



# Executive Summary

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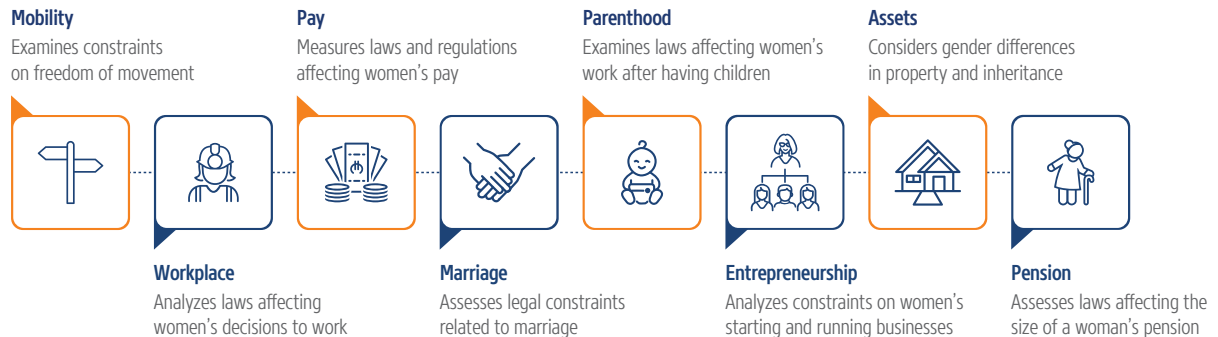
## The state of women's legal rights

**Policies empowering women strengthen the economy and are critical for lasting progress in development.** Slowing global growth, the rising risks of climate change, conflict, and the lingering effects of COVID-19 have dealt a major setback to this progress in recent years—with disproportionate effects on the lives and livelihoods of women (Akrofi, Mahama, and Nevo 2021; De Paz, Gaddis, and Muller 2021; ILO 2022; Torres et al. 2021).

***Women, Business and the Law's* analysis of 53 years of laws affecting women's economic rights shows why greater gender equality is essential for ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity.** Equal treatment of women under the law is associated with larger numbers of women entering and remaining in the labor force and rising to managerial positions. It generates higher wages for women and facilitates more women owning a business.<sup>1</sup> Reforming in ways that incentivize women to enter the labor force—as employees and entrepreneurs—will both level the playing field and make the economy more robust in the face of shocks (Halim, O'Sullivan, and Sahay 2022; Ubfal 2022). *Women, Business and the Law* has tracked these regulatory changes from 1970 to today, offering objective benchmarks for measuring global progress toward gender equality in 190 economies.

***Women, Business and the Law 2023* details the current state of women's legal rights.** The ninth in a series, this study presents a data set and index structured around a woman's working life (figure ES.1) as well as findings from historical data that highlight opportunities for reform and can inspire efforts to seek equality. Governments, the private sector, and civil society can use this framework to identify and remove barriers to women's economic empowerment and boost labor force participation and

**FIGURE ES.1 | EIGHT WOMEN, BUSINESS AND THE LAW INDICATORS MEASURE LEGAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THEIR WORKING LIFE**



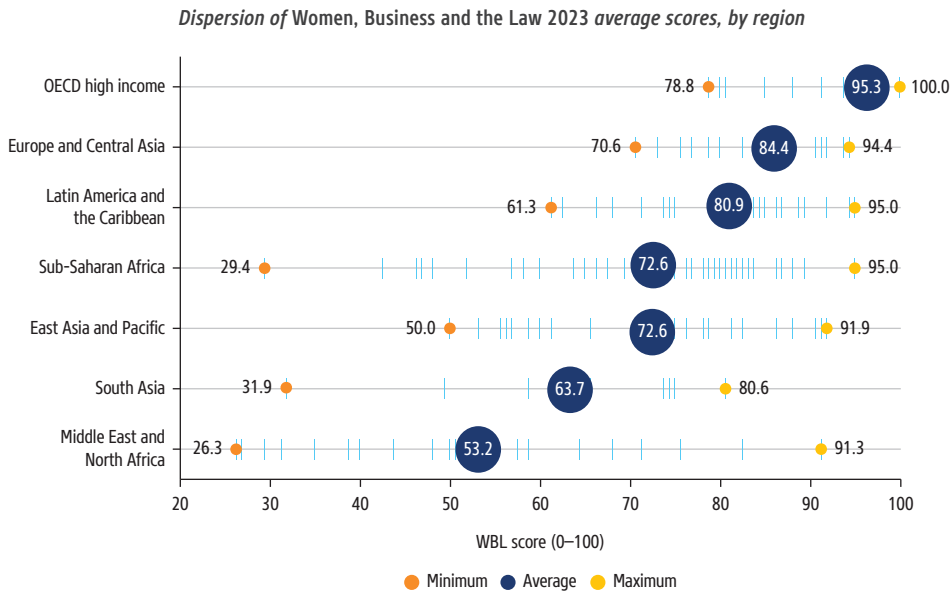
Source: *Women, Business and the Law* team.

entrepreneurship. The World Bank Group's lending and technical assistance operations use *Women, Business and the Law* data to provide the analytical underpinnings for project design. Other institutions—such as the Atlantic Council; Equal Measures 2030; the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security; the Heritage Foundation; the Millennium Challenge Corporation; and UN Women—use it to influence policy change.

**Women still have only three-quarters of the legal rights of men, and nearly 2.4 billion women of working age still do not have the same legal rights as men.** The global average *Women, Business and the Law* score is 77.1 out of 100 in 2022, only half a point higher than in 2021. Today, 14 economies (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden) score 100 on the index, meaning that women are on an equal legal standing with men in all of the areas measured (table ES.1). Nearly 90 million women of working age gained legal equality in the last decade. Yet, 2.4 billion women of working age do not have the same legal rights as men. More than half live in East Asia and Pacific (710 million) and South Asia (610 million), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (330 million), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) high income (260 million), Latin America and the Caribbean (210 million), Middle East and North Africa (150 million), and Europe and Central Asia (140 million). Economies with average scores above the global average of 77.1 tend to be in OECD high income, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean regions (figure ES.2). The Middle East and North Africa as well as South Asia have the lowest average scores.

**Progress toward equal treatment for women has fallen to its weakest pace in 20 years.** Since 2021, 18 economies introduced a total of 34 reforms toward gender equality across all areas measured by *Women, Business and the Law* (figure ES.3), the lowest number since 2001. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for more than half of all reforms, with seven economies—Benin, the Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Malawi, Senegal, and Uganda—enacting 18 positive legal changes. Among these, two economies stand out: Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon. Côte d'Ivoire enacted reforms prohibiting discrimination in access to credit based on gender, addressing domestic violence, and removing restrictions on women's employment. Gabon continued along the path of reform undertaken last year, equalizing the process for obtaining a passport, mandating

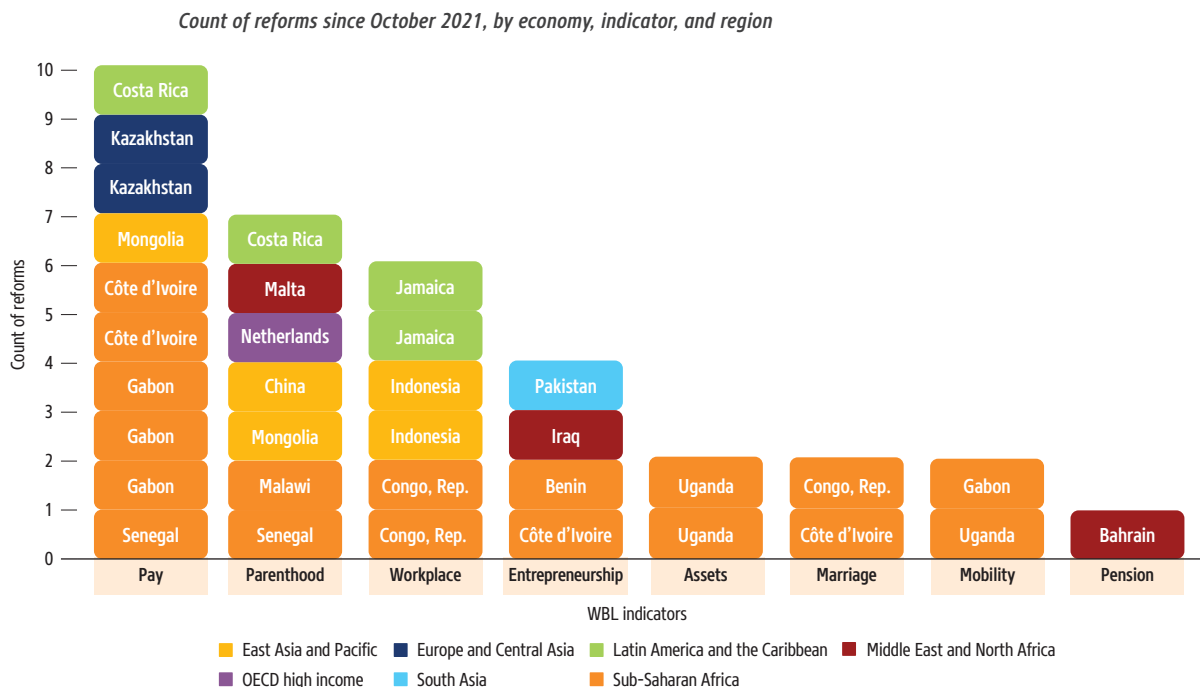
**FIGURE ES.2 | THE LARGEST GAPS ARE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA AND IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**



Source: Women, Business and the Law database.

Note: Each vertical line represents the score of an economy in its respective region. Each blue circle indicates the average score for a region. The minimum and maximum scores within each region are specified. OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

**FIGURE ES.3 | IN 2021–22, 18 ECONOMIES ENACTED REFORMS ACROSS ALL WOMEN, BUSINESS AND THE LAW INDICATORS**



Source: Women, Business and the Law database.

Note: OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

TABLE ES.1 EIGHTEEN ECONOMIES IMPROVED THEIR <i>WOMEN, BUSINESS AND THE LAW</i> 2023 SCORE									
Economy	Score	Economy	Score	Economy	Score	Economy	Score	Economy	Score
Belgium	100.0	Malta ✓	91.3	St. Lucia	83.8	Burundi	76.3	Botswana	63.8
Canada	100.0	Taiwan, China	91.3	São Tomé and Príncipe	83.1	Kiribati	76.3	Mali *	63.8
Denmark	100.0	United States	91.3	Burkina Faso	82.5	Seychelles	76.3	Dominica	62.5
France	100.0	Bulgaria	90.6	Fiji	82.5	Belarus	75.6	Haiti	61.3
Germany *	100.0	Mongolia ✓	90.6	Mozambique	82.5	Kazakhstan ✓	75.6	Micronesia, Fed. Sts.	61.3
Greece	100.0	Romania	90.6	Singapore	82.5	Morocco	75.6	Cameroon	60.0
Iceland	100.0	Ecuador	89.4	Türkiye	82.5	Bhutan *	75.0	Papua New Guinea	60.0
Ireland	100.0	Mauritius	89.4	United Arab Emirates	82.5	Ghana	75.0	Lebanon	58.8
Latvia	100.0	Bolivia	88.8	Togo	81.9	Honduras	75.0	Myanmar	58.8
Luxembourg	100.0	El Salvador	88.8	Bahamas, The	81.3	Samoa	75.0	Pakistan ✓	58.8
Netherlands ✓	100.0	Mexico	88.8	Cambodia	81.3	Trinidad and Tobago	75.0	Tonga	58.8
Portugal	100.0	Uruguay	88.8	Liberia	81.3	India	74.4	Congo, Rep. ✓	58.1
Spain	100.0	Georgia	88.1	Tanzania	81.3	Jamaica ✓	74.4	Algeria	57.5
Sweden	100.0	Lao PDR	88.1	Uganda ✓	81.3	Guatemala *	73.8	Niger	56.9
Estonia	97.5	South Africa	88.1	Zambia	81.3	Guinea	73.8	Solomon Islands	56.9
Finland	97.5	Switzerland	88.1	Grenada	80.6	Maldives	73.8	Palau	56.3
Italy	97.5	Vietnam *	88.1	Israel	80.6	Suriname	73.8	Vanuatu	55.6
New Zealand	97.5	Armenia	87.5	Kenya	80.6	Russian Federation	73.1	Brunei Darussalam	53.1
United Kingdom	97.5	Moldova	87.5	Nepal	80.6	Senegal ✓	72.5	Equatorial Guinea	51.9
Australia	96.9	Guyana	86.9	Barbados	80.0	Sierra Leone	72.5	Egypt, Arab Rep.	50.6
Austria	96.9	Zimbabwe	86.9	Chile	80.0	Djibouti *	71.3	Libya	50.0
Hungary	96.9	Cabo Verde	86.3	Malawi ✓	80.0	Saudi Arabia ✗	71.3	Malaysia	50.0
Norway	96.9	Dominican Republic	86.3	San Marino	80.0	St. Kitts and Nevis	71.3	Bangladesh	49.4
Slovenia	96.9	Namibia	86.3	Angola	79.4	Indonesia ✓	70.6	Iraq ✓	48.1
Côte d'Ivoire ✓	95.0	Nicaragua	86.3	Argentina	79.4	Uzbekistan	70.6	Mauritania	48.1
Gabon ✓	95.0	Timor-Leste	86.3	Belize	79.4	Eritrea	69.4	Jordan	46.9
Peru	95.0	Bosnia and Herzegovina	85.0	Panama	79.4	Gambia, The	69.4	Somalia	46.9
Cyprus	94.4	Brazil	85.0	Azerbaijan	78.8	Madagascar *	69.4	Eswatini	46.3
Paraguay	94.4	Korea, Rep.	85.0	Congo, Dem. Rep.	78.8	Bahrain ✓	68.1	Guinea-Bissau	42.5
Croatia	93.8	Montenegro	85.0	Japan	78.8	St. Vincent and the Grenadines	68.1	Syrian Arab Republic	40.0
Czechia	93.8	North Macedonia	85.0	Philippines	78.8	South Sudan	67.5	Oman	38.8
Lithuania	93.8	Slovak Republic	85.0	Tajikistan	78.8	Antigua and Barbuda	66.3	Kuwait	35.0
Poland	93.8	Ukraine	85.0	China ✓	78.1	Chad	66.3	Afghanistan ✗	31.9
Serbia	93.8	Venezuela, RB	85.0	Lesotho	78.1	Nigeria *	66.3	Iran, Islamic Rep.	31.3
Costa Rica ✓	91.9	Colombia	84.4	Thailand	78.1	Marshall Islands	65.6	Qatar	29.4
Hong Kong SAR, China	91.9	Benin ✓	83.8	Central African Republic	76.9	Sri Lanka	65.6	Sudan	29.4
Kosovo	91.9	Puerto Rico (US)	83.8	Ethiopia	76.9	Comoros	65.0	Yemen, Rep.	26.9
Albania	91.3	Rwanda	83.8	Kyrgyz Republic	76.9	Tunisia	64.4	West Bank and Gaza	26.3

Source: *Women, Business and the Law* database.

Note: Economies with a green check (✓) saw an improvement in score due to reforms in one or more areas. Economies with a red X (✗) introduced at least one legal change that reduced the score. Economies with an asterisk (\*) saw a change in their score due to revisions made as a result of new information (Djibouti, Germany, Guatemala, Vietnam) and coding consistency (Bhutan, Madagascar, Mali, Nigeria).

equal remuneration for work of equal value, and removing all job restrictions for women. As a result, for the first time in 53 years, two economies from the Sub-Saharan Africa region score above 90 on the *Women, Business and the Law* index, and the average score for the Sub-Saharan Africa region has surpassed the score of the East Asia and Pacific region. Other countries that reformed this year are Bahrain, China, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Iraq, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Malta, Mongolia, the Netherlands, and Pakistan.

**Most reforms focused on increasing paid leave for parents and fathers, removing restrictions on women’s work, and mandating equal pay.** Although the Parenthood and Pay indicators have the most room to improve, with average scores of 56.4 and 70.0, respectively, they also registered the most reforms in 2022. Seven economies in five regions reformed laws measured by the Parenthood indicator. Specifically, China, Malta, and the Netherlands mandated paid parental leave, Costa Rica, Malawi, and Mongolia introduced paid paternity leave, and Senegal amended its law to prohibit the dismissal of pregnant women. Additionally, six economies in four regions enacted reforms captured by the Pay indicator. Costa Rica, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Kazakhstan, and Senegal removed restrictions on women’s work. Gabon and Mongolia also introduced provisions mandating equal remuneration for work of equal value.

## Data trends from five decades of reform

**The *Women, Business and the Law* historical data highlight the benefits of reform.**

Spanning from 1970 to today, *Women, Business and the Law*’s historical database is an important tool for understanding the geographic and chronological dimensions of legal barriers faced by women. Removing legal constraints for women has been shown to be associated with various metrics of women’s economic opportunity and socioeconomic development. The ability to act autonomously and work without legal limitations also allows women to access better jobs and can lead to higher labor force participation overall (Amin and Islam 2015; Htun, Jensenius, and Nelson-Nuñez 2019). Moreover, freedom from discrimination helps women to become entrepreneurs and access finance (Islam, Muzi, and Amin 2019). Evidence is also growing that family leave policies are correlated with women’s empowerment. For example, Amin and Islam (2022) find a significant positive association between the legislated number of maternity leave days and female employment at the firm level. Evidence is emerging that gender equality is important not just for women’s economic empowerment but also for macroeconomic development. Recent studies show that removing legal barriers for women can help poorer economies to catch up with richer economies (Sever 2022). This growing body of evidence highlights the need to continue working to level the legal playing field between women and men.

**Comparative evidence is also growing to show why countries decide to remove legal barriers for women.** For example, a common driver for the expansion of women’s rights is the evolution of a country’s political system. The extent to which various groups can participate in the decision-making institutions of a democratic economy matters, as does a civil society that is actively challenging societal order or mobilizing action. Education and higher human capital are also important enablers for the expansion of women’s rights. Tertilt et al. (2022) show that economic development is an important predictor of women’s rights. Case studies of historical legal reforms aimed at gender equality in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, São Tomé and

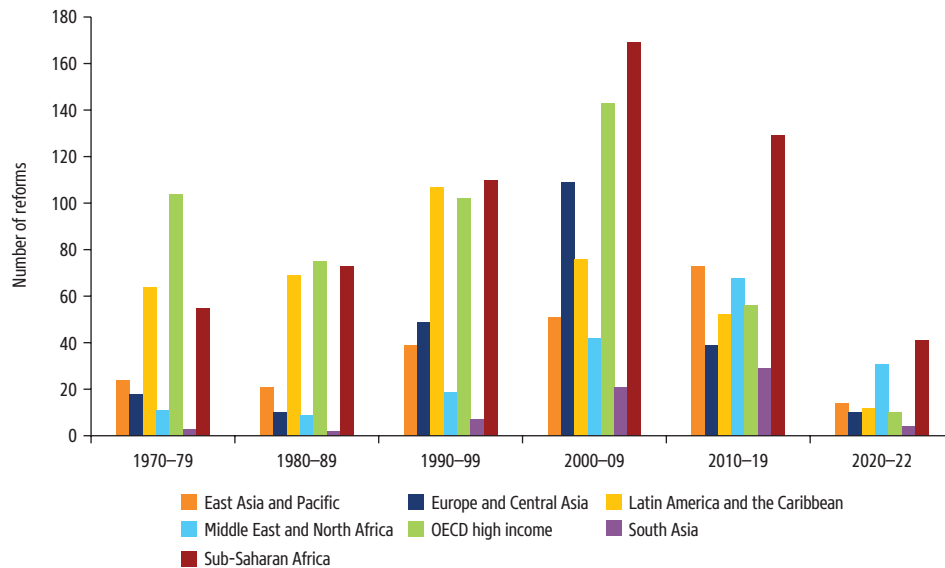
Príncipe, South Africa, Togo, and the United Arab Emirates reveal that international legal mandates, technical assistance from international development partners, the activism of women's groups, strategic multistakeholder coalitions, and the use of research and data are all decisive factors encouraging and supporting the enactment of successful reforms. Efforts to shed more light on what factors are driving reforms can guide future policy and expedite movement toward legal gender equality. They are a crucial first step toward identifying key challenges and opportunities to accelerate women's economic empowerment around the world.

**Five main takeaways outline how, where, and how fast laws have changed since 1970.** To provide more legal rights for women, economies have reformed existing laws or introduced new legislation. By tracking these changes, *Women, Business and the Law* highlights the remarkable catch-up effect in some economies. The findings underscore that reform efforts are happening around the world, irrespective of income level, culture, or region.

1. **In the last five decades, the global average of the *Women, Business and the Law* score has improved by about two-thirds as a result of more than 2,000 reforms expanding women's legal rights.** Over the course of 53 years, economies have introduced an impressive 2,151 reforms in all 35 areas of measurement, increasing the global average *Women, Business and the Law* score from 45.8 to 77.1 points. Between 2000 and 2009, more than 600 reforms were introduced, with a peak of 73 annual reforms in 2002 and 2008. However, since then, the pace of reform has slowed, and economies seem to be exhibiting reform fatigue in addressing notoriously stickier areas of the law such as Mobility and Assets. For instance, reforming inheritance laws will inevitably challenge long-established norms, and legislative measures might be slow and incremental. In 2022, only 34 reforms were recorded, a historic low since 2001. It will take another 1,549 reforms to reach legal gender equality everywhere.
2. **Only 14 economies have achieved legal gender parity in 2022, as measured by *Women, Business and the Law*, and progress has been uneven across regions and over time.** Worldwide, every economy has implemented at least one reform since 1970, allowing women to move one step closer to gender parity under the law. Despite this progress, gender disparities persist in all regions and all income levels: 176 economies still have room to improve, and at the recent pace of reform they will need at least another 50 years to reach 100.<sup>2</sup> This means that a young woman entering the workforce today will retire before she is able to enjoy gender equal rights during her working life. Yet given the rather slow progress in some areas, such as reforming laws related to inheritance rights, it may take many more years to close existing gender gaps across all areas. Today, equality of economic opportunity for women is highest in OECD high-income economies, where the average score on the *Women, Business and the Law* index is 95.3 points, and lowest in the Middle East and North Africa region, where the average score is 53.2 points. There are also regional differences in the timing of reform efforts. Economies in Latin America and the Caribbean reformed substantially in the 1990s. Sub-Saharan Africa saw a significant spike in reforms in the 2000s, with the adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol). The Middle East and North Africa's reform efforts did not take off until the 2010s (figure ES.4);

## FIGURE ES.4 | PROGRESS TOWARD GENDER-EQUAL LAWS HAS BEEN UNEVEN ACROSS TIME AND REGIONS

Number of women's rights reforms implemented, by decade and region



Source: *Women, Business and the Law* database.

Note: The figure shows the number of reforms, by region, that removed legal gender barriers. A reform is counted if, within any of the 35 areas of measurement, an answer changes from "no" to "yes" because of the adoption of a new law or the amendment of an existing law. The last set of bars reflects reforms enacted in only three years: 2020, 2021, and 2022. All regions are classified as of 2022. OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

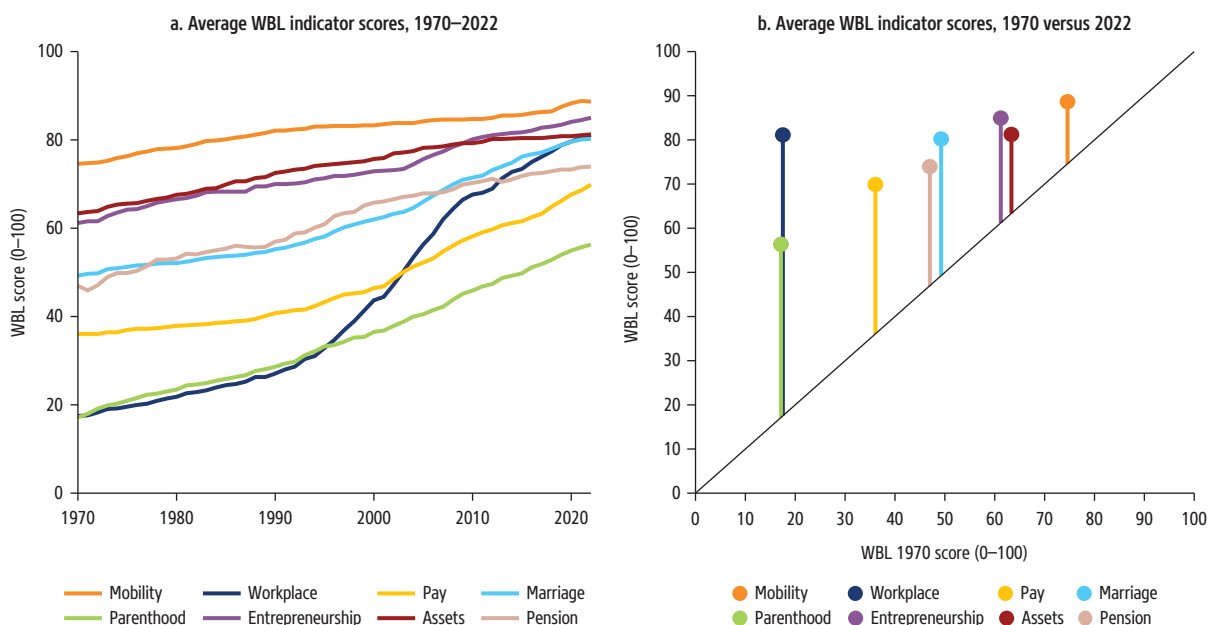
since then, the region has implemented more reforms (100) than in the previous four decades combined (81 reforms from 1970 to 2009). The differences in reform efforts have been less pronounced across income groups.

- 3. Progress across the areas measured has also been uneven, with most reforms in Workplace and Parenthood.** Across all topic areas, most reforms have been issued to address domestic violence, prohibit gender discrimination in employment, and legislate on sexual harassment. Reform efforts have unfolded in waves, with a focus on specific areas. In the 1970s, economies largely removed gender barriers on mobility, allowing married women to choose where to live, and introduced legislation addressing the dismissal of pregnant workers. In some instances, the removal of restrictions on women's mobility was due to the overhaul of legacy civil codes that had been in place during colonial times. In other cases, archaic national legislation dating back to the previous century was finally updated. The 1980s was a decade of isolated breakthroughs, but the 1990s set the stage for a steep increase in women's legal empowerment: 19 economies mandated equal remuneration for work of equal value, 10 granted women at least 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, and 38 introduced domestic violence legislation. The 2000s were a golden decade for women's legal rights: economies reformed in all areas, with a remarkable spike in reforms under the Workplace indicator.

4. **Economies with historically larger legal gender gaps have been catching up, especially since 2000.** Analysis of the annual growth rate in the *Women, Business and the Law* index shows that faster progress is being made in economies that have had a historically lower level of gender equality. The two economies that have had the fastest annual growth rates in the index are São Tomé and Príncipe and the United Arab Emirates. While reform in São Tomé and Príncipe has been a gradual process since 1970, with some intermediary periods where the pace of reform slowed and then, after a time, gathered pace again, reforms in the United Arab Emirates took off only in recent years. Other economies that are among the fastest reformers, with annualized growth rates in the index in the top fifth percentile, are Bahrain, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Togo.
5. **The catch-up effect has been happening across all areas covered by *Women, Business and the Law*, but the pace of progress has been uneven.** The catch-up effect has been strongest in the laws affecting women’s decisions to enter and remain in the labor force, followed by those affecting women’s work after the birth of a child, and the right to receive equal pay (figure ES.5). The catch-up effect has been weakest in laws related to agency and freedom of movement, and property and inheritance rights.

**FIGURE ES.5 | HISTORICALLY MORE UNEQUAL AREAS HAVE REFORMED FASTER OVER TIME**

*Evolution of Women, Business and the Law indicator scores, 1970–2022*



Source: *Women, Business and the Law* database.



### Overcoming legal gender barriers benefits all of society—not just women.

Although reform efforts are happening around the world, appalling gaps in women’s rights persist today in all regions, especially in the areas of leave policies and equal pay. Ninety-three economies still do not mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value, and some economies are even reversing rights for which women have fought long and hard. Nevertheless, women worldwide remain important agents of change in demanding their equal rights and opportunities, even under dire circumstances. Policy makers should reinforce these efforts because overcoming legal gender barriers benefits the economy as a whole, not just women. The *Women, Business and the Law* data present a unique opportunity to assess countries’ performances in closing legal gender gaps and to inspire policy makers to remove existing discriminatory laws. Although great achievements have been made over the last five decades, more and better data are needed, and more needs to be done worldwide to ensure that good intentions are accompanied by tangible results—that is, equal opportunity under the law for women. In an era when economies everywhere will need to mobilize every ounce of productive capacity to generate sufficient growth, sidelining half the population constitutes an egregious waste. Women cannot afford to wait another 50 years or more to reach equality. Neither can the global economy.

## What’s next

### *Women, Business and the Law* continues to expand its substantial research agenda.

Recognizing the formidable challenges facing women, *Women, Business and the Law* is exploring several areas of research aimed at expanding the reach of the indicators (figure ES.6). Building on evidence and preliminary data collected and analyzed over the last several years, *Women, Business and the Law 2024* will publish data on new indicators measuring childcare legislation and implementation of the law. The team is also expanding data and analysis on measures related to women’s safety and embarking on a review of areas in which legal equality has almost been reached, such as the right of women to sign a contract in the same way as men, a right now granted by 99 percent of economies. This pilot data set will be published in *Women, Business and the Law 2024* and fully integrated into the index and report in the 2025 edition.

**FIGURE ES.6 | EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF THE *WOMEN, BUSINESS AND THE LAW* INDEX**



Source: *Women, Business and the Law* team.

## Notes

1. This research includes Amin and Islam (2015); Htun, Jensenius, and Nelson-Nuñez (2019); and Islam, Muzi, and Amin (2019), all of which use cross-country data from the *Women, Business and the Law* project, as well as country-specific studies such as Zabalza and Tzannatos (1985). Roy (2019) provides an overview of the evidence linking legal gender equality and women's economic outcomes.
2. If all economies reform equally across all indicators, at the pace seen in the past year, it will take at least another 50 years to reach 100.

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