



# GENDER EQUALITY

## IN SWITZERLAND

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE  
**OPTIMISTIC** – RIGHTLY SO?











**70 percent of girls and women in Switzerland believe in their leadership abilities. Does this translate into leadership positions? Unfortunately, not. So far, it's a massive missed opportunity. What can we do to nurture and empower girls and young women to realise their full potential? Investing in gender equality is the greatest investment in the future progress, societal and economic development.**

— SUBA UMATHEVAN

## IMPRINT

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# FOREWORD

**At Plan International Switzerland, we commissioned an independent survey of attitudes towards gender equality of girls and young women in Switzerland. This reveals a sharp decline in optimism as young women enter the workplace and try to build a career. Positive attitudes and experiences in younger life evaporate in the face of the realities of the working life.**

We believe this raises important questions about how we teach our children and prepare them for real life. It shows a need for more refined coordination between the role of education, the flow of information through government and media, and workplace practices. There are pieces missing in this puzzle.

Plan International is a global leader in campaigning for girls' rights and advancing gender equality, with more than 80 years of experience working with children, families and communities around the world. For us it is about challenging social norms and attitudes to achieve transformative change for adolescent girls and young adults. We seek to influence policy and design programmes that promote girls' education, social justice and economic opportunity.

I consider it a privilege to lead Plan International here in Switzerland, where we also provide mentoring programmes to help young women navigate the workplace, as well as expert media comment and professional training on gender equality issues. In summer 2019, prompted by the first women's strike in Switzerland since 1991, we wanted to dig deeper into gender equality in Switzerland and hear the voices of adolescent girls and boys on this topic.

Our survey focused on three groups: women aged 14–24, women from 24–40 and men from 14–24. There is a high feeling of optimism in the 14–24 groups of women and men, with 75 % hopeful that gender equality will become the norm in Switzerland.

However, 6 out of 10 in this age group have experienced gender discrimination. Amongst the women between 24 and 40, it is even 7 out of 10. Most often, they come across inequality at work. That younger optimism seems misplaced. As they get older and leave school and college for work, women seem to come across, or recognise, inequality more, and their earlier confidence can start to vanish.

**The transition  
from education to work –  
as the change  
from girl to woman –  
is crucial.**

We focus our analysis here, and offer specific recommendations for education, information and the workplace. What can we do to advance equality in Switzerland? Are we ready to take responsibility for activating change?



**SUBA UMATHEVAN**  
CEO Plan International  
Switzerland

# SETTING THE SCENE

**The women campaigning in June 2019, out on the streets all over Switzerland, were clear that progress towards eliminating the gender pay gap, promoting women equally with men, tackling work/life balance to enable women to share domestic chores and childcare more equally with their partners and challenging sexual harassment at work was far too slow.**

Swiss women are not alone, inequality – at work, at home, at school – affects women all over the world and it is not only an issue of individual rights, important as they are. According to a recent study from the International Monetary Fund reducing barriers to women's participation in the labour force has a gender diversity impact on productivity, as well as expanding the economy in terms of overall input of time and skill.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, according to the latest global research, in terms of equality at work and in education, health and political empowerment, at the present rate of progress, it will be nearly 100 years before we reach gender parity.<sup>2</sup> The situation is even worse in terms of economic participation and opportunity, with 257 years before achieving gender parity. The UN Sustainable Development Goals 5 aims to achieve gender equality by 2030. This is going to be the decade of action.

Historically, gender equality got off to a slow start in Switzerland: only in 1971 did women gain the vote in federal elections and until 1985 they needed a husband's permission to work or have a bank account. It was not until 2005 that paid maternity leave was put into law and there is still no legal provision for paternity leave, though there is a popular vote pending to provide a statutory two weeks.

In 2018, the Economist's Glass Ceiling Index once again ranked Switzerland behind most other OECD countries as regards gender equality in the labour market: globally rated above only Turkey, Japan, and South Korea, Switzerland performed badly in almost all aspects of labour market participation.<sup>3</sup>

So, it is perhaps surprising that **three quarters of our survey participants** – across different ages and genders – **said that in fact they are optimistic about the progress of gender equality in Switzerland.** The survey begs a lot of questions. Why the optimism? Is it justified? And what, if any, are the underlying challenges?

**At the present rate of progress,  
it will be nearly 100 years before  
we reach gender parity.**

<sup>1</sup> Ostry et al. (2018) Economic Gains from Gender Inclusion: New Mechanisms, New Evidence

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>

<sup>3</sup> Making Gender Work: foraus discussion paper April 2019

# WHAT WE LEARNED

**It is clear that the underlying inequality – reflected both in girls' and women's experiences of discrimination and in the recognition from all participants of the power of stereotyping – becomes increasingly apparent as women get older. Male choices too are over-influenced by patterns of domestic and working lives that have been laid down for generations.**

Female confidence at work or male willingness to take on more domestic responsibility does not seem, from our results, to be a key issue. Participants point out instead that what needs attention is equal pay and job opportunities: not so much the workforce and their lack of skills and capabilities but the institutions they work in and the culture they live in.

« In my work, I have noticed from the allocation of tasks that women are sometimes less trusted and underestimated.

♀ WOMAN, 27

## METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted by Nanos in September 2019 via an online survey with 1,002 girls and women in Switzerland, between 14 and 24 years of age and 1,242 boys and men in the same age range. In November the same survey was administered to 714 women between 24 – 40 years of age.

All the results were statistically checked and weighted by age using the latest demographic information and the sample is geographically stratified to be representative of Switzerland.

The research questions and analysis fell under seven key themes:

- gender equality
- experiencing gender discrimination
- gender stereotypes
- feeling empowered
- leaders
- balancing work and private life
- moving towards gender equality



# KEY FINDINGS

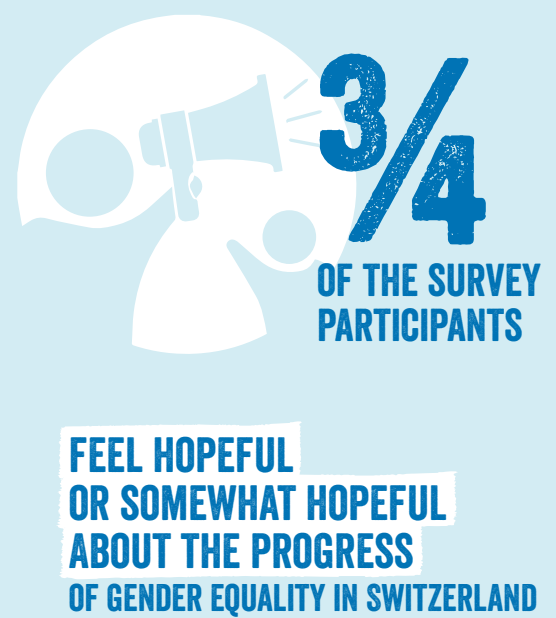
## SURVEY PARTICIPANTS:



## KEY THEMES

GENDER EQUALITY • EXPERIENCING GENDER DISCRIMINATION •  
GENDER STEREOTYPES • FEELING EMPOWERED • LEADERS • BALANCING WORK AND PRIVATE LIFE •  
MOVING TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

## THE GOOD NEWS



## THE LESS GOOD NEWS



## THE MOST FREQUENTLY SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS



TO IMPROVE GENDER EQUALITY:

EQUAL WAGES AND EQUAL JOB OPPORTUNITIES



FOR THE BALANCE BETWEEN WORK AND PRIVATE LIFE:

GIRLS AND WOMEN:

PART-TIME JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND FAMILY FRIENDLY POLICIES



**As women get older  
the number who feel less equal  
at work rises.**





# GENDER AT WORK

It is clear from the survey data, and backed up by research from Advance<sup>4</sup>, that it is in the workplace that inequalities really seem to bite. Workplace discrimination affects women's financial standing, and their confidence: undermining self-esteem and perpetuating long-standing inequalities between the genders. It is in this area in particular that there is clearly much work to be done.

**42 % OF 24 – 40-YEAR-OLD WOMEN**  
**SAY THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED GENDER DISCRIMINATION AT WORK**

This figure is much higher than for the 14 – 24 age group. So, it is apparent that at work, despite overall optimism, equality remains elusive: we know for example that in Switzerland, women earn 14,8 % less than men.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, it is the youngest age group, the group likely to have limited, or no, experience of the workplace, who are the most optimistic.

**36 % OF 14-17-YEAR-OLD GIRLS**  
**WERE HOPEFUL ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY, THIS FELL TO 23 % FOR THE 18 – 24 AGE GROUP**

The optimism of the young may be protecting them from the harsher realities of both their own experience and the experiences that lie ahead. Why is it that, for girls and women, feeling equal to men and confident in your own ability, is not translating into tangible equality in terms of pay, representation at higher levels of management and the ability to exercise real choice in terms of work/life balance?

**MORE THAN 50 % OF GIRLS AND WOMEN BETWEEN 14 UND 40 YEARS**  
**SAY THEY FEEL EQUAL TO MEN AT WORK AND A SLIGHTLY HIGHER NUMBER, 57% AND 58% RESPECTIVELY, SAY THEY FEEL EQUAL IN SOCIETY**

This still leaves a sizeable minority who do not feel equal and women's working lives bear this out. Despite women entering the workforce in equal numbers with men, often with better qualifications, the numbers decline as workers get into management roles: the higher the scale, the fewer women. At the lowest management level 38 % of managers are women, at the highest the numbers drop to 18 %.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Advance-HSG-Gender-Intelligence-Report-2019

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/gender-wage-gap.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Advance-HSG-Gender-Intelligence-Report-2019



NEARLY **1/4** OF GIRLS AND  
YOUNG WOMEN

REPORT FEELING THAT THEIR GENDER  
MEANS THEY ARE NOT ENCOURAGED  
TO TAKE UP STEM<sup>7</sup> SUBJECTS, COMPARED  
WITH 16% OF THEIR MALE PEERS

What is going on? It may be that women are under-represented in the areas that command higher salaries and enhance promotion prospects. But whatever it is, it is not lack of female confidence: **seven out of ten survey respondents – both girls and women – report feeling confident in their leadership abilities** and an even higher percentage of girls and young women report feeling empowered to make decisions about their careers.

It is revealing, however, that it is in the areas of leadership and making decisions for others that girls and young and older women all report feeling less confident compared to making decisions, for example, about their romantic lives or their career more generally.

It is here that Plan Switzerland's CEO feels there is room for more research: **"we know, not just from our survey, but from talking to well established female leaders and from our experience setting up a mentoring programme that, somewhere along the line girls lose a sense of self-confidence. Is it because they feel that in the workforce, in positions of power, their faces just do not fit? I would like to look more closely at this issue."**

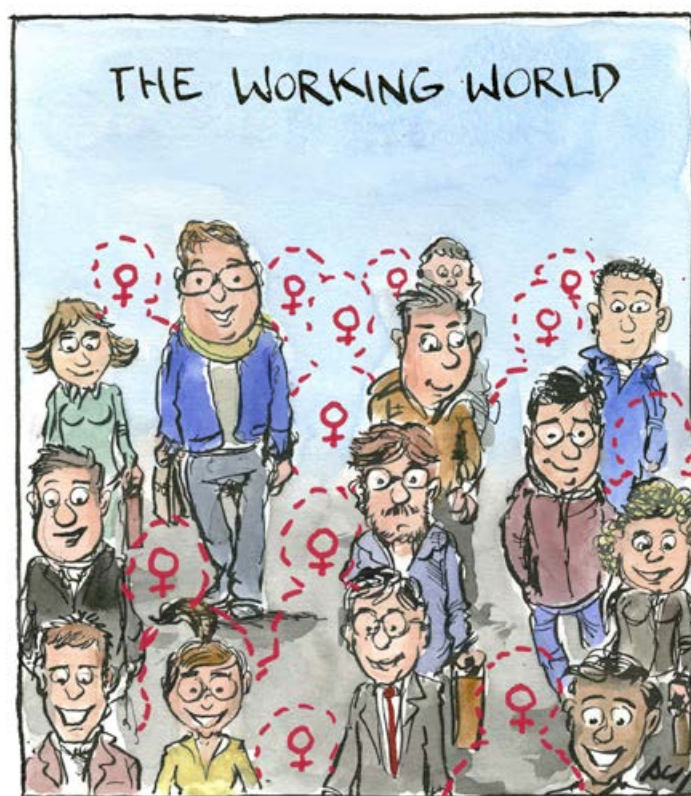
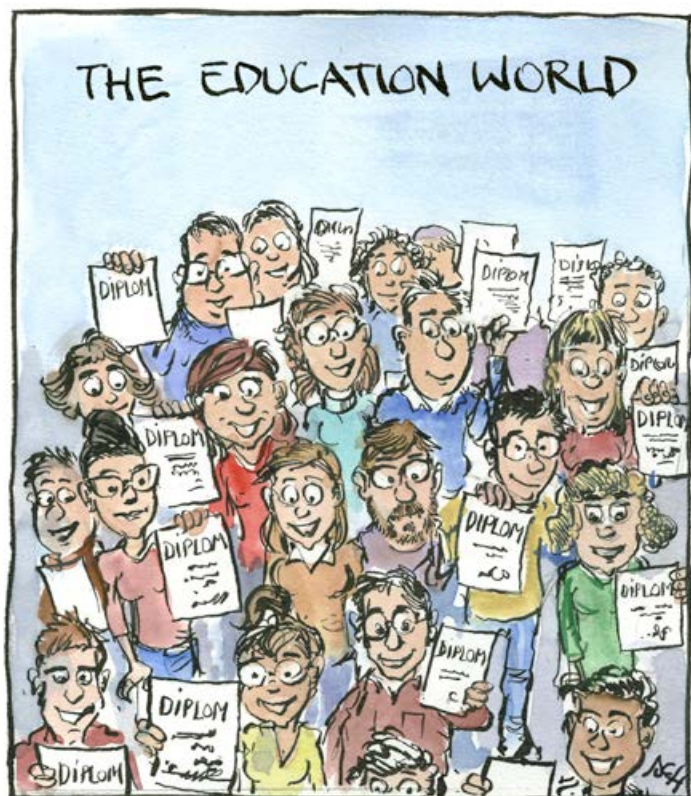
« I believe that everyone has the same potential.

♀ GIRL, 16

« Raising awareness of women's rights and equality is very important, also at home.

♀ WOMAN, 20

<sup>7</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics



**Despite women entering  
the workforce in equal numbers with men,  
the numbers decline as workers  
get into management roles.**



# CAREERING AHEAD

**Recent research in Switzerland highlights an important fact – at 31, women begin to spend less time at work. Between 21 and 30 years of age, men and women’s average employment rate is almost identical at 93 % and 91 %, respectively: from 31 years upwards the female average employment rate is considerably below the average employment rate of both men and employees in management positions.<sup>8</sup> 82 % of men in Switzerland work full-time, compared to only 41 % of women.<sup>9</sup> Part time workers struggle to be taken seriously, to progress up a career ladder, and they are primarily female.**

Both our survey results, which reflect an increasing struggle at work as women get older, and these research findings, indicate, as Suba Umathevan points out: **“an institutional and structural problem, embedded in social and cultural expectations rather than in individual talents and choices.”**

Significantly our survey participants, whatever their age or gender, feel that the best way to improve gender equality in Switzerland is with equal wages and equal job opportunities.

**In our survey boys and young men were asked how they would feel about staying at home and looking after their children if their wife had a better job. Nearly six in ten Swiss boys expressed some interest in doing this. This compares with just under five out of ten girls expressing the same interest.**

Gender inequality at work goes around in a vicious circle: men earn more money so when people start families and childcare options are discussed women stay at home or go part-time and because they do, men carry on climbing up the management ladder and continue to earn more money. This imbalance puts pressure on men too.

Both boys and girls blame stereotypes for perpetuating gender inequality, and childcare – whose job it is to stay at home – is a prime example of this. Roles are traditionally determined by gender rather than individual preferences and are compounded by labour market practices and the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, which means that two full time working parents is often not an option.

Suba Umathevan also points out that in the Plan International survey none of the girls or women asked had a Swiss role model to encourage them in their ambitions: **“many of the participants could not think of a role model at all and when they did it was Angela Merkel or Michele Obama, or, for the younger women and girls, their mums, while the boys taking part in the survey drew on a larger number of role models.”**

Women’s lack of visibility in positions of power matters. Younger women see that a woman’s primary role remains domestic which means despite changes in educational attainment and social attitudes, keeping everyone in the same place they have been in for generations.

This also means we are letting down our young people, blocking the optimism younger boys and girls in particular are expressing. Schools in Switzerland seem to be better at nurturing optimism than the workplaces young people move onto.

**As women get older the number who feel less equal at work rises from 21 % to 31 %, while far fewer girls, 15 % of them, report feeling less equal to their male counterparts at school.**

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<sup>8</sup> Advance-HSG-Gender-Intelligence-Report-2019

<sup>9</sup> OECD Report accessed <https://intpolicydigest.org/2019/08/07/switzerland-needs-to-do-better-on-gender-equality/>

**Boys and men  
drew on a larger number of  
female role models.**





« Once I have children, I want to look after them. After all, they're my children too. »

♂ BOY, 17

♂ MAN, 21

Education and upbringing are very important. The younger generation can achieve a lot. »

Young people today are actually most in favour of gender equality. But it will probably take two or three generations until we have complete equality. »

♀ WOMAN, 23

« A man is more likely to be expected to work 100 percent. For a woman, 80 or 50 percent is often okay. »

♂ MAN, 24

« Stereotypes can be so deeply rooted that even women themselves cling to them and are convinced of them. They also pass these on to girls and women in their immediate environment. Therefore, it takes a long time to break these stereotypes. »

♀ WOMAN, 27

« As a woman you are generally taken a little less seriously. »

♀ WOMAN, 24

« I sometimes do have the feeling that I am expected to stay at home and take care of the children, especially by the older generation. »

♀ WOMAN, 34

Women are expected to choose professions where you can work part-time and thus better care for the children. However if a man stays at home to take care of the children and household, he is praised to the skies. »

♀ WOMAN, 20

It's going in the right direction, but very slowly. We are taking three steps forward and one step backward rather than the other way round. »

♂ MAN, 23

« When I was working as a master student in a hospital, the secretary (an elderly woman with a daughter) complained that the boss shouldn't hire female doctors because planning the work is difficult if they get pregnant. »

♀ WOMAN, 27

« It would be helpful if part-time work was more "normal", for both men and women, especially in higher positions. For example, one should be able to share a management position with someone. »

♀ WOMAN, 34

♂ MAN, 21

I work in software engineering in a department with 400 people, 10 of which are women, at most. We don't select by gender, but at the universities there are simply not many women in these fields. »

« I have not been affected myself so far, but I have witnessed discrimination. For example, a female and male friend started the same job at the same time – the female friend was paid 200 Swiss francs less than the male friend. I found that to be a striking difference. »

♂ MAN, 24

# TAKING ACTION

Across the board survey participants ranked part time job opportunities, closely followed by family friendly policies, as the way to improve a work-life balance, which, in turn, is key to genuine progress in gender equality: unlocking real choice for women and men and providing diverse role models for the younger gen-

eration rather than perpetuating stereotypes. Action is therefore needed primarily from employers and the government, but as participants point out there are roles also for the education system, for the media and for the general public. Gender equality cannot be tackled in silos or by one section of society alone.

## 1. EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

Educational authorities, the media, and the government need to increase the flow of information about gender equality including:

- providing and disseminating resources for schools, colleges and youth groups that raise awareness of gender discrimination, discourage stereotyping and promote leadership skills for male and female students equally
- policing social media / advertising / TV in order to discourage discrimination and promote positive and non-stereotypical role models
- promoting discussion and debate at all levels of society, including publicly funded campaigns against gender discrimination to enable men to feel that caring for their children and doing an equal share of the housework is an acceptable role
- providing girls and young women with safe spaces to discuss issues of discrimination and self-confidence in order to have a better understanding of the barriers to women's leadership.

## 2. WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Employers must pro-actively encourage retaining female staff and promoting female leadership by:

- providing part-time job opportunities, including job shares in leadership roles, so that part time employment is no longer a barrier to career advancement and is genuinely open to both women and men
- embedding mentoring into the workplace culture and HR practice, with more attention paid to the transition into work and the importance of female role models and mentors
- raising awareness of the unconscious bias that can be exhibited in job interviews and promotion opportunities and employ strategies to overcome this
- designing and conducting gender trainings for apprenticeship supervisors
- insisting on zero tolerance of sexual harassment at work, whether verbal, physical or social: state funded training programmes for the prevention of harassment should be initiated and attended.



Nearly forty years ago, in 1981, gender equality and equal pay for equal work was written into the Swiss constitution. Nobody can deny that there has been progress but it is also hard to deny that progress has been slow. It is too easy to look at a law and think the work has been done. But even in our survey of optimists too many women and girls report experiencing discrimination in many areas and aspects of their lives. Boys and young men also can see a different way of being a man with a better work/life balance: they ex-

press a willingness to take on childcare, which means a more equitable sharing of domestic unpaid work and less pressure in terms of career and financial power.

The challenge for employers, law and policy makers, teachers, journalists, media executives, and for all of us really, is to find ways of honouring the optimism our survey has revealed and not wait another forty years for real change to be implemented and gender equality to be fully realised.

**Gender equality cannot  
be tackled in silos or by one  
section of society alone.**

# CONCLUSION

What has emerged from the research is that optimism is not enough. Young people are positive about the progress of gender equality and the benefits it will bring but, despite the educational opportunities now available to girls and young women – and the growing awareness of the personal and economic cost of gender dis-

crimination – society, at home and at work, has been slow to adapt. There are steps that need to be taken to embed equality at the heart of our political and economic institutions so that the talents and choices of individuals are recognised and respected, irrespective of their gender or the dictates of tradition.







**There is equality as soon as you no longer have to talk about it. When it no longer matters whether you are a woman or a man, when you are treated equally automatically.**

♂ MAN, 23

# ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL SWITZERLAND

**Plan International Switzerland is a non-profit organization working to advance gender equality and girls' rights in different parts of the world. Our programmes create the conditions for adolescent girls and young adults to be educated, safe and economically empowered.**



Plan International Switzerland is part of the global development organisation Plan International. The organisation has been working for 80 years with children, adolescents, families and communities around the world and is active in more than 75 countries. Plan International has a special focus on the rights of girls and young women. We challenge social norms and attitudes in order to bring transformative change for adolescent girls and young adults. We influence policy and develop programmes that promote education, social justice and economic opportunities for girls. To make girls' concerns and the obstacles they face more visible, Plan International initiated a worldwide day of action for girls: the "International Day of the Girl Child".

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