What the Data Says on Gender

Idea In Short

Professional services firms tend to look relatively gender-balanced at first glance, with men and women represented across most levels of client delivery work. Yet a broader look at the global data reveals real, persistent gaps: uneven representation across industries, wide variation by country, and strikingly low female representation in the most senior leadership roles despite genuine progress in education and workforce participation. Understanding both the progress and the gaps matters for any organization trying to make full use of its available talent.

A Relatively Balanced Profession, on the Surface

Client delivery work in many professional services firms tends to look relatively balanced by gender across most levels, from junior analyst roles up through senior leadership. This makes some intuitive sense: the work depends heavily on the ability to think through ambiguous problems, act resourcefully, and persuade others to take action, none of which are inherently tied to gender.1

Industries Vary Considerably

Beyond professional services broadly, individual industries vary considerably in gender representation, pay equity and seniority. Industries historically associated with physically demanding labor, such as manufacturing, transportation and mining, alongside fields like software engineering, have tended to skew more heavily male, a pattern shaped partly by historical labor conditions and partly by the current gender composition of graduates in related fields of study.

Geography Shapes Economic Opportunity Significantly

Economic opportunity for women varies enormously by country, shaped by a combination of policy, infrastructure, cultural norms and labor market structure. Cross-country comparisons using dozens of indicators consistently show significant variation, with some regions offering considerably stronger conditions for female economic participation than others, underscoring that gender gaps in the workforce are not a uniform global phenomenon but one deeply shaped by local context.

The Economic Cost of Underused Talent

A substantial and growing body of economic research estimates that failing to fully use the available talent pool carries a real, measurable cost to national output. Multiple studies project that closing the gap between male and female labor force participation would meaningfully increase GDP in many economies, with some of the largest projected gains concentrated in countries where the current participation gap is widest.2 Roughly a billion additional women are expected to join the global workforce over the coming decade, and how effectively that potential gets realized will depend heavily on removing the regulatory, cultural and infrastructure barriers that currently constrain it.

More Women Graduating, Different Fields of Study

Globally, women now make up the majority of university graduates in many countries, a meaningful shift from prior generations. A notable gap remains, however, in the specific fields chosen: men remain overrepresented in science and engineering degrees, while women remain overrepresented in health and social welfare fields, a pattern that continues to shape which industries each group enters after graduation.

Progress at the Top Remains Slow

Despite genuine progress in education and overall workforce participation, women remain significantly underrepresented in the most senior corporate leadership roles. The share of women holding chief executive positions at the world's largest publicly traded companies has grown over recent decades, reaching its highest point in history, yet it still represents only a small single-digit percentage of those roles, a statistic that is simultaneously encouraging in its trajectory and sobering in its current state.

Barriers Are Often Subtle Rather Than Obvious

Research on corporate advancement consistently points to unseen structural barriers that slow women's progress toward senior leadership, barriers that are frequently subtle rather than overt, embedded in how opportunities, mentorship and stretch assignments get distributed rather than in any single obvious policy. Genuine meritocracy requires actively identifying and removing those subtle barriers, not simply assuming that formal equal opportunity alone is sufficient.

Building a Culture That Makes Full Use of Talent

Organizations built around apprenticeship, where people learn continuously, help each other succeed, and build genuine long-term relationships with clients and colleagues, tend to benefit the most from actively recruiting and developing talent regardless of gender. Making full use of the available talent pool, smart, self-aware, engaged people of every background, remains as much a straightforward economic argument as it is a matter of fairness.

A Long-Term View Worth Taking Seriously

None of this progress happens automatically or on a fixed timeline; it requires sustained, deliberate effort across recruiting, mentorship and promotion decisions over many years.3 Organizations that treat this as an ongoing priority, rather than a one-time initiative, tend to see the most durable improvement in how fully they use the talent already available to them.

- 1Gender diversity
- 2Labor force
- 3Glass ceiling

Summary

Global data on gender and work tells two stories at once: genuine progress in education and workforce participation, alongside persistent gaps in senior leadership representation and significant variation by industry and geography. Organizations that fail to make full use of half their available talent pool are, quite simply, leaving real economic growth on the table.