

CLOSING THE GENDER GAP: A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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About the WORLD Policy Analysis Center

The goal of the WORLD Policy Analysis Center (WORLD) is to improve the quantity and quality of comparative data available to policymakers, citizens, civil society, and researchers around the world on policies affecting equity, development, human health, and well-being. Under the leadership of Jody Heymann, WORLD is committed to making its broad, globally comparative findings publicly accessible to inform and encourage improvements in legal and policy frameworks worldwide, allow nations to learn from the approaches taken in other countries, facilitate studies of the feasibility and effectiveness of laws and policies in critical areas, and support global and local civil society in their efforts to hold decision-makers accountable.

About This Report

It has been 20 years since the international community committed to advancing equality for women around the world through the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Using our global datasets capturing the legal and policy contexts shaping gender rights worldwide, we have created a series of policy briefs that highlight areas of progress and areas needing further improvement in education, constitutional rights, work and family, and child marriage. In this brief, we provide a summary overview of countries' progress toward embedding the principles of the Beijing Declaration in national laws and policies across these policy areas. We then lay out three recommendations for action for promoting gender equality through legal reforms. WORLD is committed to making a lasting difference on the ground through interactions among researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders invested in translating evidence into practice.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to our partners at the Maternal and Child Health Equity (MACHEquity) research program at McGill University, who worked with us to develop longitudinal data in the following areas: child marriage, breastfeeding breaks, minimum wage, and maternal leave. This work was made possible through the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in partnership with the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation's No Ceilings Initiative, as well as the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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BACKGROUND

The importance of achieving gender equality extends beyond the lives of individual women and girls. The extent of women's social and economic equality is widely considered a critical factor in both population health and nations' economic well-being.¹ However, despite the health, economic, and ethical motivations for achieving gender equality, women and girls continue to have access to fewer opportunities than men and boys around the world. Closing the gender gap remains one of our greatest challenges.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN in 1979, established a foundation for action towards gender equality and has since been ratified by 186 countries.¹ In 1995, the international community took another important step forward by introducing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women. The Beijing Platform was adopted by 189 countries, and still serves as a defining framework for women's and girls' full participation in every dimension of life.² Yet the impact of these agreements relies on states embedding their principles within domestic laws and policies. The 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform provides a crucial opportunity to examine whether countries have taken the necessary steps to improve women's and girls' lives.

The WORLD Policy Analysis Center (WORLD) and Maternal and Child Health Equity (MACHEquity) have systematically analyzed the rights, laws, and policies in place in 197 U.S.-recognized countries and 186 CEDAW-ratifying countries³ to create globally comparative databases in key areas relevant to gender equality including: women's and girls' rights in constitutions, access to quality education, legal protections against child marriage, economic opportunity, and labor policies that promote equality and health at work and home. This summary presents some of the key findings and policy recommendations from the accompanying series of briefs and discusses the role of quantitative indicators of law and policy in monitoring countries' progress towards full gender equality.

WHERE DOES THE WORLD STAND?

Establishing equal rights in constitutions, laws, and policies is a first step toward improving outcomes for women and girls. Laws and policies lead to change by shaping public attitudes, encouraging government follow-through with regulation and implementation, and enabling the public to hold governments accountable through court action. Constitutional rights can provide a foundation for challenging discriminatory legislation or introducing new laws that protect equality. Since the Beijing Platform, many countries have advanced gender equality broadly and in specific areas by enacting important constitutional and legal protections.

WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS

Examples from around the world demonstrate the potential of leveraging constitutions to promote equal rights for women. In Afghanistan, civil society activists employed constitutional protections of gender equality to successfully challenge provisions in the Shiite Personal Status Law that would restrict women's ability to leave the house without their husbands' permission and mandate that women have sex with their husbands upon their request.⁴ Similarly, a female plaintiff in Nigeria cited a non-discrimination clause in Nigeria's constitution to successfully oppose a custom that denied inheritance rights to women.⁵ In Botswana, South Africa, and

Zimbabwe, constitutional prohibitions against gender discrimination helped invalidate regulations that banned pregnant students from attending school.⁶

To date, the vast majority of national constitutions include broad protections of women's equal rights. Specifically, 84% of constitutions prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender and/or guarantee at least one of the following: women's right to equality, right to equality before the law, or equal enjoyment of rights. However, 6% allow customary or religious law to supersede some or all constitutional provisions of equal rights. Remaining constitutions either guarantee equal rights to citizens without addressing gender (10%) or do not mention any approach to equality (5%).⁷

Yet constitutions vary significantly in the extent to which they protect girls' and women's rights in specific areas. Girls' right to equality in education and right to free primary education are protected in the majority of current constitutions (60% and 54%, respectively). However, only 22% of constitutions guarantee the right to free secondary education, reflecting a critical gap in provisions that support girls' access to secondary school. Fewer than half the world's constitutions take any approach to guaranteeing women's and girls' right to health (44%), while constitutional protections for women and girls' specific rights to medical care and public health are even less common (31% and 12% respectively). Relatively few constitutions prohibit gender-based employment discrimination or protect women's right to equal pay for equal work (19% and 21% respectively). Similarly, only 28% of constitutions guarantee women's equal rights within marriage and/or in entering and exiting marriage.⁸

By contrast, a significant share of constitutions protects women's access to the political process. Expanding women's access to political decision-making is now recognized as central to achieving sustainable development.⁹ Evidence suggests that when women have greater voice in the public sphere, public resources are more likely to be allocated towards human development priorities. Female political leaders do seem more likely to represent the needs of women, and often prioritize investment in child health, nutrition, and access to employment.¹⁰ Most constitutions include relevant provisions to guarantee women's access to fundamental political rights, including the right to vote (79%), right to hold legislative office (76%) and right of association (56%).¹¹

While the extent to which constitutions guarantee equal rights for women and girls varies for different areas, progress since Beijing is almost universal. Specifically, the 56 constitutions that were adopted after 1995 more commonly include guarantees of women's general equality in rights without exceptions relative to the 141 constitutions that were adopted in 1995 or earlier (91% vs 73%).¹² For example, Ecuador's constitution of 2010 strengthened protections for women's equal rights by stating: *"All persons are equal and shall enjoy the same rights, duties and opportunities. No one shall be discriminated against for reasons of (...) sex. (...) The State shall draw up and implement policies to achieve equality between women and men, through the specialized mechanism set up by law."*¹³

Similarly, constitutions that were adopted after Beijing exhibit greater levels of protection of individual rights in education, health, work and political rights relative to previously adopted constitutions. However, progress in two areas has been slower. Only 23% of constitutions that were adopted since 1995 guarantee women's right to equal pay for equal work, relative to 20% of previously adopted constitutions. Likewise, only 29% of post-Beijing constitutions protect women's equality in rights to enter and exit and/or within marriage, compared to 28% of constitutions that were adopted before or in 1995.¹⁴

ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION

Access to education is critical for girls' and women's opportunities globally. While many factors determine girls' access to education, evidence shows that cost is a significant barrier, and eliminating tuition fees allows more children, especially girls, to enroll. Mauritius, for example, is one of two countries in East Africa to have achieved gender parity in secondary school enrollments with high enrollment rates for girls. In 2005, Mauritius strengthened its education laws to guarantee all education would be free and that education would be compulsory until age 16. Girls' enrollment in education has increased by more than 10% since before the law was changed. Like Mauritius, the vast majority of countries have ensured that basic education is financially accessible: 89% of low-income countries, 97% of middle-income countries, and 100% of high-income countries have made primary education tuition-free.¹⁵

Yet far fewer countries have extended the same policy to secondary education. Although completion of secondary education is often a minimum requirement for jobs that provide a decent income, 24% of countries impose tuition barriers before the end of secondary school. Only 17% of countries provide tuition-free and compulsory education through the completion of secondary school. Many countries that still charge tuition in secondary can afford to do more. Among those countries with available expenditures data, 43% that charge tuition before the completion of secondary education spend less than four percent of their GDP on education.¹⁶ With appropriate investments, making secondary education tuition-free and compulsory is feasible across regions and income groups. For example, the Kenyan government spends the most on education as a proportion of GDP in east Africa, makes education compulsory for 12 years, and has a higher minimum age for full-time employment than its neighbors. It is noteworthy that gross enrollment ratios for girls in secondary education in Kenya are nearly double those in neighboring Uganda and Tanzania.¹⁷

Finally, although access to tuition-free and compulsory education at the primary and secondary level is fundamental to girls' opportunities, the quality of instruction is a critical determinant of how much students learn. According to UNESCO's review of the evidence, a majority of studies conducted in low- and middle-income countries found that teacher training had a significant effect on student performance.¹⁸ While 54% of countries require teachers to have completed at least a bachelor's degree to teach at the primary level, 7% of countries only require primary-school teachers to have completed lower-secondary. At the upper-secondary level, a troubling 16% of countries only require teachers to have completed secondary school, or secondary school and some teacher training. As a result, some teachers have little to no more education than the students they are instructing.¹⁹

LEGAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage threatens girls' ability to complete an education and puts them at greater risk of violence and poor health. Early marriage commonly leads to early childbirth, which is more likely to result in preterm delivery, low birth weight, stillbirths, and threatens the survival of infants and mothers.²⁰ Babies born to teenagers are twice as likely to die as babies born to women in their twenties,²¹ and global data also indicate that morbidity and mortality rates for children under five are higher for those born to young mothers.²²

Child marriage continues to shape the lives of millions of children around the world. While the percentage of countries that allow girls to be married before age 18 fell from 24% to 12% among 105 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) from 1995 to 2013, legal loopholes persist.²³

Girls under 18 could legally be married with their parents' consent in 52% of 194 countries as of 2013. Since most child marriages occur with parental permission and involvement, these exceptions seriously undermine the protections established by law. Additionally, civil law exists alongside parallel customary and religious systems in many countries. These parallel laws often do not establish an adequate minimum age for marriage, or any at all, weakening civil law prohibitions and exposing girls in particular religious and ethnic communities to early marriage. Nineteen percent of countries allow marriage of girls below age 18 under exceptions for customary and religious law. Of the 11 countries with the highest rates of married women between age 15 and 19, over half (6 countries) permit the marriage of children below 18 with parental consent. Child marriage is permitted under customary or religious law in at least 4 of these 11 countries.²⁴

Finally, in many countries, legal disparities in the minimum age of marriage between boys and girls reinforce gender inequality in childhood and beyond. In 31% of countries, girls are legally allowed to be married at younger ages than boys with parental permission; in some countries, the gap can be as wide as four years.²⁵ Establishing a universal minimum age of 18—the standard recognized by the international community—can help shape norms and practices. For example, between 1995 and 2009, Maldives experienced a dramatic drop in the rates at which girls between 15 and 19 were married, from 46.9% to 5.6%, respectively.²⁶ Maldives had no written marriage law in place prior to the passage of the Family Act in 2001, which set the legal minimum age of marriage at 18.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

The global burden of poverty disproportionately impacts women.²⁷ Yet with the right tools, women also have perhaps the greatest untapped potential to spur economic prosperity. When women have access to financial resources, or own assets in societies where husbands traditionally control household resources, expenditures on children are higher and their health and educational attainment improves.²⁸ Furthermore, the positive effects of women's economic opportunities extend beyond the household and contribute to economic growth at the national level.²⁹ For example, a study from the World Bank found that increasing the share of women with secondary education by one percentage point is associated with an increase of 0.3 percentage points in per capita income growth.³⁰

Minimum wage policies have long been recognized as a means to lift workers out of poverty, and have also been shown to improve women's incomes and close gender pay gaps.³¹ Evidence suggests that minimum wages are particularly important in LMICs where a large share of workers depends on the minimum wage.³² However, 14% of LMICs have not enacted a minimum wage, and an additional 9% of LMICs set minimum wages at less than \$2/day for a working adult and a dependent child—placing them below the international poverty line. To protect earnings over time, minimum wages must adjust to changing price levels, yet 55% of LMICs report minimum wage growth rates that did not keep up with growth in real GDP per capita between 1999 and 2013.³³

Beyond income, women need opportunities to build assets. Intergenerational transfers of wealth and capital investments have far reaching effects on women's and girls' long-term socioeconomic outcomes. Research shows that women who have secure access to, ownership and control over land and other assets are less vulnerable to violent relationships and poverty,³⁴ and better able to improve their own lives and those of their children. However, the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law data indicate that 17% of countries do not have equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons, nor do they have equal inheritance rights for male and female surviving spouses. Further, these data reveal that 9% of countries restrict married

women's abilities to sign a contract, register a business, open a bank account, and/or own property.³⁵ These legislative restrictions on economic opportunities still leave women severely disadvantaged in too many countries.

POLICIES THAT PROMOTE EQUALITY AND HEALTH AT WORK AND HOME

In recent decades, a wide range of countries have enacted or modified national laws to enable women to balance work and family responsibilities. Global findings show that paid maternal and parental leave significantly reduce infant and child mortality,³⁶ and longer durations of paid maternal leave are associated with higher childhood vaccination rates.³⁷ Global availability and quality of maternal leave has increased since the adoption of the Beijing Platform: 30% of countries increased the duration of leave, 11% increased their wage replacement rates, and 4% newly enacted a paid maternal leave policy. As a result, today, 95% of countries provide paid leave for mothers after childbirth either through mother-specific or gender-neutral leave.³⁸

Within this 95%, specific choices about duration and wage replacement rates can have a considerable impact on the benefits for mothers and their children. When wage replacement rates are high during paid leave, more mothers can afford to take it. Since Beijing, countries have made progress in meeting the International Labour Organization (ILO) standard of fourteen weeks of maternity leave with payment of at least two-thirds of workers' wages.³⁹ For the countries for which data are available from 1995 to 2014, 53% guaranteed the ILO standard of 14 weeks in 2014, compared to 41% in 1995, and 85% provided wage replacement at the ILO standard of at least 2/3 wages in 2014, compared to 77% in 1995.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the duration of paid leave has significant implications for whether mothers can afford to breastfeed exclusively for the full six months recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).⁴¹ Breastfeeding is widely recognized as the single most effective approach to improving infant health, lowering infant mortality 1.5- to 5-fold.⁴² Women who breastfeed also have more rapid post-partum weight loss, increased birth spacing with accompanying lower maternal morbidity and mortality risks, lower rates of pre-menopausal breast cancer, and may have lower risks of ovarian cancer, osteoporosis, and coronary heart disease.⁴³

Yet even with some paid leave available, many mothers will have to return to work before their child is six months old. A second policy that can support consistent breastfeeding is the provision of breastfeeding breaks at work. While the share of countries providing breastfeeding (paid or unpaid) breaks for at least six months has increased from 62% to 71% since 1995, 26% of countries still provide neither paid leave nor paid breastfeeding breaks for a full six months—ultimately forcing many women to choose between working and breastfeeding their child.⁴⁴

Supporting women's ability to work and advancing gender equality also requires opportunities for men to assume more caregiving responsibilities. This is a critical area where the world falls short. While paid leave for new mothers is nearly universal, 51% of countries do not provide paid leave that is available to new fathers. When countries do provide leave to fathers, it is for far shorter duration—specifically, 49% of the countries that do provide fathers access to paid leave offer fewer than three weeks.⁴⁵

Finally, there are also large gaps in policies to support caregiving needs beyond infancy for mothers and fathers. Even after children are attending school, common illnesses require time away from school to recover and chronic conditions often require treatment. Additionally, elderly men and women often rely on their adult daughters and sons to care for them when they are ill. Both men and women need access to time off to tend to their family members' health needs in

order to ensure that this does not remain a responsibility disproportionately borne by women. When leave is unavailable, it is women who more often risk job or income loss to provide care, but 60% of countries fail to provide working men and women leave to care for either adult family members or children's health needs.⁴⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Across rights, laws, and policies relevant to gender equality, there are common strategies that countries can employ to advance opportunities for girls and women. In order to fulfill the promise of gender equality, countries must enact legislation that provides equal opportunities for women and men, expand legal protections in areas that matter to women and girls, and remove exceptions in laws that disadvantage women and girls.

CHANGE LAWS THAT REINFORCE GENDER INEQUALITY BY TREATING WOMEN AND GIRLS DIFFERENTLY FROM MEN AND BOYS

In too many countries, legal frameworks still reinforce, rather than combat, gender inequality. One critical area of concern is gender disparities in the minimum age of marriage. Countries must ensure that legislation treats girls and boys equitably by no longer permitting the marriage of girls at younger ages than boys and by raising the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18.

Explicit gender disparities also exist in labor policy. As more women work outside the home, and as men continue to do so, enabling all parents to balance paid work and caregiving is more important than ever. However, many countries' laws and policies still neither provide adequate leave for caregiving nor encourage or facilitate an equal role for men in caregiving. Although all but nine countries provide paid leave for new mothers, more than half of countries still do not provide paid leave to new fathers. Similarly, some countries only provide access to leave to care for family members' health or education needs to women.⁴⁷ To support equal opportunities both at home and at work, countries should ensure that both parents have equal access to leave to meet the health and educational needs of their children and adult family members.

Finally, women still face more explicit legislative barriers to economic opportunity that men do not. To support women's autonomy, safety, and ability to invest in their children, countries need to change laws to ensure women's access to equal inheritance rights and remove legal barriers that prevent women from signing contracts, registering businesses, opening bank accounts, and owning property.

REMOVE LEGAL LOOPHOLES THAT LEAVE WOMEN AND GIRLS UNPROTECTED

Legal reforms to advance women's and girls' equal opportunities are not enough if loopholes remain that undermine these legal protections. As noted, in 6% of countries, customary or religious law is legally allowed to supersede constitutional protections, potentially jeopardizing provisions that ensure gender equality. Provisions permitting these exceptions are almost equally common in constitutions adopted before and after the Beijing Platform.⁴⁸ Countries can eliminate this risk to gender equality by ensuring that constitutional equal rights consistently take legal precedence.

Similarly, while the percentage of countries that generally allow the marriage of girls before age 18 has fallen over the years, many countries still permit girls to be legally married at younger

ages with parental permission or under customary or religious law. Today, 20% of countries allow marriage of girls below age 18 under exceptions for customary and religious law, and 52% of countries allow marriage of girls below age 18 with parental consent.⁴⁹

ADDRESS LEGAL AND POLICY SHORTCOMINGS THAT MATTER TO WOMEN AND GIRLS

Despite significant progress in securing fundamental rights and equal opportunities for women and girls, critical gaps remain in many areas. While fundamental constitutional protections reflect increasing recognition of women's overall equality, the explicit enumeration of rights in different spheres of life is lacking. Protections lag in areas of economic and social rights, such as work and family life. More than two-thirds of constitutions do not mention the right to equal pay for equal work, and nearly three-quarters are silent on women's right to equality in marriage. When nations expand constitutional protections of women's fundamental rights across multiple dimensions, they provide grounds for legal or other actions to promote gender equality.

Many countries also still have far to go in achieving gender equality in education. While the world is close to achieving universal access and gender parity in primary enrollment, too little attention has been devoted to secondary education, where enrollment gaps persist between girls and boys. Barriers to completing a secondary education disproportionately affect girls' earning potential later in life. Secondary education can be made accessible even in challenging contexts; despite a history of conflict, Sri Lanka has made education tuition-free from primary through university, one of only two countries in South Asia to do so. These policies are reflected in the outcomes of the country's children: primary enrollment and completion are close to 100%, over 90% of students progress to secondary school, there is gender parity in both primary and secondary enrollment, and enrollment in higher education is rapidly increasing.⁵⁰ Ensuring that school is tuition-free and compulsory through secondary is a crucial step for countries to take to advance the opportunities of girls and low-income children.

Increasing the number of women exiting poverty also requires access to jobs that provide for an adequate standard of living. As women are more likely than men to work in low-wage jobs,⁵¹ minimum wage policy is a powerful tool to provide working women and their families with access to fair income and essential resources. Although most LMICs have adopted minimum wage policies, many set the minimum wage below the international poverty line of \$2 per person per day for a working adult and a dependent child.⁵² To provide women and their families with access to adequate income, countries need to set minimum wages at levels sufficient to cover the cost of basic needs, and ensure that minimum wage levels keep up with the cost of living over time.

Policies that support women and men succeeding at both work and caregiving are fundamental to equal economic opportunities. While providing paid leave for new mothers is the norm around the world, provisions for fathers lag far behind.⁵³ To further gender equality at home and at work, countries need to make paid leave available equally to both new mothers and fathers.

Additionally, to ensure that women do not have to risk their jobs or income to provide care to child and adult family members, countries need to eliminate gaps in policies supporting caregiving needs beyond infancy.⁵⁴ Strengthening existing leave policies and promoting broader coverage of leave policies by targeting the informal sector and other marginalized workers are critical to the promotion of gender equality at home and in the workplace.

FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF GENDER EQUALITY

Despite notable progress in the two decades since the Beijing Platform, significant barriers to global gender equality persist. Too many girls still face early marriage or barriers to post-primary education. Too many women lack the economic resources that could lift them from poverty, protect them from violence, and safeguard their own and their children's health. Too much human capital is not yet being employed in crafting solutions to the twenty-first century's most pressing problems. These persistent inequalities greatly compromise the potential of girls, boys, women, and men everywhere.

To guarantee every woman and girl access to the rights and opportunities outlined in CEDAW and the Beijing Platform, countries must take steps on a national level. Identifying what steps to take begins by evaluating progress, gaps, and feasible policy options. The official report-based monitoring mechanism for international commitments like CEDAW offers a wealth of qualitative information. However, a complementary tool providing frequently updated, easily-analyzable indicators of law and policy could have a unique and critical impact. This type of data allows cross-country comparisons to inform policymakers, and provides researchers with a means to investigate links between policy choices and outcome indicators. Increased transparency and accessibility to information about legislation and social policies can also serve as an empowering tool for civil society.

The WORLD Policy Analysis Center and MACHEquity have collected and analyzed constitutions, primary legislative texts, international reports, and other sources to create such quantitative indicators of law and policy. Throughout this summary we've drawn on this new data set to demonstrate the feasibility and utility of this approach in assessing country action on gender equality. For detailed information and further data, please see the accompanying series of briefs⁵⁵ and publications^{56 57} on constitutional rights, laws, and policies⁵⁸ affecting women and girls.

The 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform is an opportunity for the international community to renew its commitment to enact laws and implement policies that advance gender equality. Deploying new tools to enhance transparency and accountability is an important way to ensure countries take the necessary steps to unleash the individual and global potential of the world's women and girls.

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