

WOMEN: THE CRITICAL LINK

background reading | the world's women unit

EARTH matters

Studies For Our Global Future

The United Nations refers to gender equality as “the unfinished business of our time.” Indeed, women have traditionally been the world’s farmers, child bearers and caretakers of young and old – the backbone of families and societies. Women play a central role in the effective development of families, communities, nations and regions. Yet, despite their vast contributions to humanity, women continue to suffer from gender discrimination in much of the world. Being born female in some of the world’s regions means a life as a second-class citizen, denied most of the opportunities available to males in the areas of health, education, employment and legal rights. This second-class citizenship is detrimental, first and foremost, to the well-being of women themselves; however, it also a major obstacle to advancing development, reducing poverty and achieving environmentally sustainable societies.

According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), more than half of young girls today live in countries that can be considered very unequal in terms of gender. In these places, girls are systematically disadvantaged in a number of ways including 1) lower participation and completion of formal schooling, 2) poorer physical and mental health, 3) fewer opportunities and engagement in paid employment, 4) fewer legal rights, and 5) a greater likelihood of having their childhoods interrupted by early marriage and childbearing. As a result, the UN concludes, “women across the globe today are not able to fully contribute to their families or communities or realize their full potential. This systematic discrimination greatly affects the ability of countries to develop socially and economically by effectively limiting the contributions of half of the population.”¹ As such, the UN, through Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) has set targets for empowering women and breaking down age-old discriminations that threaten human rights and economic growth.



A midwife in Algeria measures the blood pressure of a woman after giving birth in a post-partum visit.

Unwanted girls

This pattern of gender discrimination even begins before birth. In many cultures around the world, sons are preferred over daughters, primarily for economic reasons. In these places, only sons inherit property, provide for aging parents and carry on the family name. Daughters, on the other hand, are often considered financial burdens, especially if an expensive **dowry** has to be paid when they marry. Once married, daughters are often expected to look after their in-laws, rather than their own parents.

As a result of this preference for sons and the availability of ultrasound technology that can identify the sex of a fetus early in a pregnancy, some countries are seeing the results of **gender-biased sex selection**. That is, female fetuses being aborted, if prospective daughters are unwanted. In parts of Asia and Eastern Europe, where this practice is most prevalent, there are an estimated 128 million women believed to be “missing,” skewing the gender ratio, especially in China and India. Since the 1990s some areas have seen up to 25 percent more male births than female births. For every 100 girls born in China, there are 118 boys born (up to 128 in some regions). In India, there are 110 boys born for every 100 girls (120 in the Punjab region); 116 in Azerbaijan, 115 in Armenia, 111 in Vietnam.² Since this trend first emerged in the 1980s, these countries are now seeing generations of “surplus” young men unable to find marriage partners and greater instances of sexual violence and trafficking linked to this gender imbalance.

Other threats await girls who are born into households where they are less valued than their brothers. A pattern of gender-biased neglect can lead to higher proportions of girls who are undernourished, sickly and uneducated. The mortality rate for girl children under age two is higher than for boys, due in large part to less nutritious food and healthcare being made available to girls, especially in poorer, rural communities in Asia. In many societies, women and girls eat the food remaining after the male family members have eaten. This “food discrimination” results in chronic undernourishment and ill health. In fact, worldwide, twice as many women suffer from **malnutrition** as men, and girls are twice as likely to die from malnutrition as boys.³

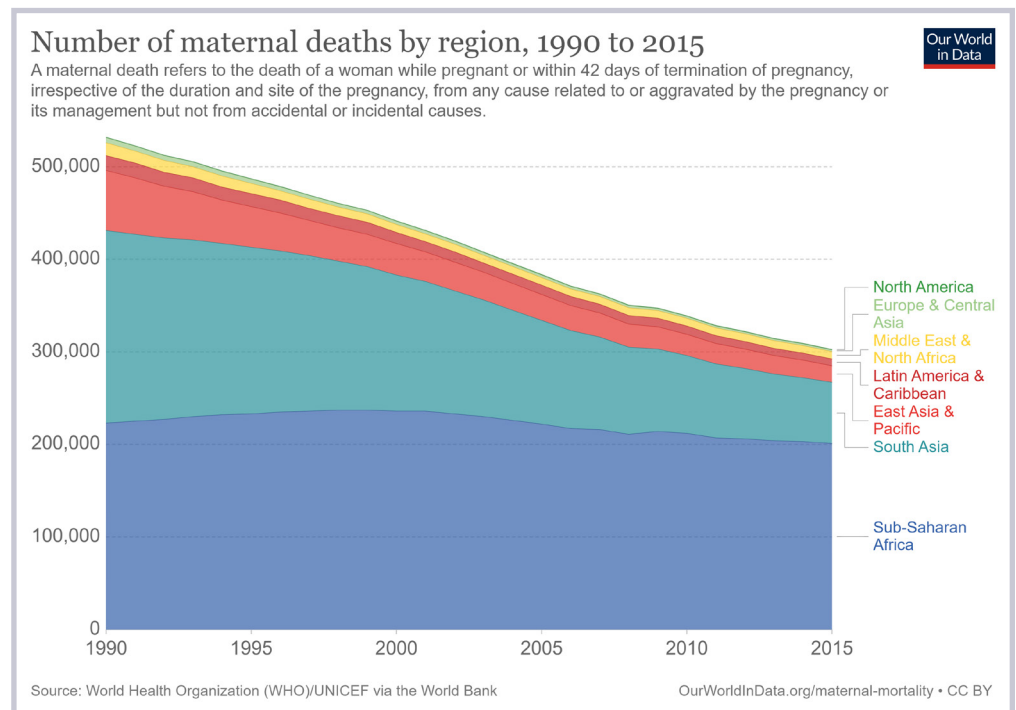
Women’s health

Anemia

Iron deficiency is the most common and widespread nutritional disorder in the world, resulting in 2 billion people who suffer from anemia.⁴ Anemia is a condition where the blood lacks sufficient red blood cells or hemoglobin, preventing your body from getting enough oxygen and causing chronic weariness. Because girls are more likely to be malnourished and because menstruation and childbirth causes iron loss, women are more likely to suffer from anemia. The disease affects close to half of women of reproductive age in less developed countries, directly causes one-fifth of maternal deaths worldwide, and contributes to up to 50 percent of all maternal deaths.⁵ Malnourished mothers are more likely to give birth to low birthweight babies, perpetuating a cycle of ill health.

Reproductive health

Girls and women are also more likely to suffer from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV. Young women are twice as likely to acquire HIV as young men, and women now make up more than half of all people



living with HIV.⁶ This is due to both biological reasons (the virus is more easily transmitted in women) and societal (women are more likely to experience vulnerable situations like sex trafficking and sexual violence). Inadequate access to healthcare means that HIV is often deadly for young women.

Adolescent girls are also at risk of complications from pregnancy and childbirth in less developed countries. In poorly resourced areas of the world, inadequate healthcare services prevents hundreds of millions of women from using effective methods of **contraception** and from getting proper **prenatal care**. Some regions of the world, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, have too few skilled health workers to safely deliver babies and provide maternal care to prevent infections and other childbirth complications. Every day, approximately 810 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. The risk of **maternal mortality** is highest for adolescent girls under age 15.⁷

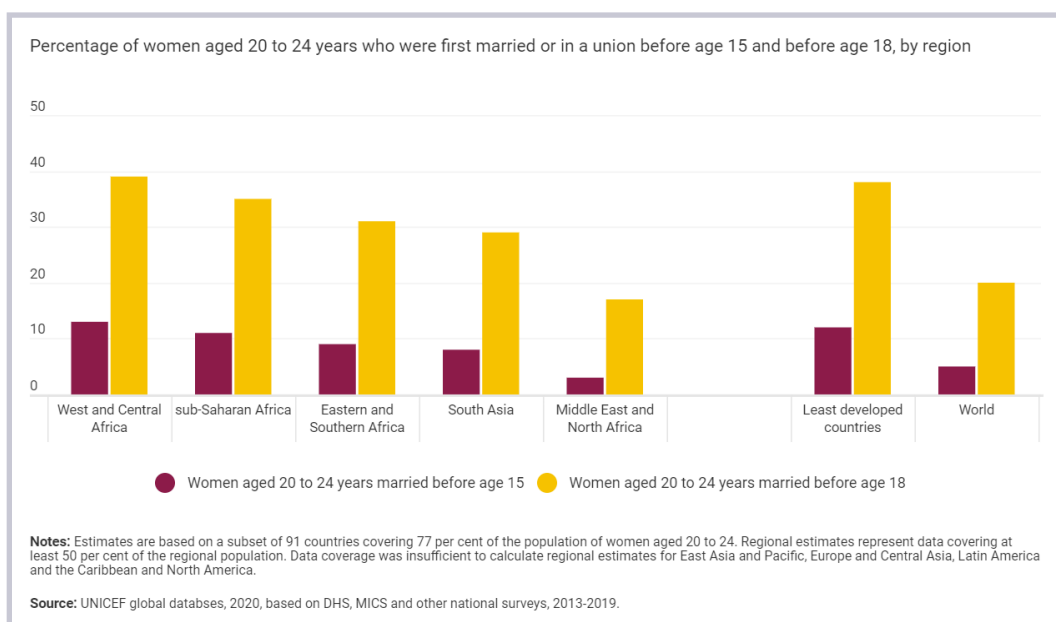
Only with access to contraceptives and sexuality education can women effectively prevent unwanted pregnancies and plan the timing and spacing of children. While use of modern contraceptives is on the rise, some 270 million women around the world still lack access to these basic services.⁸ By allowing a woman to conceive a child only when she is healthiest and emotionally prepared, **family planning** reduces infant mortality and improves the long-term health of women and children. Total **fertility rates** have dropped from 3.2 children per woman in 1990 to 2.3 children in 2020. Unsurprisingly, in 21 countries where women are still having an average of 5 or more children, modern contraceptive use is as low as 6 percent.⁹

Violence against girls

Gender discrimination also breeds gender-based violence. According the World Health Organization, 1 in 3 girls will experience violence in their lifetime and many will experience it during adolescence.¹⁰ When girls are devalued, they are at risk of violence everywhere – within their homes, on their way to collect water and firewood, and traveling to school or the market. When it occurs, they are often blamed as the responsible party and have little or no standing in the criminal justice system.

Child marriage

Some 12 million teens give birth each year, most in low- and middle-income countries. Many of these pregnancies follow an early marriage.¹¹ Child marriage (marriage before age 18) is a fact of life for more than 1 in 3 girls in **developing countries**; 1 in 8 marry before age 15. Rates of child marriage are highest in West and Central Africa, where 4 in 10 girls marry before age 18.¹² These are typically arranged marriages, often to older men. Girls who are child brides miss out on an education, are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and often bear children before they are physically or emotionally ready to become mothers.



Though many countries have laws prohibiting child marriage, they are too often not enforced or, as in rural areas in Southeast Asia, marriage traditions are carried out under the legal radar. The reasons child marriage persists are linked to poverty, gender discrimination and long-held cultural traditions. Where girls are considered an economic burden, parents are quick to marry them off to another family. In Bangladesh, Mali, Mozambique and Niger, where more than three-quarters of the population subsists on less than two US dollars a day, more than half of girls marry before their 18th birthdays.¹³ “Child marriage is a violation of a child’s rights in and of itself,” states UNFPA. “But this harmful practice often results in the denial of other human rights, such as the right to an education.”¹⁴

Girls in school



Photo Credit: borgogni/istockphoto.com

Educated women have fewer and healthier children, are more likely to find work, and are less likely to marry at an early age.

A commitment to education is the very thing that can open up opportunities long denied to girls around the world. Yet gender discrimination is often what simultaneously keeps many teen girls out of school. In less developed countries, girls are often forced to leave school to take on responsibilities at home, such as cooking, cleaning, gathering fuelwood and caring for younger children. While school enrollment for boys and girls is about equal in the elementary grades, they start to diverge in secondary school, especially in the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa. According to UNESCO, 67 million adolescent girls are not in school today.¹⁵ Having to leave school early prevents girls from developing the skills needed to participate in emerging economies.

In some communities, traditional gender roles are so ingrained in the local culture that girls face strong opposition to attending school. Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani teen in the Taliban-controlled Swat region, made international headlines as a vocal activist for girls’ education. After a murder attempt by Taliban gunmen at age 15, she doubled her efforts to advocate for girls. At 16, she spoke at the United Nations to call for worldwide access to education, and was the youngest ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Educating girls has been described as the “world’s best investment” because it not only helps a family’s and community’s prosperity, but also leads to a cycle of healthier, better-educated children.¹⁶ Because education increases women’s self-sufficiency, it also decreases their dependency on having many children for security and status. The years of schooling a woman has is one of the best predictors of how many children she will have and how healthy they will be. Studies repeatedly show that educated women marry later, want fewer children, are more likely to use effective methods of family planning and have greater means to improve their economic situation.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, where **illiteracy** among adult women is still close to 50 percent, the average number of births per woman is five. In Latin America and the Caribbean and eastern and southeastern Asia, where illiteracy rates for women have fallen to around 8 percent, the average number of births per woman is two.¹⁷

Women's work

A curtailed education limits paid work opportunities for women. About half of the world's women are in the paid labor force, compared to three-quarters of men.¹⁸ That's not to say that women don't work as much as men do. Quite the contrary. In both more and less developed countries around the globe, women work longer hours than men when you add paid and unpaid work. While women work fewer hours in paid work, they perform the vast majority of unpaid work in the household (cleaning, childcare, food production and cooking) – a full 2 ½ times more than men.¹⁹

Within the paid labor force, women are on the short end of a pay gap, earning 19 percent less than men globally.²⁰ This **wage gap** is linked to the undervaluation of the types of work done predominantly by women, gender discrimination in many workplaces, and the breaks in employment that women need to take when they have children. This gender wage gap is unrelated to a country's level of economic development. In fact, some of the highest income countries also have the highest pay gaps between men and women. In 2014, South Korea's pay gap was 26 percent, significantly higher than the global average.²¹ In the U.S., the gender gap is most visible at the highest levels of wage earners. Only 5 percent of Fortune 500 companies are headed by women. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that if current trends persist, it will take 70 years to close the world's gender wage gap.²²

The lack of pay equity and unequal labor force participation has a negative effect on economic growth. The ILO posits that if women participated in the labor force at the same level as men, it would add as much as \$28 trillion (or 26 percent) to annual global gross domestic product (GDP).²³ In order for this to happen, men would have to assume greater responsibility for childcare and household work.

Women and property rights

Even though women work inside and outside the home, they are less likely to have access to the money they earn or to control financial decisions. In this way, women disproportionately lack financial security around the world. This is often due to unequal rights to own property. Where women are discriminated against in land and housing ownership, they are dependent on men and can easily be exploited. And yet, research shows that a child's chances of survival increase by 20 percent when the mother controls the household budget, because women are more likely to spend their incomes on food and children's needs.²⁴ Without formal land titles, women have a more difficult time feeding and educating their children.

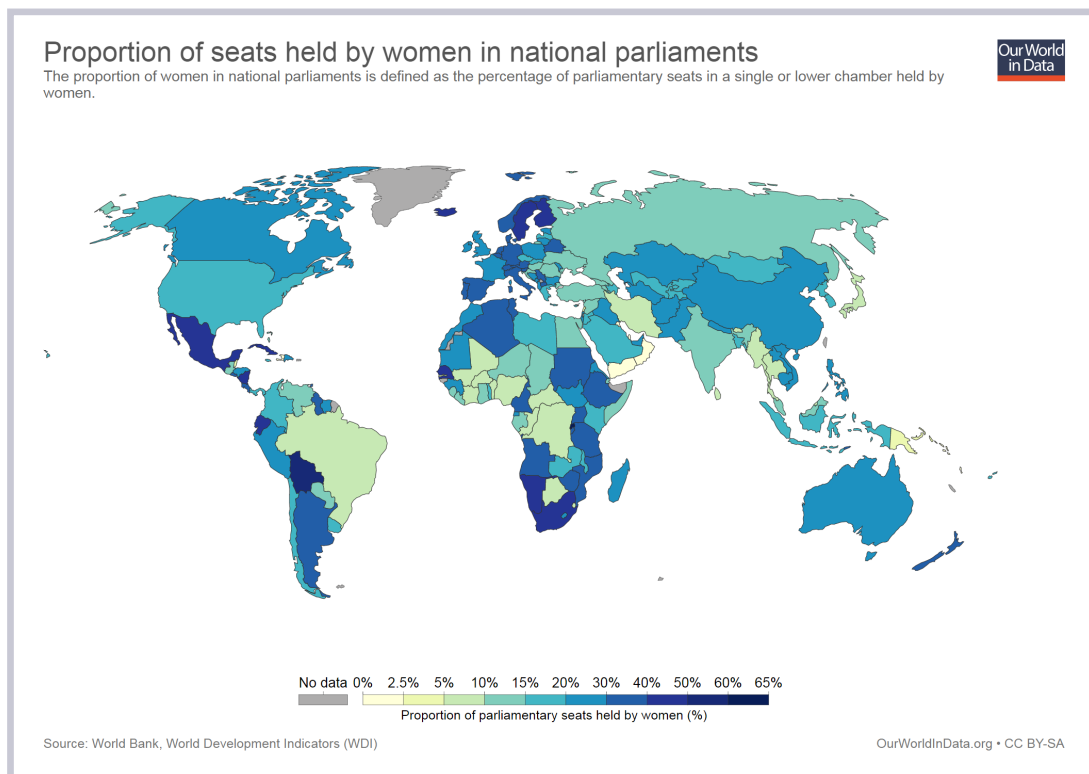


Sources: World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2019, International Labour Organization; The Power of Parity, September 2015, McKinsey Global Institute, McKinsey & Company

Agriculture in many developing countries is a woman's occupation. Even so, women in rural areas have less access than men to all of the resources they need to successfully and sustainably grow food including land, livestock, seeds and farming technology. Though three-quarters of Indian women work as farmers, only 16 percent of the land is owned by women.²⁵ In 2005, India passed a law allowing daughters to inherit land, but lack of knowledge of the law and cultural resistance to change has still left most eligible women without land deeds.

Political participation

In order for more laws to favor women's rights, more women need to be lawmakers. But the current reality is that in every region of the world, women are greatly outnumbered in the halls of government. Globally, less than one-quarter of national legislators (senators, representatives and parliamentarians) are women. Regional averages vary from a high of 44 percent in the Nordic countries to a low of 17 percent in Pacific nations. Only 1 out of 12 heads of state are female, even though half of their constituents are.²⁶



All of the barriers to women's equality already discussed – lower educational attainment, more hours of unpaid work, less financial security and a culture of gender discrimination – contribute to fewer women seeking political office. At the same time, it is only through greater representation of women in government that these barriers will begin to break down. A survey of parliamentarians conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (part of the UN) found that women parliamentarians in all regions of the world are at the forefront of efforts to combat gender-based violence, which is endemic in many societies. Women have been instrumental in ensuring that issues such as parental leave and childcare, pensions, gender-equality laws and electoral reforms that enhance women's access to parliaments appear on the legislative agenda.

Marking progress

In an important speech to the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, then First Lady Hillary Clinton declared “human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights.” She followed this by saying, “As long as discrimination and inequities remain so commonplace everywhere in the world, as long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled, subjected to violence in and outside their homes—the potential of the human family to create a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realized.”²⁷

Since those words were spoken, some progress has been made on the road to gender equality. Maternal mortality rates have been cut in half, girls’ participation in primary school has reached parity with boys, and there are more women in public office than ever before. Still, there are huge inequalities in secondary and college enrollment, job opportunities, legal rights and political participation.

Gender equality is the UN’s Sustainability Development Goal #5. This SDG seeks to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere by 2030. This would include ending all forms of violence against women and girls, ending child marriage, ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, and promoting gender equity in the home, workplace and national leadership.²⁸ Yet the U.N. doesn’t only promote gender equality because women’s rights are human rights. By elevating the status and opportunities of half the world’s population, gender equality also furthers all of the other SDGs to promote a future world that is more just, prosperous and environmentally sustainable.

¹ United Nations Population Fund. (2017, March 9). Gender equality. Retrieved from <https://www.unfpa.org/gender-equality>

² United Nations Population Fund. (2017, March 15). Gender-biased sex selection. Retrieved from <https://www.unfpa.org/gender-biased-sex-selection>

³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (n.d.). Gender: Food security. Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/gender/background/en/>

⁴ World Health Organization. (n.d.). Micronutrient deficiencies. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/ida/en/>

⁵ Khaskheli, M. N., Baloch, S., Sheeba, A., Baloch, S., & Khaskheli, F. K. (2016). Iron deficiency anaemia is still a major killer of pregnant women. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 32(3). <https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.323.9557>

⁶ UN Women. (2018, July). Facts and figures: HIV and AIDS. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/hiv-and-aids/facts-and-figures>

⁷ World Health Organization. (2019, September 19). *Maternal mortality*. [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality>

⁸ World Health Organization. (2020, June 22). *Family planning/contraception methods*. [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/family-planning-contraception>

⁹ Population Reference Bureau. (2020). *2020 World Population Data Sheet*. [Wall chart]. Washington, DC: PRB.

¹⁰ World Health Organization. (2017). Violence against women: key facts. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

¹¹ World Health Organization. (2020, January 31). *Adolescent pregnancy*. [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

¹² UNICEF. (2020, April). Child marriage. Retrieved from <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage>

¹³ International Center for Research on Women. (n.d.). Child Marriage Facts and Figures. Retrieved July 17, 2020 from <https://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures/>

¹⁴ Kollodge, R. (Ed.). (2016). *State of World Population 2016*. New York: United Nations Population Fund, p. 39.

- ^{15,17} UNESCO. (2019, September). New Methodology Shows that 258 Million Children, Adolescents and Youth Are Out of School. [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/new-methodology-shows-258-million-children-adolescents-and-youth-are-out-school.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Sperling, G. B., & Winthrop, R. (2016). *What works in girls' education: evidence for the world's best investment*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- ^{18,19,22,23} International Labour Office. (2016). *Women at work: trends 2016*. Geneva, Switzerland: ILO.
- ^{20,21} International Labour Office. (2018). How big is the gender pay gap in your country? Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/maps-and-charts/enhanced/WCMS_650829/lang--en/index.htm
- ²⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2011). *State of food and agriculture 2010-11: Women in agriculture - closing the gender gap for development*. Rome, Italy: FAO.
- ²⁵ University of Manchester Global Development Institute. (2020, April). Which women own land in India? Retrieved from <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/gdi/publications/workingpapers/GDI/gdi-working-paper-202043-agarwal-anthwal-mahesh.pdf>
- ²⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2019, October). Global and regional averages of women in national parliaments. Retrieved July 17, 2020 from <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages>
- ²⁷ Clinton, H.R. Remarks to the U.N. 4th World Conference on Women Plenary Session, delivered 5 September 1995, Beijing, China. Retrieved from <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/hillaryclintonbeijingspeech.htm>
- ²⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). Goal 5. Retrieved from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>