

# Research report

Forum: Commission on the Status of Women

Issue: Creating policies to promote women's participation and leadership within the workforce

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## Introduction

Gender equality is the fifth of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015. This goal has many aspects, and significant improvements are still needed across all areas of gender equality for the international community to achieve it by 2030. In this report, member states focus on the status of women in the workforce worldwide. Female employees face different experiences in the workplace across continents and countries, but improvements are necessary everywhere.

Female labour participation first became an issue in the late 19th century, although male leaders did not often see it as a significant one back then. While some international organizations and rules emerged after the First World War, substantial global progress was made only after the Second World War.

There is a gender participation gap between men and women in labour force participation rates, with men working more than women in every country except for three. This gap keeps itself alive: in many countries, women do not get the opportunity to work, preventing them from proving their value as employees. As a result, the demand for women in the workforce remains low, making it harder for women to get hired. In this manner it forms a seemingly unbreakable circle. If the international community does not address this issue, the gap will persist.

The other part of the problem is leadership. Less than 30% of leadership positions worldwide are occupied by women. Despite progress in educational opportunities for women, this percentage is not expected to increase significantly in the near future. Due to biases, occupational segregation has developed, limiting female employees' opportunities in certain professional areas and positions. This is why it is important that clear international policies are made.

Closing the global gender gap in the workforce will promote human welfare and national economies. Eliminating the differences in working opportunities for women and men is essential for a sustainable future. The purpose of this report is to provide member states with background information and future expectations so long-lasting solutions can be developed.

## Definitions of key terms

### Gender gap

The gender gap, as defined by the European Institute for Gender Equality, refers to a "gap in any area between women and men in terms of their levels of participation, access, rights, remuneration, or benefits."<sup>1</sup> In most research, a positive gap indicates that men have more of something than women.

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<sup>1</sup> "Gender Gap." *European Institute for Gender Equality*, EIGE, 2016, [eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1086?language\\_content\\_entity=en#:~:text=Gap%20in%20any%20area%20between,%2C%20rights%2C%20remuneration%20or%20benefits.](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1086?language_content_entity=en#:~:text=Gap%20in%20any%20area%20between,%2C%20rights%2C%20remuneration%20or%20benefits.)

## Participation rate

The participation rate is the percentage of women participating in the workforce of a nation or the entire world. An adult is considered part of the workforce if they are either employed or actively looking for a job. Many women are working in an informal environment or unpaid, this does not show up in the participation rate.

## Occupational segregation

Occupational segregation occurs when certain jobs or sectors are predominantly occupied by one gender. This can reinforce existing gender roles in society and make it more difficult for individuals to enter professions dominated by the opposite gender.

## Vulnerable employment

Vulnerable employment refers to situations where employees have little to no access to social protection, including unpaid work, lack of maternity leave, and insufficient social security. Prominent levels of vulnerable employment among women can discourage unemployed women from entering the workforce. Increasing workforce participation can enhance human welfare and strengthen national economies.

# General overview

## History

Discussions about women's participation in the workforce began in the late 19th century. In Europe, the image of a housewife who managed daily chores and cared for children was idealized<sup>2</sup>. However, governments had different approaches to legislating women's right to work across nations.

Although limited information remains about female employees in Europe during this period, it is known that, at the start of the 20th century, men were typically the sole earners in most families. Women in rural areas often did work on the farms, and with the industrial revolution some were employed in poorly paid factory jobs. During the wars, many women were employed in dangerous jobs with little protection, only to be dismissed when men returned from the army. After the Second World War, there was a growing call for women to be allowed to work in regular occupations permanently. Although countries such as Norway had already given women almost equal rights to men, there were European countries such as France that had to be encouraged by the ILO and other international organisations before discriminative laws were undone.<sup>3</sup> Western Europe, in particular, has made considerable progress in closing the gender participation gap, though inequalities in paid hours and wages persist in many European countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Borck, Larissa. "A Woman's Work Is Never Done' - A History of Women's Working Lives in Europe." *Europeana*, 25 Sept. 2019, [www.europeana.eu/en/stories/a-womans-work-is-never-done-womens-working-history-in-europe](http://www.europeana.eu/en/stories/a-womans-work-is-never-done-womens-working-history-in-europe).

<sup>3</sup> Letablier, Marie-Thérèse. "Legislation on Women's Work in Europe." *Encyclopédie d'histoire Numérique de l'Europe*, 22 June 2020, [ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/earning-a-living/legislation-women%E2%80%99s-work-in-europe](http://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/earning-a-living/legislation-women%E2%80%99s-work-in-europe).

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In the United States, more detailed data has been preserved. Female participation in the workforce before 1900 is commonly estimated at nearly 20%, with a significantly lower rate—around 5%—among married women. However, many women likely engaged in unpaid work at home or in family businesses, which is not included in participation rates. By the 1930s, participation had increased to half of all U.S. women, thanks to early equality movements. By 1970, more women were graduating from high school, and demand for female employees in healthcare increased. The peak participation rate was 60% in 1999, but it has declined since then.<sup>4</sup>

In South America, policies regarding female workforce participation have varied between countries. In the Caribbean, participation rates have consistently been similar to those in the United States. At the start of the 21st century, after female workforce participation had peaked in North America, it even surpassed that of the United States in the Caribbean. The LA5 nations (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru) and other Central and Latin American countries had a slower start. Although the LA5 and Latin America have improved rapidly, some Central American countries still have lower percentages of female employees. Surveys and research from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have shown that especially younger women in the region were starting to work more in the 2010s.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1: (Novta, Natalija, et al. "Women at Work: Remarkable Achievement in Latin America ..." *International Monetary Fund*, 15 Sept. 2016, [www.imf.org/external/np/blog/dialogo/091516.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/np/blog/dialogo/091516.pdf).)

Across Asia, labour rights for women were limited in most countries until after the Second World War. International calls for equality and domestic emancipation movements led most states to legislate women's rights in the workforce. Although laws were passed, they were

<sup>4</sup> Yellen, Janet L. "The History of Women's Work and Wages and How It Has Created Success for Us All." *Brookings*, 6 Jan. 2021, [www.brookings.edu/articles/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/).

<sup>5</sup> Novta, Natalija, et al. "Women at Work: Remarkable Achievement in Latin America ..." *International Monetary Fund*, 15 Sept. 2016, [www.imf.org/external/np/blog/dialogo/091516.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/np/blog/dialogo/091516.pdf).

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and often remain poorly enforced due to persistent cultural biases<sup>6</sup>. None of the 36 Asian and Pacific member states of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have ratified the Maternity Protection Convention.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, more than 60% of female employees in Asia were in vulnerable employment. Since the 1990s, female participation in East Asia has declined, while in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, it stagnated at the end of the 2010s.<sup>8</sup> However, some countries in these regions have higher numbers of female politicians than the global average and are expected to have some of the highest percentages of female managers by 2050.

In Africa, colonial powers influenced many nations until the 20th century. Although limited data is available about African women in the workforce during this period, it is known that colonial policies often marginalized female citizens. When men were forced to work far from home due to colonial tax policies, many women were left without income, caring for their children alone while their husbands sometimes started new relationships<sup>9</sup>. Like in Europe, the ideal for women was often to care for the home and children rather than work. During the second half of the 20th century, some women were employed in low-wage factory jobs, where discrimination and exploitation were common but rarely addressed<sup>10</sup>. In recent decades, many African economies have strengthened, and with declining birth rates and increased access to education for girls and women, the gender participation gap has narrowed<sup>11</sup>. However, particularly in northern Africa, some countries still have large gender gaps.

## Present

In modern times, more unbiased research has been conducted on the position of women in the workforce. In most countries, women have the right and opportunity to protest for more equality. Considerable progress has been made in labour rights since the last century, but in many member states, the gender gap remains too large, and opportunities for women to advance in their professions are too limited.

Research from the ILO in 2021 showed that men's participation rates are higher than women's in all countries except three — Burundi, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone. The largest gender gap is in Yemen, where 67.6% of men and only 6% of women are active in the

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<sup>6</sup> Nishimoto, Tomoko. *ILO*, International Labour Organisation, 2018, [www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-new\\_delhi/documents/publication/wcms\\_234727.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_234727.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> "ILO Conventions." *International Labour Organization*, International Labour Organisation, 13 July 2011, [www.ilo.org/resource/ilo-conventions](http://www.ilo.org/resource/ilo-conventions).

<sup>8</sup> Young, Gwen. "Legacy of the Pacific War: 75 Years Later." *Wilson Center*, Wilson Center, Aug. 2020, [www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/AP\\_2020-08%20Legacy%20of%20the%20Pacific%20War%20-Diana%20Negroponte.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/AP_2020-08%20Legacy%20of%20the%20Pacific%20War%20-Diana%20Negroponte.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Lues, Liezel. "The History of Professional African Women." *Sabinet African Journals*, 2005, [journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA1684498X\\_134](http://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA1684498X_134).

<sup>10</sup> Chapman, Cait. "Women's Workplace Oppression in 1970s South Africa." *South African History Online*, 14 May 2015, [www.sahistory.org.za/article/womens-workplace-oppression-1970s-south-africa-cait-chapman](http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/womens-workplace-oppression-1970s-south-africa-cait-chapman).

<sup>11</sup> Asamoah, Lawrence Adu. "Women's Labor Participation in Africa." *ACET*, June 2023, [acetforafrica.org/pdfviewer/womens-labor-participation/?auto\\_viewer=true#page=&zoom=auto&pagemode=none](http://acetforafrica.org/pdfviewer/womens-labor-participation/?auto_viewer=true#page=&zoom=auto&pagemode=none).

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workforce. In Burundi, the "gender gap magnitude" is -1.6 percentage points (79% of women versus 77.4% of men are employed).<sup>12</sup>

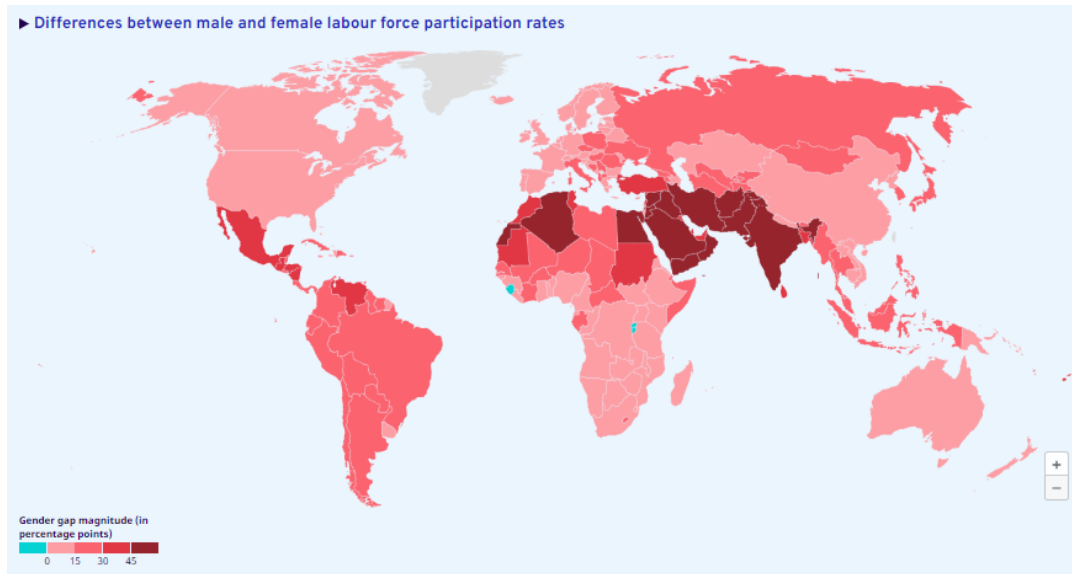


Figure 2: ("The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?" ILO InfoStories, International Labour Organisation, Dec. 2017, [webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#global-ga](http://webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#global-ga).)

This does not mean that women lack the desire to work. In 2017, 55% of U.S. women were employed, while 72% wanted to have a job. In China, 62% had an occupation, though 72% expressed a desire to work. In India, the figures were 19% employed against 52% who wanted to work, a 33-percentage-point difference.

Participation rates alone do not solely determine the gender gap in nations. Employed women often have less access to social rights and receive lower wages than men in similar occupations.<sup>13</sup> Vulnerable employment includes shorter hours, unpaid work, employment in family businesses, lack of maternity coverage, and limited social security. In 2017, women were 10 percentage points more likely to work in family businesses than men. In addition to their paid work, many women perform unpaid household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare, which are due to biases generally done by women in most cultures.

In 2020, 73.5% of all employed women worldwide did not have access to social security. This disparity is due to differences in work habits, job types, and caused by discriminatory wage agreements. Women are more likely to be food insecure and often bear the responsibility for water collection in areas with insufficient water sources. Additionally, more than two-thirds of all economies have laws that restrict women's decisions to work and their occupational choices.

Despite legislation against sexual harassment in many countries, it remains one of the biggest global issues. In the EU in 2014, 55% of women had been assaulted at least once in their lives, with 32% of these incidents occurring at work. According to UN Women, one-third of women experience violence in their lifetimes. This creates an unsafe environment that may discourage women from seeking employment.

<sup>12</sup> "The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?" ILO InfoStories, International Labour Organisation, Dec. 2017, [webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#global-ga](http://webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#global-ga).

<sup>13</sup> Mirza-Davies, James, and Khadijah Zaidi. "The Gender Pensions Gap - the House of Commons Library." UK Parliament, 1 Aug. 2024, [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9517](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9517).

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Certain jobs are dominated by women; for example, in the U.S., 96.8% of preschool teachers were female in 2021. This is an example of occupational segregation. In contrast, women sometimes represent less than 3% of employees in mechanical jobs. This segregation is not due to laws but often results from stereotypes. In 2021, 77.6% of U.S. women worked in the health or social care sectors<sup>14</sup>. Globally, women are responsible for approximately two-thirds of all care work, yet three-quarters of leadership roles in the health workforce were occupied by men in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tracks the global gender wage gap, which was 11.4 percentage points in 2022. Korea had the highest wage gap at 31.2 percentage points, while Luxembourg had the lowest at 0.4 percentage points.<sup>16</sup>

Although women in many nations surpass men in higher education achievements, they do not occupy nearly half of the higher professional roles. In 2023, only 28.2% of leadership positions were held by women, and just 24% of all managers were female according to UN Women.

## Future

In 2020, the EIGE estimated that with sufficient progress in gender equality in the workforce, the average participation rate in Europe could reach 80% for both men and women, with gender participation gap of zero.<sup>17</sup> UN Women has estimated that, if current trends continue, the gender wage gap will close by 2086.

Research in the United States indicates that women's participation rates will gradually converge with those of the general population over the next decade. The projection below suggests that men's participation rates have slightly decreased since the mid-20th century, while the participation rate of women over 55 is expected to increase the most.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Over 16 Million Women Worked in Health Care and Social Assistance in 2021." *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, U.S. Department of Labor, 7 Mar. 2022, [www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2022/over-16-million-women-worked-in-health-care-and-social-assistance-in-2021.htm](https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2022/over-16-million-women-worked-in-health-care-and-social-assistance-in-2021.htm).

<sup>15</sup> "Value Gender and Equity in the Global Health Workforce." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, Mar. 2019, [www.who.int/activities/value-gender-and-equity-in-the-global-health-workforce](https://www.who.int/activities/value-gender-and-equity-in-the-global-health-workforce).

<sup>16</sup> "Gender Wage Gap." *OECD*, OECD, 2022, [www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/gender-wage-gap.html?oeecdcontrol-96565bc25e-var3=2022](https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/gender-wage-gap.html?oeecdcontrol-96565bc25e-var3=2022).

<sup>17</sup> "Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union." *European Institute for Gender Equality*, EIGE, 30 June 2023, [eige.europa.eu/newsroom/economic-benefits-gender-equality?language\\_content\\_entity=en#toc-study-s-publications](https://eige.europa.eu/newsroom/economic-benefits-gender-equality?language_content_entity=en#toc-study-s-publications).

<sup>18</sup> Machovec, Christine. "Working Women: Data from the Past, Present and Future." *DOL Blog*, 15 Mar. 2023, [blog.dol.gov/2023/03/15/working-women-data-from-the-past-present-and-future](https://blog.dol.gov/2023/03/15/working-women-data-from-the-past-present-and-future).

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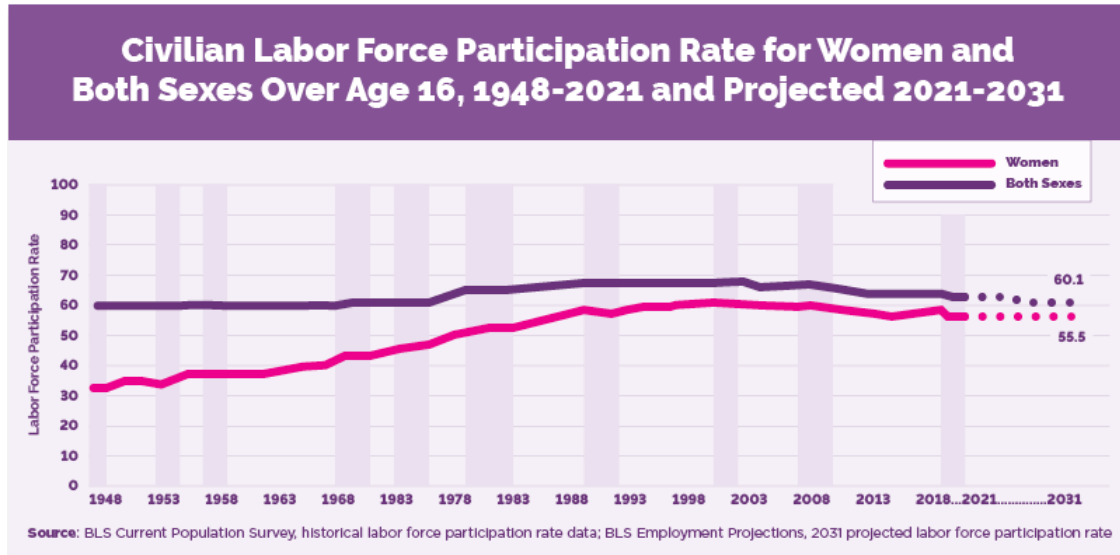


Figure 3: (Machovec, Christine. "Working Women: Data from the Past, Present and Future." DOL Blog, 15 Mar. 2023, [blog.dol.gov/2023/03/15/working-women-data-from-the-past-present-and-future.](https://blog.dol.gov/2023/03/15/working-women-data-from-the-past-present-and-future/))

UN Women has projected that the global percentage of female managers will reach 28% by 2050, representing a 4-percentage-point increase over 27 years.<sup>19</sup> Promoting women's participation and leadership in the workforce is essential for human welfare and will directly improve many national economies. In 2014, UN Women estimated that if women played the same role in the workforce as men, global annual GDP could increase by 28 trillion US dollars by 2025.<sup>20</sup>

## Major parties involved

### UN Women

UN Women is a UN entity focused on women's rights and gender equality, aiming to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of gender equality for all women worldwide. The organization was established in 2011 after merging several existing UN equality movements.<sup>21</sup> UN Women is active in many countries, supporting governments in gender equality plans and providing extensive information on CSW conventions and plans<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Hanna, Taylor, et al. "Forecasting Women in Leadership Positions." *UN Women*, Nov. 2023, [www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/forecasting-women-in-leadership-positions.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/forecasting-women-in-leadership-positions.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> "Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment." *UN Women – Headquarters*, UN Women, Feb. 2024, [www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures](https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures).

<sup>21</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions." *UN Women Asia and the Pacific*, UN Women, Sept. 2016, [asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/fiji/faq](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/fiji/faq).

<sup>22</sup> "Commission on the Status of Women." *UN Women – Headquarters*, UN Women, [www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women](https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women). Accessed 11 Aug. 2024.



## European Union

The EU plays a significant role in promoting gender equality. Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights states that equality between European women and men must be ensured<sup>23</sup>. This law is binding on all member states whenever EU law is applicable. Internationally, the European Union is active on this topic as well, cooperating with NGOs and UN entities to promote gender equality worldwide.<sup>24</sup>

## International Labour Organization

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) was established by the League of Nations in 1919 after the First World War as part of the Treaty of Versailles. Its primary focus was to ensure social justice as part of "long-lasting peace." After the Second World War, the United Nations adopted the ILO. Since then, the ILO has promoted fair work for adults around the world.

## Timeline of Key Events

- 1914-18 World War I: Many women around the world are employed in factories, after the war many of them get fired
- 1919 The International Labour Organisation is founded under the League of Nations
- 1919 The ILO adopts the first two international conventions on women's labour rights
- 1939-45 World War II: Again, numerous women find themselves in vulnerable employment in factory jobs.
- 1946 CSW is established after ECOSOC resolution 11 (II) from the 21st of June.
- 1979 CEDAW: The UN General Assembly adopts the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ("The Women's bill of rights")
- 1993 The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women is adopted by the GA; it is the first international rule about violence against women.

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<sup>23</sup> "Equality between Women and Men." *European Commission*, European Commission, 2017, [commission.europa.eu/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-rights-eu/know-your-rights/equality/equality-between-women-and-men\\_en#:~:text=Documents-,Know%20your%20rights,of%20the%20under%2Drepresented%20sex.](https://commission.europa.eu/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-rights-eu/know-your-rights/equality/equality-between-women-and-men_en#:~:text=Documents-,Know%20your%20rights,of%20the%20under%2Drepresented%20sex.)

<sup>24</sup> "Promoting Gender Equality & Women's Rights beyond the EU." *European Commission*, European Commission, 2020, [commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/promoting-gender-equality-womens-rights-beyond-eu\\_en.](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/promoting-gender-equality-womens-rights-beyond-eu_en.)

2015 The United Nations set the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, SDG 5 is to achieve global gender equality

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

Since the late 19th century, there have been numerous attempts to promote female participation in the workforce, mostly through conventions or resolutions. Though the position of women in the workplace has significantly improved in the last hundred years, plans for gender equality are often not well enough executed. And estimations for the next century are not looking optimistic.

The first international attempt occurred in 1919, when the ILO adopted two conventions on women's labour rights in its first year. One focused on maternity protection, and the other on night work. More than a hundred years later, maternity protection remains an issue in most countries, and many women still must leave the workforce after starting a family.

In the 1990s, multiple international benchmarks for women's rights were established, including CEDAW and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. In 1994, a 23-year action plan was created, followed by an action platform and declaration in Beijing in 1995.<sup>25</sup>

The next major goal is set for 2030, by which time the 17 UN SDGs, created in 2015, should be achieved. However, UN Women stated in 2022 that the international community was far from reaching gender equality goals and was significantly off track. Without change in actions it would then take the international community 140 more years to achieve equal occupation of leadership roles in the workforce.<sup>26</sup>

## Possible solutions

### Eliminating discrimination in the workplace

In many ways, female employees are not treated the same as their male counterparts in the workplace. Issues such as the gender wage gap and harassment can discourage women from seeking employment. To promote female participation and leadership, the international community must address these issues. By focusing more on education about equality and human rights, nations can gradually reduce discrimination within their cultures. Another approach could be strengthening law enforcement against sexism and harassment. Additionally, increasing regulation within companies and encouraging female employees to report discrimination could support these efforts.

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<sup>25</sup> "Timeline: Women of the World, Unite!" *UN Women*, UN Women, 2024, [interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/timeline/womenunite/en/index.html#](https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/timeline/womenunite/en/index.html#/).

<sup>26</sup> "In Focus: Sustainable Development Goal 5." *UN Women – Headquarters*, UN Women, 23 Aug. 2022, [www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/08/in-focus-sustainable-development-goal-5](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/08/in-focus-sustainable-development-goal-5).

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### **Increasing regulation informal/unpaid work**

Although women working in informal environments contribute to their economies, they often lack access to basic labour rights. To reduce the prevalence of vulnerable employment globally, countries can increase regulation in informal work environments. Ensuring that all female employees are paid for their work and can continue working after starting a family will lower barriers to workforce entry for women. This can reduce the gender participation gap, which is crucial for strengthening societies and ensuring economic growth.

### **Reducing occupational segregation**

Currently, the majority of women work in healthcare and social assistance, sectors that tend to have lower wages due to the gender wage gap and the high number of female employees. This deters men from entering these professions, perpetuating occupational segregation. By educating people about the importance of female-dominated occupations, nations can motivate men to work in these sectors and reduce stigmas about female employees. This will ensure that different genders work in the same sectors and create more diverse professional environments. Addressing this problem will encourage more women to pursue their preferred professions, thereby promoting national economies and human welfare.

## **Further reading**

This is the homepage of the ILO: <https://www.ilo.org/>

The homepage of UN Women: <https://www.unwomen.org/en>

Here you can read the WEF annual global gender gap report (edition of 2023: gender gaps in the workforce): <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/in-full/gender-gaps-in-the-workforce/>

For European countries more information can be found on for instance: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200306-1>

## **Bibliography**