

**10 MYTHS ABOUT...**

# **WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

**Sorting facts from fiction.**



**How much do you know about women's rights in the world today?**

Explore 10 common myths about the progress on women's rights, the impact of crisis situations on women and representation in politics.



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# INTRODUCTION

If you're a woman and want equal rights with men, it's best to live and work in Belgium, Denmark, France, Latvia, Luxembourg or Sweden – the only 6 countries in the world that include gender equality in laws affecting work. The World Bank's **Women, Business and the Law** report for 2021 found that on average, women around the world only have three-quarters of the legal rights afforded to men. It also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic would reinforce gender inequalities.

The report highlights how the women experience discrimination every day, through mobility, pay, the workplace, parenthood, marriage, entrepreneurship, assets, and pensions. Such discrimination not only affects women and their families. It also has negative impacts for their communities, countries and the world at large.

Tellingly, the report acknowledges that countries are improving but the author's language tells a familiar and depressing tale. It argues that countries are 'inching' toward greater gender equality. This situation is utterly unjust and counterproductive and it affects all of us in so many ways. It also makes a mockery of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the SDGs) objective of leaving no one behind.

Gender-based inequality is one of the most enduring and deep-seated discriminations. It affects all regions, classes and sectors. In most countries, it is maintained and defended in most of the same ways. One key component of that maintenance is a set of myths that are repeated time and time again.

As with other forms of inequality, governments are the central players, along with the international bodies they have created to monitor and address such inequalities. Other major actors such as trade unions, professional associations, teachers, churches, employers, farmers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also have key roles.

Gender inequality does not emerge spontaneously – it is learned, nurtured and sustained in the minds and behaviours of individuals and groups. It is here that the urgent agenda for change also needs to begin.

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# WHY SUPPORTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS MATTERS

- 1. Approximately half of the world's population is female.**  
Widespread gender-based inequality and discrimination directed at half the world's population denies them rights, opportunities and a quality of life based simply on gender. This negatively affects all families, communities and countries and often results in violence and at times, murder.
- 2. Gender-based inequality marks our planet and fundamentally slows down human development.** It damages whole societies and limits their potential. How we think about gender inequalities remains one of our greatest failings in promoting all aspects of human development.
- 3. It is important that we sort fact from fiction** – many people across the world continue to believe that gender inequality is almost a 'natural' and inevitable law, one that many believe is 'divinely inspired', cannot be altered or even challenged.
- 4. Women play a key role in many areas** such as public health and well-being, in agriculture, health, education and business and we urgently need to recognise that gender-based inequality undermines and obstructs progress in the future and the overall well-being of the planet.

It is a shocking reality that today there are just 6 countries which grant equal rights to women as to men through legislation.

## Find out more

This booklet has been developed using a number of established and constantly reviewed data sources. We suggest the following as starting points for exploring women's rights and gender equality:

- This website - <https://sdg-tracker.org/gender-equality> - gives an excellent overview with maps, data and analysis of the major issues from the Our World in Data people
- See also <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> from the UN
- For more data and debate, see the UN's main site <https://www.unwomen.org>
- A 'must watch' video is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk which covers much of the ground: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_we\\_should\\_all\\_be\\_feminists?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists?language=en)
- Women, Business and the Law report, blogs and data by the World Bank at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>
- For national perspectives, views and campaigns on women's rights see the National Women's Council of Ireland at <https://www.nwci.ie>
- For Euro-Mediterranean regional aspects of women's rights and gender justice see the activities, factsheets and more from the Euromed Rights working group at <https://euromedrights.org/theme/gender-equality>
- For more on the economic dimension and its consequences of gender inequality, see [www3.weforum.org](http://www3.weforum.org)
- Look at submissions by civil society groups and by governments, including Ireland, on progress (or not!) on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), known as the 'international bill of rights for women' at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/cedawindex.aspx>



The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an internationally agreed agenda for moving toward a better, more just and sustainable future for all of us and for the planet. The 17 Goals and their various targets interconnect and seek to begin to address the key global challenges we face today, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, peace and justice.



SDG 5 relates to the issue of gender inequality and women's empowerment and seeks to

- build upon the overall SDG agenda to **'Leave No One Behind'** in which countries have committed themselves to fast-tracking progress for women worldwide.
- ensure **equal rights** for women and girls as well as full opportunities to live their lives free from discrimination, including in the workplace, access to property to land and property rights, to sexual and reproductive health as well as to end gender-based violence.
- promote the need to adopt national and international policies that promote mechanisms for **social protection** that achieve greater equality over time.
- **end the negative and harmful practices** such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Today, more women than ever are involved in the labour market, but large inequalities continue to exist in some regions, with women systematically denied the same working rights as men. The unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, and discrimination in public office all remain barriers to equality. Climate change and environmental disasters continue to have a disproportionate effect on women and children, as do conflict and migration.

For more, visit <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

## [MYTH 01]

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**THE SITUATION FOR  
WOMEN IN THE WORLD  
HAS IMPROVED  
DRAMATICALLY IN  
RECENT DECADES —  
WE ARE NOW WELL  
ON THE WAY TO BASIC  
EQUALITY FOR WOMEN.**

# [FICTION]

The rights of women worldwide have improved significantly in recent decades largely because of the campaigns and struggles of the international women's rights movement through combinations of local, national and international campaigns. This has led many to argue that the world is now well on its way to realising gender equality. The fact that we still must argue about and campaign for equality for half of humanity illustrates otherwise. Between 2000 and 2017, progress has been substantial:

- maternal mortality rates worldwide fell by 38%;
- more girls were at school than ever before;
- 131 countries introduced over 270 reforms in gender equality;
- 1 in 3 news reporters and 25% of all politicians are women; and
- almost 30% of peace agreements included gender issues

However, the progress achieved also highlights the glaring gaps that remain...

- women have just 75% of the legal rights of men;
- nearly two thirds of the world's 781 million adults who cannot read and write are women;
- women are paid 24% less than men for similar work, on average;
- 153 countries still have laws that discriminate against women economically, including 18 countries where husbands can legally prevent their wives from working; and
- worldwide 1 in 3 women and girls will experience violence or abuse in their lifetime.

For more, see <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/womens-rights-in-review>

## [MYTH 02]

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**WOMEN ARE NOW IN  
MORE POSITIONS OF  
POWER THAN EVER  
BEFORE AND WOMEN'S  
VOICES ARE NOW BEING  
FINALLY HEARD.**



## DESPITE PROGRESS, STILL... [FICTION]

Research reports from the World Bank, UN Women and the UN Development Programme indicate that more women are now directly involved in decision-making roles in business, politics, science, education and society in general. This is true for all regions in the world, with some Developing Countries leading the world in this respect.

Despite this, the needs, agendas and voices of women remain marginal in decision-making in almost all spheres of life.

- 1 in 4 Parliamentarians are women or managers in business.
- 14% of landholders are women.
- Women in the age range 25-34 are 25% more likely to live in poverty which limits their opportunities in life.
- In 59 countries, women and girls in poorer households are 4 times more likely than men to have unmet literacy needs.
- 65% of women have accounts in a financial institution of some sort.
- 740 million women continue to work in the informal industry sector of where wages are lower and employment vulnerability is higher.
- Currently, just 6 countries worldwide are characterised by equal rights for both women and men.
- 1 in 3 women and girls (33%) will experience violence or abuse in their lifetime.

Together these inequalities severely limit the power, voice and opportunities for women worldwide, especially in the Developing World.

More, check out the Women, Business and the Law report by the World Bank at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>

## [MYTH 03]

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**WHY ARE WE STILL  
TALKING ABOUT  
'WOMEN'S RIGHTS'  
WHEN LAWS HAVE  
BEEN ESTABLISHED  
TO GUARANTEE THEIR  
RIGHTS.**

# MORE... [FICTION] ...THAN FACTS

There are many international treaties signed and ratified by nations such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Resolution 1325 for women in conflict/war, various 'Platforms for Action', conferences, legislation for equal pay and equal rights.

Despite these, the reality on the ground for women across the globe remains one of inequality, oppression and discrimination that becomes part of their daily lives. In some countries, seeking and defending women's rights can be fatal.

Of recent concern are the direct challenges against progress over the centuries by and for women towards achieving gender equality. This was noted by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachele:

***“In many countries, the fundamental recognition that all human beings are equal, and have inherent rights, is under attack. And the institutions set up by States to achieve common solutions are being undermined”***

So, while there have been laws, processes and institutions established to protect the rights of women and girls to ensure their equal participation and recognition within societies, the reality is that women in all contexts across this planet continue to experience violence, oppression and inequality.

For more, read Michelle Bachele's statement in September 2018 at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23640&LangID=E>

## [MYTH 04]

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# FEMINISM IS FOR WHITE, WEALTHY WOMEN.

### INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM — DEFINITION

Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American law professor who coined the term in 1989, explains Intersectional Feminism as a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.

“All inequality is not created equal,” she said in an interview with Time Magazine. An intersectional approach shows the way that people’s social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination.

“We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts,” Crenshaw said.



# [FICTION]

‘Feminism’ as a term, ideology and a movement has been much debated, critiqued and even blamed for the social disintegration and the ‘crisis’ of masculinity in response to the changes we see in today’s societies. The rise of what has been called the ‘manosphere’, an extreme set of ‘male’ ideas and perspectives has grown significantly in recent years as part of an anti-feminist agenda.

Feminism and the feminist ‘agenda’ is often popularly viewed as being led by and benefitting largely ‘white’ ‘women’ of ‘wealth’. Over a century ago, it was women in the ‘western world’ who fought for the right to vote, the right to work, the right to equal pay, the right to decision-making over their reproductive health, the right to own property and for equal rights. Increasingly, this one-dimensional understanding of feminism as ‘white’ was fundamentally challenged by the growing awareness of the experiences of oppression of women of colour in the United States and their responses to it. This was also paralleled by two other stories – those of women in the ‘Third World’ and also by the more recently highlighted discriminations faced by faced by LGBTQIA+ groups.

Also, feminism is not confined to ‘women’. Many men support feminism and feminist principles in their own journey towards a gender equal society. Feminism enables all of us to ‘see’ the often hidden and ignored inequalities faced by oppressed members of our societies. As the Nigerian author and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie insists, ‘we should all be feminists’.

See **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TED Talk:** on We Should All Be Feminists at [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_we\\_should\\_all\\_be\\_feminists?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists?language=en)

## [MYTH 05]

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**RECENT WOMEN'S  
RIGHTS CAMPAIGNS  
SUCH AS #METOO  
REFLECT WESTERN  
CONCERNS AND  
ARE NOT RELEVANT  
ELSEWHERE IN THE  
WORLD.**

# [FICTION]

In 2015, Argentina witnessed an explosion of protest over extremely high levels of violence against women – the slogan they used was Ni Una Menos (Not One Less). The movement spread across Latin America and took on a variety of issues. In Chile, the focus was on equality issues and the cost of living.

The African Women's Leaders Network began in 2017 and within three years it has grown into a network of over 500 women leaders focused on leadership in the context of sustainable development. Its agenda includes governance, political participation, peace and security, finance and entrepreneurship, youth, agriculture and social movements. In the 1990s women became a significant political force winning more than one-third of parliamentary seats in countries such as Burundi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. Women in Rwanda hold the highest percentage of legislative seats in the world.

In 2020, over 90 Middle-Eastern women's organisations signed a global appeal headed by the UN Secretary General for a ceasefire in the conflicts in Libya, Palestine, Yemen and Syria at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They represent hundreds of women's rights organisations across the region focused on a very broad range of issues and agendas.

These are but three representative examples of women's rights organisations outside the Developed World who have been active on a very broad range of issues since colonial times and have much in common with feminism and women's movements worldwide.

For an initial introduction, see the interactive and illustrated report **Gender equality: Women's rights in review 25 years after Beijing** at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/womens-rights-in-review>

## [MYTH 06]

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**THE IMPACT OF  
COVID-19 IS SHARED  
EQUALLY BY WOMEN  
AND MEN.**



# [FICTION]

2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the international agenda for action on women's rights that was agreed in Beijing in 1995. However, COVID-19 has contributed to undermining the limited gains made since and has even rolled some back. According to the UN, the pandemic will deepen pre-existing gender-based inequalities, highlighting economic, social and political vulnerability.

As a result of the pandemic, it is estimated that in 2021, another 47 million women and girls will be pushed into extreme poverty. As a result:

 **FOR EVERY 100 MEN AGED 25 TO 34 LIVING IN EXTREME POVERTY**  
 **THERE WILL BE 118 WOMEN**  
**...BY 2030, THIS IS EXPECTED TO INCREASE TO 121**

Women continue to work in vulnerable and low paid employment during the pandemic, they remain largely excluded from peace negotiations, from vital climate talks and continue to have just 75% of the legal rights that men do.

In this context, the World Bank estimates that it could take 150 years to achieve gender parity in respect to earned income. Rights organisations are concerned that as public support for women's rights becomes a mainstream concern, groups opposing gender equality will organise retaliation.

**Source:** UN policy briefing on The Impact off COVID-19 on Women, at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

[MYTH 07]

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**THE GENDER PAY  
GAP IS A FICTION  
THAT MANIPULATES  
STATISTICS AND A  
FALSE AGENDA FOR  
CHANGE.**

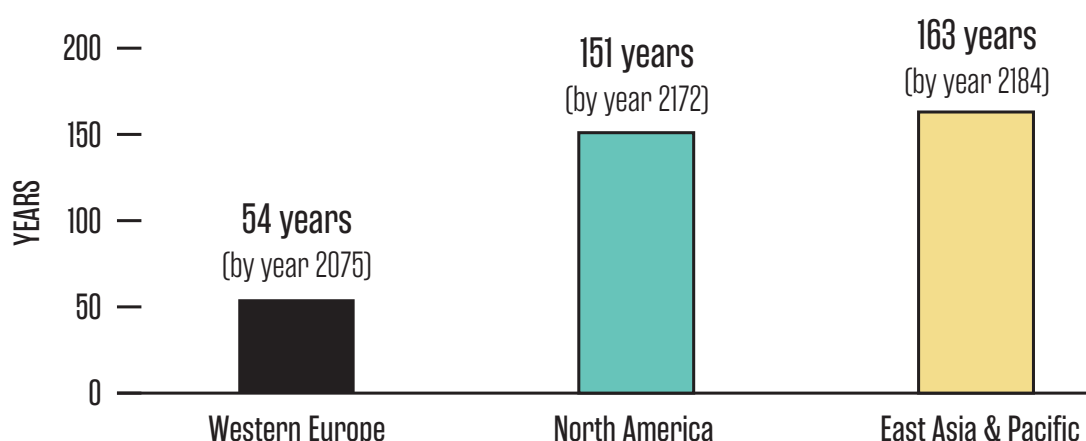
# [FICTION]

The recent Global Gender Gap Report 2020 by the World Economic Forum confirms that the Gender Pay Gap is indeed real and that,

***“None of us will see gender parity in our lifetimes, and nor likely will many of our children... the overall global gender gap will close in 99.5 years, on average...”***

In Western Europe, it will take 54 years, as compared to North America or East Asia and the Pacific, which will take 151 years and 163 years respectively.

**Graph:** Time until gender parity is reached, by region:



The report reveals that globally, the average gender pay gap for women is 31.4% less than their male counterparts. In Ireland the gap is 13.9% less, which equates to 50 days per year where women work for free.

In addition, women generally spend twice as much time as men in unpaid housework and caring roles, and most often work in insecure and often unregulated and part-time work (41% as compared to 12%).

The continuing gender pay gap is evidenced across the world and corroborated through statistics and facts across a spectrum of organisations collecting data, such as the Central Statistics Office in Ireland.

Source: <http://www3.weforum.org>; <https://www.cso.ie>

[MYTH 08]

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**MEN EXPERIENCE  
VIOLENCE IN THEIR  
LIVES JUST AS MUCH  
AS WOMEN**



# [FICTION]

Violence is widespread across all genders, class, age and locations. Men experience high suicide rates, suffer serious accidents at work (for example, on building sites), represent high numbers of conflict/war related casualties, are overrepresented in prison statistics and experience gender-based violence.

In comparison, women are disproportionately impacted across all aspects of violence and statistics throughout their life. 1 in 3 women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Globally, for example women:

- are more likely to be killed by a male family member
- are more likely to experience forced sex and/or marriage at an early age
- are trafficked in greater numbers for sexual exploitation

And are subjected to:

- purdah (a religious and social practice of female seclusion, prevalent among some Muslim and Hindu communities), dowry and honour killings;
- widow inheritance and cleansing;
- are forced into prostitution and coercive sexual transactions;
- female infanticide and femicide; and
- being targeted or abducted for rape as a strategy of war

During global health crises, such as in the current Covid19 pandemic, women's experiences of violence across the planet has intensified in particular during state imposed 'lockdowns' known as the 'shadow pandemic'.

While some men experience violence, the violence targeted towards women is widespread, intersecting and cuts across all ages and stages of their lives.

**Source:** UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women> and WHO <https://www.who.int/health-topics/violence-against-women>

## [MYTH 09]

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**MEN GET SICK TOO,  
OFTEN WITH SIMILAR  
CONDITIONS. THERE IS  
AN OVEREMPHASIS ON  
WOMEN'S HEALTH.**

# [FICTION]

The Human Development Report's Gender Inequality Index (GII) measures women's empowerment in health, education and economic status. It tells us that no place in the world has achieved gender equality and that overall progress has been slowing, with the world off track to achieve gender equality by 2030.

A key indicator of this reality is the lack of progress in women's health, in particular sexual and reproductive health and rights.

There has been progress: the reduction of harmful gender practices such as Female Genital Mutilation and reducing maternal mortality worldwide by about 38% between 2000 and 2017 (the maternal mortality ratio, MMR, is the number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). However, in sub-Saharan Africa, 1 woman in every 180 giving birth dies – more than 20 times the rate in developed countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that 94% of all maternal deaths occur in low and lower middle-income countries.

The impact on women's health extends to their role as 'caregiver' where many women continue to face violence and abuse in the workplace, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women's lack of access to healthcare is also a factor in their negative health outcomes.

The health and well-being of half of the world's population continues to need serious consideration and action. Supporting women's health is a human rights necessity.

**Source:** WHO <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/ten-top-issues-for-women's-health>); UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/en>

## [MYTH 10]

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**THERE ISN'T MUCH ONE  
PERSON CAN DO TO  
CHANGE THE STATE OF  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS.**



# [FICTION]

It is true that there are many things that cannot be changed by one individual working alone - climate change, unjust international trade and finance, regional conflicts or transnational or governmental corruption come to mind. Some would argue that this proves there is little or nothing an individual can do, yet clearly this is a fiction and a dangerous one at that.

Each of us in our families, communities, network of friends, workplaces and leisure activities, in our communications and conversations deal directly and indirectly with women's rights. Every day we have many opportunities to speak out and 'do' in support of rights or to challenge what undermines them.

Most of the major changes throughout history began with the actions and behaviours of individuals or small groups rather than with large institutions, processes or structures.

So, here are 4 simple actions/behaviours you might consider in the context of women's rights.

1. Don't be silent – speak up in support of equality or against inequality; join the conversation on women's rights.
2. Share workloads – challenge the idea that women's and men's work are always different; support each other and be the change we wish to see.
3. Be involved – don't leave it to others.
4. Educate yourself and others about rights and equality; knowing some of the basics is important in moving the agenda forward.

For more, see <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/3/compilation-eight-ways-you-can-be-a-womens-rights-advocate>

# 10 MYTHS ABOUT... SERIES

The 10 Myths About.... series looks to sort facts from fiction on key global development, human rights and justice issues.

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