

Forum: Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Issue: Empowering Women's Economic Participation in Developing Economies

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TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Empowering women's economic participation is making sure women have the same chances as men to access, contribute to, and benefit from economic activities in everyday life. This includes access to paid jobs, starting businesses, financial services, education, land ownership, and leadership roles in both public and private sectors. Economic empowerment is not just about increasing how many women are in the workforce; it also requires removing the structural, legal, social, and political barriers that keep women from fully joining the economy. In developing economies, where many people rely on informal work and poverty rates are still high, raising women's economic participation has been recognized as an important factor for inclusive economic growth, reducing poverty, and supporting sustainable development. Research shows that when women can earn money and make economic choices, household wellbeing improves, children get better access to education and healthcare, and communities become stronger.

Even though there has been real progress worldwide in gender equality, women still face many challenges that limit their economic opportunities. These challenges include laws that discriminate, unequal access to education and financial resources, unpaid care work, gender-based violence, wage differences, and cultural norms that limit women's roles in society. These barriers are not just social or economic, but also political, since governments set labor laws, education policies, social protections, and legal systems that affect women's access to economic opportunities. Different political theories look at this problem in different ways. Liberal views usually say that governments and international groups should support equal rights, education, and market access to boost economic growth and personal freedom. On the other hand, realist views focus more on national economic interests, political stability, and state sovereignty, often judging gender equality efforts by whether they help strengthen state

power and economic competitiveness. For delegates, understanding these different perspectives is important when considering solutions and working on international cooperation.

As one of the six main organs of the United Nations, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is in a special position to deal with this problem. ECOSOC is in charge of encouraging international economic and social cooperation, coordinating the work of specialized UN agencies, and helping to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By working with governments, international organizations, financial institutions, and civil society, ECOSOC offers a space to develop policies that support inclusive and sustainable economic development. In this committee, delegates will look at why women are excluded from the economy, review current international efforts, and discuss new solutions that can empower women while taking into account the different political, economic, and cultural situations in developing economies.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Women's Economic empowerment

Women's economic empowerment means ensuring women can equally participate in and benefit from decent work and social protection; access markets and have control over resources, their own time, lives, and bodies; and increased voice, agency, and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions. ¹

Gender Equality

Gender equality refers to the state in which individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities across all areas of life. This includes equal access to education, employment, pay, healthcare, leadership roles, and representation in

¹ UN Women. (2024). Facts and figures: Economic empowerment. In *UN Women*.
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>

decision-making. Gender equality is rooted in the principle that a person's gender should not determine their opportunities or outcomes.²

Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap is the difference in average gross hourly earnings between women and men. It is based on salaries paid directly to employees before income tax and social security contributions are deducted. Only companies of 10 employees or more are taken into account in these calculations.³

Financial Inclusion

Financial inclusion is multi-dimensional. It encompasses digital, consumer protection, market conduct, gender and climate issues. It requires differentiated approaches to target groups, such as youth, small businesses, rural populations, forcibly displaced people, and people with disabilities – working to understand their needs, preferences, and challenges, and involving them in finding solutions.⁴

Microfinance

Microfinance, also called microcredit, is a type of banking service provided to low-income individuals or groups who otherwise wouldn't have access to financial services.

² Wilkinson, D. (2024). Gender equality - Definition and Explanation. In *The Oxford Review - OR Briefings*. <https://oxford-review.com/the-oxford-review-dei-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dictionary/gender-equality-definition-and-explanation/>

³European Parliament. (2020b). Understanding the gender pay gap: definition, facts and causes | Topics | European Parliament. In *Topics* | *European Parliament*.
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20200109STO69925/understanding-the-gender-pay-gap-definition-facts-and-causes>

⁴ What is financial inclusion? - alliance for financial inclusion. (2024). In *Alliance for Financial Inclusion - Bringing smart policies to life*. <https://afi-global.org/about-afi/what-is-financial-inclusion/>

While institutions participating in microfinance most often provide lending—microloans can range from as small as \$50 to under \$50,000.⁵

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historical Background

Women's role in the economy has shifted considerably over time. While women have long contributed through agriculture, family businesses, and unpaid domestic work, much of this work was not formally recognised. During the Industrial Revolution and the World Wars, increasing numbers of women entered the formal workforce. International agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), CEDAW (1979), the Beijing Declaration (1995), and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) also advanced women's economic rights and equality.⁶

Women's economic participation involves more than employment. It also includes equal access to education, decent work, entrepreneurship, financial services, land ownership, leadership positions, and equal pay. Economic independence means providing women with the opportunities, resources, and legal protections required to participate fully in economic life and make their own financial decisions.

Current Situation

Global statistics

Current Global Situation Women still participate in the global labour force at lower rates than men. Many work in informal or poorly paid jobs that offer no social protection or

⁵ Kagan, J. (2024). Microfinance definition: benefits, history, and how it works. In *Investopedia*. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/microfinance.asp>

⁶United Nations. (2015). the 17 sustainable development goals. In *United Nations*.

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

legal security. Although many countries have made progress, clear gender gaps remain in employment, wages, and leadership positions.

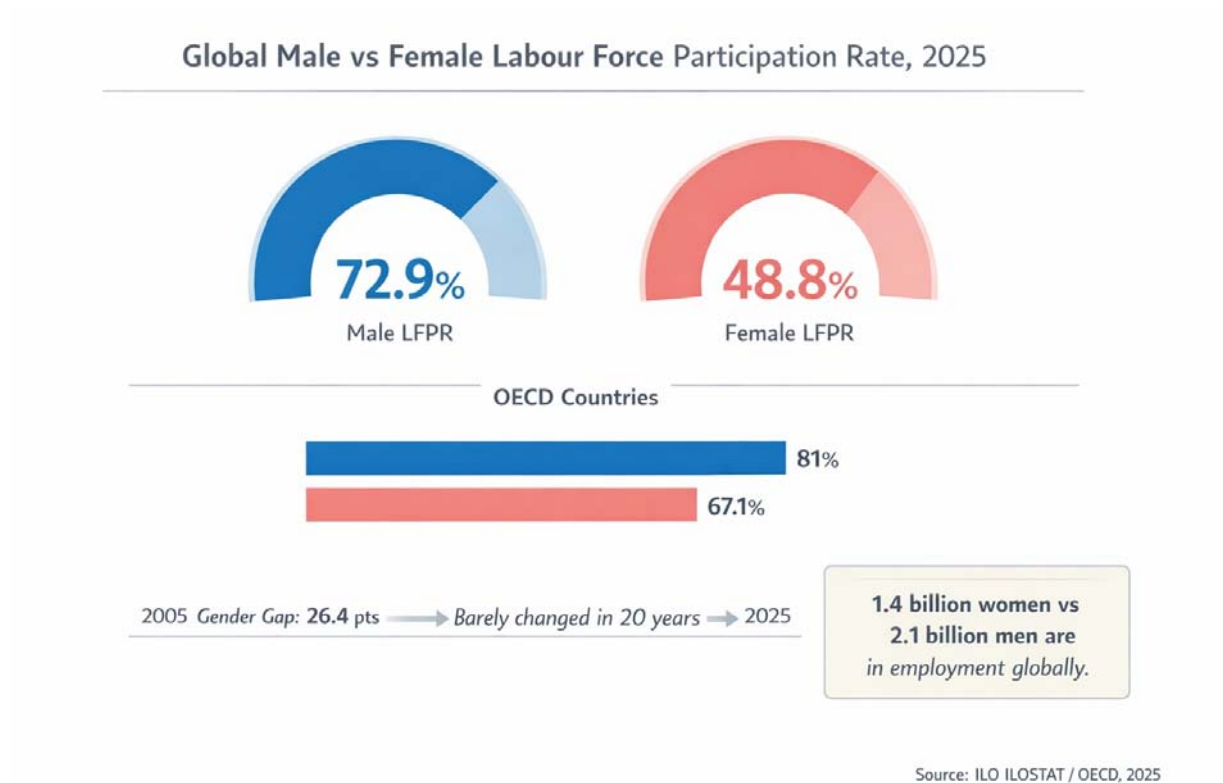


Figure 1: Male vs Female Employment Statistics (Latest 2026 Data)

Regional differences

The issue varies considerably across regions. Sub-Saharan Africa has relatively high female labour force participation⁷, but much of this consists of informal employment. East Asia has made significant gains through industrialisation and education. Latin America has experienced steady progress, while the Middle East and North Africa still

⁷ Dr. Adeline Nembot, Kum, D. V., & Nembot, A. (2026). Recognizing, reducing, and rewarding unpaid care work in central africa. In *Nkafu Policy Institute*. <https://nkafu.org/not-just-numbers-but-impact-transforming-womens-labour-force-participation-in-sub-saharan-africa-ssa/>

have some of the lowest female labour force participation rates because of legal, cultural, and social barriers.⁸

Main barriers women face

Women encounter numerous obstacles that restrict their economic opportunities. These include unequal access to education and finance, discriminatory laws, unequal property rights, unpaid care responsibilities, discrimination in the workplace, gender-based violence, and limited access to technology. Such barriers can reinforce each other, making financial independence difficult for women to achieve.⁹

Economic consequences of low participation.

Increasing women's economic participation strengthens economies by raising productivity, expanding the labour force, and supporting innovation. Higher female employment also reduces poverty, improves education and healthcare outcomes for families, and raises household income. Greater economic participation also contributes to more resilient and inclusive societies.¹⁰

Importance of the Issue

Impact on GDP growth

Women's economic participation is a key driver of economic growth. When more women join the labour force, countries benefit from a larger workforce, increased productivity, greater innovation, and higher tax revenues. Closing the gender gap in employment can

⁸ Migliaccio, E., Nico, G., Gomez Tamayo, S., Alrayess, D., Moraes, G., & Koettl, J. (2026). *Socioeconomic Data on Fisheries Workers Availability and Strategies for Better Data Quality Female Labor Force Participation in the Middle East and North Africa Region Regional trends and the experience of Saudi Arabia.*

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099654003182613637/pdf/IDU-aea350d5-82ac-48f2-b391-8ba9c6fbf339.pdf>

⁹ United Nations. (2025). Goal 5: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. In *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*. United Nations.

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

¹⁰ UN Women. (2024b). Facts and figures: Economic empowerment. In *UN Women*.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>

significantly increase both GDP and GDP per capita,¹¹ particularly in developing economies where women's potential remains underutilised. Investing in women's education, entrepreneurship, and access to finance allows countries to make better use of their human capital and achieve more inclusive economic growth.

Poverty reduction

Increasing women's economic opportunities is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Women who earn a stable income are more likely to invest in their families, improve household living standards, and contribute to local economies. Greater financial independence also reduces vulnerability to economic shocks and can help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. As a result, empowering women economically benefits not only individuals but entire communities

Education and healthcare outcomes.

Women's economic empowerment has long-term social benefits beyond the economy. Studies show that women are more likely to spend their income on education, nutrition, and healthcare for their children, leading to higher school attendance, improved health, and better future employment opportunities.¹² These positive outcomes contribute to stronger human capital, reduced inequality, and more sustainable development, making women's economic participation an important investment for future generations.

Sustainable Development Goals.

Connection to Sustainable Development Women's economic independence directly supports several Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality

¹¹ Stuttgart, H. der M. (2026, July 8). *MOSTLY TRUE: "Closing the gender gap in employment could mean an extra 10% in EU GDP per capita"*. Eufactcheck.Eu.

<https://eufactcheck.eu/factcheck/mostly-true-closing-the-gender-gap-in-employment-could-mean-an-extra-10-in-eu-gdp-per-capita/>

¹² Gunes, P. M. (2025). Female education and socioeconomic outcomes. *IZA World of Labor*. <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.513>

Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Progress in this area supports economic development that is both sustainable and inclusive.¹³



*Figure 2: The UN's sustainable development goals*¹⁴

Current global statistics

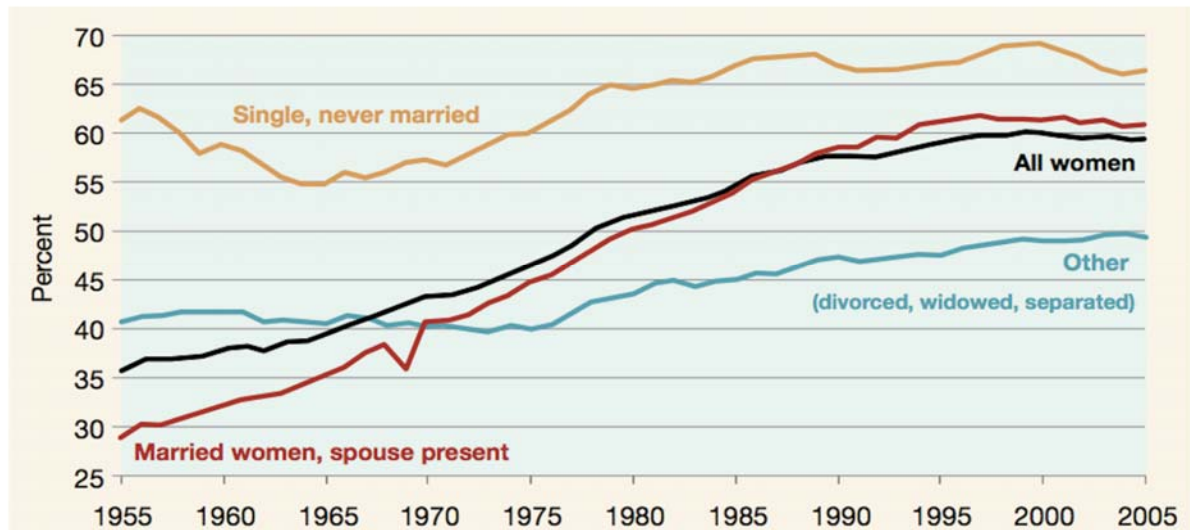
The chart shows that around half of all women worldwide are participating in the labor force. That is, they are of working age and “economically active”, either because they are working or actively looking for a job. But this global average hides how this differs across world regions: while most regions are slightly or clearly above the world average, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia have much lower participation rates.

¹³ UNDP. (2025). Sustainable development goals. In *United Nations Development Programme*. United Nations. <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

¹⁴ Sustainable development goals. (2024a). In *European Court of Auditors*. <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/sustainable-development-goals>

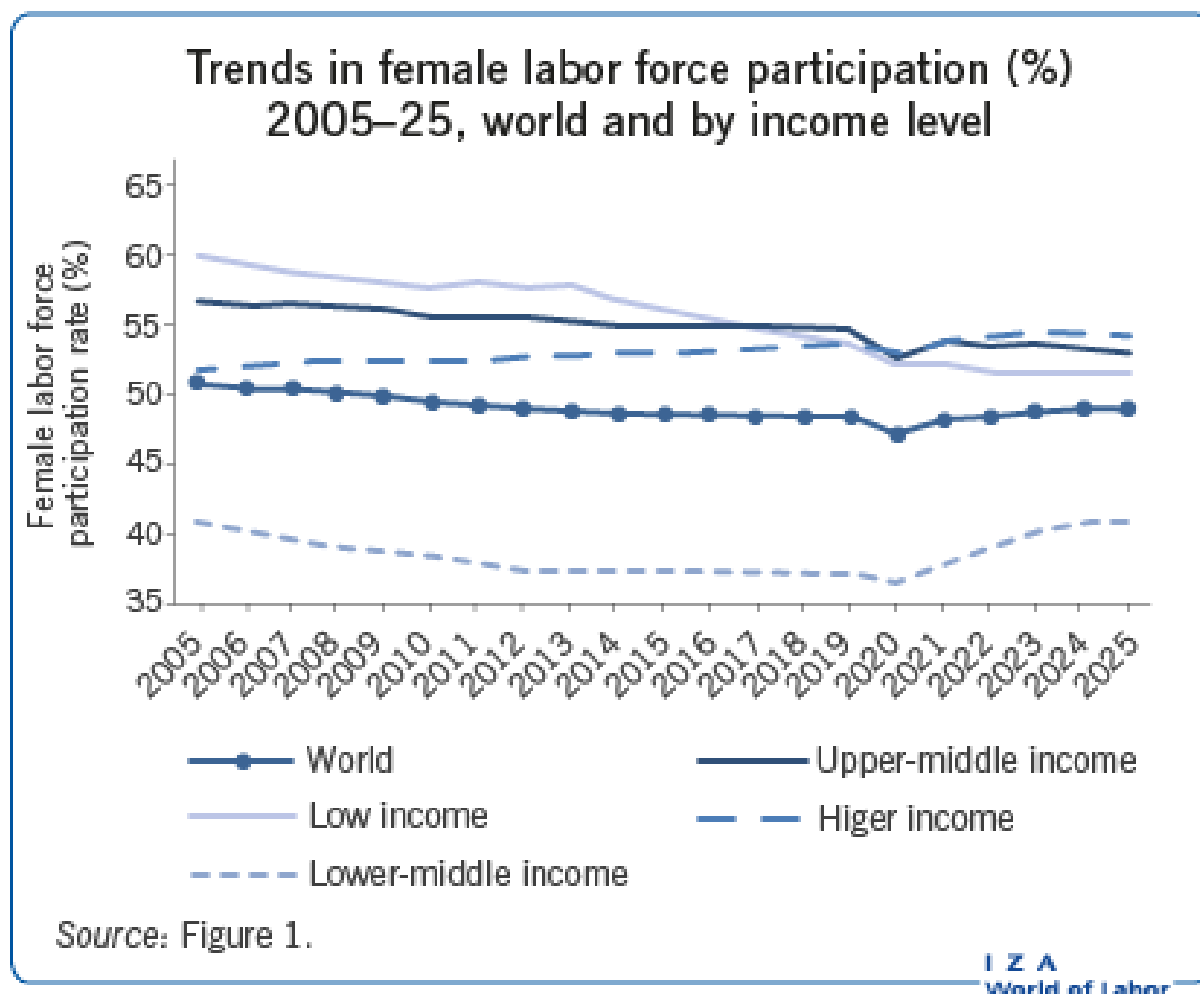
Switching to the map view shows that female labor force participation also differs a lot within world regions.¹⁵

Labor Force Participation of Women in the USA, 1955-2005



Data source: Data from 1955 to 1975 come from the US Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003. Data from 1976 to 2005 come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics

¹⁵ Ortiz-Ospina, E., Tzvetkova, S., & Roser, M. (2018). Women's employment. In *Our World in Data*. <https://ourworldindata.org/female-labor-supply>



The relationship between women's participation in the labor force and development is complex and reflects changes in the pattern of economic growth, educational attainment, fertility rates, social norms, and other factors. However, labor force participation rates paint only a partial picture of women's work. More important is understanding the quality of women's employment, wages, and the ability to get positions of leadership. To achieve gains in job quality in developing countries, policies should focus on both labor demand and supply dimensions. Expanding access to secondary and higher education is particularly relevant but this needs to be matched by the creation of jobs that can be accessed by women.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

India

India has one of the world's largest working-age female populations, making women's economic participation particularly important to its development. Although women's education and access to financial services have improved, many women remain outside formal employment or work in informal and agricultural sectors. Social expectations, unpaid care responsibilities, safety concerns, and unequal employment opportunities can restrict participation. The government has introduced initiatives supporting women's entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, skills development, and self-help groups. India is therefore important to the debate because increasing women's participation could contribute significantly to economic growth and poverty reduction.

Kenya

Women are essential contributors to Kenya's economy, particularly in agriculture, small businesses, and the informal sector. However, many women face difficulties accessing credit, land, technology, and formal employment opportunities. Women entrepreneurs may also struggle to obtain financing because they often have fewer assets that can be used as collateral. Kenya has introduced policies and funds intended to support women-owned businesses and improve financial inclusion. The country demonstrates how entrepreneurship and access to finance can be used to strengthen women's economic independence.

South Africa

South Africa has established strong constitutional and legal protections for gender equality, yet significant economic inequalities between men and women remain. Women face high unemployment and are often concentrated in lower-paid or less secure employment. Historical inequality, poverty, unequal care responsibilities, and limited

¹⁶ Verick, S. (2014). Female labor force participation in developing countries. *IZA World of Labor*, 87(1). <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.87>

access to economic opportunities can further affect women's participation. South Africa has introduced policies supporting women's employment, entrepreneurship, and representation in business. It is an important case because it demonstrates that legal equality does not automatically result in economic equality.

UN Women

UN Women is one of the most directly relevant organizations to this issue. It works to increase women's access to decent employment, entrepreneurship, financial resources, property, and leadership positions. It also advocates for equal pay and policies that recognize and redistribute unpaid care work. UN Women works with governments and other organizations to develop policies and programs that remove structural barriers preventing women from participating fully in economic life.

World Bank

The World Bank plays an important role by financing development projects and producing research on barriers to women's economic participation. Its work includes supporting female entrepreneurs, expanding financial inclusion, improving education and skills, and examining laws that affect women's economic opportunities. Its *Women, Business and the Law* research is particularly relevant because it examines how laws and regulations can influence women's economic participation across different countries.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

UNDP works to reduce poverty, inequality, and exclusion while supporting sustainable development. Women's economic empowerment is closely connected to these objectives. Its programs can include entrepreneurship training, employment opportunities, financial inclusion, digital skills, and support for women affected by crises or poverty. UNDP is particularly relevant because women's economic participation is connected to several Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
19 June – 2 July 1975	The UN declares International Women's Year and hosts the first World Conference on Women, bringing global attention to women's rights and equality. (UN WOMEN)
18 December 1979	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is adopted, becoming the most important international treaty protecting women's rights.
4–15 September 1995	The Fourth World Conference on Women adopts the Beijing Declaration, encouraging governments to improve women's access to employment, education and leadership.
6–8 September 2000	The United Nations Millennium Summit adopts the Millennium Development Goals, including promoting gender equality and empowering women.
2 July 2010	UN Women is established to coordinate the UN's work on gender equality and women's empowerment.
25 September 2015	The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development introduces SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work), highlighting women's economic participation as a global priority
11 March 2020	The COVID-19 pandemic causes major job losses for women and increases unpaid care responsibilities worldwide
2023	International reports show that many women in developing economies still face legal, financial and social barriers to entering the workforce.
2025	Governments and international organizations continue expanding programmes that support women entrepreneurs, financial inclusion and equal employment opportunities

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, CEDAW is one of the most important international agreements protecting women's rights. It requires participating states to take action against discrimination against women in political, social and economic life. In terms of economic participation, it supports women's equal rights to employment, education, professional opportunities and economic resources. However, its effectiveness depends greatly on how individual governments implement its provisions at the national level.¹⁷

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted in 1995 during the Fourth World Conference on Women by representatives of 189 governments. It identified 12 critical areas of concern, including women and poverty, education, employment and access to economic opportunities. The Platform encouraged governments to remove barriers preventing women from participating fully in economic life and to introduce policies supporting equal employment, training and access to resources. It remains one of the main international frameworks used to guide policies promoting gender equality.¹⁸

Sustainable Development Goals – SDG 5 and SDG 8

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 as part of the UN 2030 Agenda. SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, while SDG 8 promotes inclusive economic growth, productive employment and decent work for everyone. Together, these goals encourage governments to increase women's access to employment, leadership positions and economic opportunities while addressing discrimination in the

¹⁷ United Nations. (1979c, December 18). *Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women New York, 18 december 1979*. Ohchr. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

¹⁸ UN Women. (2015c). *Beijing declaration and platform for action, Beijing +5 political declaration and outcome*. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>

workplace. They also connect women's economic empowerment with wider economic development and poverty reduction.¹⁹

ECOSOC Resolutions on Gender Equality

ECOSOC has adopted numerous resolutions encouraging governments and UN organizations to integrate gender equality into economic and social policies. A major focus has been *gender mainstreaming*, meaning that the different effects policies may have on women and men should be considered when programmes are created and implemented. ECOSOC has also encouraged better gender-related data collection, stronger cooperation between UN bodies and greater inclusion of women in development programmes. These resolutions help keep gender equality and women's economic empowerment on the international development agenda, although their success ultimately depends on implementation by states and organizations.²⁰

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (1958)²¹

Convention No. 111 requires ratifying states to pursue policies promoting equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation. It addresses discrimination in areas such as access to jobs, vocational training, and working conditions. Its effectiveness, however, depends heavily on national legislation and enforcement.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)²²

CEDAW established an important international legal framework for eliminating

¹⁹ United Nations. (2015c). *The 17 sustainable development goals*. United Nations.
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

²⁰ IANWGE: *Resolutions on gender equality*. (2026b). Un.Org.
https://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/resolutions/ecosoc_res_by_topic.htm

²¹ ILO. (2024). *Convention c111 - discrimination (employment and occupation) convention, 1958 (no. 111)*. Ilo.Org.
https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C111

²² United Nations. (1979b, December 18). *Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women New York, 18 december 1979*. Ohchr.
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

discrimination against women. Its principles extend to education, employment, economic opportunities, property, and participation in public life. Although it encouraged governments to reform discriminatory laws, legal equality has not always translated into equal economic opportunities in practice.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)²³

Adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Platform for Action identified women's economic inequality as a major global concern. It encouraged governments to improve women's access to employment, resources, markets, training, and decision-making. Thirty years later, the UN reports that substantial legal and structural barriers to women's economic equality remain.

Establishment of UN Women (2010)²⁴

UN Women was created to strengthen and coordinate UN efforts on gender equality. It works with governments and other actors to eliminate discrimination and increase women's empowerment, including their economic opportunities and participation in decision-making.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Improve girls' education and vocational training

Governments can increase access to quality education for girls, particularly in rural and low-income areas. Vocational and technical training can provide women with skills needed in growing sectors such as technology, finance, renewable energy, and healthcare.

Increase access to financial services

²³ UN Women. (2015b). *Beijing declaration and platform for action, Beijing +5 political declaration and outcome*. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>

²⁴ OSAGI - creation of UN women. (n.d.). Wwww.Un.Org. Retrieved 24 August 2026, from https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagine/sta_creationUNWomen.html

Governments and financial institutions can expand women's access to bank accounts, loans, credit, insurance, and digital banking. Reducing requirements for collateral can be particularly important for women who do not own land or property.

Support women-owned small businesses

Governments can provide grants, low-interest loans, business training, mentorship programs, and easier access to markets for female entrepreneurs. Policies can also encourage public institutions and large companies to purchase goods and services from women-owned businesses.

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<https://eufactcheck.eu/factcheck/mostly-true-closing-the-gender-gap-in-employment-could-mean-an-extra-10-in-eu-gdp-per-capita/>

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