



## Milestones

By **Ahana Lakshmi**  
(ahanalakshmi@gmail.com), Independent  
Researcher, Chennai,  
India



## Can global goals succeed if women are left behind?

**Despite legal and policy reforms, women continue to lag in rights, income, and leadership**

Eighty years ago, in 1945, the Charter of the United Nations was signed in San Francisco. It was the first international agreement to recognize gender equality as a fundamental human right. Fifty years ago, in 1975, the United Nations observed the first International Women's Year, which also marked the first World Conference on Women. When the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted, Goal 3 was dedicated to promoting gender equality and empowering women (now Goal 5 under the Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs).

The evaluation of the MDGs showed some progress—increased access to education and more women joining the workforce outside of agriculture. But major gaps remained. As the report stated: “Women continue to experience significant gaps in terms of poverty, labour market and wages, as well as participation in private and public decision-making.”

Has much changed in the last quarter century? What does the SDG Report 2024 say about women's progress, not only under Goal 5 but across themes?

One of the key challenges is income inequality. In nearly half the countries with available data, women heading small-scale food production operations earned less than 70 percent of what men in similar roles earned. Although fisheries are not explicitly mentioned, it is likely that similar inequalities exist in this sector as well.

Tenure rights are another pressing issue for women in fisheries and agriculture. Goal 5 on Gender Equality highlights that legal protection of women's land rights remains grossly inadequate: among 77 countries, only one-fifth provide strong legal protection. Between 2019 and 2023, there were 56 legal reforms aimed at improving gender equality across 120 countries. However, most of these reforms focused on equal rights

in employment, economic benefits, and addressing violence against women.

Looking beyond Goal 5, how are women faring under other SDGs? Women continue to face higher working poverty rates than men, with the gap being most pronounced in Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Gains in women's leadership have occurred mainly where gender quotas are in place. Globally, young women are more than twice as likely as young men to be NEET, that is “Not in employment, education, or training”. Though Central and Southern Asia have seen improvements since 2005, overall gender unemployment gaps in 2023 remain largely unchanged from 2015.

The SDG Report 2024 provides a helpful visual summary of progress so far. For Goal 5, only the target on women's access to technology is on track. Targets related to women in leadership have stagnated, while legal frameworks on gender equality and gender-responsive budgeting show only marginal progress. More concerning is the lack of sufficient data for four of the nine targets under Goal 5.

The central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to “leave no one behind.” But we appear to be far from that goal, largely due to poor availability of disaggregated data. The Gender Data Compass highlights significant gaps in key social, economic, and environmental indicators. Most available data relate to demographics, migration, fertility, and reproductive health, leaving critical areas underreported.

Clearly, far greater efforts are needed to close these gaps for the SDG targets to be achieved in the next five years. ■

*The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 is available at:*

*<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf>*