



Nisha Arekapudi

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## World Bank report: when COVID struck, gender equality came crumbling down

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*The world has experienced substantial progress towards gender equality over the past 50 years. However, COVID-19 laid bare the cracks in our foundation, exposing the persistent inequalities that threaten women's lives and livelihoods, especially during difficult moments. **Nisha Arekapudi** discusses key findings from the World Bank Group's report ***Women, Business and the Law 2021***. The report highlights the discriminatory laws that continue to hinder progress towards gender equality.*

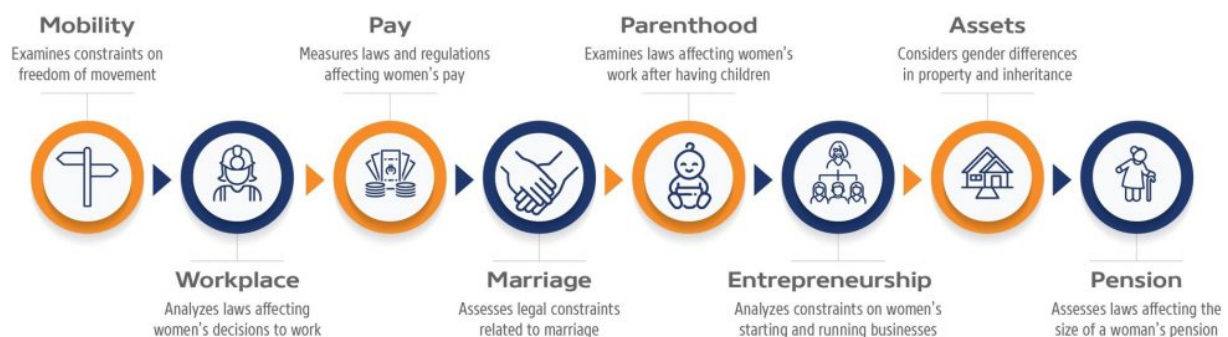
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By 2020, the promise of gender equality seemed closer than ever. Though there was still work to be done, women had more voice and agency, security, and economic autonomy than at any other point in history. But when crisis struck, the walls began to crumble. COVID-19 laid bare the cracks in our foundation, exposing the persistent inequalities that threaten women's lives and livelihoods, especially during difficult

moments. **Once again**, I'm talking about the discriminatory laws that continue to hinder the incredible progress made over the last **50 years**.

In the face of challenges like the pandemic, many women start at a disadvantage. In its seventh edition, the World Bank Group's ***Women, Business and the Law 2021*** builds evidence of this, identifying the laws and regulations that restrict women's economic opportunity. The project presents this data through an index structured around a woman's working life, answering 35 essential legal questions of gender equality for 190 countries. It finds that in 95% of them, there is room for improvement in the areas measured. In fact, on average, women still have just three-fourths of the legal rights of men.

**Figure 1. The eight *Women, Business and the Law* indicators**



Such inequalities can exacerbate difficulties in times of crisis. In 88 countries, for example, the law restricts the jobs and hours that women can work, affecting more than 2.5 billion women worldwide. This leads to occupational segregation and has resulted in the overrepresentation of women in the sectors most affected by COVID-19: healthcare, education, and essential service delivery. Women are also more likely than men to take on unpaid care work during lockdowns. Yet globally, just 44 countries offer paid parental leave to encourage the sharing of childcare responsibilities. Finally, one in three women suffers from gender-based violence, with the pandemic only contributing to a rise in its severity and frequency. Still, 32 countries lack legislation specifically addressing domestic violence.

Of course, in an emergency, governments can and should enact targeted policies and interventions to address these issues. This year, *Women, Business and the Law* presents compelling research on **gender-sensitive government responses to COVID-19**. When nearly every country closed schools and childcare centres last year, it was primarily mothers taking on increased care work, often having to choose between

their jobs and families. Since the onset of the pandemic, close to 40 countries have provided leave or benefits to help employed parents reconcile work with newly expanded childcare obligations. This includes paid leave where regular childcare is unavailable, childcare provision for essential workers, and tax relief to the childcare industry itself. In Australia, childcare was free for all workers between April and July. In Italy, employees received support to pay for babysitters via a voucher for families with children.

Court systems have also acted to enable women to access justice during the pandemic. Globally, women initiate the majority of family law cases, including formalizing marriage or divorce, seeking custody of children, and requesting protection from violence. At least 72 countries introduced measures to declare family cases urgent or essential during lockdown. In places like Ethiopia and South Africa, this included domestic violence, with courts continuing to hear cases. Many governments also enabled remote court proceedings for family law matters. Barbados' judiciary, for instance, introduced virtual courts and began conducting hearings by videoconference. And in Mauritania, prosecutors created a digital platform via WhatsApp where citizens could file complaints.

**Figure 2. Select measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Childcare	Court systems	Health and safety
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Leave and compensation to care for a child</li><li>• Childcare for essential workers</li><li>• Childcare assistance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Access to family courts</li><li>• Electronic or remote hearings, filing of claims, and protection orders</li><li>• Automatic extension of protection orders</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nondiscrimination in health insurance premiums</li><li>• Services to address violence against women</li></ul>

Governments have further allocated resources to mitigate the impact of increased violence against women. *Women, Business and the Law* research finds that since the pandemic began, countries around the world have introduced approximately 125 new measures to facilitate women's access to services protecting them from violence. In China, the eight-hour domestic violence hotline is now a 24-hour operation. Peru enacted Legislative Decree No. 1470 to guarantee health care for all women victims of violence. Diverse responses such as these are critical during a pandemic that has disproportionately affected women's health and safety.

While innovative, however, these measures were few and far between, and likely insufficient to tackle the unprecedented challenges faced by working women during this time. Though they can provide temporary relief, in many cases the fundamental, permanent measures that guarantee women's economic inclusion are absent. Building atop a framework that lacks these basics could prove inadequate in the long run.

Fortunately, governments around the world are taking note of this. Despite the challenges of the past year, 27 countries from all regions and income groups enacted legal reforms increasing gender equality. Most popular were changes to laws affecting women's pay and paid leave policies, the areas most in need of improvement. Eliminating restrictions on women's employment in Costa Rica will contribute to reductions in wage inequality and allow them access to more choice of jobs. By fostering gender equality at home, the introduction of paid parental leave in places like Ireland and the United Arab Emirates will help to achieve gender equality in the workplace. Comprehensive domestic violence legislation in Madagascar will allow for criminal prosecution of abusers. *Women, Business and the Law* finds that in countries with good practice policies such as these in place, there is a narrower gender gap in development outcomes, higher female labour force participation, and lower vulnerable employment. These **benefits** not only create more equality of opportunity between women and men, but they also build more stable economies.

The challenges of the past year have only deepened existing inequalities and exposed the vulnerabilities of our social, political, and economic systems. While many have acted to combat the gendered effects of the pandemic, **economic security** may be out of reach where the legal environment itself fails to encourage and incentivize women's work. Reforms can serve as an important catalyst to improve daily life for women and their communities under any circumstance. By emphasizing the work still to be done, *Women, Business and the Law* is an important tool in this effort. Indeed, for an inclusive and resilient recovery from this pandemic, we must repair the foundation we have built.

***Simeon Djankov and Eva (Yiwen) Zhang's insights from the data in the Women, Business and the Law 2021 report:***

### Countries inch towards legal gender equality



The data in the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2021 report show that gendered laws have been improving in a number of countries in the Middle East, and North and Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years. Simeon Djankov and Eva (Yiwen) Zhang write that lessons from the success of early crisis

response measures to ... [Continue reading](#)



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### About the author



#### Nisha Arekapudi

Nisha Arekapudi has been with the World Bank Group's Women, Business and the Law project for five years. She evaluates constitutional, labour, employment, family, and property laws affecting the business environment for women. She has spoken extensively about women's rights and access to justice, including at the US Department of State, the International Labour Organization and UN Women. She has also led capacity building workshops with civil society organizations from across the African subcontinent. She is a member of the New York State Bar.