

Seven Gender Experts Explain How to Make Progress for Women and Girls

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Some 130 million girls remain out of primary to upper secondary school worldwide. Godong/BSIP

As we mark our first year of publishing Women & Girls, we're looking ahead to understand the biggest issues facing women and girls in the coming year. To help shed light on the extent of the work to be done in gender equality, we asked seven leading gender experts a single question: In your field, where have we made gains and where are we falling behind?

Education

Fiona Mavhinga, Camfed: One of the big gains we have made is the global recognition that quality education is key to the world achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. We have the data which proves that investing in girls' education delivers the biggest returns for the world, not least in terms of women having smaller, healthier families – stemming population growth and improving economic, environmental, social and political outcomes.

We have made huge progress in primary school enrollment and we're closing the gender gap at secondary level. But there isn't enough action, finance or urgency around the issue: 130 million girls remain out of primary to upper secondary school worldwide, and the cost to all of us is catastrophic. When your population grows quicker than your GDP, and there are no jobs for young people, and young people don't get the skills they need to create jobs, this causes huge instability and displacement.

We need not only to build more schools, recruit more rural teachers and improve the quality of education – we also need to harness the expertise of those who have emerged from the marginalization to drive this change quickly. And that's young women themselves, from poor and marginalized communities, who have succeeded in education. They are ideally placed to work with girls, their communities, schools and governments to create solutions that reach the most marginalized, and break down the many barriers girls face. Yet mostly their voices still go unheard.

Economic Independence

Cherie Blair, Cherie Blair Foundation for Women: There is no doubt that we are making important strides on women's economic empowerment. Targets on economic empowerment for women are woven across the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals, and last year the U.N. set up its first-ever High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment – a strong signal that our global leaders are taking this issue seriously.

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But progress is slow and there are still huge gender gaps in economic activity. Estimates on how far away we are from achieving economic equality between men and women vary from depressing to abysmal – 70 years based on the International Labour Organization's calculations, and up to 170 years according to the World Economic Forum.

There are three key areas where we are falling behind. First, the responsibility for unpaid care work still falls disproportionately on women's shoulders. We need to tackle the structures and social norms that create this inequality.

Second, there's a lack of investment in women's economic empowerment initiatives. For example, just 2 percent of total bilateral aid from OECD countries targets women's economic empowerment as the primary objective.

Third, there are barriers that shut women out of the labour market – from educational inequalities and a lack of access to capital, to social attitudes that perpetuate the idea that a woman's “place” is in the home. We are trying to remove some of these hurdles, by supporting women entrepreneurs in developing and emerging economies to access the skills, technology, networks and financial services they need to build thriving enterprises and become financially independent.

The McKinsey Global Institute has found that advancing women's equality could add \$12 trillion to global growth by 2025. Failing to address the barriers to women's economic participation is a failure to invest in a better world for all.



Green shoots: Women's economic empowerment is key to closing the gender gap. (Marco Longari/AFP)

Maternal and Child Health

Amie Batson, PATH: The world has made tremendous progress in improving the health of women and children in the past 25 years. Unprecedented collaboration between governments, civil society and industry has cut annual child deaths by more than half – from 12.7 million in 1990 to 5.9 million in 2015. Over the same period, maternal deaths have fallen from 532,000 to 303,000 per year.

Looking ahead, one of the biggest challenges – and opportunities – is ensuring that health products, services and technologies that address the health needs of women and girls are accessible.

We are working on innovations that ensure high-quality, affordable and appropriate products are available for all women and girls, especially the poorest. Improved family planning options are allowing more women to choose whether or when to have children, while affordable and appropriate menstrual products help ensure girls don't miss school just because they are menstruating. When girls and women thrive, their families, communities and countries thrive.

Success depends on creative partnerships and a committed effort to address the unique needs of women and girls around the world.

Reproductive Health

Simon Cooke, Marie Stopes International: Contraception and safe abortion are the difference between staying in school and having to drop out, or having a family of three

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children instead of eight. They are essential to global efforts to end poverty and build more stable societies.

Fortunately, recent policy changes in many countries – from Bolivia to Uganda – are giving women better access to family planning care.

Despite this progress, the world is still failing women and girls in too many ways. Globally, 225 million women want to access modern contraception but are unable to get it, and each year 21.6 million women resort to unsafe and life-threatening measures to end an unwanted pregnancy.

The Trump administration's reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy is just one example of a global setback that will erode women's access to contraception and increase unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortions.



Investing in girls' education provides one of the best returns on investment in the world.
(Yvan Traver/Photononstop)

Julia Bunting, Population Council, New York: We have made tremendous progress for women and girls in recent years – getting more girls into school, increasing access to contraception and improving gender equality. While this is incredibly exciting, the emerging data also tell a more nuanced story. And that is a story about quality.

In many parts of the world, for example, there are now just as many girls in classrooms as boys. Since the launch of Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) in 2012, there are now more than 30 million additional women and girls using family planning in 69 countries.

Yet while these gains are encouraging and need to be celebrated, we are also seeing that in some cases, levels of literacy have deteriorated as school enrollment has increased. Many countries have increased access to contraception, but the mix of contraceptive methods

available remains limited or the quality of services has not kept pace. This limits women's ability to achieve their reproductive intentions.

In order to fully advance the rights of women and girls, we must continue to expand access while ensuring a focus on quality on all fronts. We need to be able to effectively measure, monitor and achieve high-quality health, educational and social outcomes for girls and women no matter where they live.

Quality needs to be more than an anecdote or afterthought – it needs to be central to our efforts.

Human Rights

Francoise Girard, International Women's Health Coalition: The women's movement has made major gains over the past few decades. International agreements such as the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 broke ground by recognizing women's reproductive rights for the first time. In the years since, feminist activists have used these agreements to push for changes in laws and policies in their countries.

Over the past five years, women's rights groups have gained strength by building alliances and joining forces with groups advocating for human rights, environmental justice, peace, immigrant rights and LGBTQ rights – this is a new and important change in progressive, feminist activism. We saw those alliances in play at the Women's Marches in January.

Still, the very idea that women have the right to control their bodies, sexuality and reproduction remains contested in many countries. The rise of authoritarian leaders around the globe is a highly alarming trend. These leaders always target women's rights, and especially reproductive rights, to garner support from their base. Yet resistance grows and the women's movement is mobilizing everywhere. Activists are demanding that women's rights, especially sexual and reproductive health rights, be front and center.

Solidarity and collaboration across social movements will be critical to turn the tide of authoritarianism and repression.



Kenyan women attend the Women's March, in Nairobi on January 21, 2017. (Bryan Jaybee/Anadolu Agency)

Women in Conflict

Isobel Coleman, former U.S. ambassador to the U.N. for Management, Reform and Special Political Affairs: The benefits of women in peacekeeping are clear: When female peacekeepers are deployed to field missions, they are on the front line of policing and patrolling and play a critical role as human rights observers.

From Haiti to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), women peacekeepers – with access to segments of the population that men often don't get – have made a qualitative difference in protecting the most vulnerable.

Yet despite decades of pledges to increase the number of women in peacekeeping, the results are disappointing. In 1993, less than 1 percent of U.N. peacekeepers were women. Today, that figure is still below 5 percent, and in some of the hardest missions, such as in the DRC, where women peacekeepers are arguably most needed, the rates are even lower. The few women who are deployed are too often consigned to low-level desk jobs. For all the aspirations of Security Council Resolution 1325, which stresses the role of women in conflict resolution, we have barely moved the needle on increasing the number of female peacekeepers.

The U.N. depends on troop-contributing countries to send more female peacekeepers, but clearly that is happening far too slowly. To realize the promise of Resolution 1325, the member states of the United Nations should move beyond talking points and approve both incentives and penalties to encourage the deployment of more female peacekeepers.