

Executive summary

Social institutions refer to the established set of formal and informal laws, norms and practices that govern behaviour in society. Discrimination in these institutions is at the heart of the inequalities and inequities that women face worldwide. Achieving gender equality, therefore, demands transforming discriminatory social norms into gender-equitable ones.

Based on updated measures of the levels of discrimination in social institutions across 179 countries, the fifth edition of the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) shows that change is underway but must accelerate. Progress has occurred across all regions of the world, and developing countries are bridging the gap with developed countries. Since the fourth edition of the SIGI, in 2019, many countries have enacted legal reforms that protect women's rights and grant them equal opportunities, notably to address violence against women in a comprehensive manner, prevent child marriage and increase women's political representation. Moreover, civil society and feminist organisations have relentlessly and effectively advocated for women's sexual and reproductive rights.

Yet, progress is not homogeneous, advances remain fragile, and women and girls continue to experience important deprivations and inequalities in all aspects of their lives. Large disparities remain across and within regions. Worldwide, 40% of women and girls live in countries where the level of discrimination in social institutions is estimated to be high or very high. Certain rights, such as the right to safe and legal abortion, are under threat and have already been legally restricted in several countries. Changes since the fourth edition of the SIGI thus reveal a mixed picture of progress and setbacks, confirming a well-established fact: transforming attitudes and practices takes time.

Notably, discrimination remains highest within the family sphere, where discriminatory laws, social norms and practices create fundamental and systemic differences between men and women – e.g. unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work, unequal access to inheritance or early and forced marriage. By weakening women's and girls' agency, discriminatory social institutions also have lasting consequences on all other aspects of women's and girls' lives: from sexual and reproductive health and rights, to violence against women, economic empowerment, political representation, and decision-making power in the private and public spheres. For instance, social norms according to which men are the ultimate decision makers – either as a partner or father – undermine women's and girls' ability to choose, voice and act on contraception and family planning preferences.

Similarly, gender-based traditional hierarchies within the household negatively influence women's capacity to cope with disasters induced by climate change. These distinct roles at the household level are often replicated at the national and political levels, where women do not have the same opportunities as men to participate in disaster risk reduction management nor to contribute to the development of mitigating policies. Overall, policies aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change continue to be largely gender-blind, exacerbating women's disproportionate vulnerability to its socio-economic effects. Strengthening women's resilience, especially in developing countries, is essential to remedy this asymmetric exposure to risks.

Ongoing crises can also exacerbate challenges, and ignoring their gendered impacts can substantially aggravate the well-being and livelihoods of millions of women and girls. Recent simultaneous shocks – COVID-19, climate change, the global food crisis, etc. – are threatening to reverse some gender equality gains. For instance, the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19, particularly in contexts where discriminatory informal laws exist, are putting millions of girls at risk of early and forced marriage. Likewise, conflicts jeopardise adolescents' and women's access to essential sexual and reproductive health services, including maternal and newborn healthcare or contraception. These threats and crises also increase the risk of backlash against gender equality, diverting resources towards issues that are considered more pressing in times of crisis and downplaying the status of gender inequality as a systemic and urgent problem.

Yet, these crises offer a window of opportunity for greater gender equality and women's empowerment. Because of women's pivotal role and unique perspective, empowering them and realising gender equality would improve the policy and programmatic response to crises. It constitutes an opportunity to bridge gaps between men and women and put equality back at the heart of the global policy agenda. For instance, the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 have shed light on a large range of existing gender-based inequalities and highlighted the need to include women in decision-making processes. Ensuring that a diverse range of opinions, expertise and socio-professional backgrounds are represented at all levels would generate substantial added value for societies. Likewise, leveraging women's unique expertise and perspectives could substantially strengthen climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. For instance, indigenous women have been on the frontline of environmental and conservation initiatives; their valuable expertise and awareness can help find innovative solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Likewise, empowering women in agriculture and providing them with equal access to resources could increase the productive capacity of women-owned farms by 20% to 30% in developing countries. Finally, women are essential to strengthening resilience to climate-induced disasters. Evidence demonstrates that women are powerful agents during and in the aftermath of disasters by rapidly contributing to post-recovery efforts.

To accelerate change and eliminate discrimination in social institutions, bold action is needed by all – from governments and policy makers to development partners, the private sector, philanthropic actors and civil society organisations. Doing so requires a co-ordinated effort from all these stakeholders. It also entails recognising intersecting forms of discrimination that go beyond gender – e.g. age, ethnicity, place of residence or religion, among others – and add to gender-based discrimination.

Public, private, philanthropic and civil society actors should seek to:

- reform and amend laws to guarantee equal rights and opportunities, and support existing legislation with a comprehensive policy framework.
- transform discriminatory social norms into gender-equitable ones.
- include men and boys in promoting gender equality.
- make the invisible visible through a better collection of gender-disaggregated, gender-relevant and intersectional data and indicators.
- further monitor the impact of initiatives, and share lessons about what works and what does not.
- finance gender equality, including key transformative actors such as grassroots and feminist movements.



From:
SIGI 2023 Global Report
Gender Equality in Times of Crisis

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/4607b7c7-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2023), "Executive summary", in *SIGI 2023 Global Report: Gender Equality in Times of Crisis*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/338e78ec-en>

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area. Extracts from publications may be subject to additional disclaimers, which are set out in the complete version of the publication, available at the link provided.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.