

Beijing+30: A Roadmap for Women's Rights for the Next Thirty Years



By Jennifer Klein, Rachel Vogelstein, and Lauren Hoffman



IGP Institute of
Global Politics
WOMEN'S INITIATIVE



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The Institute of Global Politics (IGP) Women’s Initiative harnesses the targeted focus of a dedicated think tank with the breadth and power of a world-class research university to develop policy solutions that advance women’s full and equal participation in the United States and globally. Housed within Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), the IGP Women’s Initiative is led by women’s rights experts Jennifer Klein and Rachel Vogelstein. For more information, visit <https://igp.sipa.columbia.edu/our-work/initiatives/womens-initiative>.

ABOUT GWL VOICES

GWL Voices is an organization of women leaders from all regions and backgrounds committed to building a gender-equal international system that effectively advances sustainable development, peace, security, and human rights. GWL Voices’ almost eighty members leverage their voices and experience to shape and rally global leaders and public opinion to build a gender-equal international system that places women’s rights and transformative power at the center. For more information, visit <https://www.gwlvoices.org/>.

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ABSTRACT

This report provides an actionable roadmap that can be used to implement the Beijing Platform for Action over the next thirty years, outlining policy priorities critical to advancing the full and equal participation of women and girls in the twenty-first century—including in the areas of democracy and human rights, technology, economic participation, and conflict and climate. The report also proposes key levers designed to accelerate the pace of change, including innovative financing, institutional leadership and reform, coalition building, and improved data and research. It concludes with a call to accelerate progress on fulfilling the Beijing Platform and realize the promise of women's full and equal participation once and for all.

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FOREWORD

Thirty years ago in Beijing, I declared a simple but transformative truth: Women's rights are human rights. That declaration was never just a slogan. It was a commitment to reimagine our societies, our institutions, and our global systems through the lens of equality. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action became a landmark blueprint for that transformation, and its legacy continues to shape movements for justice and equality across the globe.

I have long believed—and the evidence for this is overwhelming—that sidelining women's health, education, and political and economic participation harms not only women, but also entire nations. The Beijing Conference was a rare chance to break the silence on abuses and injustices, and to affirm that women's rights and human rights are one and the same.

This report is not only a commemoration of that moment in Beijing, but also a prescription for the future and a call to action. It gathers the insights of leaders, practitioners, and activists who know that women's equality is not only a policy priority, but also a precondition for peace, prosperity, and sustainable development. And it makes clear that aspiration and rhetoric are not enough. Only action—urgent, sustained, courageous—will move us forward.

The urgency has never been greater. We are living in an era of regression as well as progress. In too many places, hard-won gains are being rolled back. Authoritarians are silencing women and girls. Rights we thought were secure are under renewed attack. And still, women remain dramatically underrepresented in positions of power, particularly in the national and multilateral institutions that set the course for our common future. Until we achieve parity in leadership at every level, we will continue to fall short of the promises made in Beijing.

The challenges of this moment—climate change, violent conflict, democratic backsliding, economic instability, and technological disruption—demand new forms of leadership and the full participation of women in all facets of society. Women have shown time and again that when they are given the chance to contribute, change follows: Priorities shift, processes are more representative, and outcomes are more fully responsive to the needs of all people. Full and equal participation is not simply about adding more women to existing tables. It is about transforming how decisions are made.

Reforming our national and multilateral system to better respond to the urgent need to address women's rights and opportunities requires bold steps. Representation must be matched with resources. Commitments must be measured with accountability. And leadership must be redefined to reflect the values women have long championed: peace, equity, care, and justice.

This report offers a roadmap for the next chapter. It connects the unfinished work of the past to the urgent demands of our present and the possibilities of our future. It reminds us that equality is not inevitable—it is intentional. In this moment of both progress and peril, deliberate collective action is the only way to honor the promise we made in Beijing, and to finally deliver on it for generations to come.



67th Secretary of State and former Senator from New York; Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia SIPA; Institute of Global Politics Faculty Advisory Board Chair

INTRODUCTION

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the 1995 United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, a watershed moment in the fight for women's rights. At the Beijing Conference, tens of thousands of government delegates and civil society leaders gathered to recognize that women's rights are human rights, and 189 nations adopted an ambitious Declaration and Platform for Action that outlined an agenda for the full and equal participation of women and girls.¹ Spanning twelve critical areas—including education, health, freedom from violence, economic participation, power and leadership, and the environment—the Beijing Platform for Action created a blueprint for progress for women around the world.²

The past three decades have produced significant gains in many of the Beijing Platform's critical areas of concern. Women have won legal rights and protections in over a hundred nations, and an estimated 1,531 legal reforms were enacted between 1995 and 2024 that advance women's equal participation in society.³ The gap in primary schooling has virtually closed on a global level, giving a generation of girls access to educational opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers did not have.⁴ The maternal mortality rate declined substantially, and young women experienced the fastest increase in access to modern family planning in history.⁵

This work remains unfinished, however, and in areas other than the above, progress has been incredibly slow. Over the past thirty years, global progress in women's formal labor force participation has been stagnant.⁶ Violence against women persists in every region of the world.⁷ Women remain dramatically outnumbered in positions of power and leadership in both the public and private sectors, and remain underrepresented in peace and security efforts—notwithstanding evidence that their participation makes peace more likely to endure.⁸ And even where legal protections for women's rights do exist, stubborn social norms inhibit equal application and implementation of laws.⁹

Furthermore, today, women and girls face new and emerging challenges to their rights and full participation. Rising authoritarianism and democratic erosion have resulted in a systemic roll-back of women's rights, including enactment of regressive laws and policies and dissolution of government ministries and initiatives focused on women's rights.¹⁰ Technological innovations that generated new opportunities for women and girls have also introduced new forms of inequality, including threats to women's safety online, amplification of misogynistic content, and bias in artificial intelligence (AI).¹¹ Conflicts and crises, including the effects of climate change, are surging around the world and pose disproportionate risks to the health, economic participation, and security of women and girls.¹²

These challenges are rising at a moment when resources, policies, and political will in support of women's equality are under attack in many parts of the world. Despite a strong body of evidence that confirms the benefits of equal opportunities for women and girls—including economic growth, improved education and health outcomes, and lower political instability and violence—illiberal actors are calling the global consensus on women's rights into question and challenging policies that safeguard and advance these rights at the national and international levels.¹³ As UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned at the sixty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in

March 2025, “A surge in misogyny and a furious kickback against equality threaten to slam on the brakes and push progress into reverse.”¹⁴

Despite these current challenges, there is still cause for hope. Women’s rights activists worldwide continue to serve on the front lines of pro-democracy efforts, organizing to challenge repressive regimes and advocate for progressive reforms—including changes that will advance women’s rights.¹⁵ Some countries have led the way in developing innovative policies to strengthen equality for women and girls, from online safety laws that address harassment and abuse, to policies that incentivize fathers to take paid parental leave to promote an equitable division of caregiving responsibilities, to national climate action plans that incorporate women’s participation into adaptation and mitigation strategies.¹⁶ And existing international frameworks, such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, as well as recent outcomes at international conferences—including the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the sixty-ninth session of CSW—reaffirm that a majority of countries view women’s equality as not only a fundamental human right but also as an essential element to advancing progress, prosperity, and stability.¹⁷

This report comes at a pivotal moment for the future of women’s rights. To combat global regression on women’s rights and accelerate progress, the report offers an actionable roadmap to meet modern challenges and further the Beijing Platform over the next thirty years. The report reflects insights from a global commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Conference cohosted by the Institute of Global Politics (IGP) Women’s Initiative at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA); GWL Voices; Georgetown University’s Institute for Women, Peace and Security; Vital Voices; and Wellesley College in March 2025, which featured recommendations from world leaders and young activists at the forefront of the women’s movement.¹⁸

Section I of the report outlines policy priorities critical to advancing equality for women and girls in the twenty-first century—including in the areas of democracy and human rights, technology, economic participation, and conflict and climate—and provides national and regional examples of policy reform. Section II outlines key levers for accelerating the pace of change, including innovative financing, institutional leadership and reform, coalition building, and expansion of data and research. The report concludes with a call to turn the aspiration of the Beijing Platform into action and fulfill the promise of women’s full and equal participation once and for all.

SECTION I

Twenty-First-Century Women's Rights Policy Priorities

Each of the twelve areas outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 is critical to advancing women's rights and achieving the global Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, and we must continue to make and sustain progress on everything from improving women's health to expanding access to education to addressing violence against women and other safety concerns. Making progress in 2025, however, requires particular attention to recent and rising threats to women and girls. To fulfill the promise of Beijing in the present moment, the international community should prioritize women's rights in the areas of democracy and human rights, technology, economic participation, and conflict and climate.

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Advancing democracy and human rights is essential to unlocking the full potential of women and girls in the twenty-first century. Threats to democratic rights, freedoms, and institutions are growing around the globe. According to the Varieties of Democracy Institute at the University of Gothenburg, autocracies currently outnumber democracies for the first time in twenty years, with nearly three-quarters of the world's population now living under autocratic regimes—the highest number since 1978.¹⁹ Moreover, more recent democracies—including Hungary, India, Poland, and Turkey—are becoming less free, while established democracies, including France, Germany, and the United States, are witnessing a rise in illiberalism and the ascension of far-right populist movements and leaders.²⁰

A defining and often-overlooked feature of the global resurgence in authoritarianism is the organized, transnational effort to roll back women's rights.²¹ This is, in part, due to the link between women's rights and democracy: From the global suffrage movement led by women at the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century to their leadership at the forefront of the Arab Spring uprisings in the early 2000s, women's political and civil participation is strongly correlated with democratic movements.²² Consequently, many autocratic leaders have sought to marginalize women's rights and roles in the public sphere in an effort to quash support for democracy.²³

As autocratic movements have risen in recent years, so too has regression on women's freedom. In 2024, nearly a quarter of countries reported a backlash on women's rights and gender equality.²⁴ In Argentina, for example, President Javier Milei vowed to remove the serious crime of femicide from Argentina's penal code, associating it with “wokeism” and “radical feminism.”²⁵ In The Gambia, religious conservative lawmakers attempted to overturn the country's ban on female genital mutilation/cutting, notwithstanding the risks to girls and women.²⁶ In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan withdrew his nation from the Istanbul Convention—a landmark international treaty aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women—and his government alleged that the treaty “was incompatible with Turkey's social and family values.”²⁷ And in Afghanistan, under the Taliban rule, women have been subjected to grave human rights violations and systematic exclusion from public life in what scholars have termed “gender apartheid.”²⁸

In addition to rolling back legal protections for women's rights, many authoritarian-leaning and right-wing populist regimes have also dismantled government bodies focused on advancing women's rights, under the guise of defending “traditional values” or combating so-called “gender ideology.” In Argentina, under President Milei, the Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity was eliminated, and the country's teen pregnancy prevention program and budget for the office of sexual and reproductive health was cut by nearly two-thirds.²⁹ Similarly, in Turkey, under President Erdoğan, the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs was dissolved and replaced by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, signaling a shift away from women's rights.³⁰ In the United States, President Donald Trump disbanded the White House Gender Policy Council on the first day of his second term through an executive order titled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.”³¹ The Trump administration also eliminated the Office of Global Women's Issues at the State Department, initiated a purge of federal women's rights programs, and

eliminated references to many women's human rights abuses in the State Department's annual Human Rights Reports.³²

These institutional erasures are often coupled with attacks on judicial independence and the rule of law that in turn undermine women's rights. In Poland, for instance, the Law and Justice party packed the Constitutional Tribunal with loyalists, enabling the court to impose a near-total abortion ban in 2020.³³ In the United States, following a raft of new judicial appointments, the Supreme Court jettisoned nearly five decades of established precedent by overturning *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, thereby eliminating federal protections for abortion and undermining constitutional privacy protections that safeguard other human rights—including the right to contraception and same-sex marriage.³⁴

Authoritarian leaders also promote policies that reinforce traditional hierarchies, such as pronatalist policies that incentivize women to assume unpaid caretaking roles. Under Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, the government advised women to focus on caregiving instead of closing the pay gap, and eliminated personal income taxes for women who have four or more children as part of a seven-point “Family Protection Action Plan.”³⁵ In Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, nearly a dozen regional governments have enacted laws to pay female college students to give birth to healthy babies in an effort to increase the country's birth rate, and the government passed a law that bans “childfree propaganda” and imposes large fines for violators.³⁶ Although it is important to support caregivers, these policies have the effect of motivating women to retreat from the public sphere instead of supporting them in balancing work and family life. These leaders also strategically position women's rights as direct threats to “traditional values,” stoking hostility among citizens, particularly young men who feel left behind by the rapid socioeconomic and cultural changes of the past few decades.³⁷

A growing coalition of authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning leaders have exported an anti-equality agenda into multilateral forums, rejecting previously agreed-upon language in UN resolutions, thereby eroding established international norms and frameworks on women's rights.³⁸ At the 2024 World Health Assembly, for example, several conservative states objected to the inclusion of “gender” in multiple resolutions, even though all member states had previously agreed to this language in the Sustainable Development Goals.³⁹ At the COP29 climate summit in 2024, the Vatican, Egypt, Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia joined together to deadlock negotiations over the text of the Lima Work Programme on Gender, which was first established in 2014, by objecting to insertion of the term “gender,” which formerly had been included without controversy.⁴⁰ This backtracking threatens the thirty-year consensus on women's rights forged during and after the Beijing Conference.

Furthermore, many illiberal leaders target women who raise their voices and advocate for democracy—including politicians, journalists, and human rights activists—through attacks and harassment that reinforce patriarchal norms about women's place in public life.⁴¹ An Institute for Strategic Dialogue study of the 2020 US congressional elections revealed that women running for office were subjected to far higher levels of online abuse than men: On Facebook, Democratic women candidates faced abusive comments at a rate ten times as high as that experienced by their male peers.⁴² Comparable patterns of harassment have been reported in countries such as India, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe.⁴³ In sub-Saharan Africa, women journalists face organized trolling, online smear campaigns using nonconsensual intimate images, doxing, and physical violence.⁴⁴ In Azerbaijan, investigative

journalist Khadija Ismayilova was surveilled, blackmailed—including with intimate images—and imprisoned for exposing corruption at the highest levels of government.⁴⁵ And in China, the “Feminist Five,” a group of women’s rights advocates, were detained by the Chinese government for over a month for handing out stickers protesting sexual harassment on public transportation for International Women’s Day.⁴⁶ Women human rights defenders are also at particular risk of physical violence: A 2023 survey of women human rights defenders conducted by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation found that approximately one in four respondents had received death threats, and thirty-seven activists had survived attempted murders.⁴⁷

Given the strong link between authoritarianism and backlash against women’s equality, investing in efforts to safeguard democracy and human rights is an essential priority to protect and expand the status of women and girls.⁴⁸ Research confirms that the converse is also true: Promoting women’s rights and civic participation is a critical and often underestimated tool in the fight against democratic erosion.⁴⁹ Around the world, women’s rights activists continue to be on the front lines of pro-democracy efforts, organizing to challenge repressive regimes and demand representation.

Many modern feminist leaders explicitly link their work on women’s rights to the defense and renewal of democracy, making the case that women’s equality is essential to full democratic participation. For example, in Tunisia, Aya Chebbi, founder of Nala Feminist Collective, has linked women’s rights with the pro-democracy movements in North Africa, insisting that democratization efforts in the region cannot succeed without the full participation of women and young people.⁵⁰ In Slovenia, the 8th of March Institute, led by Nika Kovač, helped defeat Slovenia’s populist right-wing Prime Minister Janez Janša in 2022 by framing the election as a referendum on democracy itself and boosting voter turnout by nearly 20 percent.⁵¹ In South Korea, young women were central to the 2024–2025 mass protests that led to the impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol following his autocratic declaration of martial law.⁵² Many women viewed the demonstrations against President Yoon’s government as not only a rejection of authoritarian governance but also as a response to entrenched misogyny and the president’s denial of systemic sexism.⁵³

Campaigns for reproductive rights have also become a key driver of women’s democratic resistance. In Latin America, the “Green Wave” has mobilized over a million women across class and generational lines to defend reproductive rights and support democratic participation through legal action, mass protest, and organizing.⁵⁴ The movement has succeeded in winning abortion legalization campaigns in several Latin American countries and in putting women’s rights at the forefront of democratic debate.⁵⁵ Similarly, in Poland, mass women’s rights mobilizations against abortion bans have become one of the most visible forms of democratic protest in the country’s recent history. The country’s 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling that effectively outlawed abortion was met with the largest demonstrations since the fall of communism.⁵⁶ These protests, led by groups such as the All-Poland Women’s Strike, not only targeted restrictions on reproductive freedom, but also challenged the broader authoritarian tendencies of the Law and Justice party, including its attacks on judicial independence and civil society.⁵⁷ These movements are critical not only to defending the consensus on women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights forged at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo but also to the health and strength of democracies around the world.⁵⁸

Progress on these fronts, however, has not been uniform. Despite commitments made at Cairo, recent years have seen a rollback on sexual and reproductive health and rights in some national contexts. Globally, the trend toward liberalization stands in contrast to the 2022 United States Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*.⁵⁹ *Dobbs* broke from decades of expanding recognition of reproductive rights as human rights and set a precedent that other governments could cite to justify abortion restrictions. For example, Hungary has imposed increasingly restrictive measures, framing abortion access as a threat to “family values” and national identity, and Argentina has recently started to follow this trend as well.⁶⁰ At the same time, some countries have strengthened their abortion laws since *Dobbs*: France, for example, became the first country to guarantee a constitutional right to abortion in 2024.⁶¹

References to sexual and reproductive health and rights are increasingly contested in international negotiations or diluted or omitted altogether in outcome documents. For example, in 2019, the United States threatened to veto a UN resolution on conflict-related sexual violence because it included references to sexual and reproductive health and rights.⁶² The final text was adopted without this language, despite the fact that access to reproductive care is essential to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.⁶³ And although the sixty-ninth session of CSW adopted an important political declaration on women's rights and empowerment in 2025, it did not include any mention of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the United States declined to endorse this declaration.⁶⁴

To protect women's rights at this moment, governments, multilateral institutions, and philanthropies should address the link between women's rights activism and pro-democracy efforts. Campaigns for women's rights should prioritize investments in programs to safeguard democracy; in addition, pro-democracy initiatives should support efforts led by women's rights defenders and women's movements on the front lines. Some funders are beginning to acknowledge the interrelationship between the fight for women's rights and the fight for democracy. For example, in 2023, Open Society Foundations spearheaded the creation of the Women's Political Leadership Fund, now known as the Colmena Fund, as part of its \$100 million commitment to women's political leadership to identify and support women political leaders advancing human rights, equality, and democratic values across the Global South.⁶⁵ In 2025, Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security launched the Women Changemakers Initiative, a cross-border, intergenerational platform to promote collective action for women leading at all levels.⁶⁶ However, to succeed in protecting women's rights and democracy at a moment of regression, more must be done to resource the women leaders and movements on the front lines.

Furthermore, governments must support international bodies that are critical to protecting and advancing women's human rights and leverage the existing human rights architecture that has helped spur greater progress toward equality for women and girls. One institution that warrants greater investment is the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a body of independent experts that monitors implementation by the 189 states that have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and helps hold them accountable to their women's rights commitments.⁶⁷ CEDAW addresses abuses of women's human rights in some of the most challenging places in the world for women. For example, in June

2025, the Committee reviewed Afghanistan's compliance with international human rights obligations since the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, finding widespread denial of women's rights under international law.⁶⁸

However, the efficacy of CEDAW is undermined by financial constraints and the UN's liquidity crisis.⁶⁹ In some cases, nations have even withheld support in response to the Committee's recommendations: Japan, for instance, froze its financial support for CEDAW in 2025 in response to the Committee's recommendation to end male-only imperial succession.⁷⁰ To ensure effective implementation of the CEDAW treaty through the work of the Committee, member states must increase their contributions to the UN treaty body system, ensure timely payment of assessed dues, and expand financial support in order to safeguard the independence and effectiveness of international human rights mechanisms and thereby increase accountability for violations of women's human rights.

Growing Regression on Social Norms Among Young Men

The global backlash against women's rights is reflected by both rising support for traditional social norms and regression in support of women's participation in the workplace and public life, particularly among young men. A 2025 survey conducted in thirty nations by Ipsos UK and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London found that nearly 60 percent of Gen Z men say that "we have gone so far in promoting women's equality that we are discriminating against men," compared with nearly 40 percent of Gen Z women.⁷¹ Furthermore, a recent PerryUndem survey consisting of forty in-depth interviews with Gen Z men across the United States found that some have increasingly traditional views on gender roles due to three factors: feeling left out, attacked or uncertain about their place in the world; online narratives; and family upbringing and role models.⁷²

Social media platforms have helped amplify this shift toward traditional norms through their algorithms.⁷³ Content reflecting these norms is concentrated and amplified on the "manosphere," a set of digital communities glorifying aggressive masculinity and positioning women's rights as a threat, with exponential effect.⁷⁴ These narratives have gained particular popularity among younger men online, who are now more likely than older men to support regressive social norms, which researchers attribute to a perception of loss of status among men.⁷⁵ This shift has emerged around the globe: For example, in South Korea, online youth platforms are rife with hate speech and threats of violence directed at women.⁷⁶ In the United Kingdom, new data from the Department for Education reveals that misogynistic attitudes have reached "epidemic scale" by the end of secondary school, with over half of 11- to 19-year-old students witnessing comments they consider misogynistic.⁷⁷ These trends confirm that more research must be done to better understand not only the underlying cause of these shifts but also the best strategies for addressing and challenging myths, discrimination, and threats of violence toward women online.

TECHNOLOGY

Closing gender gaps in technology—including those related to women’s access, safety, and participation in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields—is critical to advancing equality for women and girls in the modern era. As the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized, technology is a double-edged sword for women’s rights and participation in society.⁷⁸ On the one hand, technological advancements have provided significant opportunities for women’s economic participation by creating markets for women entrepreneurs, accelerating greater financial inclusion through digital financial services on mobile phones, and enabling remote and flexible work.⁷⁹ Technology has also reshaped the environment for women’s political and civic participation by creating new platforms that can be used to organize campaigns locally and transnationally, mobilize support, and advocate for rights and protections.⁸⁰ For example, organizers have used social media campaigns to fight for girls’ education, to raise awareness about sexual harassment in the workplace, and to protest against femicide, among other issues.⁸¹

On the other hand, technology has given rise to new forms of inequality. Although the world is more connected now than ever before, the digital gender divide is stark. According to the International Telecommunication Union, 189 million more men than women were using the internet in 2024; the gap was most pronounced in Africa, where only 31 percent of women had internet access, compared with 43 percent of men.⁸² This gap also exists in mobile phone usage, with 235 million fewer women than men using mobile internet in low- and middle-income countries.⁸³ The gap in digital access can be exacerbated by traditional social norms that prohibit or limit women’s and girls’ access to technology, thereby undermining their digital literacy and skills and inhibiting women’s full participation in a tech-driven economy in which more than 90 percent of jobs have some digital component.⁸⁴ The digital gender divide not only impairs women’s earning potential and access to jobs but also compromises broader economic growth: By some estimates, closing the gap in mobile internet access could add \$1.3 trillion in GDP to low- and middle-income countries by 2030.⁸⁵

Women are also dramatically underrepresented in STEM fields globally. Although STEM jobs have been increasing, women comprised only 28 percent of the global STEM workforce in 2024, holding just one in five technology positions and only 26 percent of AI and data jobs in 2022.⁸⁶ The gender gap in STEM fields, which offer some of the most lucrative professions around the world, is rooted in disparities in STEM education: Globally, between 2018 and 2023, women accounted for just 35 percent of all STEM graduates.⁸⁷ Men were the majority of STEM graduates in 113 of 122 countries, and some countries, including Hungary, reported a decline in female STEM graduates.⁸⁸

The imbalance in access to technology and STEM professions results in the underrepresentation of women in the technology sector, particularly in leadership and technical roles. This gap in the tech industry has profound implications for how platforms are built, which problems are prioritized, and who is considered during the development process, thereby helping create the conditions for perpetuation of biases and stereotypes in technology. A review by the Berkeley Haas Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership of AI systems using machine learning across industries from 1988 to 2021 found that 44 percent exhibit sex bias, with 26 percent demonstrating both sex and racial bias.⁸⁹ Examples include

AI health diagnostic tools misdiagnosing women's health conditions, AI recruitment tools prioritizing male applicants, and AI lending tools offering women less credit because their systems were trained using biased data.⁹⁰ A 2024 UNESCO study found that open-source large language models (LLMs), including Llama 2 and GPT-2, were reinforcing occupational segregation and regressive social norms by assigning high-earning jobs, such as engineer and doctor, to men, and low-earning jobs, such as domestic worker and cook, to women.⁹¹ These disparities can even affect the functionality of technology: A recent Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford study found that the error rate for facial recognition software was nearly 35 percent for women of color and just under 1 percent for light-skinned men.⁹² Furthermore, women are predicted to be more likely to lose their jobs to AI than their male counterparts: A Brookings Institution analysis of OpenAI's GPT-4 task ratings found that about 36 percent of women work in occupations where generative AI could reduce task time by half, compared with 25 percent of men.⁹³

The underrepresentation of women in the technology sector also results in product design that often fails to prevent or address online harassment and abuse disproportionately experienced by women and girls. The scourge of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is a new, twenty-first-century form of violence against women that is inflicting widespread harm around the world.⁹⁴ It includes an array of digital harms, including deepfakes, image-based sexual abuse, doxing, online stalking, coordinated harassment campaigns, and disinformation.⁹⁵ A 2021 Economist Intelligence Unit report found that between 2019 and 2020, 85 percent of women globally had witnessed or experienced online violence; 38 percent had been personally affected.⁹⁶ Rapid advancements and the under-regulation of AI has fueled the growth of TFGBV, and, in particular, the rise of deepfake image-based sexual abuse, which is included in an estimated 98 percent of all deepfake videos online, with 99 percent of those depicting women.⁹⁷ The underrepresentation of women in technology fields is a factor in the insufficient regulation of these harms; in fact, even while TFGBV is rising globally, there is a growing movement within the technology sector to retreat from trust and safety and content moderation infrastructure and policies.⁹⁸

The proliferation of TFGBV does not just harm individuals—it also undermines women's democratic participation by serving as a political silencing tool and deterring women and girls from entering or remaining in public life. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, nearly 42 percent of women parliamentarians globally have had “extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of [themselves] spread on social media.”⁹⁹ Online hate can also translate into real-life harm and inspire acts of violence: For example, Slovakia's former president Zuzana Čaputová received death threats that influenced her decision not to run for reelection in 2024, and Dutch Deputy Prime Minister Sigrid Kaag resigned in 2023 after years of “hate, intimidation, and threats” amplified by social media.¹⁰⁰ TFGBV has also become a weapon used by authoritarian actors to carry out broader interference operations abroad. For example, Russian-backed disinformation campaigns during Germany's 2021 elections attacked Green Party candidate Annalena Baerbock using misogynist slurs and conspiracy theories, demonstrating how online abuse can be mobilized to discredit women leaders and destabilize democratic institutions.¹⁰¹

To promote equality for women and girls in a tech-driven era, it is essential to close gaps in technology—including by eliminating the gender digital divide, improving women's representation in the tech

sector, and addressing online harassment and abuse. Doing so will require a multifaceted approach and investment by governments, multilateral institutions, philanthropy, and the private sector. Additionally, nonprofit organizations worldwide will need to become more adept with both use cases and harms of technology in order to better advocate against tech implementation that disproportionately harms women and girls.

To help close the digital gender divide, more support is needed for initiatives that increase women's and girls' access to technologies, including digital and skills training and social norm change efforts that normalize women's tech use. Many innovative programs should be replicated and brought to scale. For example, in Cambodia, the Sisters of Code camp provides a coding program for public school girls ages 10 to 20, and in Northern Nigeria, a World Bank initiative is equipping girls and women with digital skills, especially in underserved rural regions, resulting in increased confidence, autonomy, and financial access.¹⁰² Government commitments to boost women's online participation have also proven to be effective organizing tools. For example, in Chile and Rwanda, government initiatives designed to promote digital access and increase STEM education for women and girls have spurred progress, and nations, including Botswana, Costa Rica, and Senegal, have set targets for women's inclusion in national broadband plans.¹⁰³

Multilateral commitments to boost women's internet access are also crucial: In 2023, for instance, G20 nations committed to cut the gender digital divide in half by 2030, and by May 2024, government and private sector partners had generated \$1 billion in pledges to meet this goal.¹⁰⁴ Although a monitoring mechanism is needed to ensure accountability, these government and multilateral commitments help support advocates pushing for greater investment.

Legal and Policy Approaches to Addressing TFGBV

To address online harassment and abuse, stronger national and international laws and policies are needed in order to provide recourse to survivors and require technology companies to take action that will prevent these harms. Several promising models exist: Australia's Online Safety Act, for example, empowers the Australian eSafety Commissioner to issue takedown notices for a broad range of harms, including adult cyber abuse, cyberbullying of children, and image-based abuse, and impose fines on platforms that fail to comply.¹⁰⁵ The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act criminalizes the act of sharing or threatening to share intimate images without consent.¹⁰⁶ The United States recently enacted the bipartisan TAKE IT DOWN Act, which makes it unlawful for a person to knowingly publish or intentionally threaten to publish nonconsensual intimate imagery, including deepfakes, on social media and other platforms and requires social media companies to remove the content within 48 hours of a request from the affected individual.¹⁰⁷ The European Union's Digital Services Act requires major digital platforms and search engines to assess and mitigate systemic risks, including illegal content and gender-based violence;

Legal and Policy Approaches to Addressing TFGBV (continued)

its Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence requires European Union member states to transpose its criminalization of forms of cyber violence, including the nonconsensual sharing of intimate or manipulated images, cyberstalking, and cyber harassment, into their national legal frameworks by 2027; and its AI Act mandates the labeling of synthetic content such as deepfakes, among other important provisions.¹⁰⁸

Countries in Latin America have also passed a series of reforms to address TFGBV. In 2021, Mexico promulgated a series of reforms through the Olimpia Law, which recognizes digital violence and criminalizes nonconsensual distribution of intimate imagery; Argentina enacted its own Olimpia Act in 2023, which empowers courts with protective measures, including cease-and-desist orders, communication restrictions, and content removal orders.¹⁰⁹ In Asia, Singapore conducted a public consultation on online harms in 2024 to inform legislation, resulting in the creation of a new agency, the Online Safety Commission, to support victims of online harms—including cyberbullying and nonconsensual sharing of intimate images—which will begin operations in 2026.¹¹⁰ And in Africa, Nigerian civil society, in collaboration with the National Information Technology Development Agency, has helped advocate for the Online Harms Protections Bill to place greater responsibility on internet service providers and platforms for addressing and remedying online harms.¹¹¹ These national models should be implemented, evaluated, and scaled where successful, and countries should support regulators charged with enforcing these laws.

At the regional and international level, important efforts are also underway to tackle online harms. For example, the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse has brought together over a dozen governments to prevent and address TFGBV, including financial pledges and commitments to improve research and data collection.¹¹² Furthermore, the UN General Assembly recently adopted a resolution on preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls in the digital environment, and also adopted the landmark UN Convention against Cybercrime, which recognizes how cybercrime affects women and stresses the importance of addressing TFGBV.¹¹³

Moreover, as technology continues to advance and evolve, multilateral institutions and nations should develop frameworks to ensure that new technologies address both safety and equity and are grounded in human rights. At the 2024 Summit of the Future, the United Nations adopted the Global Digital Compact, the first comprehensive global framework for digital cooperation and AI governance, which includes a commitment to mainstream women’s perspectives in digital connectivity strategies, help close the gender digital divide, and foster a safe and inclusive digital environment for women and

girls.¹¹⁴ In 2024, the European Union adopted the AI Act, the world's first comprehensive AI law, which aims to protect fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law by creating a risk-based approach to regulating AI so that high-risk AI applications—including those used in educational institutions, for employment purposes, and in safety components in critical infrastructures—face the strictest requirements.¹¹⁵ More such policies are needed to ensure that new and emerging technologies advance women's equality rather than undermine it.

Even in the absence of regulation, technology companies and philanthropies can and should take steps to reduce online harms and promote trust and safety. Some technology companies have developed tools to make it more difficult to create deepfakes, including “immunizing” and “poisoning” images, and technologists in West Africa and Central Africa have developed an AI-powered chatbot that provides survivors of online harassment and abuse with self-help strategies and support resources.¹¹⁶ Philanthropic leaders have also made commitments: In 2023, a group of ten leading philanthropies—including the Ford Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Mozilla Foundation, Omidyar Network, and Open Society Foundations—contributed more than \$200 million in funding for public interest efforts to reduce AI harms and advance responsible use and innovation.¹¹⁷ Multisectoral partnerships formed to address online harms have also proven fruitful: In 2024, for example, a group of philanthropies and technology companies, including OpenAI, Google, Discord, Knight Foundation, and AI Collaborative, invested \$28 million in initial funding to launch ROOST (Robust Open Online Safety Tools), which develops open-source safety tools for the AI era.¹¹⁸ To advance women's equality in technology, more private sector initiatives—in collaboration with public sector efforts—are needed in order to ensure that women and girls have digital access, participate in STEM fields, and are safe online. These efforts must include robust investment in women-led tech ventures to close the gap in access to tech capital.¹¹⁹

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Advancing women's economic participation is critical to achieving women's equality in the modern era. Thirty years after the Beijing Conference, women's labor force participation has remained largely stagnant; in 2024, women's global labor force participation rate was just 48 percent, compared with nearly 73 percent for men—a gap of almost 25 percentage points—and in certain regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa, women's labor force participation was only 19 percent.¹²⁰ Women also continue to be dramatically underrepresented in leadership positions, occupying only 11 percent of Fortune 500 CEO positions.¹²¹ The pay gap is also significant: Globally, women earn seventy-seven cents for every dollar men earn, and the gap is largest for women with children, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.¹²² According to the World Economic Forum's analysis of progress in one hundred economies, unless economies accelerate the pace of change, it will take 123 years for women to achieve parity globally.¹²³

One reason for the persistent global gap in women's economic participation is that legal barriers continue to restrict women's equal access to employment, property ownership, and credit. According

to the World Bank, women on average enjoy fewer than two-thirds of the rights men have.¹²⁴ More than 75 nations have laws that impose restrictions on the jobs that women can hold.¹²⁵ In Argentina, for example, women are prohibited from operating trains; in Cameroon, women are forbidden from working in mines; and in Lebanon, women are not allowed to drive large-engine vehicles.¹²⁶ In many nations, there are still laws on the books that restrict women's ability to own and inherit property, thereby reducing their ability to obtain loans and start businesses.¹²⁷ More than forty countries do not grant sons and daughters equal rights to inherit property, and more than twenty do not give women equal ownership rights over land.¹²⁸ In addition, many nations lack comprehensive laws that address sexual harassment and violence against women in the workplace, thereby imperiling women's economic advancement.¹²⁹ When women have to choose between their safety and their livelihood, it creates a chilling effect on career advancement, income security, and overall economic participation.

And even in countries that do have legal protections for women's equal rights and opportunities, implementation remains a challenge: According to the World Bank, on average, countries have less than 40 percent of the systems needed for full implementation of workplace equality laws, including enforcement mechanisms for equal pay laws and guidelines on flexible work arrangements.¹³⁰ This gap undermines implementation of workplace fairness laws that do exist: For example, although ninety-eight countries have enacted laws mandating equal pay for women for work of equal value, only 35 countries have enacted pay transparency measures or enforcement mechanisms.¹³¹ In addition, while workers in 36 percent of countries can request flexible work arrangements, which have been demonstrated to increase women's labor force participation, only 19 percent of countries have guidelines on flexible work.¹³²

In addition, women lag behind in economic participation because of structural barriers, including the disproportionate burden of household and unpaid care work, including childcare, eldercare, and care for the sick or disabled. The divide between women and men in care work is stark: According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 708 million women were out of the labor force globally because of care responsibilities in 2023, compared with only 40 million men.¹³³ Although care work is essential to the global economy, it continues to be undervalued and underfunded by national governments. For example, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ireland, Portugal, Turkey, and the United States spend less than 0.5 percent of GDP on early childhood education and care.¹³⁴ Insufficient care infrastructure can force women to choose between caring for a loved one and reducing working hours, turning down promotions, or exiting the labor force altogether. The systemic undervaluing of care work results in the undervaluing of care workers themselves: Care workers are disproportionately women who are low-wage workers often excluded from social and legal protections.¹³⁵

Women also disproportionately lack access to modern, digital financial systems, which inhibits their economic participation in an increasingly wired economy. Financial inclusion, defined as the ability to access and effectively use appropriate financial services, remains out of reach for hundreds of millions of women. Although the global gap in women's access to financial services has narrowed, largely through the spread of mobile money accounts in the Global South, as of 2021, more than 740 million women remained unbanked.¹³⁶ This exclusion is driven by lack of internet access, limited financial

literacy, and sociocultural norms that prioritize male control over household finances, thereby limiting women's economic agency in the twenty-first century.¹³⁷

The underrepresentation of women in the twenty-first-century economy not only fuels economic insecurity for individual women and their families, but also undermines economic growth for entire communities, economies, and nations. Evidence has long confirmed the macroeconomic benefits of increasing women's labor force participation. A 2015 McKinsey Global Institute estimate shows that closing gaps in women's workforce participation would add as much as \$28 trillion in global GDP over a decade.¹³⁸ Other benefits include long-term poverty reduction, economic diversification, and reduction in income inequality—all of which are critical to overall economic health and global economic growth.¹³⁹ In addition, according to a 2018 ILO estimate, recognizing and valuing care work could add \$11 trillion to the global economy.¹⁴⁰

The Power of Women's Entrepreneurship

According to the World Bank, women's parity in entrepreneurship could add \$5 to \$6 trillion to the global economy.¹⁴¹ However, despite the clear economic benefits of women's entrepreneurship, women still face barriers to starting businesses: Women experience a \$1.7 trillion financing gap, resulting from a lack of access to capital and markets, limited financial networks, discriminatory laws and policies, and underdeveloped business skills.¹⁴² The global gap in women's capital is stark. In Africa, for example, male-owned enterprises are likely to have six times as much capital as female-owned businesses, on average.¹⁴³ Although many countries have eliminated legal barriers pertaining to women's abilities to sign a contract, register a business, or open a bank account, ninety-six countries do not have laws that prohibit discrimination in access to credit.¹⁴⁴

To help close the gap in women's entrepreneurship, partnerships among government, the private sector, and philanthropy have been particularly effective. For example, in 2017, the World Bank launched the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi), a partnership between fourteen governments, eight multilateral development banks, and other public and private sector stakeholders to provide access to capital for women-owned and women-led small and medium-sized enterprises in developing countries.¹⁴⁵ Through this partnership, We-Fi has mobilized over \$5 billion in financing for nearly 400,000 women-led small and medium-sized enterprises in eighty-three countries.¹⁴⁶ More initiatives like this are needed to help close the gap in women's access to capital.

To accelerate women's economic participation in a twenty-first-century economy, nations must repeal discriminatory laws in order to level the economic playing field for women. Some countries

are already taking positive steps: For example, Armenia, Jordan, Moldova, and Suriname enacted laws prohibiting sexual harassment in employment.¹⁴⁷ Azerbaijan, Jordan, Malaysia, and Sierra Leone eliminated restrictions preventing women from holding employment in certain sectors or dangerous occupations.¹⁴⁸ Rwanda and Togo enacted prohibitions on sex-based discrimination in financial services.¹⁴⁹ In addition, reforming discriminatory land rights laws, including in Kenya and Sri Lanka, has been an important tool to advance women's economic independence and ensure access to collateral.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, a growing number of jurisdictions around the world—including the European Union, Japan, the United Kingdom, and states and cities across the United States—have enacted pay transparency laws to help close the pay gap and promote fair pay practices.¹⁵¹ Advocates should continue to press for legal reforms to equalize economic opportunities for women.

To advance women's economic participation, nations should also work with partners to invest in and strengthen care infrastructure. Several nations have implemented promising models. For example, provinces and territories across Canada have expanded their subsidized early learning and childcare systems, and the federal government has set a goal of reducing average fees to \$10 per day.¹⁵² In Latin America and the Caribbean, many governments have adopted the 2022 Buenos Aires Commitment, which recognizes care as a universal right and urges governments to adopt long-term sustainable financing for national care systems.¹⁵³ Today, more than fifteen countries in the region are designing and implementing comprehensive national care systems.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, some countries and regions have taken steps to strengthen their parental leave systems. Malaysia and Oman, for instance, increased their paid maternity leave guarantee from sixty to ninety-eight days, introduced paid paternity leave, and prohibited the dismissal of pregnant workers; Sweden and Quebec have introduced nontransferable father-specific paid leave alongside shared parental leave to promote a more equitable division of caregiving responsibilities; and in India, the Supreme Court held that maternity leave is a constitutional right.¹⁵⁵ Other countries, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, Singapore, Spain, and the United Kingdom, have pioneered colocation of eldercare and childcare facilities to help better support “sandwich generation” caregivers.¹⁵⁶ These policies foster women's economic participation and should be replicated.

Furthermore, multilateral institutions should promote international agreements and partnerships that strengthen care infrastructure. For example, in 2011, the ILO adopted Convention 189, which established fundamental labor rights for domestic workers who are often excluded from national labor laws and standards.¹⁵⁷ Forty countries have now ratified this convention, leading to the enactment of national laws, such as the Domestic Workers Act in the Philippines, which expanded protections for domestic workers and extended social security benefits to domestic workers.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, although it is not legally binding, the Sevilla Commitment resulting from the 2025 Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development recognized care work as a core area of investment, adding multilateral support for greater financing for care infrastructure.¹⁵⁹ Multilateral institutions have also begun to forge critical partnerships to elevate investment in care infrastructure globally. The World Bank, for instance, recently launched the Invest in Childcare Initiative, a partnership with several donor governments and philanthropies designed to catalyze investment in childcare in low- and middle-income countries around the world.¹⁶⁰

In addition, to help accelerate women's financial inclusion, governments, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations must work together to enfranchise women in the twenty-first-century digital economy. Donors should increase support for digital innovation through fintech, which can help close gaps in women's financial inclusion. For example, investment in M-PESA, Kenya's mobile-money platform, has improved women's access to finance, and women-headed households are increasing savings; furthermore, households run by women in Kenya with greater access to mobile money enjoyed an 8.5 percent increase in consumption levels.¹⁶¹ In Estonia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea, the creation of national digital identification systems has helped address a major barrier to women's financial inclusion by creating access to formal identification documents.¹⁶² More investment in these innovative efforts is needed to ensure equal opportunities for women to compete, earn, and lead in the modern economy.

CONFLICT AND CLIMATE

Addressing gender gaps in conflict and climate response is also essential to advancing the full participation of women and girls. In the modern era, the number of global conflicts is surging; over the past five years alone, the number of global conflicts has nearly doubled.¹⁶³ According to the Peace Research Institute Oslo, fifty-nine state-based conflicts occurred in thirty-four countries, the highest number registered since 1946.¹⁶⁴ From Ukraine to Gaza to Sudan, conflict is pervasive around the globe.¹⁶⁵

Moreover, as the climate crisis intensifies, climate change is increasingly considered a “threat multiplier,” imperiling health, economic growth, and stability, and rendering societies more vulnerable to conflict or relapses of violence.¹⁶⁶ A 2019 Stanford study estimates that climate change has influenced between 3 and 20 percent of armed conflict over the past century and projects that this impact will likely increase.¹⁶⁷ The nexus between conflict and climate change is significant. Today, thirteen of the fifteen countries most vulnerable to climate change are also grappling with violent conflict, from severe drought in Afghanistan to flash floods in the Democratic Republic of Congo to desertification in Iraq.¹⁶⁸

Research confirms that conflict and crisis pose unique and disproportionate risks to women and girls. The connection between conflict and gender-based violence is indisputable. Rape is used as a tool of war, and instability is linked to higher likelihood of early and forced marriage, human trafficking, and other forms of violence.¹⁶⁹ Conflict also undermines women's and girls' access to health services, particularly sexual and reproductive health care.¹⁷⁰ It has also had a pernicious effect on girls' education: In 2024, more than 39 million girls were out of school because of conflict and crisis, and girls are two-and-a-half times as likely as boys to lose access to education in a fragile or conflict-affected setting.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, as conflict spreads, more women are forced into migration, which in turn creates risks of human trafficking, exploitation, and violence.¹⁷²

Similarly, climate change poses particular threats to women and girls. Women and children are fourteen times more likely than men to die from extreme weather disasters, and women and girls account for four out of five people displaced by climate change.¹⁷³ Climate change also exacerbates

preexisting social and economic inequalities. For example, because women and girls are more likely to bear responsibility for gathering water, food, and fuel for their families, climate change can force women to travel farther to secure these essential resources, putting them at greater risk of violence.¹⁷⁴ Women also comprise the majority of agricultural workers in many low- and middle-income countries, leaving them more vulnerable to disruptions in agricultural yields, reduced income, and food insecurity.¹⁷⁵ Climate change also increases the prevalence of climate-borne diseases, which in turn adds to the burden of unpaid care work performed by women and girls.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, women and girls are more likely to be displaced by climate change: The UN estimates that 80 percent of the people displaced by climate change are women.¹⁷⁷

Notwithstanding the risks that conflict and climate change pose to women and girls, thirty years after Beijing, they remain dramatically underrepresented in crisis and conflict resolution processes.¹⁷⁸ According to the Council on Foreign Relations, women constituted on average only 16 percent of negotiators for peace processes led or co-led by the UN in 2022, a decline from 23 percent in 2020.¹⁷⁹ No women were part of the negotiating teams for conflicts in Ethiopia, Myanmar, the Balkans, Sudan, or Yemen, and only one of the eighteen peace agreements reached in 2022 had a woman signatory.¹⁸⁰ The underrepresentation of women in conflict resolution processes persists despite evidence showing that women's participation leads to more durable, inclusive, and sustainable peace agreements.¹⁸¹

Similarly, despite the unique threats that climate change poses to women and girls, women continue to be underrepresented in climate diplomacy. At the COP29 opening session, for example, only eight women out of seventy-eight government leaders spoke, and only four leaders discussed the impact of climate change on women.¹⁸² The underrepresentation of women in climate diplomacy translates into insufficient climate financing for women. According to UN Women, in 2022, only 3 percent of all official development assistance on climate adaptation and mitigation addressed specific risks faced by women or included equality-related objectives.¹⁸³ Moreover, climate finance initiatives often fail to track the proportion of dollars that go to women, thereby recreating gaps in women's access to capital that are endemic in other sectors.¹⁸⁴ In addition, women are underrepresented in the green and blue sectors: For example, women constitute only 32 percent of the global renewable energy workforce, and too often lack access to green technologies, such as regenerative agriculture.¹⁸⁵

Women's Human Rights Violations During and After Conflict: Afghanistan Under the Taliban

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghan women have been subjected to a draconian set of legal and institutionalized restrictions designed to erase women and girls from public life.¹⁸⁶ Women and girls are prohibited from schooling past sixth grade and are largely restricted from professional employment.¹⁸⁷ They are prohibited from traveling without a male guardian and must wear full-body coverings in public.¹⁸⁸ Those who disobey these rules risk detention and

Women's Human Rights Violations During and After Conflict: Afghanistan Under the Taliban (continued)

abuse.¹⁸⁹ This systemic erasure of women's rights, autonomy, and visibility in the public sphere amounts to a regime that has been characterized as state-imposed gender apartheid, a system of institutionalized discrimination against individuals based on sex.¹⁹⁰ The exclusion of half the population from political, economic, and social life also undermines the stability and security of Afghanistan.¹⁹¹

Legal and human rights advocates have increasingly turned to international law as a means of pursuing accountability. In 2003, the Afghan government ratified the CEDAW treaty, enabling other signatory states to take legal action.¹⁹² In 2024, Canada, Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands initiated legal proceedings against the Taliban at the International Court of Justice brought under the CEDAW treaty.¹⁹³ In July 2025, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Taliban officials for crimes against humanity—specifically for gender-based persecution of women and girls.¹⁹⁴ Prominent legal experts, policymakers, and human rights advocates have also called on UN member states to codify the crime of gender apartheid in the Draft Articles on Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Humanity Convention, in hopes of holding the Taliban accountable for its campaign of human rights abuses against Afghan women.¹⁹⁵ Whether through forthcoming convention negotiations or other reforms of international law, the international community must take action to uphold international commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action and impose accountability on the Taliban for violations of the human rights of Afghan women and girls. Furthermore, given severe cutbacks in foreign aid, multilateral and philanthropic organizations should do more not only to address the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, but also to push back on the grave violations of women's human rights that only serve to worsen it.

To advance equality for women and girls at a time of rising crises, international institutions, national governments, and their partners must address persistent gender gaps in conflict and climate response. Since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, 112 UN member states have developed National Action Plans (NAPs) to implement a focus on women, peace, and security (WPS) in their own country contexts.¹⁹⁶ Multilateral institutions, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Economic Community of West African States, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have embedded a commitment to women's inclusion in peace processes into policy guidance and regional strategies, and some countries are developing Local Action Plans.¹⁹⁷ However, more must be done to implement these commitments in practice, including fully funding NAPs to ensure their effective implementation and furthering government commitments to WPS.

A growing number of countries have taken steps to advance commitments to WPS at the national level.¹⁹⁸ For example, Japan has prioritized this issue as a cornerstone of its foreign policy by establishing a WPS task force, promoting the involvement of women in disaster risk reduction and climate change mitigation, and launching international initiatives to support recovery and reconstruction efforts that include a focus on women.¹⁹⁹ In Ukraine, following reports of conflict-related sexual violence, the government enacted a groundbreaking law that recognizes the status of survivors, including children born of wartime rape, and provides interim war reparations.²⁰⁰ In 2025, Trinidad and Tobago became the first Caribbean nation to implement a WPS NAP.²⁰¹ Multilateral and regional entities should do more to replicate and support national commitments to advancing women's inclusion in peace and security efforts.

International institutions, national governments, and partners also must ensure the inclusion of women in climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. Some countries have begun taking significant steps in this direction. For example, Cameroon, Malawi, and South Sudan now give women access to climate-resilient agricultural assets, jobs, and training.²⁰² Costa Rica has committed to developing training programs for women to enter green industries—including renewable energy and sustainable construction—and Cambodia has committed to reducing the gender gap in its waste and energy sectors.²⁰³

To meet the scale of the challenge, however, more national and international commitments and investments are needed. Countries should incorporate provisions related to women's inclusion in national climate action plans expressed in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. A recent report by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat reveals that although 85 percent of countries engaged in the UN climate action process have referenced gender equality in their climate reporting, less than 5 percent of those countries included any related budgeting commitments.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, while COP29 saw several positive developments for women's participation in climate mitigation efforts—including a ten-year extension of the Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender, an agreement to develop a new Gender Action Plan in 2025, and a reference to women in the New Collective Quantified Goal—the conference did not produce clear targets to ensure women's access to climate finance.²⁰⁵

Going forward, member states should ensure that the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan includes clear targets and adequate funding for implementation, addresses the underrepresentation of women in climate governance structures, and sets targets to close the gap in women's access to climate finance—including by requiring the collection of sex-disaggregated data on disbursement of climate dollars.²⁰⁶ Public and private sector actors should also partner to help ensure women's access to climate finance: The Climate Gender Equity Fund launched by Amazon, Reckitt, Visa, and others provides one model, but additional partnerships and investment are needed.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, stakeholders should also take steps to increase women's access to green technologies, which will help advance climate resilience and also promote economic and food security.



SECTION II

Levers for Change

Making real, sustainable progress to fully realize the promise of the Beijing Platform for Action in the twenty-first century will require the international community—including governments, multilateral organizations, the private sector, philanthropy, and civil society organizations—to accelerate the pace of change and employ new strategies. Innovative financing, institutional leadership and reform, coalition building, and improved data and research are all essential to achieving the Beijing Platform over the next thirty years.

INNOVATIVE FINANCING

Implementation of the Beijing Platform continues to be hampered by underinvestment in women's rights efforts. Although more than one hundred countries used some form of equality-related budgeting as of 2022, only 26 percent of countries by mid-2023 included comprehensive mechanisms to track women's rights efforts in their budgets.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee, only 4 percent of total bilateral aid by OECD nations in 2021–2022 was dedicated to programs with a principal objective of advancing gender equality.²⁰⁹ In the US, less than 2 percent of charitable giving in 2020 went specifically to women and girls.²¹⁰

The chronic underfunding of women's rights efforts predates the recent rise of populist governments—but it is exacerbated by—the rise of populist governments that have slashed already-low levels of support for policies and programs focused on women's equality. For example, in 2025, the United States froze most foreign assistance and eviscerated the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which previously helped provide \$2.6 billion in federal aid to advance women's rights and gender equality around the world.²¹¹ The Dutch government, pursuing a “Netherlands first” approach to foreign aid, has dramatically reduced foreign assistance, focusing cuts on women's rights, among other issues; in addition, the Swedish government has jettisoned its commitment to advance a “feminist foreign policy” in its diplomatic and foreign assistance efforts around the world.²¹² A number of other donor countries, such as Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have removed billions from their aid budgets, including programs focused on a variety of women's rights issues.²¹³

As a result of such global funding cuts, developing countries and women's organizations face staggering funding shortfalls. In May 2025, UN Women warned that half of women's rights organizations and women-led organizations in countries affected by humanitarian crises are at risk of closure due to global funding cuts.²¹⁴ At the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, UN Women also warned that developing countries face an estimated \$420 billion annual shortfall in funding needed to advance gender equality.²¹⁵ The funding crisis extends to the United Nations itself—a critical institution in the global campaign for women's rights—which is struggling to cope with cuts in government support that threaten to reduce funding for women and girls.²¹⁶

At a time when resources are increasingly limited, governments, multilateral organizations, the private sector, and philanthropies should embrace innovative strategies to ensure adequate investment in women's rights—beginning with budgeting. Traditional budgeting strategies often overlook women's equality, leading to underinvestment in areas critical to the advancement of women and girls, such as education, health care, and childcare.²¹⁷ Countries should implement concrete budgeting commitments that have clear indicators to ensure that women and girls benefit from foreign and domestic resource allocation.²¹⁸ Some countries have begun to institute such reforms. In Morocco, for example, the Center of Excellence for Gender-Responsive Budgeting within the Ministry of Economy, Finance, and Administration Reform oversees implementation of budgeting commitments related to women's rights and issues an annual gender budget report.²¹⁹ The Indian government created a federal institute within its Ministry of Finance to analyze the impact of public spending on women and

girls and requires a gender budget statement alongside budget documents.²²⁰ Austria's constitution mandates that its states consider women's equality in their budget management, including at all budget levels and at every stage of the process.²²¹

Countries should also explore debt and taxation policies that advance women's equality, and the forthcoming UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation should embed these considerations into global tax policy and administration.²²² Governments, multilateral institutions, and other entities should conduct annual women's equality audits, making the results public. Several countries have already taken this approach: In Kenya, for instance, audits are conducted by the National Gender and Equality Commission as a prerequisite for completing the budgeting process.²²³ In Serbia, the State Audit Institution regularly conducts audits to assess whether women's rights-related budgetary goals are being met.²²⁴ In the Philippines, the Commission on Audit compiles a yearly audit observation memorandum for government departments, thereby promoting accountability.²²⁵ These and other models should be evaluated and emulated where possible, and results-based financing approaches that incentivize or require progress on women's equality should be tested and scaled where appropriate.

Governments, multilateral organizations, the private sector, and philanthropies should also employ innovative financing mechanisms and instruments to further goals related to women's equality—including pooled financing.²²⁶ Pooled funds have the benefits of increased transparency, greater access to diverse sources of capital, and improved coordination and efficiency at the country level.²²⁷ To capitalize on these advantages and help close the women's equality funding gap, stakeholders should create a new pooled funding mechanism dedicated to advancing the status of women and girls, similar to pooled funding mechanisms created to address other global challenges, such as climate change and infectious diseases.²²⁸ A joint funding mechanism would enable funders to consolidate country efforts, exchange best practices, and issue coordinated grants to accelerate progress on shared goals related to women's equality. The pooled Gender Fund launched by Co-Impact—which aims to mobilize \$1 billion over a decade to provide sustained, adaptable funding to women-led and community-based organizations in the Global South—provides one such model.²²⁹ A pooled funding mechanism could also help support advocacy efforts critical to building a favorable ecosystem for women's rights, including by funding regional and global convenings, as philanthropic organizations previously did in the years leading up to the Beijing Conference.²³⁰

Countries, multilateral banks, and investment banks should also launch and scale up bonds to mobilize private capital in service of women's rights.²³¹ In 2024, Iceland, in collaboration with UN Women, became the first sovereign nation to issue a gender bond, creating a €50 million vehicle designed to improve the welfare and financial health of Icelandic women—including by increasing affordable housing for low-income women and supporting initiatives to reduce the burden of unpaid care and domestic work.²³² In Morocco, the Banque Centrale Populaire, a pan-African and global financial group, issued a four-year, approximately \$20 million bond to fund microcredit loans for women.²³³ As of April 2023, the Asian Development Bank, through its Gender Thematic Bond program, had issued fourteen gender bonds and has raised over \$3.655 billion as of March 2022.²³⁴ These innovative mechanisms should be replicated elsewhere to unlock new forms of sustainable financing for women's equality.

Finally, international financial institutions and regulators should reform global financial governance standards to include criteria related to women's equality in evaluations. International economic governance historically has omitted such considerations; however, important policy shifts are underway. For example, in 2022, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released its first gender equality strategy, which recognizes the link between women's rights and economic growth and integrates equality considerations into the IMF's core activities, including surveillance, lending, and capacity development.²³⁵ In 2024, the World Bank released an updated strategy to accelerate women's equality in three areas that are critical to economic development—ending gender-based violence and elevating human capital, expanding economic opportunities, and engaging women as leaders—and unveiled a World Bank Group Scorecard to track indicators of progress, including on women's equality.²³⁶ In addition to including equality criteria in their decision-making processes, international financial institutions and regulators should increase the representation of women in leadership positions to ensure that women's voices are at the table.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND REFORM

The Beijing Conference catalyzed many governments around the world to establish or strengthen institutional mechanisms for advancing equality for women and girls. However, women still remain underrepresented at the highest levels of power, and women's rights issues are often siloed throughout government, international institutions, and the private sector. Despite the benefits of increasing women's leadership—such as better governance, inclusive policies, and sustainable peace—women continue to encounter significant challenges and barriers to leadership, including online and offline violence, lack of role models and mentorship, and biased media coverage.²³⁷ According to the Council on Foreign Relations, only twenty-six of 193 countries have a female head of state or government, and just nine of those countries have reached parity between women and men in their national legislature.²³⁸

To address this representation gap, countries should consider using special measures, such as quotas and appointment targets.²³⁹ A 2025 Inter-Parliamentary Union report found that quotas had a clear impact in increasing women's representation in national parliaments: On average, women made up more than 31 percent of parliaments in countries that had quotas in place in 2024, compared with less than 17 percent in countries without quotas.²⁴⁰ Several countries strengthened quotas in 2024, including Ireland, Jordan, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan, all of which saw improvements in women's representation.²⁴¹ Governments should also consider investing in capacity-building programs for women candidates, recognizing that quotas alone are insufficient to achieving women's equality in politics. In addition, governments should consider reforming campaign finance rules to help level the playing field for women, who often have limited access to donor networks, and addressing bias in political media coverage through monitoring, accountability guidelines, and public broadcasting policies.²⁴²

National legislatures should also consider establishing dedicated caucuses so that women parliamentarians can collaborate across party lines and advocate for policies that promote women's

rights and full and equal participation in society. In Indonesia, the Women's Parliamentary Caucus played a pivotal role in advocating for the passage of a sexual violence bill in 2022.²⁴³ In Sierra Leone, women lawmakers, civil society groups, and UN Women worked across political lines to push for legal reforms that would guarantee at least 30 percent representation of women in public and private sectors through the passage of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2022.²⁴⁴ And women delegates from across the political spectrum joined forces at Chile's 2021–2022 Constitutional Convention to help embed landmark rights and protections into the draft constitution, including mandatory gender parity in electoral systems and removal of structural barriers.²⁴⁵ Although the draft constitution was ultimately rejected, the process demonstrated how women can build consensus across party lines and elevate equality issues often sidelined in mainstream politics.²⁴⁶

In addition, reform efforts should focus on closing gender gaps in international institutions. Although many multilateral organizations have created offices or agencies to elevate women's rights, these entities are often siloed, underfunded, and insufficiently supported by senior leadership.²⁴⁷ Institutional reform efforts should promote accountability by evaluating funding levels, reporting structures, and other processes. This includes ensuring women's participation in leadership positions: The United Nations, for example, has never had a woman secretary-general in its eighty years of existence.²⁴⁸

Furthermore, in their revitalization of CSW, member states should collaborate to strengthen this body so that it can more effectively address current global women's equality challenges.²⁴⁹ Proposed reforms include adopting annual progress reviews and accountability mechanisms and recognizing violence against women as a standing agenda item.²⁵⁰ For lasting and meaningful progress, reforms of multilateral women's equality mechanisms must be complemented by sustained investment across the UN system; without adequate funding, these institutions cannot effectively support member states in translating commitments into action. CEDAW is already facing financial constraints, undermining its ability to uphold international women's rights obligations.²⁵¹ Member states should ensure that entities like CSW and CEDAW have sufficient resources to promote accountability for global agreements that advance women's equality, including the Beijing Platform for Action.

Institutional reform efforts should also extend to the private sector, where women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions. Women hold only 11 percent of Fortune 500 CEO positions, despite evidence that inclusive and diverse workplaces and leadership structures improve profits and decision-making.²⁵² While some private sector institutions have launched voluntary initiatives to close gaps between men and women, other countries have enacted laws to promote women's equal participation. To date, more than a dozen countries—including Malaysia, Norway, and Sweden—have implemented gender quotas for corporate service; in Norway, this has closed the pay gap between women and men board members and decreased the gap in qualified female executives' recruitment to boards.²⁵³ Companies and regulators should consider these and other policies to promote women's equality in private sector leadership.

COALITION BUILDING

In this time of regression, like-minded governments from the Global North and Global South, international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations must work together to build a formal coalition that will protect women's rights and maintain the international consensus on women's equality. Previously agreed-upon language related to women's rights and gender equality is increasingly under attack. However, supporters of women's rights have also had some success in forging alliances and devising strategies to preserve international agreements related to women's equality, giving cause for optimism.

Recent multilateral developments signal that women's equality continues to be widely regarded as both a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, prosperity, and stability. For example, during the sixty-ninth session of CSW, UN member states adopted a political declaration reaffirming global commitments to women's rights on the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, emphasizing the importance of advancements in women's economic participation and digital inclusion, and reductions in unpaid care work.²⁵⁴ Although the CSW declaration omitted references to sexual and reproductive health and rights, several countries across the Global North and Global South—including Colombia, France, the Nordic states, South Africa, and Spain—coordinated and formed a coalition to defend these foundational rights.²⁵⁵ Furthermore, the adoption of the Sevilla Commitment during the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025 includes important provisions—such as pledges to increase investment in the care economy, promotion of gender-equal budgeting and taxation, promotion of women's entrepreneurship, and reaffirmation of commitments to eliminate gender-based violence—that represent a meaningful step forward for women's rights in global economic governance, even though critical policy gaps remain in areas such as official development assistance, debt relief, and climate finance, where equality considerations are still missing.²⁵⁶ Finally, at the UN's 2025 High-Level Political Forum and Economic and Social Council High-Level Segment, ministers from around the world reaffirmed their commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, calling for greater investment in the care economy, narrowing of the digital divide, advancement of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, and bolstering of women's leadership, all while explicitly urging states to address existing structural barriers to women's equality.²⁵⁷ For all of these agreements, strong coalitions across the Global North and Global South were critical to maintaining commitments and forging new ground—and will be essential to ensuring accountability and successful implementation.

Coalitions formed to advance women's rights should also include the private sector—both to leverage strengths and resources and to achieve meaningful, sustainable progress. For example, governments should work with companies to incorporate women's equality considerations into procurement processes, support women-owned businesses, and address systemic inequalities in public contracts.²⁵⁸ Governments and stock exchanges worldwide could also explore mandating environmental, social, and governance (ESG) disclosures for companies, paired with reform efforts to ensure that ESG programs are transparent, accountable, and meaningful.²⁵⁹

Supporters of women's rights should also invest in creating larger and more diverse coalitions at the international, national, and subnational levels, with regular convenings to promote coordination. International organizations should bring stakeholders together to establish or expand voluntary women's equality compacts to mobilize resources, advance voluntary commitments, and accelerate the pace of change.²⁶⁰ Nations should engage in diplomacy to broaden the coalition of governments working together to advance women's equality multilaterally. Women's rights leaders should also forge alliances with leaders of other social justice and human rights groups: democracy, labor, LGBTQ+, and climate movements should share effective strategies and tactics. Women's rights advocates should amplify the voices of the most marginalized—young women, indigenous women, rural women, and women with disabilities—and recognize the individual and intersecting challenges they face. This principle rests on the premise that unless women's rights are firmly protected, no minority group can reliably expect to safeguard its own rights. Supporters should also engage men, particularly young men, to understand their shifting views on women's equality and tackle harmful social norms.

DATA AND RESEARCH

Governments and multilateral institutions have made strides since 1995 in the collection and availability of sex-disaggregated data. However, too often, international and national efforts still fail to track how policies and programs affect women and girls. For example, the international community lacks comprehensive data on issues as varied as the incidence of TFGBV, the proportion of climate finance dollars that go to women, and household-level data on assets and ownership. As of June 2022, only 42 percent of the data needed to monitor the women's equality-related dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals was available.²⁶¹ These data gaps make policies and programs less effective and inhibit stakeholders' ability to monitor progress on the Beijing Platform for Action and fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals. These gaps are also at risk of worsening at a moment when some governments are reducing data collection and research. One example is the elimination of US support for its widely used Demographic and Health Surveys, which have been an essential data source for complementing global data for the past forty years on a number of issues, including maternal mortality, child health, and education.²⁶²

To close data gaps related to women's rights, governments, philanthropies, multilateral institutions, and the private sector must prioritize funding data collection, including strengthening statistical systems, such as censuses and household surveys, and open data platforms.²⁶³ Furthermore, stakeholders should invest in data collection and analysis of under-explored issues critical to accelerating women's equality in the twenty-first century—such as the nexus between climate, conflict, and women's rights; the economic implications of ending child marriage; and the relationship between technology and the rise in regressive social norms. With more data and evidence-based research, policymakers will be able to develop more effective policies to advance the priorities outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action.

CONCLUSION

Advancing the full and equal participation of women and girls is one of the most powerful and proven strategies to advance prosperity and stability. In an era of new and emerging challenges to women's rights, it is imperative that governments, multilateral institutions, the private sector, philanthropy, and civil society organizations work together to preserve and further the hard-won gains of the Beijing Conference and redouble efforts to achieve the vision outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action. To accelerate the pace of change, these parties must together advance innovative financing approaches, institutional leadership and reform, coalition building, and improved data and research. These efforts will help fulfill the unfinished Beijing Agenda over the next thirty years and beyond.

AFTERWORD

Thirty years ago in Beijing, Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton declared a bold vision to the world: Women's rights are human rights. Her declaration unified the world on a singular mission to advance equality and justice for women and transform our systems to further this moral and strategic imperative.

This report was born out of the joint work of institutions committed to elevating the status of women and girls. It reflects a shared belief that progress on women's equality will only come when we turn aspiration into action and finish the unfinished business of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In order to do so, as the report outlines, we must pursue new ways of financing, build broader coalitions, improve data and research, and transform our institutions so that women can lead and thrive.

We believe that increasing women's leadership and representation is particularly important. We know that women's leadership is not only about achieving parity, but it is also about transforming the very nature of leadership. We live in a time of converging crises that demand new responses—responses rooted in care, collaboration, accountability, and courage. In other words, we need a different kind of leadership than what we are seeing today. When women lead, we do not just see different outcomes, we see different priorities, different processes, and a broader vision of the common good.

Yet, despite decades of advocacy and evidence, women remain dramatically underrepresented in positions of power—especially within the multilateral system, where the architecture of global governance is built and rebuilt each day. Until we see a truly gender-equal multilateralism, we will continue to fall short of the promises made in Beijing. It is time to correct this imbalance—not only because it is just, but because it is also necessary.

We believe that reforming the multilateral system from a women's perspective requires bold and tangible steps, and that this report offers a roadmap for the next chapter. Only through deliberate, collective action and new strategies for change can we achieve the vision outlined at Beijing once and for all. The future depends on us.



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