Low-Income Countries Advancing Faster on Gender Equality as Some Wealthy Nations Backslide, New Index Finds

- *Gender equality improved in two-thirds of countries, but global progress remains too slow.*
- *Low-income countries are advancing nearly four times faster than high-income countries, with the strongest gains in Latin America & the Caribbean (+3.7), Asia & the Pacific (+3.4), the Middle East & North Africa (+3.1), and Sub-Saharan Africa (+2.5).*
- *Around one-third of countries stagnated or declined, with the United States recording the largest setback.*

WASHINGTON, DC / NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 10, 2026 — Gender equality improved in two-thirds of countries between 2020 and 2025, according to the **2026 Equal Measures Gender Equality Index** released today. Some of the most significant gains came from countries making rapid progress from lower starting points, demonstrating that meaningful advances are possible across a wide range of contexts.

Low-income countries improved nearly four times faster than high-income countries on average, while several wealthy nations — including the United States, Hungary, the Netherlands, and France — moved backwards.

The Index is one of the most comprehensive measures of gender equality, capturing the interconnected rights and opportunities that shape women's and girls' lives across 130 countries, covering 3.7 billion women and girls (around 90% of the world's female population). The Index scores countries on a scale of 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating stronger performance across 27 gender equality targets spanning health, safety, economic opportunity, leadership, and the enabling environment for gender equality. Between 2020 and 2025, the global average Index score rose from 66.7 to 69.0 out of 100 — with just 5% of women and girls living in countries receiving the Index's highest rating of 'very good' for gender equality.

Despite strong gains in some countries, global momentum is being held back by stagnation and backsliding. **Approximately 1.6 billion women and girls live in countries where progress on gender equality has stalled or reversed.** The data also reveals concerning negative trends in

women's access to justice and freedom of expression, which recorded the largest declines among the Index's 27 indicators.

"Opportunity without power is not enough," said **Alison Holder, Executive Director, Equal Measures**. "Our Index shows that women and girls are gaining opportunities faster than they are gaining power. While access to education, healthcare, technology, and jobs is expanding in many countries, rights, freedoms, and power are not keeping pace, and in some places are moving backwards. That's a dangerous gap, because when opportunity advances without power, progress can be quickly reversed."

Areas of progress

Of the Index's five dimensions, Economic Opportunity & Power was the highest-scoring and fastest-improving. Looking across all the issues in the Index, significant advances were also recorded in women's internet use, maternal mortality, and women's representation in parliament, demonstrating how sustained investment, stronger public services, and policy reforms can deliver meaningful improvements for women and girls.

Notable progress is being made in regions that are often overlooked in global gender equality debates. Latin America & the Caribbean recorded the largest regional improvement between 2020 and 2025 (+3.7 points), followed by Asia & the Pacific (+3.4 points), the Middle East & North Africa (+3.1 points), and Sub-Saharan Africa (+2.5 points). Europe & North America was the only region to stagnate (+0.8 points).

The five fastest-improving countries since 2020 were Armenia (+8.70 points), Mexico (+8.65), Chad (+7.51), Honduras (+7.47), and Sierra Leone (+7.30), showing that meaningful progress is possible in countries with very different starting points and resources.

Progress in populous countries is consequential. India, home to nearly one in five women represented in the Index, improved by almost five points. Overall, 57% of women and girls covered by the Index live in countries that improved between 2020 and 2025.

Where gains are at risk

The Index reveals troubling setbacks in women's ability to exercise their rights and participate in public life — underscoring that women's rights and freedoms cannot be taken for granted, even in countries with a strong track record on gender equality. Women's access to justice declined by 2.12 points globally, while women's freedom of expression fell by 2.03 points, the two largest global setbacks across the Index. More than a quarter of countries moved backwards on both women's access to justice and freedom of expression, including Australia, Austria, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Civic Space & Leadership was the lowest-scoring of the Index's five dimensions, with a global average score of 60.5 out of 100, making it the only dimension classified as ‘poor’. Women's leadership remains among the weakest-performing areas in the Index. Women’s representation in senior government roles was the lowest-scoring indicator in the entire Index, with an average of 25% of minister-level roles held by women, a figure that barely changed between 2020 and 2025. Three countries — Azerbaijan, Hungary, and Saudi Arabia — had zero women ministers in 2025. Women’s representation in parliament is seeing ‘fast progress’, but still only sits at a global average of just over 28% of parliamentary seats held by women. Declines in women's leadership were a common feature of broader gender equality backsliding, with drops in women's ministerial representation or participation in climate decision-making among the main drivers of decline in eight of the ten countries that recorded the largest overall decreases in the Index.

Some of the clearest setbacks are occurring in countries long considered to be gender equality leaders. **The United States recorded the largest decline globally, losing 6.06 points and falling 15 places in the rankings.** The Netherlands, France, Finland, Canada, and Sweden also recorded declining scores. While Europe & North America remains the highest-scoring region for gender equality, they made the slowest progress during the period measured.

Progress is possible — but it must be protected

The Index points to a defining challenge for the next phase of global gender equality progress: ensuring that gains in opportunity are matched by gains in power. Across many countries, women and girls are gaining greater access to education, healthcare, technology, and economic opportunities, but advances in rights, representation, and influence are not always keeping pace. The result is a growing risk that today's progress could be undermined by tomorrow's political, social, and economic setbacks.

How to protect and accelerate global gains in gender equality will be a key focus of the upcoming Copenhagen Summit for Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Rights on November 16, hosted by the Government of Denmark and Nordic Council of Ministers.

"The countries making progress show us that change is possible," said Holder. "Their success is not accidental. It reflects deliberate political choices: stronger laws and policies, sustained investment, and a commitment to advancing women's rights, representation, and leadership. But at a moment when civic space is shrinking, democratic institutions are under pressure, international funding for gender equality is retreating, and hard-won rights are increasingly being challenged, progress cannot be taken for granted. The governments gathering in Copenhagen have an opportunity to demonstrate that gender equality remains a political priority, and that today's gains will be protected and built upon for future generations."

Read the full Index: 2026 Equal Measures Gender Equality Index: Opportunity Without Power is Not Enough

About Equal Measures 2030: Equal Measures helps gender equality movements turn evidence into influence. We build the evidence architecture that movements need to strengthen accountability, shift power and shape the decisions, institutions and systems that affect women, girls and gender-diverse people. By combining trusted gender data, advocacy tools, learning opportunities and global networks, we help advocates bring evidence to the moments that matter most. With a goal of reaching 100,000 Factivists by 2030, we are helping build a future where evidence-powered movements can drive lasting change.

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