

The Global Gender Gap: Progress and Challenges in Education, Wages, and Health from 2018 to Present

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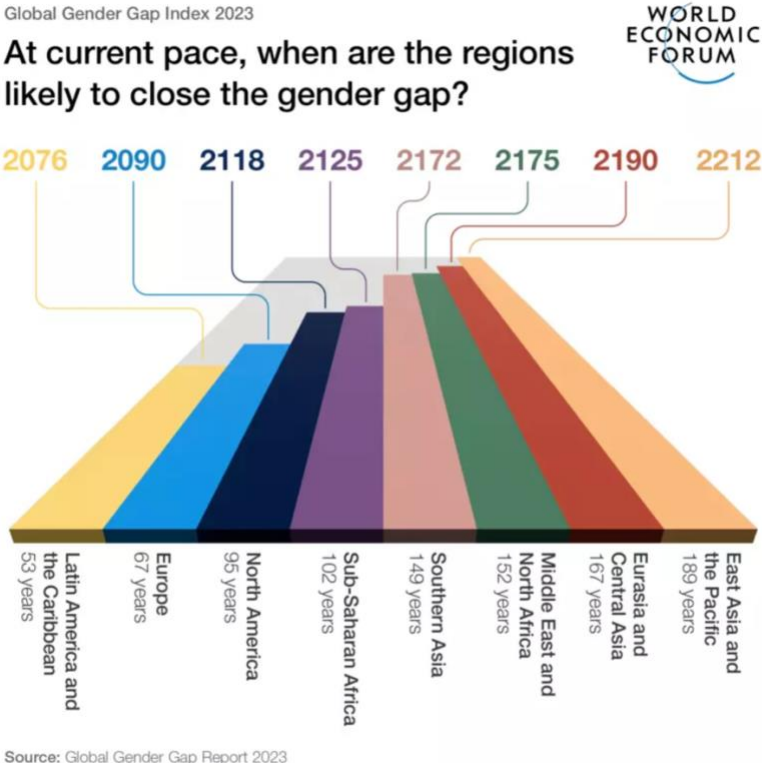
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Over the years, political representation, workplace opportunities, and social awareness of gender equality have gradually increased, advancing women's rights and global gender equality. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated economic, healthcare, and safety disparities between men and women. Women continue to face gender-based violence, systemic discrimination, and unequal access to healthcare and education, necessitating ongoing efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable world. This essay examines the progress and setbacks since 2018, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's lives, and the persisting gender inequalities to shed light on the shifting landscape of women's rights and equality and to emphasize the need for sustained action to address the remaining challenges in gender justice.

The global gender gap is a complex and persistent problem that has plagued societies for centuries. While this has been a pervasive challenge for an extensive time, this essay will focus on the progress and changes within the five years between 2018 and 2023. This was selected because it represents a timeline that faced unique global struggles and because the data and sources during that period can be equally compared and contrasted. In 2018, the data used in the Global Gender Gap was updated to ensure consistent data references moving forward with year-over-year comparisons. The Global Gender Gap refers to the systematic differences in opportunities, resources, and outcomes between men and women, resulting in disparities in education, employment, health care, and social status, among other areas of life. Addressing gender disparities is crucial from a moral and ethical standpoint and for the advancement and well-being of communities and societies. Based on the current pace of progress, it will take a

staggering 131 years to reach global gender parity (World Economic Forum, 2023). The figure below shows the rate to parity based on the different global regions.

Figure 1



Gender-based discrimination has impeded women's full potential for centuries, limiting their opportunities and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. While significant progress has been made in several regions, gender disparities persist in various forms and to varying degrees globally. The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) was introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006 to provide a comprehensive framework for measuring and quantifying gender disparities. This index evaluates gender disparities in four key areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political participation. The Global Gender Gap Index will be the evaluation benchmark used throughout this essay.

Beyond the ethical imperative, gender equality is essential for long-term economic development and growth. Consistently, research indicates that gender parity positively influences economic performance. Closing the gender gap in education and employment enables societies to realize the full potential of their human capital, resulting in greater productivity, innovation, and competitiveness. In addition, gender inequality has far-reaching effects on social and political stability. Conflict and unrest are more likely to occur in societies where women are marginalized and excluded from decision-making.

In contrast, communities that promote gender equality and women's empowerment tend to be more peaceful and prosperous. Given the importance, awareness, and resources available to effect positive change, one could be led to assume this is a simple matter and anticipate positive progress. However, according to the 2023 report, "Parity has advanced by only 4.1 percentage points since the first edition of the report in 2006, with the overall rate of change slowing significantly." (World Economic Forum, 2023).

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) identify the importance of advancing gender equality. The 2030 Agenda recognizes gender equality as a standalone objective (Goal 5) and a cross-cutting theme crucial to the success of all other Sustainable Development Goals. Education, health care, and poverty eradication are inextricably linked to gender equality and women's empowerment. While the impact and scope of gender equality are extensive, this work will focus on critical metrics to represent the current state and opportunities for change. This essay examines the progression of the global gender gap from 2018 to the present, focusing specifically on education, wages, and health, including medical

care and gender-based violence, and highlighting the progress made and the remaining challenges still resulting in a stagnant change.

Education is a pillar of gender equality and an effective means for empowering individuals and driving social change. Girls and women have historically encountered barriers to education, including cultural norms, discriminatory practices, and a lack of resources. Efforts to promote gender equality in education centre on increasing girls' access to quality education and ensuring equal opportunities at all educational levels. This involves addressing the issues of child marriage, gender-based violence in schools, and cultural prejudices. When girls and women have equal access to education, it contributes to their well-being and poverty reduction, economic growth, and societal development.

In many parts of the world, gender inequality in education continues to be a pressing issue. Although some progress has been made over the years, significant gaps remain, especially in regions with deeply rooted cultural norms and socioeconomic challenges. In some regions, girls' education is devalued relative to that of boys, resulting in unequal investment in their schools. Girls are frequently withdrawn from school prematurely due to early marriage and cultural norms, perpetuating the cycle of gender inequality. In addition, safety concerns, particularly in conflict-affected regions, deter families from sending their daughters to school. Girls and women continue to face educational obstacles that limit their personal growth and economic empowerment opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened many of these struggles by isolating and restricting females into the roles they had to hold during the pandemic and lockdowns (International Labour Organization, 2021; PAHO, n.d.). Fortunately, in 2023, many countries regained some of the momentum lost concerning education during covid.

Education is one of the areas in which significant progress has been noted, and as of 2023, 117 of 146 countries had reached 95% parity (World Economic Forum, 2023).

While only 5% of the work remains to reach parity, some areas that remain in that small percentage dramatically affect all areas of gender parity. For example, according to the 2018 document, 20% of women are illiterate in 44 countries, and in some of the lowest-ranking countries, only 13% of women can read and write. Compared to the 2023 data, we can see progress for most countries. 25 of the 145 economies included have reached educational parity. However, the countries that are not close to closing the gap remain significantly below the ones making strides. Afghanistan has not yet reached 50%, and many sub-Saharan countries, including Chad, Niger, and the Republic of the Congo, all sit between 60-80% parity. The numbers reinforce that, for most of the world, there has been progress in improving enrollment rates and access to education for girls and women, but two-thirds of the approximate 763 million illiterate individuals globally are women (UNESCO, 2022).

Several initiatives have been layered as a top-down approach and from the grassroots movements to ensure accountability to help effect change in access to education and improve literacy rates. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and communities have increased awareness of the significance of girls' education through global initiatives and efforts. Consequently, more girls are enrolling in school, and gender disparities in enrollment rates are shrinking in many regions. In addition, initiatives such as scholarships, school feeding programs, and efforts to reduce transportation barriers have increased girls' and women's access to quality education. They are helping improve retention and graduation rates. Targeted programs have

been implemented to address specific issues, such as providing sanitary supplies in schools to enable girls to maintain regular school attendance during menstruation (UNESCO, 2022).

Despite progress in primary education, challenges in achieving gender parity persist in secondary and tertiary education. Girls often face pressure to drop out of school to assume household responsibilities or get married. In some cultures, girls' education is perceived as less valuable than boys', leading to lower investment in their schooling. According to the United Nations, "Girls universally face systemic barriers which intersect with poverty, geography, disability and minority status that prevent their access to and benefiting from 12 years of quality education. Yet, education remains their most likely path to empowerment." (2022). It takes engagement at all levels to make continuous and sustained progress in this area. According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM Report, n.d.), the global literacy rate among women aged 15 years and older increased from 81% in 2000 to 89% in 2019, narrowing the gender gap.

In many countries, efforts to promote girls' education have resulted in more girls completing primary school. Various factors have contributed to this progress, including policy changes, targeted interventions, and increasing community support for girls' education. Female teachers and role models have been crucial in encouraging girls to pursue education and break traditional barriers (Edmonton Social Council, 2001). Numerous initiatives and programs have demonstrated success in promoting gender equality in education. One example is the "The Girl's Initiative" in Rwanda, where the government worked with international organizations to increase girls' enrollment and retention in schools. This initiative provided school uniforms, sanitary pads, and mentorship programs, significantly increasing girls' attendance and

performance. Williams (2022) discusses how many variables have required a slow and sustained effort at multiple levels of advocacy. Government initiatives established in 1995 required decades of work to see the impact that is now showcasing Rwanda's success in working towards gender parity in education and throughout the economy. William's report emphasizes how financial barriers hinder access to higher education for many girls and women. In some regions, cultural biases and stereotypes about women's capabilities discourage families from supporting their daughters' pursuit of higher education and professional careers.

In India, the "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) campaign addresses gender-based discrimination and promotes girls' education. This initiative introduced financial incentives and awareness campaigns to encourage families to invest in their daughters' education, increasing girls' enrollment rates. However, this initiative reinforces the importance of change from all levels, including grassroots movements, to hold political initiatives accountable, as investigations and reports show that this movement in India is spending between 50-80% of the funds on advertising and propaganda (Quint, 2021). Another example with more empirical evidence of success is the CAMFED organization, operating in several African countries, which provides educational support to girls and young women, including scholarships, school supplies, and mentorship. By addressing financial and social barriers, CAMFED has empowered thousands of girls to complete their education and become agents of change in their communities. Since 1993, CAMFED has supported 6,476,311 children to go to school in Ghana, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, including 1.8M girls in secondary school (CAMFED, n.d.).



However, while this work is occurring in many countries worldwide, the limitations of our global structure are revealed when the actions of a single country can indisputably limit women and girls from accessing education. UNESCO states that since 2021 “1.1 million girls and young women are without access to formal education. Currently, 80% of school-aged Afghan girls and young women, 2.5 million people, are out of school. Nearly 30% of girls in Afghanistan have never entered primary education.” (2023). These numbers showcase the harsh reality of how quickly progress can be reversed and how critical this work remains at all levels.

Although progress has been made in addressing gender disparities in education, significant obstacles remain. Girls and women continue to face educational obstacles, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. However, successful initiatives and programs have demonstrated that targeted efforts, community involvement, and policy changes can result in significant advancements in promoting gender equality in education. By investing in girls' education and empowering women, societies can enable women to realize their full potential and contribute to more inclusive and prosperous communities.

As women work towards realizing their full potential and bridging gender parity, the natural transition from education to employment brings to the forefront this glaring disparity within the gender gap. The gender pay gap remains a significant obstacle to achieving workplace equality between men and women. Women continue to earn, on average, less than men for performing the same or equivalent work, and no country globally has yet to reach gender parity concerning wages. Numerous factors, including occupational segregation, discrimination, and the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities, influence the wage

gap. Pay equity benefits women by ensuring they are compensated fairly for their work and contributes to economic development and social equality.

The gender pay gap, a pervasive global issue, refers to the average earnings difference between men and women. Even though some regions have made progress, disparities persist in various sectors and industries, including technology, finance, and healthcare, with the most significant gap occurring in STEM- Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 from the World Economic Forum, women worldwide earned 52% of what men earned on average. This disparity is more pronounced in certain regions, with some nations reporting more significant gaps than others, including Iran, Algeria and Egypt, where parity is less than 20%. In addition to technology, finance, and healthcare, the gender pay gap can be observed in several other fields. In addition, as women advance in their careers, the wage gap tends to widen, a phenomenon known as the "motherhood penalty," in which women with children face additional wage disparities. In the US, mothers make, on average, 58 cents for every dollar paid to fathers (AAUW, n.d.).

As of 2018, the global economic gap was 58%. This considers wages, opportunities for advancement, and representation in the labour market. This indicator had risen to 60% in 2022 but regressed again to 59.8%. While there was an increase in the number of countries registering at least a marginal improvement, such progress is mitigated by an increase in the number of countries with declining scores steeper than one percentage point (from 12 in 2022 to 35 in 2023). This means, at this current rate, it will take 169 years to reach economic gender parity, the lowest of the four key factors in the report (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Multiple factors contribute to the continued existence of the gender wage gap. Occupational segregation, in which women are overrepresented in lower-paying professions and men dominate higher-paying fields, is a significant factor. Also contributing to the persistence of wage gaps are discrimination and unconscious bias in hiring, promotion, and salary decisions. Women with comparable qualifications typically receive lower starting salaries and have fewer opportunities for career advancement than men, as shown by the total economic gap rather than focusing singularly on income. Afghanistan, Pakistan and Algeria continue to rank at the bottom of this category, with less than 5% of professionals in senior positions being women (World Economic Forum, 2023).

In addition, the unequal allocation of caregiving responsibilities contributes to the wage gap. Women frequently assume caregiving responsibilities, resulting in career interruptions or reduced working hours that negatively affect their earnings. A lack of flexibility and support for work-life balance can hamper women's career advancement and earning potential. This imbalance peaks in countries including Japan, India, and Korea, where the ratio is 5 to 1 for unpaid labour tasks and in most countries, it sits at a minimum of 2 to 1, with women completing double the domestic and unpaid duties to that of men (World Economic Forum, 2018; ILF, 2021; Madgavkar, 2020; UUWA, n.d.). These factors were reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic when women faced significant challenges of job loss combined with a lack of social assistance due to the nature of the work they have been doing. "Women have suffered disproportionate job and income losses, including because of their over-representation in the hardest-hit sectors, and many continue to work on the front line, sustaining care systems, economies and societies, while often also doing the majority of unpaid care work, which

underscores the need for a gender-responsive recovery.” (International Labour Organization, 2021). It is shown in the dips of the post-pandemic Gender Gap Reports that we are just now returning to the pre-pandemic rates to reach gender parity. (World Economic Forum, 2023).

These variables intersect and continue to limit women's financial independence and stability globally. Women only have access to land ownership in 41% of the countries participating in the Global Gender Gap Report and equal access to financial services as men in just 60% of available countries. “These facts, albeit partial, suggest that in most countries still half of the female population does not have direct control over economic resources and assets.” (World Economic Forum, 2018, p. 9). Diversity and inclusion in the workplace are essential to closing the gender pay gap. Companies prioritizing and promoting inclusive practices and diversity tend to have narrower wage gaps. Diverse leadership teams are more likely to comprehend and address the needs of their employees, leading to more equitable compensation structures and opportunities for career advancement. In addition, inclusive workplaces encourage women to negotiate salaries and advocate for themselves, which can result in more equitable compensation (International Labour Organization, 2021). By cultivating environments that recognize and value the contributions of all employees, businesses can foster an equitable and diverse workforce.

Governments and organizations worldwide have enacted legislative and policy measures addressing pay equity. Introducing pay transparency measures, which require companies to disclose salary data, is one of the most prevalent methods for identifying and addressing wage disparities. Countries like Iceland and Germany have made significant progress in this direction by requiring employers to demonstrate compliance with equal pay laws. Iceland has been a

leader in pay equity, enacting strict pay transparency laws and actively addressing any identified disparities. In addition to ranking highly on indices of gender equality, Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland have robust social policies that promote work-life balance and parental leave. In order to uphold equal pay standards, they also require reporting accountability (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Legislation encouraging paid parental leave, affordable childcare, and flexible work arrangements may also contribute to closing the gender pay gap. These policies challenge traditional gender roles and promote workplace equality by allowing all genders to balance work and caregiving obligations. Moreover, certain nations have adopted affirmative action policies to increase the number of women in executive and higher-paying positions (International Labour Organization, 2021). These measures aim to break the cycle of gender inequality by creating opportunities for women to advance in their careers.

Rwanda stands out as a nation that has made significant strides toward eliminating the gender pay gap. Rwanda has implemented policies and initiatives to increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions, thereby contributing to more equitable pay scales. Many of these policies began to be implemented due to Agathe Uwilingiyimana's efforts. She advocated for women's rights and equality until her assassination in 1994, when she served as the country's Minister of Education and then as its first and only female Prime Minister. Although this work predates the timeline for the baseline analysis of this paper, it was a crucial step in initiating the policies that followed the Rwandan genocide. It also emphasizes that change and progress require sustained policies (Melvern, 2000).

Despite the pervasiveness of the gender pay gap, several countries have taken significant steps to address this disparity. Legislative measures, the implementation of pay transparency measures, the promotion of flexible work arrangements, workplace diversity and inclusion, and parental leave policies are indispensable tools for reducing wage disparities and challenging gender bias in hiring and promotion practices and supporting an equal labour force (Carli, 2020). We can work toward achieving pay equity and creating workplaces that are fairer and more inclusive on a global scale by learning from the successes of these nations and continuing to implement targeted strategies.

When women receive equal pay and a fair wage for their work, they have increased autonomy and greater self-empowerment. An area that is directly affected by this autonomy or limited by the lack of it is health and medical care. In many parts of the world, gender disparities in healthcare access and outcomes persist. In particular, women and girls face health challenges such as reproductive health issues and maternal mortality. Access to essential healthcare services, including family planning, prenatal care, and reproductive health rights, is crucial for the empowerment and well-being of women (Madgavkar, 2020). Gender-sensitive healthcare policies and practices are necessary to address the unique needs of women and men effectively. In addition, addressing gender disparities in medical research and treatment can improve the health of all individuals.

While the Global Gender Gap shows that health is the category in which we are closest to reaching parity, gender-based disparities in healthcare continue to persist globally, affecting access and outcomes (World Economic Forum, 2023). Sociocultural norms, monetary constraints, and lack of transportation often prevent women from accessing healthcare, leading

to delays in seeking medical care. Women's health concerns, such as reproductive and maternal health, have historically received less funding and attention, resulting in poorer health outcomes. In comparison, men may be less inclined to seek preventive care and delay seeking medical attention, worsening men's health issues and poorer outcomes. In reviewing the Global Gender Gap, the health category remains the closest to parity, with only 5% parity to go for many countries (World Economic Forum, 2023). Women generally live longer than men, healthcare access has improved, and maternal morbidity rates have declined. Efforts to address gender-specific health issues and raise awareness of conditions affecting one's gender disproportionately have helped foster increased early detection and better outcomes for women. Policies that prioritize research on gender-specific health issues and fund programs targeting gender disparities can improve health outcomes for all genders (PANO, n.d.).

However, sex birth rates indicate there are many cultural challenges still affecting women. Until skewed birth rates level out in the countries like China and India, where the birth rate of females is 90% relative to males, then girls are still at risk just from being conceived (World Economic Forum, 2023; Ritchie & Moser, 2019). Furthermore, while reproductive health rights and services for women have undergone significant changes, obstacles still exist, particularly in regions with restrictive policies and cultural norms regarding women's reproductive rights (PANO, 2022). Legal barriers, lack of information, and stigma can restrict access to reproductive healthcare for women. Cultural norms also influence healthcare-seeking behaviour, with women often prioritizing their families' health over their own. Challenges to reproductive rights are occurring even in countries that have reached near parity of the gender gap. The United States recently overturned a 50-year ruling on women's right to abortion

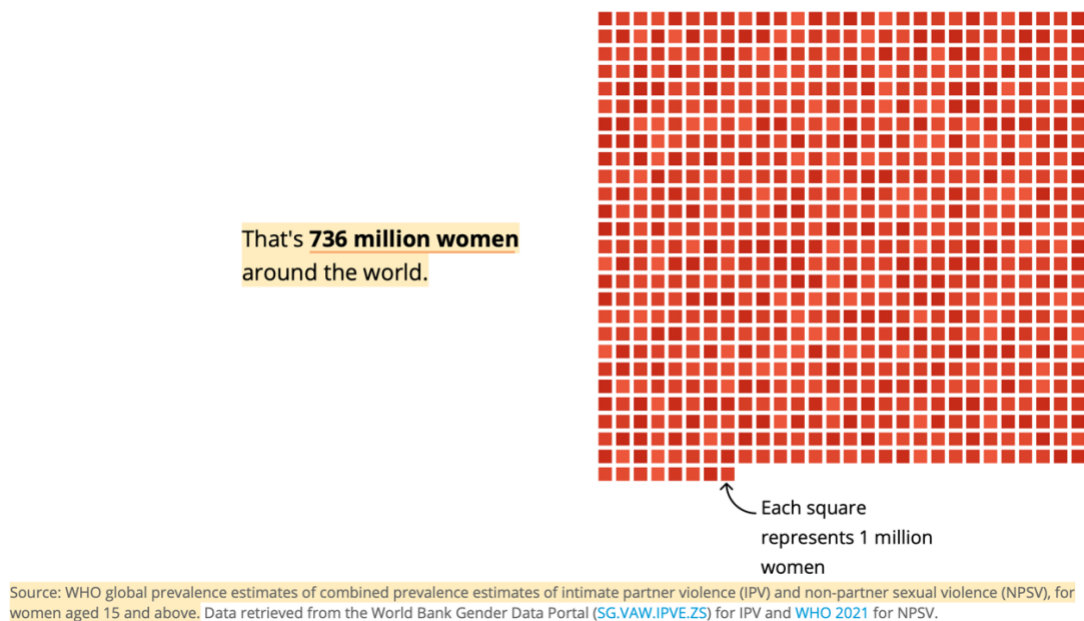
(Brennan Center for Justice, 2022). This serves to reinforce how nuanced and intersectional the subject of gender parity remains to be. If a woman does not have access to equal medical care, the autonomy to make those decisions, the financial resources to seek an alternative solution, and a lack of support after she has been forced into this scenario, then does the fact that many of these countries have nearly reached health gender parity actual mean that things are equal? The answer is echoed in the grassroots and organized movements that are occurring around the world. From musicians to charitable foundations, from Vivir Quintana (Vivir Quintana, 2020) to Pink (Pink, 2022) to Melinda Gates (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (n.d.), advocates are continuing to spread messaging, education, financial support, and resources to support women globally to access safe, quality healthcare and to have the power to choose while the work continues transforming things at a political and legal level.

The subject of women's health would be incomplete without reference to one of the most significant risks to women's health, gender-based violence (GBV). This subject is beyond the scope of this paper to cover in-depth and one that is highly recommended as a subsequent subject to examine in alignment with the topic of the Global Gender Gap. However, it is inextricably linked to this content. Gender-based violence is a severe violation of human rights and an obstacle to gender equality. Domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation are all examples of GBV. Gender-based violence is occurring at pandemic levels around the world. 736 million women have suffered from this crime, and even in Canada, which has one of the lowest rates of domestic violence globally, a woman died every 48 hours last year from femicide (Howard, 2023; CFOJA, n.d.). "Gender-based violence is more prevalent when there are no legal consequences, sexist



and patriarchal cultural norms, and in humanitarian emergencies or conflict. Younger people are more at risk, as are girls who grow up in abusive households. Women who married before 18 or are one of many wives are also more at risk.” (World Bank, 2022). GBV disproportionately affects women and girls but also affects men and boys. To effectively combat GBV, a comprehensive strategy is required, including legal reforms, survivor support services, awareness campaigns, and modifications to cultural norms that perpetuate violence. Creating safe environments for everyone, regardless of gender, promotes equality and ensures everyone can live without fear or violence.

Figure 2



Women’s health and well-being are not at risk strictly from gender-based violence; there are many other times when women are at greater risk than men. In circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw women disproportionately disadvantaged over men. When women start with fewer financial and social resources, their vulnerability increases in times of

crisis and adversity (McKinsey, 2021). During large-scale crisis situations, the individual is often tasked with their safety; the community does not provide it. This puts those already struggling to meet their basic needs in a vulnerable position during emergencies. Globally, people are told to gather cash, food, essential items, bottled water, fuel, and sometimes alternate accommodations when fleeing a dangerous situation. However, as shown in this essay, 40% of women globally do not have control over their finances; therefore, they are not empowered to take the necessary actions for their and their family's safety. In crisis situations, women are 14 times more likely to die than men. The United Nations Development Programme further expands on that by stating, "The disaster risk reduction community has long recognized risk as being systemic, and gender inequality is a large part of that" (2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, natural disasters, and many more global challenges reinforce the importance of gender equality in all circumstances to build healthy communities for everyone.

The global gender gap is a persistent issue requiring immediate and ongoing attention. At the current pace of progress, we will reach parity by the year 2154 or in 131 years, and the rate of progress has slowed significantly since the peak just before the COVID-19 pandemic when the rate to parity was 100 years (World Economic Forum, 2023). Societies can unleash the full potential of every individual, foster sustainable development, and create a more just and inclusive world for all by addressing gender disparities and promoting gender equality in education, wages, health care, and all aspects of life. Everyone is responsible for taking action, removing obstacles, and creating a future where a person's gender will never influence their opportunities or outcomes. Education, income, and health and wellness are all critical identifiers of the progress, potential and challenges that continue to exist. By permitting gender disparities

to continue, we perpetuate a cycle of discrimination and inequality that affects not only individuals but entire communities and nations. The importance of closing the global gender gap cannot be overstated. It is a matter of human rights and social justice, and we must establish local policies on a worldwide scale that are inclusive, sustainable, and resilient so that no one is left behind. All individuals, regardless of gender, deserve equal opportunities, rights, and treatment in all aspects of life.

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