

Gender ROI™ Insight Series



17 Inclusive health insurance policies

Access to quality healthcare a strategic lever to support and empower women and girls

Ensuring women and girls can access basic healthcare should be a non-negotiable from a human rights and an economic perspective. The reality that gender-appropriate healthcare still isn't a given in many geographies and cultures is mobilising change in policies and practices and spurring innovative solutions on the ground.

A diverse workforce by definition means different healthcare needs.

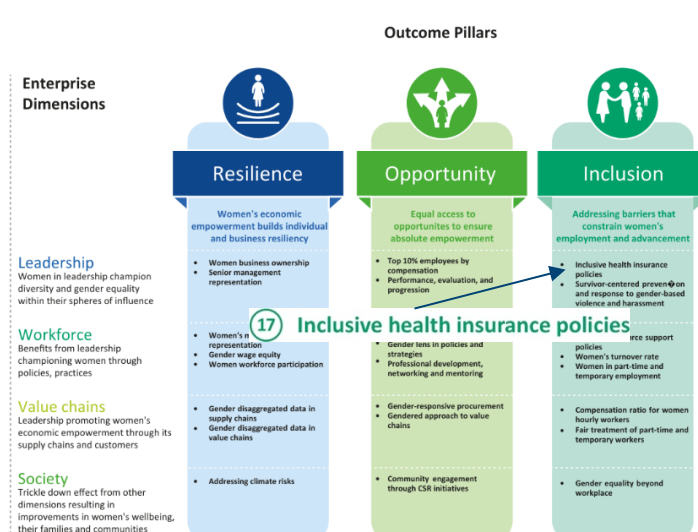
Yet according to the European Commission (EC), at least half of the world's population can't access the health services they need. The EC says about 100 million people fall into extreme poverty each year because of excessive health spending and more than 800 million people spend at least 10 per cent of their household income on healthcare.

When the Sustainable Development Goals were defined in 2015, achieving universal healthcare coverage (UHC) was among the targets adopted worldwide. UHC means all individuals and communities receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship. Despite the UHC push, research by the World Bank and others shows out-of-pocket payments continue to constitute a large share of health expenditures in developing countries.

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- European Commission

This is a pressing issue for both governments and business leaders, who rely on healthy and productive workforces to deliver their goods and services.



Sweef Capital Gender ROI™ indicator matrix

Not surprisingly, women shoulder a higher burden of out-of-pocket costs for health-care services than men who have similar levels of insurance coverage, largely due to non-coverage or limits on coverage for sexual and reproductive health services.

Employer-sponsored healthcare programs were originally developed for a relatively homogenous segment of the population – males of dominant ethnicities, within a certain age range.

Sweef Capital Director Ms Rowena Reyes says the assumptions that underpinned such schemes are no longer valid, such



as the male breadwinner model, and wives having primary responsibility for unpaid family care and household tasks.

“The Covid-19 pandemic showed that health insurance coverage, and gender-specific health policies, are critical to protect individuals and families from financial loss for costs incurred because of sickness or injury,” Ms Reyes says. “Women in insecure or poorly compensated work and juggling unpaid care responsibilities are especially vulnerable. For women who are sole breadwinners, missing work just isn’t an option, let alone affording expensive treatment.”

Policy makers and impact investors are increasingly focused on the link between improving women’s health and increasing economic empowerment. As a policy briefing by the US-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies puts it, “economic empowerment does not exist in isolation in women’s lives; it is interconnected with and dependent upon access to women’s health services, notably maternal health and family planning, as a fundamental enabling factor.”

One of the oldest development finance institutions in the world, Denmark’s Investment Fund for Developing Countries (IFU) has a multi-pronged impact investment strategy with a strong gender lens focus. Primary focus areas are sustainable food systems, green energy and infrastructure, financial services and healthcare, all of which directly and indirectly support the wellbeing of women and girls in developing countries.

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- Birgitte Bang Nielsen, IFU

IFU’s healthcare strategy includes investing directly in primary healthcare and hospitals, outreach and education programs, and funding business models supported by universal healthcare programs or insurance schemes, such as United Exports’ program for workers in South Africa’s blueberry industry (see breakout).

According to IFU’s Sustainability Director, Ms Birgitte Bang Nielsen, IFU’s gender lens focus emerged through a partnership with the Danish Family Planning Association, which helped it identify key gender elements to consider in investment decisions.

“We reviewed all of our investments to see whether they had health and reproductive health policies,” Ms Nielsen says. “In the countries where we work, we see that there are no dedicated initiatives regarding women’s health specifically - even simple things such as separate restrooms. Family planning initiatives as well, for both women and men. And in general women’s career possibilities are limited compared with men’s, because of care responsibilities and maternity leave (access).”

In 2020, some 78 per cent of IFU’s direct investments reported that they had taken initiatives to promote health and reproductive health. The most common initiatives included time off for medical care, providing health check-ups, separate functional facilities and offering health insurance for employees.

Sweef Capital’s Ms Reyes says all enterprise leaders should have a granular understanding of the different healthcare needs and risks of their employee base. “There are specific risk factors that disproportionately affect women employees,” she says. “And women often lack or have limited access to crucial services like pre-natal care, screening for breast or cervical cancer, and other women-specific healthcare needs.”

Smart organisations collect and analyse gender-disaggregated inclusive insurance data so they can address the needs of different employee cohorts.

“They can use this data to make insurance more accessible and customised to women’s and other under-served groups’ health needs,” Ms Reyes says. “Assessing any gaps against prescribed regulations and global



The **Sweef Capital Gender ROI™** identifies gender equality and diversity gaps and informs interventions to build resilience, equal opportunity and inclusion. This Insight Series explores how each indicator contributes to delivering social, financial and economic returns: <https://sweefcapital.com/gender-roitm/>

standards enables companies to identify the priority areas they want to address. That's simply good leadership."#

About the contributors



Birgitte Bang Nielsen is Sustainability Director at IFU, based in Copenhagen.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/birgittebangnielsen/>



Rowena Reyes is Investment Director at Sweef Capital, based in Singapore.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/rowena-reyes-82578850/>

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IFU – Supporting gender initiatives from the ground up

When it comes to achieving change, Denmark's Investment Fund for Developing Countries (IFU) believes small initiatives can make a world of difference to women in the workplace.

Sustainability Director, Ms Birgitte Bang Nielsen, says the IFU works closely with its investments to assess where they're at and progress across a range of impact metrics. IFU has already exceeded its own target of 40 per cent of its portfolio to focus on gender issues by 2024.

"When we support companies, we want them to start off (with) a baseline because if they don't have the baseline, they can't see the change, they can't measure success," Ms Nielsen says. "If they start with showing the successes, they'll create more success and more motivation – that's really important."



For Ms Nielsen, an exemplary success story is United Exports, a South African blueberry producer that received IFU funding for health activities supporting its dispersed workforce, primarily women. Rural communities in South Africa lack access to healthcare, so poor health and family planning is one of the main barriers for gender equality in employment and empowerment, enabling skills development and leadership. By prioritising good health and wellbeing through its gender equality program, United Exports supports more women to have the opportunity to remain in employment and further their careers.

The program involves qualified nurses conducting daily primary healthcare for six thousand employees at more than a dozen production sites, providing services such as HIV testing, family planning, chronic medication monitoring, and assisting in recognising symptoms needing referrals. United Exports also works closely with mental healthcare specialists, who provide one-on-one counselling in addition to life skills training and home packs for family and community. They address issues such as conflict management, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and leadership,

United Exports has also established the Ernita Sewing Enterprise, which produces workwear for farm employees and reusable hygiene products as a Gold Standard enterprise under the [Days for Girls program](#) for Southern Africa. Through this initiative, United Exports improves the menstrual hygiene management of female employees and adolescent girls in community schools, in addition to improving their quality of life and reducing absenteeism in school and the workplace.#

For more on IFU's impact strategy, visit: <https://www.ifu.dk/om-ifu/>. To learn about United Exports' impact initiatives, visit: <https://united-exports.com/impact/#environment>



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