

How to speed up change for women in the workplace

By [Joanne Bushell](#)

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The theme of International Women's Day 2013, on 8 March, is "The Gender Agenda: Gaining Momentum". There are many signs of this momentum in Africa - from female entrepreneurship, which is driving growth in the region, to the fact there are female government ministers or heads of state in South Africa, Ghana, Liberia, Malawi and Rwanda.



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In fact, Rwanda, with 56% of seats in its House of Deputies held by women, is currently the only government in the world dominated by women, putting the East African country well ahead of the United States, United Kingdom and Japan, which all fall below the 25% mark.

So, there is momentum, but not enough of it. For instance, the global downturn appears to have worsened gender gaps in employment, according to the International Labour Organisation.

In addition, Africa lags when it comes to hiring working mothers, according to research by Regus. In sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) fewer than a quarter of firms (24%) anticipate hiring more returning mothers - less than the global average. North Africa (33%) and South Africa (31%) are slightly higher, but still behind the rest of the world.

I believe such figures are based on conservatism, not anything more pernicious. African businesses clearly value the contribution that women can make to the workforce: in Regus research, almost six out of ten (58%) businesses said firms would be more productive if they hired more women returning to work after maternity. This figure is higher than the global average of 57%. So what's needed is for the practice in Africa to catch up with the theory.

As well as hiring more working mothers, employers could help their performance in the workplace by introducing more family-friendly working. When Regus surveyed businesses on how to help women return to work, there was widespread agreement in Africa on which practices are critical:

- flexible working hours (97%)
- the option to work closer to home (92%).
- near-site crèche facilities (86%)
- flexibility to choose video conferencing over travel (80%).

Therefore, as policymakers try to drive momentum on the gender agenda, let's see businesses join in too. Almost six in ten have said that employing working mothers could boost firms' productivity, so let's innovate to make this happen. If we remove the barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the economy, the gains can include increased productivity, better corporate leadership, and more efficient utilisation of resources and talents.

There are plenty of ways to introduce the more flexible working practices that can help women re-enter the workforce. Giving staff flexibility over their working hours can help fit in with childcare (or care of other relatives). Letting staff work at locations closer to home or crèches can cut stressful hours spent commuting.

These locations can include branch offices or business centres. For example, the growth of Regus' network of business centres in Africa - adding new countries as well as strengthening its presence in existing countries like South Africa, Morocco and elsewhere in 2012/13 - gives employers and their staff greater choice about how and where they work. Instead of enduring a long daily commute to the same fixed office, staff can work at a business centre closer to home or their childcare provider. Or they can have meetings by video link instead of having to travel abroad.

Not only do such measures make working more family-friendly, they can also help companies save on costs and raise productivity. This really would make International Women's Day, on 8 March 2013, a day to celebrate.

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