

# Introduction

Well into the twenty-first century, the scale and impacts of gender inequality in the economy remain staggering. Globally, women's wages amount to just a fraction of men's: on average, women earn 80 cents on the dollar, which falls to less than 60 cents in some countries.<sup>1</sup> Women's share of the global labor force has held steady at around 39 percent for the past thirty years,<sup>2</sup> even as most women report wanting to work for pay.<sup>3</sup> In the public and private sectors, women are overrepresented in low-wage jobs and underrepresented in decision-making roles, creating vast gender gaps in access to resources and in positions of leadership. According to the World Economic Forum, at the current rate of progress, it will take over 267 years to reach gender parity in the economy.<sup>4</sup> And across workplaces, experiences of gender discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence remain widespread. In the European Union, for instance, 55 percent of women in the workforce report having experienced sexual harassment.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, women perform the vast majority of unpaid labor in countries worldwide: on average, women spend 265 minutes in unpaid care work per day, compared to men's 83 minutes.<sup>6</sup> And in part due to demands for their own household labor, millions of girls face exclusion from education, creating a substantial barrier to long-term economic opportunities: girls account for three-quarters of children globally who never even begin primary school, and across sub-Saharan Africa, just 41 percent of girls finish lower secondary school.<sup>7</sup>

These gaps aren't simply the result of historic discrimination, cultural bias, or individual choices—they're driven directly by the decisions governments make. Laws and policies that fail to address discrimination, that reinforce unequal gender roles, and that devalue caregiving fundamentally shape each of our experiences at work and at home. Addressing these legal and structural inequalities is critical for creating gender equality not only in national

economies but also in our lives: our workplaces, our communities, our families, and our relationships.<sup>a</sup>

## HOW GOVERNMENTS STRUCTURE GENDER INEQUALITY INTO THE ECONOMY

Many conversations about gender equality in the economy emphasize the consequences of individual decisions—whether to complete school, whether to ask for a raise, whether to return to work after having a baby. Yet these decisions take place not in a vacuum but in a legal and policy environment that shapes what paths are possible, for whom, and with what consequences. For many women, pursuing a particular career may not even be an option under the law—and this type of overt legal discrimination remains far more common than many people realize. For example:

- In Azerbaijan, women are banned from working in 674 different jobs, from bus driver to dough maker to helicopter technician.<sup>8</sup>
- In Brazil, companies can require women to retire five years earlier than men, increasing their risks of poverty in old age.<sup>9</sup>
- In Cameroon, men can prohibit their wives from working.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, according to the World Bank’s Women, Business, and the Law project, these examples are but a few of many: as of 2021, eighty-nine economies had laws in place that created explicit barriers to women’s employment, including sixty-nine that prohibited women from working in certain industries, twenty-one that prevented women but not men from working at night, and fifty-three that prohibited women from working in jobs deemed “dangerous.” In eighteen economies, a woman may be required to get her husband’s permission in order to work.<sup>11</sup>

a. Throughout this book, we use the term “gender equality” to refer to “the enjoyment of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment” by all, regardless of sex or gender, and the guarantee that “rights, responsibilities, social status, and access to resources do not depend on” sex or gender, consistent with definitions used by United Nations (UN) bodies including the International Labour Organization (ILO). Given its unique role as the largest global organization bringing together workers, employers, and governments to advance labor standards, including equal rights at work, the ILO’s approach to gender equality is especially pertinent to this book. The ILO goes on to clarify that: “Gender equality implies that all men and women are free to develop their personal abilities and make life choices without the limitations set by stereotypes or prejudices about gender roles or the characteristics of men and women. In the context of decent work, gender equality embraces equality of opportunity and treatment, equality of remuneration and access to safe and healthy working environments, equality in association and collective bargaining, equality in obtaining meaningful career development . . . and a balance between work and home life that is fair. . . . The ILO understands gender equality as a matter of human rights, social justice and sustainable development.” ILO, “ABC of women workers’ rights and gender equality,” 2nd ed., 2007, [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org).

Yet while explicit legal prohibitions on women's work or access to resources are particularly striking examples, governments' roles in supporting or undermining gender equality in national economies go far beyond these types of blatant restrictions. Indeed, many seemingly "gender-neutral" laws and policy choices disproportionately limit opportunities for women and girls. For example, policy makers' failure to prioritize adequate funding for rural water systems in lower-income countries, while not explicitly discriminating on the basis of gender, has acute consequences for women and girls, who bear the primary responsibility in many countries for securing water for their households. When running water is unavailable, the hours spent traveling long distances to fetch water, often on foot, create a significant barrier to paid work for women and to school attendance for girls. Many countries allocate far fewer resources to areas that impact women's economic opportunities than men's.

Around the world, countries also maintain laws and policies that derive from and reinforce gender stereotypes—to the detriment of men as well as women, but typically with greater material consequences for women. For example, when countries provide paid leave only to new mothers, rather than all parents of infants, employers may discriminate against women of child-bearing age based on the presumption that they will require time away from work that their male counterparts will not. At the same time, when only women can take parental leave, they inevitably do take on greater care responsibilities during the newborn phase. In this way, structural inequality in the law creates a vicious cycle: policies based on gender stereotypes push women into taking on the majority of caregiving responsibilities, and employers then cite these responsibilities to justify further discrimination against all women.

Finally, just as discrimination built into the law can worsen gender inequalities in the economy, so too can a lack of laws in areas where they are necessary. For example, when countries fail to comprehensively prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, women are disproportionately affected. Similarly, when countries fail to ensure that existing labor protections and antidiscrimination laws cover people in all forms of employment—including the world's sixty-seven million domestic workers, 80 percent of whom are female<sup>12</sup>—they fall short of establishing protections capable of advancing gender equality writ large.

Many of these gaps and inequalities are rooted in the systematic devaluing of labor that's seen as "women's work." Around the world, female-dominated industries are consistently characterized by lower pay. Moreover, trends in wages over time illustrate how average pay in a given occupation often increases or decreases depending on women's representation in the field.<sup>13</sup> When more men were secretaries, clerical work enjoyed higher compensation and greater prestige.<sup>14</sup> When more women entered manufacturing, average pay declined.<sup>15</sup>

Governments' approaches to care work offer some of the most powerful and consequential illustrations of these dynamics. Most fundamentally, the choice to regard caregiving and other labor performed in the home as intrinsically different from other kinds of labor—and also intrinsically female—ignores care's vast economic value, erases the wide diversity of family structures, and has helped create economies that remain hostile to all women's full participation, regardless of actual caregiving responsibilities. According to the International Labour Organization, over sixteen billion hours of unpaid care work are performed daily—an amount of work that would account for 9 percent of global GDP, or around \$11 trillion per year, if paid at the minimum wage.<sup>16</sup> Yet care is consistently treated differently from other kinds of work. It is often expected to be done without pay. When paid, care work is undervalued and often excluded from basic labor and social protections that cover other fields and occupations. Governments also deprioritize care when making investments, tacitly presuming that unpaid women or women working informally for meager wages will fill in the gaps when affordable, quality care services—fulfilled through quality care jobs—are unavailable. For example, though the vast majority of every country's population will require support of some kind in old age, most countries devote less than 1 percent of GDP to long-term care—and many budget nothing at all, relying largely on women to pick up the slack.<sup>17</sup>

The reasons behind this differential treatment of care are many. Among them are the presumption that women are the “natural” caregivers in their families and in society—even as evidence from around the world makes plain that people of all genders can and do fulfill critical care needs in their communities. A second explanation is structural racism and classism. Across countries, people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups are often overrepresented in the care workforce, reflecting the historic origins of domestic and other care work in many countries as well as the persisting low wages that help perpetuate occupational segregation of all kinds. There is also the simple convenience of free female labor to those who benefit from it as well as the perceived advantages to male workers of treating “work” and “care” as separate, gendered spheres.

Indeed, policy makers have historically voiced opposition to laws enabling women to work on the same terms as men because of the perceived threats to the gender-segregated roles of caregivers and breadwinners. For example, some of the earliest laws restricting women's work were premised on protecting women due to their potential to become mothers—but the broader context reveals that often this justification was simply pretext for discrimination. In Switzerland, for instance, legislation adopted in the 1870s that limited women's working hours, banned women from cleaning machinery, and established a list of jobs that were off limits to pregnant women found support from the “Working Man's Association,” a group that sought to eliminate women's work in factories altogether and urged that women should prioritize their roles as housewives and mothers.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in the United States, the Supreme Court held in 1908 that women's “physical

structure and a proper discharge of [their] maternal functions” justified restrictions on their working hours that were found unconstitutional for men;<sup>19</sup> during the same era, male labor unions commonly advocated for “protective” laws that would prevent women from competing for jobs.<sup>20</sup>

These same rationales persist in the present day. For example, in Russia, the Constitutional Court upheld a prohibition on women working as subway drivers in 2016 due to the “widely recognized social role of women in procreation.”<sup>21</sup> In the United States, a state lawmaker voted down a proposal to expand access to childcare in 2021 since it would “make it easier or more convenient for mothers to come out of the home.”<sup>22</sup> In Kazakhstan, the government claims that its ongoing ban on women holding over 200 different jobs “protects maternity and promotes the health of women.”<sup>23</sup> While safe and healthy work conditions are critical for everyone—not just women or pregnant women—the evidence as a whole reveals that legislators have often unjustifiably singled women out for restrictions on types of allowed work in order to reinforce sex-segregated roles.

Policy choices that exclude women from full economic engagement harm us all. The overall failure of governments to address discrimination and care keeps millions of women out of the labor force, which increases risks of household poverty and undermines countries’ economic development. Indeed, families with only a single male earner are far more vulnerable to economic hardship following a job loss than dual-earner households—particularly amid periods of mass unemployment like that triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and other large-scale crises. Meanwhile, countries as a whole substantially limit their productive capacity by creating barriers to women’s full engagement. The impacts are profound across low- and high-income countries alike. For example, in the United States, the lack of “family-friendly” labor policies—such as paid parental leave—explains nearly a third of the disparity in female labor force participation over two decades compared to other high-income countries.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, eliminating the gender gap in labor force participation in the United States would boost annual GDP by \$4.3 trillion.<sup>25</sup>

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), women perform an even higher share of the unpaid labor than in high-income countries, creating a greater barrier to their participation in paid work. Across India, Pakistan, and Cambodia, for example, women spend ten times as much time on unpaid work as men; in rural Mali, it’s fourteen times as much.<sup>26</sup> Yet if women’s labor force participation in every country in Asia and the Pacific increased to match that of the highest-performing country in the region, collective GDP would rise by \$4.5 trillion—or 12 percent—by 2025.<sup>27</sup> In Africa, equivalent increases would boost GDP by \$316 billion, or 10 percent.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, just as laws that reinforce structural inequalities can have wide-ranging harms, undoing this inequality in the law can have—and has had—wide-ranging benefits. For example, in Denmark, a 2006 law requiring that

companies provide sex-disaggregated statistics on wages decreased the gender pay gap by 13 percent.<sup>29</sup> In Malawi and Uganda, the introduction of tuition-free education led to higher enrollment among girls, in part by changing expectations about who gets to go to school,<sup>30</sup> and evidence from across African countries shows that higher educational attainment helps reduce the gender gap in employment.<sup>31</sup> And in Norway, a 1993 reform that introduced four weeks of paid parental leave reserved for fathers increased the share of new dads taking leave and improved their children's school performance, especially in families where the father had at least the same level of education as the mother.<sup>32</sup>

### WHY ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES IN THE LAW MATTERS TO EVERYONE

Significant research shows that restrictive gender norms hurt everyone, with consequences that begin even before we're born and that shape our experiences of education, health care, and work throughout the life course.<sup>33</sup> Women can experience backlash for exhibiting the same leadership qualities often valued in men, and men who prioritize caregiving or deviate from masculine stereotypes often face consequences at work.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, survey evidence shows that men across countries want to spend more time with their children but often face barriers to doing so due to workplace stigma and unsupportive policies.<sup>35</sup>

The solutions yield benefits across genders. Specific policies and laws are illustrative: tuition-free education, for example, not only increases girls' school attendance but also boosts access by all children from low-income families as well as children with disabilities. High-quality, universal childcare supports more women in working for pay and supports the early development of children of all genders, while giving families greater choice about how to divide paid work and care responsibilities. Prohibiting employment discrimination in both the public and private sectors, and ensuring mechanisms are in place to support discrimination laws' enforcement, can go far in fostering workplaces that are fair to everyone.

More broadly, country action to increase gender equality in work, education, and economic opportunity has broad benefits not only for women but also for households, communities, men, and children. Increasing gender parity in education by 10 percent is associated with a two-year increase in female life expectancy as well as a one-year increase in male life expectancy.<sup>36</sup> Increasing women's educational attainment and income also has substantial benefits for children of all genders, including lower mortality rates, reduced risks of malnutrition, higher immunization rates, and better educational outcomes.<sup>37</sup>

Closing gender gaps in employment and earnings can also make a powerful difference for economies. Leveling up women's employment can yield vast returns to GDP. Though the potential for impact is especially transformative in LMICs, every

country could realize substantial economic gains by making it possible for more women to enter and remain in the workforce. Indeed, according to the McKinsey Institute, achieving gender parity in labor force participation worldwide would add \$28 trillion to annual global GDP.<sup>38</sup>

To be clear, however, equalizing men's and women's employment is possible only if the unpaid care and household work currently shouldered largely by women is not only reduced where possible but also redistributed—both within families and within countries. Moreover, by designing policies that make it easier for men and women to share unpaid care, while simultaneously making clear that families and the state must assume co-responsibility for meeting societal care needs, countries can support a more equitable division of care tasks without reducing care quality.<sup>39</sup>

Here, too, the solutions yield dividends for all. Investing in care services, one prerequisite to enabling women to take on more paid work, would create millions of new jobs at a time when care needs are rising worldwide as the global population ages. Indeed, according to estimates from the International Labour Organization, if all countries invested sufficiently in care service provision to realize countries' global commitments under the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they would collectively create as many as 269 million new jobs.<sup>40</sup> Regional estimates further underscore this potential. For example, one study focusing on seven high-income countries estimated that investing 2 percent of GDP in care would create over twenty-one million jobs in those economies alone.<sup>41</sup> Another simulation focused on the Eurozone and United Kingdom found that expanding public childcare could create five million jobs over five years while increasing GDP growth by 2.4 percent.<sup>42</sup> Similar impacts are expected in LMICs.<sup>43</sup> At the same time that greater investments in care would support equality in care-giving, these investments would also increase equality in care receiving by making it possible to ensure universal access to quality care services.

## SECTION OVERVIEW

The book proceeds in three sections. In section 1, we examine how the laws in every country address discrimination in the workplace—not only on the basis of sex and gender but also based on pregnancy, family status, race/ethnicity, religion, disability, migration status, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. We examine what steps countries are taking to prevent and address sexual harassment and sex-based harassment in employment—which surveys demonstrate remain commonplace in all types of workplaces, from farms to factories to the halls of parliament.

These baseline protections establish whether everyone is playing by the same rules and whether everyone can expect dignity and equal treatment at work. Their

scope and details matter: when countries prohibit sex discrimination but allow discrimination against parents of small children, for example, women continue to face greater discrimination associated with caregiving. Moreover, when discrimination goes unaddressed, the sequelae perpetuate a range of inequalities. When women anticipate they will face discrimination and receive lower pay than men when they enter the labor market, within households, it will remain economically “rational” for women to take on the majority of unpaid work while men devote more time to market work. Comprehensively prohibiting discrimination in employment is thus a precondition for broader shifts toward gender equality. While this section aims to identify strategies to increase equality in the economy across all genders, a larger part of the first section of the book is dedicated to discrimination experienced by women since current gaps and inequalities in discrimination law disproportionately harm women.

Section 2 explores why achieving gender equality in the economy will be impossible without addressing both paid and unpaid caregiving. Overall, when looking at paid and unpaid work hours together, women do 52 percent of work globally. Yet most of it is unpaid; women account for just 36 percent of paid work hours but 76 percent of unpaid work time.<sup>44</sup> Further, the privatization of care means that only higher-income households can afford to access support with care needs—creating a vicious cycle that widens gaps based on both gender and socioeconomic status. In Turkey, for instance, among adults with only a primary school education, women perform seven times as much unpaid work as men do, whereas among university graduates, it falls to three times.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, care workers—disproportionately women—are often subject to some of the lowest pay and worst working conditions across countries.

Addressing these gaps and inequalities will require a comprehensive approach. Increasing gender equality in unpaid care—including by equally supporting people of all genders in taking on care responsibilities, and actively encouraging men to take on a greater role—is fundamental. Likewise, recognizing that care needs extend across the life course, and providing adequate support to meet the needs that arise at each stage of life, is essential for supporting both caregivers and care recipients. Finally, investing in the care workforce and improving the quality of care employment are critical steps toward advancing equality in the short term for a majority-female workforce and ensuring that the millions of care jobs that need to be created to satisfy growing demand are high-quality jobs, which will reduce occupational segregation. Section 2 examines how governments’ failure to comprehensively address care as a fundamental societal need and responsibility widens gender gaps in all aspects of employment and leadership. In contrast, when governments invest in supports for both short-term and long-term care, and actively encourage gender equality in the provision of care, equality and economies both advance.

Lastly, in section 3, we assess what it takes to make change happen. Section 3 examines approaches that would make a difference within months as well as approaches that would be transformational long-term. Long-term change requires shifting norms as well as opportunities for the next generation. One key strategy for doing so is increasing girls' access to education, which is the focus of the first chapter in the final section. Education lays the foundation for whether girls can access higher-paying jobs when they reach adulthood and can also powerfully influence their own children's well-being and educational expectations. To increase girls' access to education, however, countries must not only reduce direct barriers to schooling—such as tuition fees—but also address indirect barriers that reinforce gendered norms, such as inadequate investment in rural infrastructure.

Both immediate and long-term change can happen through strengthening laws. Through four in-depth case studies of civil-society-led efforts to enact, implement, and improve laws shown to make a difference for gender equality in the economy, the next chapter sheds light on successful approaches to achieving legal reforms around the world. And finally, our concluding chapter looks at what it would take and what roles everyone would need to play—from individual citizens to civil society organizations to media to policy makers—to realize gender equality in the economy within our lifetimes.

#### WHY—AND HOW—WE EXAMINE SOLUTIONS ON A GLOBAL SCALE

The first and foremost reason for taking a global approach in this book is that women have a fundamental right to equality no matter where they live.<sup>b</sup> The equal worth of each person is intrinsic to humanity. Moreover, gender equality and women's rights to be free from discrimination are fundamental rights that have been widely recognized by nearly every country, in principle, through global treaties and agreements. In particular, the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which has been ratified by 189 national governments as of this writing, commits countries to legally guarantee

b. Throughout this book, we use the term “gender equality” rather than “gender equity.” Across contexts, these terms have been used in different ways. In some, “equity” is interpreted as providing greater protections than “equality” in that it takes into account not only formal equality before the law but also the need to remedy disparities in power and resources resulting from historic and ongoing discrimination. In others, “equity” has been invoked to reinforce restrictive gender norms and the idea of men and women playing different rather than equal roles. The international human rights system prioritizes the term “equality,” consistent with the approach adopted by all UN member states at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and affirmed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in a 2010 recommendation, which cautioned against the inherent subjectivity of “equity” and its potential to justify unequal treatment that perpetuates inequalities.

women's equal rights and to "ensure [their] practical realization," including by "tak[ing] all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment."<sup>46</sup> More recently, in 2015, all 193 UN member states unanimously adopted the SDGs, which oblige them to "end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere" by 2030.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, we are living in a time when our economies are more interconnected than ever before. Increasingly, working conditions anywhere affect conditions everywhere. With the vast expansion of global trade, nearly all of us purchase goods and access services produced by workers all over the world. As consumers, we have a responsibility to learn and care how women are treated at work in all countries.

Finally, taking a global approach increases our understanding of what exists, where the gaps are, and what's feasible. Policy research in a range of areas that matter to gender equality has historically been limited in most of the world; looking globally matters to finding solutions that work for all. Given the diversity of social policies adopted to address common challenges worldwide, creating and sharing findings on the approaches taken in each country allows all countries to learn from one another.

That said, identifying and presenting solutions that make a difference across countries all over the world is a tall order. Some approaches are likely to be effective across many settings; others may vary in their impact and effectiveness depending on national characteristics. Empirical studies can shed light on which is the case. In this book, we take four different approaches to learning and sharing insights about what laws and policies have been adopted and what works to advance change in different settings: (1) creating, analyzing, and visualizing new comparative policy data for all 193 UN member states; (2) presenting results from our center's original quantitative studies measuring the effects of policy changes on outcomes across countries and regions; (3) examining how laws make a difference in practice through examples from case law from a wide range of countries as well as an extensive review of the existing literature; and (4) presenting findings from qualitative studies of change based on in-depth interviews with advocates and civil society leaders working to advance gender equality in diverse contexts.

### *Global Policy Data*

The law and policy data presented in this book are the product of a rigorous and time-intensive process undertaken by a multilingual, multidisciplinary team of researchers at the WORLD Policy Analysis Center (WORLD). WORLD's mission is to strengthen equal rights and opportunities globally by providing civil society, policy makers, citizens, and other researchers with tools to advance feasible and effective policy approaches for strengthening equal rights and improving well-being. WORLD captures quantitatively comparative data for all 193 UN countries on adult labor and working conditions, discrimination at work, child marriage,

aging, education, constitutional rights, health, disability, family, migration, child labor, environment, and income policies. For nearly two decades, policies that are central to gender equality have been a key focus of WORLD's work.

The process for creating this data begins with identifying and reading the original laws (primary sources) of all 193 countries, rather than secondary summaries or policy descriptions. Primary sources allow us to better understand each law or policy and help us avoid errors that may have been introduced in secondary sources. This distinction is particularly important when seeking to understand more complex legal areas, such as countries' methods of reaching workers in the informal economy, the scope of legal loopholes, and the functions of enforcement bodies. While we use primary sources whenever possible, we also use secondary sources when information is unclear or insufficient for particular countries, prioritizing global or regional sources that are comparable across multiple countries.

Once sources are identified, we begin coding, which refers to the process by which an individual researcher takes a piece of information on legislation, policy, or constitutions and translates it into a set of features that can be mapped, quantitatively analyzed, and readily understood and shared. To compare laws and policies across all the world's countries—even when there is a great deal of legislative variation among individual nations—we develop coding frameworks, which begin with the essential features of each policy area: its intrinsic characteristics, such as coverage; important elements identified in policy research; and minimum standards recognized in global agreements, where they exist.

After determining a set of key features, research team members read laws and policies from twenty to thirty countries to develop closed-ended categories for coding these features while capturing the full variety of different countries' approaches. They then test this coding system on an additional ten to twenty nations, and further refine the coding approach based on feedback from civil society and researchers working in relevant topic areas. Our priority is to ensure that we fully capture the richness and variety of approaches taken by different countries. At times, this means revising the framework midway through coding to capture one country's unique policy features and then reviewing all previously coded nations to ensure that all countries are ultimately coded based on the same comprehensive framework.

To ensure transparency and consistency, we develop a codebook that sets out the rules for coding each question, which researchers rely on to make decisions on coding law and policy features. Some questions nevertheless require judgment calls. Therefore, we utilize double coding to minimize human error: two researchers independently code each set of policies, laws, and constitutions and compare their results. When they arrive at different conclusions on specific coding decisions, they bring these questions to the larger coding team, which meets regularly to discuss any issues that arise through the coding process. Once coding is

complete, we conduct systematic quality checks. We also carry out targeted checks of outlier countries.

For this book, we undertook this process to analyze the legislation of all 193 UN member states for each area we address in depth: prohibitions of discrimination at work, prohibitions of sexual harassment at work, prevention of and remedies for sex discrimination and harassment, caring for children, caring for adult family members, and education. Within each of these topic areas, we capture a range of different types of policies and hundreds of different policy indicators, allowing us to create unique, quantitative datasets that enable rapid analysis of how specific policy features vary regionally and globally. For some areas that we have been analyzing for nearly two decades, we are also able to present longitudinal data to show how policies have changed over time. Full details of our approach can be found in an online appendix.<sup>c</sup>

To make this data readily accessible, throughout the book, we distill key findings into global policy maps that illustrate at a glance where the world stands in a given policy area. These maps (and the underlying data) reflect rights and protections explicitly enshrined in the text of national laws and policies; because of the wide variation across countries in whether court decisions have precedential value, as well as their risks of being overturned, we do not code case law. We also provide summary tables in each chapter to offer a quick understanding of global trends as well as variation across country income groups.

We have been grateful to have the funding to build policy data in each of these rich and critical areas. While focusing in this book on laws that directly center on economic activities as well as education, which shapes economic opportunities, we are deeply aware that other areas of law and policy make a profound difference for women's economic outcomes as well as their daily lives. Laws and policies shaping reproductive health, preventing gender-based violence, and promoting equality within families across settings are foremost among these.

The unmet need for family planning and reproductive health care is staggering: across LMICs, 218 million women report that they want to avoid pregnancy but lack access to a modern method of contraception.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the ability to decide whether and when to have children is fundamental to women's autonomy, health, and capacity to pursue their educational and career ambitions. Despite some policy-specific and emerging efforts to track laws in this area, led by the World Health Organization, the Center for Reproductive Rights, and others, a more comprehensive mapping of where countries stand on reproductive rights is essential to understanding whether all women can pursue their chosen paths.

A second profoundly important area is violence. While in this book we examine protections against sexual harassment at work and at school, we do not have the necessary data to provide a comprehensive assessment of all laws and policies

c. [www.worldpolicycenter.org/equality-within-our-lifetimes/appendix](http://www.worldpolicycenter.org/equality-within-our-lifetimes/appendix)

relevant to gender-based violence. Women’s bodily autonomy, including safety within their homes and the ability to move through public spaces freely, is fundamental to economic and political equality as well as human health. Multiple efforts have begun to capture what is being done to address gender-based violence,<sup>49</sup> but if we as a global community are going to “eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres” by 2030—as mandated by SDG 5—we need a more comprehensive effort to track global progress toward legally protecting women and girls from all forms of violence in every area of all countries.

Third, family law can substantially shape women’s economic circumstances and their ability to exercise their fundamental rights more broadly. Laws and policies that shape equal rights in entering marriage, during marriage, and after marriage, as well as equal rights within families, can have profound implications on everything from access to assets to caregiving roles to women’s ability to leave a marriage without fear of destitution or homelessness. These laws also matter to legal rights for women living in *de facto* marriages. As in other areas, while some initial efforts offer important but incomplete coverage of family law, the development of more thorough data sources remains essential.

In short, these topics, among others, merit deep and rich engagement—but despite valuable efforts that begin to address each, more comprehensive law and policy data are needed in all three areas. To provide the most actionable information for policy makers, advocates, and researchers alike, these data should quantify national approaches and make them comparable, in a way that allows for rigorous analysis; examine whether laws apply to all women within each country; highlight policy details that can undermine the effectiveness of laws, perpetuating inequalities; and cover all 193 UN member states. We hope that in the future, data and resources will be available to build on this foundation in addressing these critical areas in greater detail.

### *Impact Studies*

One important strength of developing quantitative, longitudinal, globally comparative policy data is that it allows us to rigorously analyze how policy changes affect outcomes across countries, while controlling for other factors. A randomized control trial—or experiment comparing the experiences of a “treatment” group and “control” group—is often regarded as the gold standard for measuring whether a particular medical treatment, pilot program, or other intervention “works” to produce the desired outcome. When it comes to national laws and major policies, undertaking an experiment wherein half the population is covered by a new policy and the other half is not raises both ethical and practical concerns. However, by measuring the effects of real-world law and policy change, we can take advantage of a “natural experiment” that enables us to see whether countries that adopted a particular policy fared differently from those that did not. Moreover, by merging global policy data with longitudinal data on public attitudes from sources such as

the World Values Survey, these methods allow us to measure the effects of policy change on norms.

Throughout the book, we share findings from impact studies undertaken by our center and in partnership with colleagues, which follow the experiences of millions of individuals and families across scores of countries to examine how actions governments took affected gender equality, health, education, and the economy. Included in these are:

- *Studies examining the impacts of policies that have been found to work in some settings, to test their impact across countries.* For example, we present study findings showing that extending the duration of maternity leave in LMICs increases on-time immunizations,<sup>50</sup> boosts rates of breastfeeding,<sup>51</sup> and lowers infant mortality rates<sup>52</sup>—using the power of global policy data to affirm that the health benefits of maternity leave that were previously documented in higher-income settings apply to lower-income countries as well.
- *Studies examining policies that are particularly important in low- and middle-income settings.* For example, while higher-income countries universally have free primary school, there remains variation in lower-income settings. We carry out and present findings from a series of our studies focused on LMICs’ elimination of tuition for primary school and demonstrate that these policy choices not only boost girls’ attendance but also lower rates of child marriage,<sup>53</sup> increase on-time immunization,<sup>54</sup> and make it more likely that girls will be able to fulfill their family planning needs and make their own health decisions in adulthood.<sup>55</sup>
- *Studies of how law and policy change shapes norms.* For example, we carried out and share findings from a study illustrating one way that paid leave for fathers can make a difference: by shifting attitudes toward women in the workplace. Specifically, in countries that enacted policies encouraging or incentivizing men to take leave following the birth of a child, our analysis found that both women and men subsequently embraced more egalitarian beliefs about work than in countries without such policies.<sup>56</sup>

In short, with the longitudinal policy data that allow us to measure the impacts of different approaches at scale, we can shed light on “what works” not just in one or two countries but worldwide. In this book, we share findings from our studies using this approach to elucidate how specific policy actions can advance gender equality and improve other critical outcomes across contexts.

### *Court Decisions in Countries around the World*

Third, to supplement this book’s quantitative findings on policy impact, we examine how—and why—laws and policies are making a difference in courts across countries. For example, in chapter 2, drawing on a diverse sample of case law from countries including Canada, India, and the United Kingdom, we demonstrate why

prohibiting sex discrimination may not always be enough to reach discrimination based on caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, in chapter 4, using case examples from China, Uruguay, and the United States, we illustrate why the existence and strength of countries' sexual harassment laws can meaningfully shape women's likelihood of success in litigation.

To identify court cases for analysis, we searched a series of global and regional case law repositories including the Venice Commission's CODICES database; the Women and Justice Collection, curated by the Legal Information Institute at Cornell; the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Caselaw Database; the European Union's Common Portal of Case Law; the Center for Justice and International Law's database; the European Equality Law Network; and the Global Health and Human Rights Database. Notably, though they collectively cover jurisprudence from well over 100 countries, many of these databases include only cases decided within the past one or two decades. To supplement results from these sources, we also accessed older, landmark cases as well as more recent but lesser-known decisions from across countries that were identified in the literature, using targeted searches and individual court websites.

#### *Case Studies of High-Impact Change*

Finally, to provide actionable information for readers about not only which laws make a difference but also strategies to advance their enactment, we present a series of case studies about important efforts to adopt or strengthen laws that matter to women's economic equality across a diverse set of countries. A team of researchers searched both the academic and the gray literature for civil society organizations that had demonstrated impact on gender equality. The team also asked leaders in the field for their recommendations of the most effective organizations globally. Initial research was then carried out on over 100 potential civil society organizations for evidence of impact, and a subset of fourteen was selected for in-depth interviews. The interviews conducted involved a range of stakeholders including leaders of these civil society organizations, business leaders, advocates, policy makers, lawyers, and people served. The case studies presented, which are concentrated in chapter 9, represent findings from this examination of successful movements to advance change around the world.

### ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN OUR LIFETIMES

For much of recorded history, many countries and cultures have been marked by gender inequality in the law. As long ago as 1755 BCE, the Code of Hammurabi, inscribed on stone and considered one of the oldest written laws, established that women could transfer property to their sons only with the written permission of their husbands and could never bequeath property to their daughters.<sup>57</sup> Ancient Greece, despite often being celebrated as the world's first democracy,

forbade women from voting or administering property.<sup>58</sup> The Magna Carta, heralded as the first written constitution in 1215 CE, established that women's testimony in court had less value than men's.<sup>59</sup> And during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial governments in Africa enacted numerous laws limiting women's economic rights and opportunities, based on the view that women were "perpetual minors, [who] could not independently own property."<sup>60</sup>

At the same time, equal rights on the basis of gender are not a modern-day invention. In ancient Egypt, women had the same rights to private property as men and the right to inherit.<sup>61</sup> In fifth-century Spain, the Visigoths recognized the principle of community property and likewise recognized the right of married women to administer their own property.<sup>62</sup> During the Song Dynasty in China, married women retained rights to their own property during marriage and upon divorce.<sup>63</sup> In nineteenth-century Latin America, a range of countries' civil codes recognized full or partial community property; among the Portuguese colonies, this meant that men had to consult their wives before selling property, and if a marriage dissolved, all assets were divided equally.<sup>64</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, although the historical record is rife with examples of legal discrimination against women, the evolution of women's rights has not been linear; there have been periods of both progress and regress across countries, including in recent decades. World Bank data suggest that on the whole, some of the most explicitly discriminatory laws are becoming less common; whereas nearly all economies (86 percent) had legal barriers to women gaining employment in 1970, that number fell to 72 percent by 2000 and 47 percent by 2021.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, laws limiting women's ability to travel outside the home or choose a place to live have fallen from 58 percent of economies in 1970 to 28 percent in 2000 and 18 percent in 2021. At the same time, new discriminatory laws have emerged during the same period. In Jordan, for example, the Personal Status Law, enacted in 2010, provides that a woman loses certain rights if she works without "explicit or manifested consent."<sup>66</sup> In Madagascar, a 2004 law provides that "women, regardless of age, shall not be employed at night."<sup>67</sup>

Over the course of history, humankind has achieved dramatic progress in reducing grave forms of inequality in other areas and addressing practices that were incompatible with fundamental rights. In recent decades, momentum has been building to address equal rights on the basis of gender comprehensively, and the evidence of the impacts it would have is overwhelming. We hope in this book to demonstrate that there are clear actions governments can take that would make an enormous difference for the structural fairness of the economy. Although the specific challenges may look different, all countries face common barriers to fully realizing gender equality in the workplace, and a wide range of solutions have proven effective across countries.

We have an opportunity in this moment to take transformative steps to finally achieve gender equality at a global level. Stories from around the world—such as

those we highlight in this book's concluding chapters—offer lessons about how we can effectively work together, how change becomes feasible, and how we can collectively hold our governments accountable. Realizing this vision will take all of us.

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