

Achieving Gender Equality in the Economy in Our Lifetimes

Every country in the world has committed to realizing full gender equality rapidly as part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 5 could not be clearer: governments worldwide agreed to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” by 2030, which requires “end[ing] all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.” What’s more, these promises and obligations are nothing new: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the landmark agreement adopted in 1948 that articulates fundamental civil, political, social, and economic rights and applies to all countries globally, unequivocally states that “everyone is entitled to [its] rights and freedoms . . . without distinction of any kind, such as . . . sex.” And since its passage in 1979, 189 countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which clearly delineates governments’ duties to protect equal rights across gender in the workplace, in education, and across civil society. Yet despite all these commitments, world leaders barely shrug their shoulders when the World Economic Forum estimates that it will take over 267 years to close the global gender gap in economic opportunity and participation.

Gender inequality’s vast and varied consequences in daily life are treated as inevitable by governments when they seek to evade responsibility. But the dramatic differences in the size of gender gaps across countries make plain that gender inequality is principally man-made. The facts on the ground underscore the extent of government responsibility. Around the world, 129 million girls remain out of school.¹ Yet ensuring the affordability, accessibility, and safety of schools is a key duty of government everywhere. Globally, women represent just 39 percent of the labor force but nearly half of those earning the minimum wage or less, with discrimination continuing to significantly influence gender wage gaps.² Yet governments are responsible for setting—and enforcing—the rules about whether

employers can pay women less for the same work or systematically exclude them from promotions and training opportunities. In too many countries, inadequate care infrastructure leads millions of women to leave paid work when a child is born or an aging parent gets sick. Governments are uniquely positioned to ensure that quality and affordable care is available to all.

Governments regulate the economy, yet they have decided not to provide for pensions or social protections for care workers, who are disproportionately female. They have passed laws that discourage men from engaging in paid and unpaid care alike while presuming the work will be done by women, further structuring gender inequalities into economic roles. And although created to protect all people within their borders, most nation states have gone to great lengths to ensure the security of territory but not the security of populations, despite the fact that the healthy development of the next generation of citizens is just as essential to a society's survival.

With many contemporary government structures developed and designed at a time when women had neither full citizenship rights nor the vote, it's no wonder that many issues with profound implications for women's lives were inadequately or inequitably addressed. In this initiative, we have taken seriously the signed commitments that countries have made to immediate and long-lasting gender equality—with the goal of offering actionable solutions and a pathway toward undoing the structural inequalities that have held us back for so long.

TAKING SOLUTIONS SERIOUSLY

Laws and policies shape which types of labor are paid, who is protected from discrimination, whether people have an equal chance at an education and a job, and whether all who live within a country's borders are guaranteed access to care throughout the life course. Laws also play a role in shaping—and changing—norms and values, including whether care's societal benefits and women's potential to contribute to the economy are fully recognized.

So if governments begin to take their signed commitments to equality seriously, where are we starting from? How far have we come and what remains to be done?

Where the World Stands

Addressing employment discrimination is fundamental. While 179 countries now take some approach to prohibiting gender discrimination at work, far fewer provide comprehensive protections. Indeed, eighty-nine of these countries still have not adopted legislation that prohibits gender discrimination in all aspects of employment—from hiring to pay to promotions, demotions, and terminations. This straightforward step is long overdue. Still more countries, ninety-six, lack any laws specifically prohibiting employment discrimination based on family status,

and eleven countries reinforce outdated gender norms around caregiving by protecting women but not men from caregiving discrimination.

Most countries must also do more to ensure that guarantees of equal rights at work extend to all women. A substantial body of literature has documented how women experiencing multiple forms of marginalization face even higher barriers at work, which is reflected in outcomes across countries. Yet thirty-five countries fail to prohibit both gender and racial discrimination at work, thirty-three fail to prohibit both gender and religious discrimination, and thirty-eight fail to prohibit both gender and disability discrimination. Substantially more countries lack laws that cover not only gender but also social class (sixty-nine), migration status (104), sexual orientation (125), or gender identity (160).

Countries similarly fall far short on prohibiting sexual harassment. Fifty countries worldwide still need to take the first step of enacting legislation that specifically prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace. Eighty-nine countries fail to prohibit behavior that creates a hostile work environment, and 108 countries fail to prohibit both sexual harassment and sex-based harassment.

Moreover, even countries with relatively strong laws must do more on enforcement, including by ensuring that women can access justice through the courts and through alternative mechanisms when they experience discrimination. Eighty-eight countries have no independent complaint mechanisms covering all three core areas: workplace gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and inability to take parental leave. In sixty-eight countries, women have no legal protection from retaliation for reporting workplace gender discrimination, and in even more countries, eighty-nine, women have no protection from retaliation if they report sexual harassment.

Achieving gender equality in the economy and our lives will also require closing the gaps in national policies around caregiving. Due to societal norms and lack of supports for greater equality in care, women continue to take on the majority of unpaid caregiving worldwide, with consequences for their employment and earnings. The International Labour Organization reports that 606 million working-age women, compared to just forty-one million men, are out of the labor force due to unpaid care work.³ Yet many countries only further widen these gaps through policies that reinforce the idea that women should always be the primary caregivers and men the primary earners. Seventy-one countries worldwide have yet to adopt any paid leave that can be taken by fathers of infants, undermining women's opportunities at work and men's opportunities at home. An even greater number, 165, have yet to enact leave policies that actively encourage men's take-up.

Further, far too few countries provide adequate support for caregiving needs throughout the life course, which likewise disproportionately fall to women. Studies from across countries show that women consistently comprise the substantial majority of primary caregivers for aging family members and family members with disabilities. Yet 111 countries fail to provide paid leave for workers who need

to provide care or support to meet the health needs of an ill or aging family member, and eighty-seven countries lack policies guaranteeing paid leave to mothers and to fathers to meet children's serious health needs. When this leave is unavailable, women face outsized consequences.

And finally, investing in the next generation of girls—in particular through the universal provision of free, quality education—will be critical to long-term change. Yet sixty-two countries have yet to make school tuition-free through the end of secondary, reinforcing a demonstrated barrier to girls' ability to stay in school in gender-unequal settings. Countries also lack policies needed to create a healthy and equitable environment for all girls to learn. Ten countries take no approach to prohibiting gender discrimination in schools, and thirty-five countries take no approach to prohibiting sexual harassment. Moreover, nearly twelve million girls are married before the age of eighteen every year, driving as many as a third of school dropouts for girls.⁴ Yet ninety-six countries still have legal loopholes that allow child marriage under the age of eighteen, including forty countries that allow girls to be legally married at a younger age than boys.

Critically, however, although there's far to go, change in these and related areas of the law is not only feasible but evident. For example, in a study of 113 low- and middle-income countries, while only 19 percent prohibited child marriage with parental consent in 1995, 58 percent did so in 2019. The proportion of countries guaranteeing paid leave to new fathers has likewise grown substantially, from 24 percent in 1995 to 63 percent in 2022. Protections for gender equality in constitutions, which can provide a powerful foundation for other laws and policies, have become nearly universal, appearing in every currently in-force constitution that was adopted since 2000, compared to just 54 percent of those adopted before 1970.

How Closing Gaps Would Be Transformative

Governments not only have a responsibility to end gender inequality in the law—they also have an opportunity to have tremendous impact by doing so. Our review of the rigorous research evidence and of case law demonstrated this transformative potential. Prohibiting discrimination provides just one example. In the United Kingdom, the enactment of new legislation specifically addressing gender discrimination in employment decreased the gender wage gap by 19 percent. In the United States, it led to a 10 percent decrease.⁵ In Japan, a law prohibiting gender discrimination in vocational training preceded an increase in the share of young women attending university and majoring in business.⁶ And in the Czech Republic, a 2009 law that banned employment discrimination on a wide range of grounds, including pregnancy, maternity, and paternity, decreased the motherhood wage gap significantly.⁷ Further, laws addressing discrimination have been important for increasing the economic equality of women in marginalized groups. In the United States, for instance, the adoption of state-level antidiscrimination laws increased Black women's income by around 12 percent.⁸

In the courts, protections against employment discrimination have made a powerful difference for women of all backgrounds. In China, protections against gender discrimination in employment led to a series of rulings striking down employment ads that indicated a preference for male applicants.⁹ In two cases from the Netherlands, migrant women who lost jobs or were not considered for open positions due to employer presumptions about their family responsibilities won lawsuits based on legal protections against both sex and race discrimination.¹⁰ And in New Zealand, eldercare workers won a major victory in a case grounded in the law's guarantee of equal pay for work of equal value.¹¹

Case law has likewise demonstrated the power of sexual harassment provisions. In South Korea, a collective lawsuit brought by women working at a five-star hotel in Seoul resulted in a landmark ruling holding seven executives liable for failing to address sexual harassment in the workplace.¹² In the United States, female mine workers won a groundbreaking class action lawsuit after they suffered relentless sexual and sex-based harassment at their male-dominated worksites.¹³ In France, four migrant women who cleaned some of Paris's busiest train stations secured a powerful court victory not only for themselves but also for a male colleague who had been fired after speaking up on their behalf.¹⁴ Moreover, the adoption of sexual harassment legislation has played an important role in increasing public awareness about what sexual harassment is and shaping workplace cultures to be intolerant of harassing behaviors—critical prerequisites for ending harassment altogether.

Beyond setting a baseline for equal rights at work, laws also make a difference for whether protections against discrimination and harassment are adequately enforced. When someone bringing a lawsuit has access to a lawyer, their chances of success in the courts increase as much as fourteen-fold.¹⁵ Providing a legal right to counsel supports these outcomes, in employment cases and in other civil matters that are critical to gender equality. In Ecuador, a pilot program providing legal aid to low-income women improved their perceptions of the justice system and decreased the risk of domestic violence for women bringing family law cases.¹⁶

Meanwhile, legal provisions that allow for collective litigation in cases of employment discrimination and sexual harassment can help secure stronger remedies and advance systemic change. For example, a study of over 500 employment discrimination cases in the United States found that class actions were far more likely than other cases to yield court orders requiring the employer to take specific, substantive actions—rather than mere pro forma steps—to promote equal rights in the workplace.¹⁷ In Canada, research has found that cases addressing systemic discrimination are five times as likely in the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal, which allows for group litigation, than in the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, which lacks a standard group litigation procedure.¹⁸

Laws and policies around caregiving likewise provide rich evidence of the transformative potential of policy change for both gender equality and households' overall well-being. For example, one study of 117 countries found that

women ages twenty-five to fifty-five were more likely to participate in the labor force when their countries provided moderate-length paid maternity leave.¹⁹ In Spain, the introduction of thirteen days of paternity leave increased mothers' probability of reemployment following childbirth by 11 percent.²⁰ And in California, two studies found that the introduction of an individual entitlement to paid parental leave, which was equally available to men and women, was associated with greater wages and working hours for mothers with children under age three.²¹ Moreover, there are substantial benefits for children; as our research with colleagues has found, extending the duration of legislated maternity leave in low- and middle-income countries significantly reduces infant mortality, increases on-time immunizations, reduces the incidence of diarrheal disease, and improves rates of exclusive breastfeeding.²²

How parental leave laws are structured also shapes whether fathers take it, and whether they take it matters. In particular, policies that provide father-specific leave or that offer an incentive if parents share the leave available have been shown to significantly increase men's take-up. In Germany, for instance, the share of new fathers taking parental leave jumped from just 3.5 percent in 2006 to 34 percent in 2014 following the introduction of a two-month leave "bonus" provided to the household if fathers took at least two months of leave.²³ Likewise, in Sweden, leave-taking by men nearly doubled from 46 percent of fathers whose babies were born two weeks before the introduction of a two-week "father's quota" to 82 percent of those whose babies were born in the two weeks afterward.²⁴ And when men do take leave, women's economic outcomes improve. In Sweden, research has shown that for each month of parental leave taken by her partner, a woman's future earnings increase by nearly 7 percent.²⁵

Beyond leave, laws and policies guaranteeing access to free or affordable child-care and preprimary education make it more likely that parents—and disproportionately women, given underlying norms that shape patterns of care—can return to full-time work when they have young children. In Argentina, for example, mothers were 11–14 percent more likely to have paid work following the expansion of free preschool.²⁶ Improving access to early childhood education also has benefits for older children—especially girls—who otherwise could be expected to stay home from school to care for their younger siblings while their parents worked. In Mozambique, school attendance rates went up by 6 percent for older siblings of preschoolers after the establishment of a new preschool program.²⁷

Laws also have an impact when it comes to caregiving for aging adults and family members with disabilities. Leave to support shorter-term or intermittent caregiving needs can make it more likely that caregivers for older adults can maintain their paid jobs. For example, in Japan, the introduction of ninety-three days of paid family leave was associated with a 7.4 percentage-point reduction in the probability that a worker would quit their job within a year of a parent first needing care.²⁸ Similarly, in California, a state-level policy guaranteeing eight weeks of

paid leave for a family member's serious health needs led to a 3 percent increase in the private-sector employment of forty-five- to sixty-four-year-old women who had a spouse with disabilities, relative to women in the same age group in states without an equivalent policy.²⁹ Moreover, laws addressing discrimination at work—including discrimination based on both age and caregiving responsibilities—can be particularly important for supporting the health and well-being of aging adults, as staying in the workforce longer can improve both health and economic outcomes.

Finally, laws governing access to education have made a clear difference for whether all girls can go to school, which fundamentally shapes their long-term economic opportunities. Across Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Mozambique, eliminating tuition fees for primary education resulted in an immediate increase in enrollment of between 12 percent and 51 percent, with disproportionate benefits for girls.³⁰ Further, eliminating tuition has been shown to reduce child marriage and increase access to modern family planning methods.³¹ Across Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia, for example, girls' likelihood of marrying before age fifteen fell by 4 to 5 percentage points after primary school tuition was eliminated. Making school compulsory has also had impacts on gender equality. In Turkey, for instance, increasing compulsory schooling from five to eight years improved girls' average attainment and reduced child marriage.³²

In short, by addressing the legal gaps and inequalities known to create barriers to girls' and women's full and equal opportunities, countries would vastly accelerate progress toward gender equality. Moreover, in addition to their immediate impacts, these law changes would support long-term change through their influence on norms. Norm change is a complex process, and across cultures, norms are influenced by history, religion, media, and other social and political institutions. At the same time, laws and policies are a critical piece of the equation and can shape expectations about gender, work, and caregiving in ways that have very tangible effects.

For example, the way in which laws structure parental leave can influence norms and expectations about women's contributions at work and men's contributions at home. In a study with colleagues spanning nine European countries, we found that the adoption of at least two weeks of father-specific leave and/or incentives for fathers' uptake stimulated greater support of women in the workplace among men as well as women.³³

Likewise, laws around education and child marriage have important normative value. Though substantial work remains to ensure child marriage laws are enforced, the values they communicate matter, even in the context of inadequate implementation. For example, our center's study of nineteen low- and middle-income countries found that legally banning child marriage was associated with a higher likelihood of viewing intimate partner violence as "unacceptable" among men and women alike.³⁴ Similarly, in another study with colleagues, we found that

exposure to tuition-free education increased the likelihood that women would have a say in their health decisions by 46 percent.³⁵

Beyond these impacts on beliefs and practices, laws and policies shape who gets opportunities for leadership—and consequently, who is in a position to make decisions affecting many others. Currently, women occupy just 25 percent of parliamentary seats and 31 percent of senior management roles;³⁶ just twenty-six women are serving as heads of state, while just forty-one lead Fortune 500 companies.³⁷ Gendered barriers to full economic and political engagement across the life course contribute to these gaps and skew priorities among decision-makers. Studies have shown that women parliamentarians are more likely than men to invest in public goods like health and education.³⁸ Similar dynamics are seen at the local level. Increasing the share of women in the *panchayats*—village councils—of West Bengal and Rajasthan, India, led to a higher prioritization of drinking water projects, since fetching water was a primary and time-consuming responsibility of women and girls.³⁹

These examples are but a few of many. Put simply, if governments step up and adopt demonstrated solutions to realize their commitments to gender equality, the potential impacts on individual lives as well as the structure of our societies and our collective beliefs and expectations can hardly be overstated.

A Path Forward

The slow pace of change in the seventy-five years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the nearly forty-five years since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, makes clear that accelerating progress will take broader action. Each of us has a role to play in advancing gender equality in our workplaces, communities, and national economies—and only if we all do our part can we expect to achieve gender equality in our lifetimes.

Social movements and civil society have a key role to play, and the innovative civil society organizations we studied showed paths forward—even in the face of setbacks, delays, and new challenges. In each country, a set of common tools that included raising public awareness, building evidence, and working across different stakeholders helped advance change.

With respect to evidence, each organization identified or developed data that would specifically detail the problem, addressed questions of feasibility and the impact of proposed solutions, and put forth arguments to address the opposition to the changes they were seeking. For Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa, this involved demonstrating that paid leave for fathers had been economically feasible in other African countries—a finding made possible through comparative policy data—and that it would have positive results for children, families, and society more broadly. For the Initiative on Social and Economic Rights (ISER) in Uganda, this meant analyzing the budget to illustrate that education funding had stagnated,

and that the government therefore was not doing its part to realize the promise of universal education. For SADAQA in Jordan, this required commissioning a study to evaluate the effects of providing childcare on businesses' bottom line, which demonstrated that implementing the law was in their best interest.

For each organization, creating the conditions for systemic change required building relationships and working in collaboration with partners across sectors. In Jordan, SADAQA was able to effectively work with both business and government to advance implementation of the childcare law. In South Africa, Sonke's and activist Hendri Terblanche's partnership with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a leading union that had significant prior experience working with policy makers and moving legislation through different committees, enabled their campaign to gain traction in parliament. And in Uganda, ISER was able to critique the government by illustrating how it had fallen short on implementing universal primary education while also maintaining positive and productive relationships with government agencies, driven by the compelling argument that ensuring the law's effectiveness at improving girls' access to schooling was in everyone's best interest.

For each high-impact organization, raising awareness involved both community mobilization and media engagement to reach people widely. For example, in Jordan, SADAQA kicked off its childcare campaign with a large public event that brought substantial public attention to the existence of the law and the organization's efforts to see it realized. SADAQA also capitalized on its cofounder's experience as a journalist to create news segments bringing the issue of the childcare legislation to a broad mainstream audience. ISER partnered with a popular member of parliament to bring far greater media attention to its findings on the education budget, which helped achieve an increase in funding even before the organization's court case resolved.

Perhaps most critically, in each story there was not a beginning and an end to advocates' efforts to strengthen legal rights that matter to gender equality, but rather a cycle of actions leading to improvements over time. Getting a law passed came first, followed by efforts to implement that law. Next came improving the law and identifying gaps or complementary policies needed to ensure it had impact—and then implementing and improving those reforms once adopted.

In South Africa, for example, the adoption of a maternity leave law, facilitated by COSATU, was an important start for supporting parents after the birth of a child and improving mothers' economic outcomes. Yet Terblanche and Sonke realized that this was only the beginning, and that gender equality in work and caregiving would remain out of reach without leave available for fathers. Their successful campaign to get South Africa to enact ten days of paid leave for fathers and partners was a powerful step in the right direction and a testament to the feasibility of adopting leave for fathers in low- and middle-income countries. Yet Terblanche, COSATU, and Sonke all share the view that ten days is not enough

and are working to expand fathers' leave to several months and adopt paid leave for other caregiving purposes, such as eldercare.

In Jordan, SADAQA's work to implement the decades-old childcare law resulted in the establishment of new childcare centers across the country—a powerful development for women's equal rights in employment. Yet it didn't take long for the organization to realize that the law itself needed improvement if it was to advance gender equality, specifically by guaranteeing childcare regardless of the gender composition of a particular business's workforce. In partnership with a coalition of organizations working on gender and the economy, SADAQA succeeded in advancing this reform along with a range of legislative changes to advance gender equality.

Even while broad collaboration is essential, individual people who have faced or witnessed barriers to gender equality can make a profound difference. In each case study, individuals played a powerful role in advancing change, even as their success ultimately relied on working in partnership with a range of stakeholders. In Jordan, two women with personal experience balancing paid work with care for young children were the driving force behind SADAQA and its campaign to secure access to childcare for all. In South Africa, one man's personal campaign to achieve paid leave for fathers, informed by his own experiences as a new dad, set the stage for his successful collaboration with experienced labor and civil society groups. In Uganda, a lawyer mobilized colleagues to launch ISER after her work with refugees inspired a realization that an organization devoted to social and economic rights would fill a critical gap in her country—an action that ultimately led to improvements in access to education for millions of girls. And alongside these large-scale undertakings, even small individual actions—such as signing a petition, calling a policy maker, joining a community organization, or attending a march—can add up and produce meaningful change.

And beyond individuals and civil society groups, international organizations, researchers, media, and policy makers all have important roles to play. International organizations can help hold governments accountable for their signed commitments to gender equality under international law by monitoring the adoption and implementation of the laws and policies known to make a difference. Researchers can continue to build evidence that demonstrates which law and policy approaches to gender equality are most effective. The media has a role in helping to communicate the critical importance of these issues to broad audiences and elevating the rigorous evidence about policy impacts and the experiences of community members that demonstrate how specific policies—or their absence—affect individual lives. Policy makers have a critical responsibility to take concrete action to ensure that all women and girls can fully and equally participate in their communities and economies. More broadly, all of us have a role to play in combating outdated gender norms that limit economic opportunities for women and opportunities to be engaged caregivers for men.

WE ALL STAND TO GAIN

Excluding half the world's population from full participation in the economy has inevitable costs. Failing to ensure all girls can complete their education, for example, results in between \$15 and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime earnings globally.⁴⁰ Child marriage alone is responsible for approximately \$26 billion in reduced earnings each year across fifteen of the countries where it remains most prevalent.⁴¹ Achieving gender equality in pay would increase human capital wealth (that is, the value of lifetime earnings) by 22 percent globally.⁴²

Moreover, the costs go far beyond the economic. When girls are unable to complete their education, they face higher risks of early marriage and childbearing and the attendant risks to health, including maternal mortality and birth injuries. Their own children are less likely to finish school and more likely to have poor nutrition outcomes, while their spouses likewise face higher risks of poor health. Women without their own earnings are less likely to be able to leave an abusive relationship or otherwise exercise autonomy and choice. And when women experience barriers to paid work, their households are more vulnerable to falling into poverty following a job loss.

Yet just as current inequalities harm everyone, creating a more gender-equal world would lead to vast improvements in quality of life, longevity, and economic outcomes for all people. Numerous studies have shown that boosting girls' educational attainment propels economic growth—while simultaneously improving the educational outcomes of the next generation, reducing child malnutrition, and increasing life expectancy for men as well as women.⁴³ Truly ending discrimination of all kinds in employment would not only increase opportunities for women but also create better conditions for workers regardless of race or ethnicity, religion, migration status, disability, or sexual orientation. Eliminating sexual harassment in the workplace would both create a healthier work environment and reduce turnover costs and absenteeism. Investing more in care would dramatically improve conditions of daily life for aging, ill, and disabled people worldwide, while creating a stronger and more equitable foundation for all children's early learning opportunities and healthy development. Prioritizing care would also create hundreds of millions of jobs and establish new economic pathways for workers—including many men—whose current positions are at risk due to automation. And all in all, closing the gender gaps in employment could boost global GDP by a staggering \$28 trillion.⁴⁴

In short, eliminating the barriers to economic opportunity for all women and girls—from alleviating the disproportionate burden of unpaid household labor that often begins in childhood, to ensuring all girls can access and complete a quality education, to ending all forms of discrimination at work, to providing robust support for caregiving and actively encouraging gender equality in both paid and unpaid care roles—would result in massive gains for gender equality while significantly improving conditions and opportunities for all.

EQUALITY WITHIN OUR LIFETIMES

While in many societies it was taken for granted for centuries or even millennia that women were not full political citizens, countries around the world undertook dramatic legal change beginning in the 1890s. In 1893, New Zealand became the first modern-day nation to formally recognize women's right to vote, and within less than seventy years, 129 countries had granted women the franchise.⁴⁵ In some regions, progress was even more condensed: 80 percent of African countries adopted universal suffrage between 1950 and 1975, as countries began writing their own laws following the end of colonization. This shift—rapid in historic context—preceded many countries' election of significantly more female representatives and their first female heads of state, representing an important expansion in women's political leadership and engagement. But girls' and women's economic and social equality in law and practice is far from achieved globally.

Is transformative change in gender equality in our lifetimes possible? To be sure, the challenges before us are great—but even if the fight will be long, examples from other movements for equal rights illustrate the feasibility of rapid and transformative legal change.

Across groups and spheres, laws on equal rights have been catalytic in advancing equality across countries. Laws have rapidly changed marriage equality. It's only been a little over two decades since the Netherlands became the first country worldwide to legalize same-sex marriage; since then, at least twenty-seven countries have followed, in all regions of the world.⁴⁶ An expansion of equal rights that once seemed impossible to many has suddenly become mainstream.

The recognition of the rights of people with disabilities around the world has similarly led to dramatic and rapid changes in access to education. In Malawi, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in education in 2013, the share of people with disabilities reporting ever having attended school increased from 79 percent in 2008 to 96 percent in 2014; similarly, in Egypt, which adopted a ministerial decree on inclusive education in 2009, the share of people with disabilities who had ever attended school nearly doubled from 43 percent in 2006 to 78 percent in 2012.⁴⁷ While the changes needed to advance equality for each group may differ, national laws and policies have an equally powerful role to play in accelerating gender equality.

Ultimately, long-term, transformative change in women's equal opportunities and engagement in the economy will require that everybody plays a role. To be sure, we cannot let government off the hook—governments have structured gender inequalities into each of our economies, and governments must realize their commitments to dismantle those inequalities and the consequences they've had for all. Yet it's on all of us to hold our governments to account. Currently, gender inequalities touch each of our lives—whether at school, at home, at work, or in what we've learned to believe is possible for ourselves or our sisters and brothers,

daughters and sons, nieces and nephews, and granddaughters and grandsons. Change in each of our countries will begin with each person identifying these gaps and injustices in their communities and taking small steps to address them, whether by joining a grassroots organization, calling an elected official, writing a letter to the editor, or launching a new advocacy campaign or system of accountability and seeking out partners who can offer guidance and support. While there are limits to what each of us can do alone, we can all do something, and only if each person takes action can we create a fundamentally different world rather than resigning ourselves to waiting 200 years or more until equality is realized. Equality within our lifetimes is feasible—but it will take all of us to achieve.

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