

# When Women Win, the World Wins

INDERMIT GILLTEA TRUMBIC | MARCH 06, 2024

This page in: [English](#) [中文](#)



Women participated in selecting priority project activities of the World Bank-assisted Poor Rural Communities Development Project. Photo: Alan Piazza / World Bank

In May 1988, Alejandra Arévalo became the first female geologist to enter an underground mine in Chile. In doing so, she defied a popular myth: that a woman brings bad luck by venturing into a mine. She also broke the law.

At the time, Chilean women were forbidden to work in underground mining or in any other job that “exceeded their strength or put at risk their physical or moral condition.” Arévalo’s defiance helped spark a revolution. By 1993, the restrictions on women in mining had been abolished; and by 2022, women represented 15% of the Chilean mining workforce, a threefold increase since 2007.

Equally substantial progress has occurred worldwide over the past half-century. Globally, women’s legal rights have improved by about two-thirds, on average, since 1970. Major reforms have dismantled a wide array of barriers that women face at all stages of their working lives, but especially in the workplace and in parenthood. Yet as the world marks this year’s International Women’s Day, it is clear that there is still a huge global gender gap.

In fact, the latest data show that the gap is much wider than previously thought. When legal differences regarding protections against violence and access to childcare are considered, women enjoy just two-thirds of the legal rights that men do – not 77%, as was previously believed. The World Bank’s latest *Women, Business and the Law* report finds that no country – not even the wealthiest ones – grants women the same legal rights as men.

The greatest deficiency involves safety: women enjoy barely one-third of the necessary legal protections against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and femicide. Inadequate access to childcare services is another hindrance. Only 62 economies – fewer than one-third of the world’s countries – have established quality standards governing childcare services. As a result, women across 128 economies may have to think twice about going to work while they have children in their care.

Moreover, the gender gap is wider than laws on the books might suggest. For the first time, *Women, Business and the Law* compared progress in legal reforms with actual outcomes for women in 190 economies, finding a surprising delay in implementation. Although laws on the books imply that women enjoy roughly two-thirds the rights of men, countries on average have established less than 40% of the systems needed for full implementation.

For example, 98 economies have enacted legislation mandating equal pay for women for work of equal value; but only 35 economies – fewer than one out of every five – have adopted pay-transparency measures or enforcement mechanisms to address the pay gap. That represents a colossal waste of human capital, and at precisely the moment when the world needs to marshal all its resources to escape the rising risk of economic stagnation. Today, fewer than one out of every two women participate in the labor force. By contrast, roughly three out of every four men do.

Closing that gap could help double global economic growth in the coming decade. The evidence is clear: economies with higher *Women, Business and the Law* scores tend to have larger female labor-force participation rates, stronger female entrepreneurship, and more active female participation in political institutions. Gender equality, in short, is both a fundamental human right and a powerful engine of economic development.

Again, it is not enough merely to pursue equality in the laws on the books. What we need are comprehensive sets of policies and institutions – as well as a transformation of cultural and social norms in many countries – to empower women to become successful workers, entrepreneurs, and leaders. That means stronger enforcement mechanisms to tackle workplace violence, practical provisions for childcare services, and easier access to health-care services for women who survive violence.

Such policies enable women to remain employed without suffering career setbacks, help close the gender wage gap, and reconfigure gender roles and attitudes related to workplace and household duties. And as more women rise to leadership positions, they inspire new generations of girls to achieve their full potential.

Positive outcomes take time to realize, but they do happen. As Claudia Goldin, the winner of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Economics, has observed, the 1960s surge in US women rising to high-level jobs did not happen by accident. It was the product of a slow but steady accretion of legal rights.

“Even if the laws didn’t change women’s earnings, it made their lives better and expanded their options,” Goldin noted. “Workplaces became safer for them. They were no longer barred or excused from juries because of their presumed household responsibilities. They could not be fired when pregnant and could not be refused a job because they had children. They received better education and more resources, even as girls.”

Leveling the playing field presents crucial economic opportunities, and not just for women. When half of humanity wins, the whole world wins.