^[20]) (OECD, 2024^[21]). A gender-blind approach to expanding care systems risks undermining overall system efficiency. For example, efforts to

address labour shortages in the long-term care sector in some OECD countries have focused on recruitment and service expansion but may sometimes overlook the gendered dynamics of care work. In some countries, the continued undervaluation of predominantly female care workers has led to persistent low pay, poor working conditions, and high turnover, weakening both the quality and sustainability of care provision (OECD, 2024^[1]). By missing the opportunity to professionalise and better remunerate the care workforce, countries risk entrenching gender inequality while failing to build the high-skill, high-value care systems that ageing societies require

- **Risk of low policy uptake if gender impacts are ignored:** When demographic policy design does not consider potential gender impacts (e.g. unequal care responsibility or barriers to employment), they risk appearing unfair and result in low uptake among the populations they intend to reach (OECD, 2023^[4]). This can lead to reduced trust in government initiatives, and reluctance to engage with or benefit from the policy measures, ultimately undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of demographic strategies. A gender-sensitive approach to demographic policies, informed by measurement tools like population surveys (OECD, 2025^[22]), can help support broad acceptance, improve uptake and policy effectiveness.

The role of government

Governments can play a leading role in aligning demographic challenges with gender equality goals by leveraging their legislative, regulatory, and fiscal authority, including their role as major employers and procurers. To do so effectively, they can apply tools such as gender impact assessments and gender budgeting to demographic policy areas. This, however, requires sustained institutional capacity, technical expertise, and robust gender-disaggregated data.

Importantly, there is popular support for these approaches. Survey evidence suggests that most people in OECD countries want to see policy responses that simultaneously address population ageing, worker shortages and gender equality. The 2024 OECD Risks that Matter (RTM) Survey finds that 65% of respondents, across 27 OECD countries, are somewhat or very concerned about population ageing beyond the next ten years, with rates highest in Korea (85%), Portugal (80%), and Spain (77%) (OECD, 2025^[22]).

In light of these concerns, including the negative implications for growth, a majority of respondents, on average across countries, consistently support three policy measures to address population ageing and worker shortages:

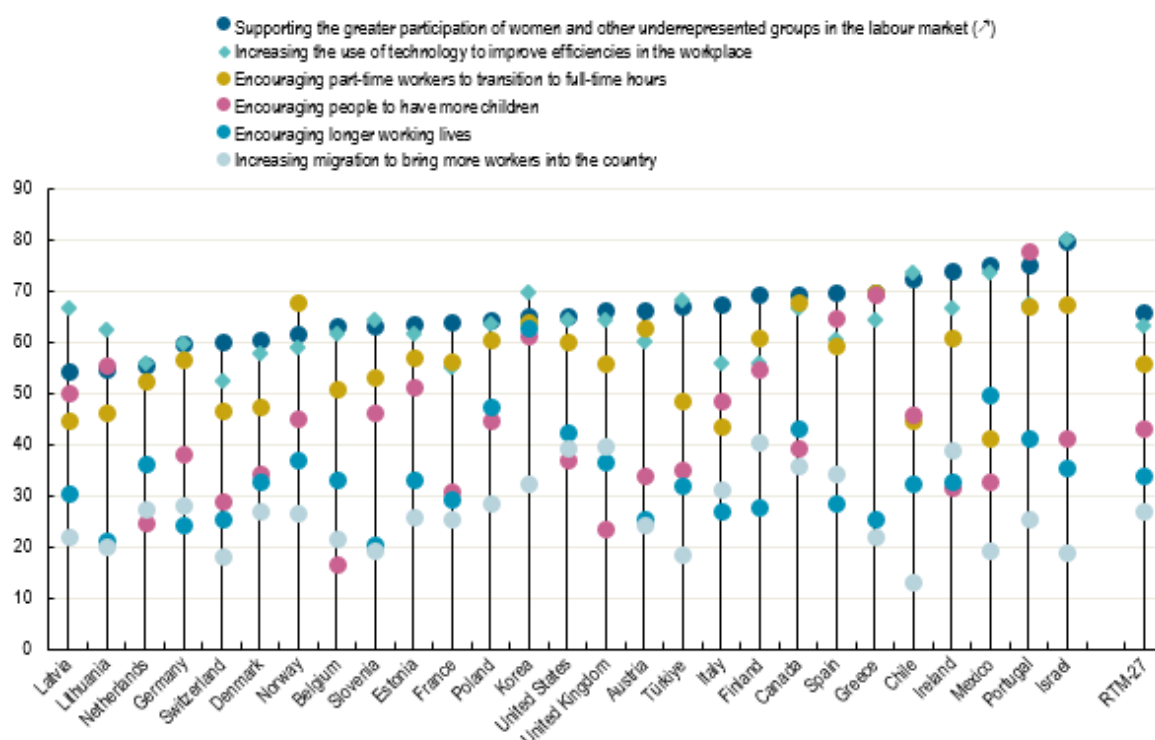
- getting more women and underrepresented groups into the workforce,
- increasing the use of technology to improve efficiency in the workplace, and
- encouraging part-time workers to transition to full-time work.

The highest policy priority – favoured by 66% of respondents – is for measures to support the greater participation of women and other underrepresented groups in the labour market. Over 70% of respondents call for more women and underrepresented groups to work in Spain, Greece, Chile, Ireland, Mexico, Portugal and Israel.

63%, on average, support measures to increase the use of technology to improve efficiencies in the workplace, and 56% call for part-time workers to transition to full-time work. To note, this goal is not unrelated to that of supporting the greater participation of women in the labour market. Women, and particularly mothers of dependent children, have high rates of part-time work relative to fathers and people without dependent children (OECD, 2024^[1]).

Figure 3.1. Increasing women’s labour force participation, better use of technology, and more full-time work are the preferred measures to address population ageing and worker shortages

Share (%) of respondents who support specified responses to population ageing, by country, 2024



Note: RTM-27 is an unweighted average. Respondents were asked “Population ageing may lead to worker shortages in the coming years. To what degree do you oppose or support the following measures to address worker shortages in your country? (a) Encouraging longer working lives, (b) Encouraging people to have more children, (c) Increasing migration to bring more workers into the country, (d) Supporting the greater participation of women and other underrepresented groups in the labour market, (e) Increasing the use of technology to improve efficiencies in the workplace, (f) Encouraging part-time workers to transition to full-time hours.” Response items (a) through (f) were randomly rotated. Response options were: “Strongly oppose,” “Oppose,” “Neither support nor oppose,” “Support,” “Strongly support,” “Can’t choose.” Estimates refers to the combined share of “Support” and “Strongly support.”
Source: 2024 OECD Risks that Matter Survey (<https://oe.cd/rtm>).

A gender-sensitive approach to population ageing calls for both targeted gender equality policy levers and the systematic integration of gender considerations into broader demographic strategies.

Policy levers

Women’s labour force participation is a powerful lever for revitalising economies and societies facing demographic decline. Governments can mobilise a combination of policy levers to address structural barriers and promote women’s full economic participation. Australia provides an example of how addressing structural barriers requires policy action across a wide range of areas (see (OECD, 2023_[41])).

However, persistent gender gaps in unpaid care work and career interruptions continue to limit women’s ability to access, retain, and advance in paid employment, exacerbating workforce shortages. When in the labour force, women often face systemic obstacles that limit their progress in advancing to managerial roles, earning as much as men for work of equal value, and owning businesses (OECD, 2023_[41]). Legal frameworks and programmes focused on incentivising women’s labour force participation and tackling

structural barriers – including gender gaps in unpaid caregiving – will be important to help ease the impacts of the demographic transition.

Indeed, research indicates that the success factors for enabling women and men to combine work and family are (at a minimum) well-designed family policies like parental leave, childcare services and financial support; family-friendly working conditions, in particular shorter working hours, workplace flexibility and stable, quality employment; and more gender-equal and family-friendly social norms and sharing of caregiving and other unpaid domestic work (OECD, 2025^[5]); (Yang, Hwang and Pareliussen, 2024^[23]). These factors are mutually reinforcing, and strong investment in one dimension may not necessarily compensate for shortcomings in other areas (OECD, 2025^[5]) (Yang, Hwang and Pareliussen, 2024^[23]). For example, affordable childcare may not enable women to work more if work hours are long and inflexible – e.g. beyond typical childcare hours – and parents do not share caring responsibilities.

Equitable, gender-responsive care economy strategies can also contribute to high quality care systems when they increase service and job quality, foster workforce development and workplace safety, promote pay equity and attract more men into the sector (OECD, 2024^[1]); (ILO, 2024^[24]). This can help meet growing elder, disability and childcare demands, promote women's employment (in, ideally, good-quality jobs) and economic security, boost local job creation and create family-friendly economies where care responsibilities are shared (ILO, 2024^[24]); (OECD, 2024^[21]); (UK Women's Budget Group, 2016^[25]). As part of their efforts to build the care economy, Australia has prioritised improving wages in the care sector (see Box 3.1). Similarly, Korea has placed gender equality and the care sector at the heart of its approach to supporting an ageing society (See Box 3.2).

Similarly, the impact of ageing on the economy will be greatly mitigated if citizens age in good health, allowing them to continue working in a productive way, participate actively in public life, and remain independent up to an advanced age. Indeed, healthy ageing and robust health systems are essential to counter slow growth or decline in the labour force (André, Gal and Schief, 2024^[26]); (OECD, 2025^[5]). For example, limited workplace accommodations for menopause can significantly affect women's employment outcomes and well-being. Physical workplace constraints such as restricted access to toilets, poor ventilation, uncomfortable uniforms, and inadequate workstations can exacerbate symptoms and reduce productivity (Victorian Government Commission for Gender Equality, 2023^[27]). Evidence from the United Kingdom shows that over a quarter of employed women aged 40–60 report menopause symptoms have negatively affected their career progression, while nearly one in five have considered leaving work due to insufficient support (CIPD, 2023^[28]). Research further indicates that menopause can contribute to lasting declines in employment and earnings, increasing women's reliance on social transfers (Conti, 2025^[29]). However, greater awareness and improved access to menopause-related healthcare and workplace support can mitigate these economic and social costs, enhancing both gender equality and labour market retention (Conti, 2025^[29]); (OECD, 2025^[5]). See Box 3.3 for an example of how Chile has integrated a gender lens into both ageing and workforce strategies to support women's economic security.

Drawing on OECD recommendations, evidence and leading practice, policy options can include:

- Adopting gender-responsive legal frameworks that promote gender equality in the world of work, in line with international standards. For example, the OECD Gender Recommendations (OECD, 2024^[1]); (OECD, 2016^[30]) and ILO conventions relating to violence and harassment (No. 190), discrimination (No. 111), equal pay for work of equal value (No. 100) and protections for parents (No. 183 and 156).
- Enhancing efforts to embed CEDAW anti-gender stereotyping and gender mainstreaming obligations into legal and policy systems.
- Developing targeted policies and policy combinations that focus on:
 - tackling labour market discrimination, including gender pay gaps and horizontal and vertical segregation of the labour market

- ending harmful gender norms that assign women disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care, limiting their paid work options, and that contribute to gender segregation in fields of study
- ensuring good-quality, well-paying jobs with adequate access to work-life supports such as child and elder care, flexible work and generous paid parental leave to support retention
- fostering girls' and women's acquisition of digital skills and competencies to prepare for ongoing changes in the world of work
- preventing and addressing workplace sexual harassment and violence including technology-facilitated gender-based violence
- promoting an equitable, gender-responsive care economy to increase service and job quality, workplace safety, pay equity and attract more men into the sector
- developing healthy ageing and women's health strategies to improve women's health and workforce development and support their continued participation in the labour market

Box 3.1. Australia's approach to advancing gender equality through wage reform in the care sector

Australia's approach to improving wages in the care sector is anchored in its national workplace relations framework under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, which sets minimum employment standards and establishes the independent [Fair Work Commission \(FWC\)](#) to determine minimum wages. In 2022, the Australian Government amended the Act to include *gender equity* as a statutory objective through the [Fair Work Legislation Amendment \(Secure Jobs, Better Pay\) Bill 2022](#). This change requires the FWC to consider gender impacts when setting minimum wages, strengthening the [gender pay equity provisions in the Fair Work Act](#). Following this legislative reform, the FWC commissioned [research into gender undervaluation in women-dominated industries](#) and launched the *Gender Undervaluation Priority Awards Review* to assess whether sectors such as health, community services, disability support, Aboriginal health, pharmacy, and childcare have been historically underpaid.

In April 2025, the FWC's [preliminary decision](#) confirmed that these industries had been undervalued due to gender bias and recommended wage increases of up to 25 per cent ([summary of decision](#)). This decision, currently under review through public hearings, is expected to deliver significant pay rises once finalised. In parallel, care-sector employees have pursued *Work Value Cases* – worker-led applications testing whether wages reflect the true value of work. Notably, some aged care workers [succeeded in securing substantial wage increases in 2023](#), and a [new case for nurses and midwives](#) is currently underway. Together, these initiatives represent a landmark step toward gender pay equity – formally recognising and revaluing care work as skilled and essential labour.

Box 3.2. Korea's approach to tackling the challenges of low fertility and population ageing

Korea's Fourth Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Ageing Society (2021–2025) marked a major policy shift by placing gender equality and quality of life at the centre of its strategy. While maintaining the core structure of previous plans, it was the first to explicitly define the creation of a gender-equal and fair society as a primary goal. The plan took further steps to address structural barriers in the labour market and caregiving that disproportionately affect women, while also expanding support for diverse family forms beyond the traditional marriage-based model.

Key policy measures under the Fourth Plan include:

- Increasing parental leave benefits for both mothers and fathers, along with expanded support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
- Recommending the adoption of Gender Equality Disclosure System
- Improving the quality of public childcare services and expanding accessibility
- Enhancing support for single parent families.

In 2024, additional measures were introduced under the **Initiative to Reverse the Declining Birth Rate** initiative. These included raising the income replacement cap for parental leave to improve the adequacy of benefits; extending paid paternity leave from 10 to 20 days to encourage men's uptake; allowing parental leave to be split into four blocks instead of the existing three blocks to enhance flexibility; and expanding support for SMEs by increasing subsidies for replacement workers. The government also announced plans to integrate childcare and early education for children aged 0–5 under a unified system, and to streamline previously separate public after-school programs and public after-school care services.

As of 2024, Korea's total fertility rate (TFR) stands at 0.75, showing a halt in the long-standing downward trend since 2015. The share of men among parental leave users rose from 4% in 2013 to 25.7% in 2023. The share of families receiving cash and care benefits has continued to increase, and public spending on family benefits reached 1.65% of GDP in 2022 – more than double the level recorded a decade earlier.

Source: Korea's Fourth Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Aging Society (2021–2025), and the Initiative to Reverse the Declining Birth Rate.

Box 3.3. Chile's approach to embedding gender mainstreaming in the implementation of ageing and workforce policies

Chile has embedded gender mainstreaming at the core of its ageing, decent work and workforce policies, with a particular emphasis on improving older women's participation in the labour market, challenging harmful gender stereotypes, and reforming the care economy to promote quality jobs and attract men to caregiving roles. The IV National Plan for Equality between Women and Men (2018–2030) promotes flexible working arrangements and work-life balance policies as key to increasing women's participation in the workforce, especially for older women and caregivers. It also prioritizes the redistribution of unpaid care responsibilities between men and women. The National Strategy for the Exercise of Economic Autonomy in Women, the Ministerial Gender Commitments 2022-2026 and the interministerial initiative 'Chile For All' (Chile Para Todas) are complementary policy frameworks that focus on improving women's economic security and wellbeing through women's skill development, women's participation in non-traditional sectors, improved access to affordable and quality childcare and support for caregivers.

Implementation of these frameworks is co-ordinated through a gender mainstreaming methodological guide issued by the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality in February 2025. The guide contains minimum standards on training and gender impact analysis as well as policy and programme planning, design, implementation and evaluation. The guide also supports ministries to meet their obligation to explain how they will implement their programme of work as well as regularly report on progress against a set of gender indicators and measures. Progress reporting is then evaluated by a network of gender experts. A dedicated gender mainstreaming fund has been established to support activities.

Source: Based on information provided to the OECD Secretariat by the Chilean Ministry of Women and Gender Equality.

4 The Way Forward

The evidence in this paper highlights that women's empowerment is a powerful lever for demographic revitalisation and growth. As such, governments need the capacity and expertise to integrate gender equality into related policy frameworks. For example, national demographic action plans offer an important opportunity to align cross-cutting policies, however, they risk being ineffective if they do not consider gender from the outset. Gender mainstreaming provides a strategic approach for embedding equality goals into demographic policy design, enabling governments to improve both efficiency and fairness. Because demographic and gender challenges intersect across policy domains (e.g. from pensions to labour markets to health), co-ordinated and/or integrated approaches can help deliver more cost-effective, fair and sustainable outcomes (OECD, 2023^[4]) (OECD, 2024^[31]) (OECD, 2025^[5]). As such, governments also play a key role in strengthening the enabling conditions for effective, coordinated policy design and delivery.

Well-resourced, whole-of-government strategies are powerful tools to help align gender equality and demographic revitalisation goals. A comprehensive gender equality strategy can show how addressing labour market inequalities and discrimination can contribute to tackling demographic challenges. Such a strategy is most effective when it includes cross-portfolio priorities and objectives, supported by a whole-of-government implementation plan that outlines clear timelines, budgets, and expected outcomes or targets – elements crucial for coordinated policy planning across public institutions (OECD, 2023^[32]). Additionally, ensuring that national demographic plans, such as those focused on demographic revitalization, incorporate high-quality gender data and analysis can enhance evidence-based policymaking. This integration promotes greater alignment between demographic initiatives and other cross-cutting national strategies, including gender equality plans. By using gender data and analysis across plans, countries can develop indicators that support coordination and tracking of progress toward shared goals (OECD, 2023).

Gender budgeting is a tool that can help governments advance gender equality with fiscal and economic benefits. Gender budgeting is especially valuable amidst demographic shifts that are reducing the working age population and putting increasing strain on government budgets. For example, it can raise awareness of budget measures that aim to close the gender employment gap, bringing economics benefits for all.

To ensure proposed demographics reforms take into account the different potential impacts on women and men and avoid unintentionally undermining cross-cutting policy objectives, countries can use Gender Impact Assessment (GIA). By applying GIA during the development of policies, legislation, and budgets (particularly in cross-cutting areas such as labour markets, health systems, social protection, and family support) policymakers can ensure that demographic strategies function as intended and promote gender equality. This approach supports more effective, inclusive, and sustainable policy outcomes in response to complex demographic challenges.

Key GIA questions for policymakers to consider include:

- Do some people benefit more from a policy or service because they have greater access and/or because of a gendered social norm? *For example, do skills and workforce policies consider women's unpaid caring responsibilities?*

- Is the policy, programme or service doing everything it can to make sure resources are distributed and used equally? *For example, in the context of an entrepreneurial grants round aimed at promoting innovative solutions to healthy ageing challenges, are the allocations gender-balanced?*
- Does the policy, programme or service potentially have negative unintended consequences for certain groups of people; and if so, how these can be redressed. *For example, some skilled migration programmes can focus on male-dominated occupations which can reinforce traditional gender roles and limit women's economic opportunities.*

Policymakers can then develop a range of policy solutions for consideration that support progress toward policy goals, including gender equality.

To undertake GIAs and design, implement and evaluate gender equality strategies, countries need high quality intersectional gender data. Planning for gender and intersectional data collection as part of national statistical systems and in programme and policy development should be a priority to support impact evaluation and future system design (OECD, 2023^[32]). The collection of detailed, high-quality data across different metrics such as time use, work-life balance, study and career choices, digital inclusion, trade and environment and by different factors such as gender and disability, socio-economic status and geographic location is vital for promoting data-driven research to strengthen policy development. This is particularly important in the context of population ageing where both age and gender data will be necessary for tracking whether reforms are effective. All ministries should be involved in the collection of data in their respective sectors, including at the programme level. This can complement data collection undertaken by national statistical offices and central gender institutions.

Gender-sensitive public procurement, particularly in sectors such as care services and healthcare, can play an important role in advancing both gender equality and demographic policies. The strategic use of public procurement not only helps promote fair access to essential services but can also support workforce diversification and women's economic inclusion, for example, as public service providers. Moreover, gender-sensitive public procurement can contribute to broader demographic goals by improving health outcomes, providing economic opportunities to various societal groups, and ensuring safety and citizens' well-being, which are essential for sustainable population growth and social development (OECD, 2023^[4]).

Clear and streamlined governance and co-ordination structures are also needed. This can ensure that all relevant ministries and institutions, including the national machinery for the advancement of women, are included as part of the policymaking process and that policy frameworks operate in a coherent way (OECD, 2023^[4]) (OECD, 2023^[32]). Developing an implementation plan for reforms can help establish clear roles and responsibilities for implementation. Failure to plan and coordinate effectively, and invest adequate public funds, risks further deepening labour shortages and increasing the strain on social programmes.

A diverse public sector workforce has enhanced potential to formulate effective policy responses that understand the origin and depth of issues, improve responsiveness of public actions, and support policy outcomes for diverse groups (OECD, 2023^[4]). Given the high number of women working in the public sector, there is also an opportunity for it to lead the way in defining policy responses and act as a model for other sectors. For example, the public sector can show policy leadership when it comes to addressing labour market inequalities by addressing horizontal and vertical segregation (i.e. through pay transparency), offering flexible work to women and men, promoting women's entrepreneurship and stopping workplace sexual harassment.

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Notes

¹ 0.7% per year in the case of the whole OECD area. This assumption could be considered *prima facie* realistic in the long run. Recent OECD work in this area, including the OECD long-term projection model, indeed assumes constant returns to scale and constant capital-labour ratios in the long run – see e.g. Guillemette and Turner (2018^[33]; 2021^[34]) and Fluchtmann, Keese and Adema (2024^[35]).

² More recent years are excluded from the calculation of benchmark productivity trends to avoid the influence of the COVID-19 crisis. The period 2006-19 is chosen to cover a full business cycle and to have start and end points corresponding to similar stages of the business cycle. Robustness exercises (available upon request) using different periods (2007-19, 2006-18 and 2007-18) show similar results – that is a projected drop of OECD GDP per capita of about 40%, and a projected growth reduction in all OECD countries except Ireland and the United States.

Women, work and the population puzzle

Gender-sensitive responses to demographic change

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