

# New report finds women and girls still face widespread discrimination in sexist laws

*Equality Now research finds that while some countries have made progress in strengthening women's legal rights, there has been alarming backsliding elsewhere.*

NEW YORK, NY, UNITED STATES, March 4, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A new global report analyzing sex discrimination in laws reveals that while some commendable gains have been achieved in strengthening legal protections for women and girls over the past five years, progress remains slow, uneven, and increasingly under threat from a growing backlash against women's rights.



Photo credit - S.Mona Sinha, Equality Now, at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Photographer - Joel Sheakoski

Research by Equality Now identifies how women and girls continue to experience systemic and intersecting discrimination in laws, policies, and cultural practices, exposing them to multiple forms of harm, sometimes with little or no legal protection. Alarming, in some places, women's legal rights have deteriorated significantly, with hard-won protections weakened or overturned through regressive legislative changes, judicial rulings, and withdrawal of funding.

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*Antonia Kirkland, Equality Now*

## THE BEIJING PLATFORM

The [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) (“Beijing Platform”) is a ground-breaking global framework for advancing women's rights. Adopted in 1995 by 189 countries at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, it outlines commitments to deliver gender equality in all

aspects of life. Crucially, countries pledged to “revoke any remaining laws that discriminate on the basis of sex.”

Equality Now's report, [Words & Deeds: Holding Governments Accountable In The Beijing+30 Review Process \(6th Edition\)](#), finds that three decades on, women and girls continue to face discrimination in the law, with not one country achieving full legal equality. Laws and practices that constrain women's and girls' rights are obstructing progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, putting the world off track to meet these critical targets.

Report co-author Antonia Kirkland explains, "Women and girls deserve full protection of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights under the Beijing Platform and other international human rights commitments. This requires repealing all sex-discriminatory legislation, enshrining gender equality in constitutions, and introducing and enforcing laws that fully protect the rights of women and girls in all their diversity."

## ROLLBACK ON WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS

Some governments are allowing sex and gender-discriminatory religious and customary laws and practices, while religious, cultural, and nationalist justifications are increasingly being harnessed to undermine and revoke women's rights.

For example, in Afghanistan, draconian restrictions have comprehensively banned women and girls from participating in public life, education, work, and leisure. The situation is also dire in Iran, where women have experienced sustained crackdowns, and those opposing sex-discriminatory laws have been subjected to arrest, detention, torture, and death.

Lawmakers in Bolivia and Uruguay are considering regressive bills to weaken protections for sexual violence survivors. While in The Gambia, a bill to repeal the law banning female genital mutilation threatened to undo years of progress. Thankfully, strong opposition successfully prevented its passing.

In Russia, 'promoting' LGBTQ+ relationships was banned in 2022 among all adults, and in late 2024, under the rubric of "anti-propaganda", legislation was adopted to prohibit the promotion of a 'child-free lifestyle.' Kyrgyzstan and Georgia have adopted similar laws curtailing LGBTQ+ rights.

In Argentina, there have been severe budget cuts to policies to address gender-based violence, and the Ministry of Women has been abolished, significantly hindering the State's capacity to safeguard women.

Over the last 30 years, more than 60 countries have liberalized their abortion laws. However, sexual and reproductive rights are facing sustained attacks. Examples include Poland, where one of the few grounds permitted for abortion access - fetal 'defect' or incurable disease - was removed in 2021. In the U.S., the Supreme Court ruled in 2022 that the U.S. Constitution does not provide the right to abortion. By January 2025, abortion was criminalized in 14 states, and

there are efforts to ban travel to other states to access abortion services.

The Dominican Republic is one of five countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to impose a complete abortion ban. Their senate is close to passing a bill continuing this prohibition and lowering penalties for marital sexual violence, labeling it 'non-consensual sexual activity' rather than rape.

## EXPLICITLY SEX-DISCRIMINATORY LAWS

Countries such as Sudan and Yemen grant male family members wide-ranging authority over female relatives and legally require wives to be obedient. In Saudi Arabia, women must obey their husbands in a 'reasonable manner,' and husbands have a 'marital right to sexual intercourse.' If a wife refuses to have sex or travel with her husband without a 'legitimate excuse,' this "disobedience" can result in her losing her right to spousal financial support.

Husbands can unilaterally divorce wives without condition, but wives must apply to the court for a fault-based divorce and prove fault within strict criteria. According to the [World Bank](#), Saudi Arabia is just one of 45 countries with different divorce rules for women and men.

Marital rape is also allowed in the Bahamas and India, while in Kuwait and Libya, a rapist can escape punishment by marrying his victim.

Various countries have laws curtailing wives' access to bank accounts, loans, and even the ability to benefit from their own labor in family businesses. For example, a husband in Cameroon controls the administration of all his wife's personal property and can sell, dispose of, and mortgage their common property without a wife's cooperation. Wives in Chile face similar discrimination.

The World Bank reports that 139 countries still lack adequate legislation prohibiting child marriage. One case is the U.S., which has no federal law against child marriage, and 37 states still allow it. California permits exceptions for marrying minors with no minimum age, while states like Mississippi mirror countries such as Bangladesh, Mali, Pakistan, and Tanzania in authorizing girls to be married younger than boys.

Poverty exacerbated by the climate crisis and forced migration is putting girls at greater risk of child marriage, with parents viewing it as a coping mechanism to alleviate financial strain and 'shield daughters from sexual violence' - despite child marriage facilitating non-consensual sex with a minor. For instance, Ethiopia suffered a severe drought in 2022, and in one year, saw child marriage rates double.

On a positive note, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Sierra Leone, and Zambia have all recently introduced laws banning child marriage under 18, without exception.

Globally, sex-discriminatory laws and policies are constraining women's full economic and social participation, trapping millions in poverty and dependency, and increasing their vulnerability to mistreatment. In many countries, women are denied equal access to employment, fair wages, property ownership, household income, and inheritance. This contributes to women's overrepresentation in insecure, low-wage jobs, and their shouldering the bulk of paid and unpaid care work.

In countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, and Russia, women are prohibited from working in particular jobs. Progress since 2020 includes similar employment restrictions being removed in Azerbaijan, Jordan, and Oman.

Also needing reform are sexist nationality laws, like in Bahrain, Brunei, Malaysia, Monaco, Togo, the U.S. and others. When mothers and fathers are not granted equal rights to pass their nationality to their children, it creates severe legal and social challenges, including statelessness. The risk of child and forced marriage is heightened, it creates child custody problems, and wives may remain in abusive marriages out of fear of losing their legal status.

Kirkland concludes, "Eliminating sex and gender-based discrimination in the law is a fundamental responsibility of governments. Equality Now calls on every country to urgently review and amend or repeal its sex-discriminatory laws, prevent removal of legal rights, and establish specific constitutional or legal guarantees of equality for all women and girls."

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Equality Now is an international human rights organization dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of all women and girls worldwide. Its work is organized around four main program areas: Achieving Legal Equality, Ending Sexual Violence, Ending Harmful Practices, and Ending Sexual Exploitation, with a cross-cutting focus on the unique challenges facing adolescent girls.

Equality Now combines grassroots activism with legal advocacy at the international, regional, and national levels to achieve systemic change, and collaborates with local partners to ensure governments enact and enforce laws and policies that uphold women's and girls' rights.

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