

2026

GLOBAL HOUSTON MODEL UN CONFERENCE



BACKGROUND GUIDE

UN WOMEN

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

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Introduction to UN Women

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) was established on July 2, 2010, by UN General Assembly Resolution 64/289 to promote gender equality and advance women's rights worldwide. As a specialized UN agency, UN Women works to ensure that commitments to gender equality are not just symbolic but are actively implemented through policies, programs, and partnerships. The organization plays a crucial role in addressing issues such as gender-based violence, economic empowerment, access to healthcare, and women's leadership in governance.

UN Women operates within a multi-tiered intergovernmental governance structure to ensure accountability and effective decision-making. The organization is guided by three main UN bodies: the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which created UN Women and periodically reviews its progress; the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which is responsible for policymaking and electing members to the UN Women Executive Board; and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the principal intergovernmental body dedicated to gender equality. The CSW plays an instrumental role in shaping global policies, setting priorities, and assessing progress in the field of women's rights.

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Introduction to UN Women

The Executive Board of UN Women, which serves as the organization's primary decision-making body, consists of 41 member states elected by ECOSOC for three-year terms. These seats are distributed to ensure regional representation, with members selected from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Western Europe and Other States. Additionally, six seats are reserved for the largest financial contributors to UN Women, as well as for developing countries that are not part of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee. The Executive Board is responsible for overseeing policies, approving strategic plans, and ensuring that UN Women's initiatives align with the broader goals of the UN system.

UN Women develops and implements programs that operate at country, multi-country, and regional levels in accordance with its Strategic Plan, which sets long-term objectives and priority areas. These programs are carried out in collaboration with governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN agencies, and intergovernmental organizations. Key areas of focus include promoting women's economic independence, increasing female participation in political leadership, ensuring access to healthcare and health care, and addressing gender-based violence. UN Women's funding is primarily derived from voluntary contributions, with donor countries playing a significant role in shaping the organization's policies and initiatives.

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Introduction to UN Women

Beyond program implementation, UN Women also plays a crucial role in monitoring and enforcing international commitments to gender equality. It works to ensure that global agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, are upheld. By promoting accountability within the UN system and among member states, UN Women ensures that gender equality remains a central priority in international development efforts.

As the leading UN entity for gender equality, UN Women coordinates efforts across multiple sectors and institutions, integrating gender perspectives into policies, peacebuilding efforts, and humanitarian responses. Its advocacy work influences governments and international organizations to adopt inclusive policies that advance women's rights. In addition, UN Women's partnerships with civil society groups amplify the voices of marginalized women and provide critical resources to local initiatives.

UN Women is a key driver of progress in the global fight for gender equality. Through its governance structure, program implementation, and international advocacy, the organization ensures that the commitments made by the global community translate into meaningful action. By fostering cooperation among UN agencies, governments, and civil society, UN Women works toward a world where all women and girls have equal opportunities and access to healthcare, economic resources, and leadership roles.

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The Intersection of Gender & Health

Gender discrimination hurts healthcare access for many women and girls around the world, with some of the greatest barriers including economic constraints, limited mobility, and domestic burdens. Women aged 25–34 are 25% more likely to live in extreme poverty than men of the same age, largely due to the costs and labor of having and raising children. In fragile contexts, women are 7.7 times more likely to live in extreme poverty (7). Fragile contexts are ecosystems, regions, or states highly vulnerable to climate change, conflict, and degradation. Only 18% of global social protection measures specifically target women's economic security, despite high inflation and rising food prices hitting women hardest (7). This lack of targeted support shows that global systems are currently failing to protect the most vulnerable women, making it nearly impossible for them to break the damaging cycle of poverty and poor health. A 2024 flagship report by UN Women reveals a widening gender gap in social protection, showing that two billion women and girls lack access to any form of protection (7).

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The Intersection of Gender and Health

Physical and social constraints further prevent women from having sufficient healthcare. Social constraints include long hours dedicated to unpaid domestic work, which means that there is less time available for them to seek medical attention. Physical constraints are oftentimes violent. Gender-based violence (GBV) is any act against women that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering, and severely harms their health. Furthermore, maternal mortality remains a critical global issue and both pregnancy and childbirth pose significant risks. In 2023, about 260 000 women died during and following pregnancy and childbirth, and more than 700 women died everyday from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

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Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

The UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls emphasizes that equality in health requires access to affordable and quality contraception, which includes emergency measures (8). This is reinforced by CEDAW Article 12, which obliges States to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of healthcare (10). The Working Group calls for allowing women to terminate a pregnancy on request during the first trimester and the decriminalization of abortion, noting that "the decision as to whether to continue a pregnancy or terminate it may shape a woman's entire future personal life... The decision is therefore fundamentally and primarily the woman's decision" (8). recognize the right of women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable methods of making these decisions. However, different countries have very different laws and religious beliefs about this topic, and SRHR has consequently become a contentious topic in recent history.

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Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

The 1995 Beijing Platform also identifies the lack of sexual and reproductive health education as having a profound impact on both women and men. Providing SRHR services to adolescent girls is vital so they may complete their education and avoid high-risk pregnancies. This also helps prevent them from a harmful cycle of poverty that would arise from having a child before they were ready. Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a safe sex life and the capability to reproduce with the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so (8). Achieving this requires that governments recognize the right of women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable methods of making these decisions. However, different countries have very different laws and religious beliefs about this topic, and SRHR has consequently become a contentious topic in recent history.

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Global Frameworks & Systemic Solutions

Efforts to improve healthcare access are guided by international targets, specifically Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) and Goal 5 (6, 9). These targets include reducing the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births and ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services by 2030. Subsequently, there has been a shift toward addressing "structural barriers" and root causes of inequality (10). This plan prioritizes "gender-responsive" social protection systems and legal reforms to ensure institutions deliver better for the most vulnerable women and girls. These are solutions that focus on fixing the system so that solutions are more permanent and longstanding.

Systemic progress has been shown globally through regional models that move beyond temporary aid. For example, Thailand launched a "One-Stop Crisis Centre" and hotline to provide both health and social assistance for survivors of violence (5). Mali established GBV units in hospitals to provide support and fight stigma. In Liberia, they have installed solar lighting in 26 clinics to ensure safer delivery of babies at night. Lastly, Senegal has adapted its National Health Insurance to cater specifically to rural women, who are often the most vulnerable. These initiatives show that systemic outcomes and progress are more than possible when healthcare is combined with social and legal protection. It just must now be replicated more consistently on a much larger scale.

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Obstacles & Potential Solutions

Inadequate Resources and National Machinery

Many countries lack the health workforce or infrastructure, such as reliable electricity in rural clinics, to provide quality care (10). To fix these weaknesses, there must be a significant increase in health financing and the recruitment and training of a health workforce in developing nations that are sensitive to women's unique needs.

Legal and Cultural Barriers

Restrictive laws regarding reproductive health and cultural conservatism often block women from seeking necessary care. Potential solutions involve advocating for the repeal of discriminatory laws and promoting "gender-responsive" social protection policies that require coordination between health, justice, and finance ministries.

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Obstacles & Potential Solutions

Violence as a Health Crisis

Violence against women is a major health crisis on its own. The World Health Organization reports that around 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide have been subjected to either partner violence or non-partner violence in their lifetime (11). UN Women has mobilized system-wide action on the "shadow pandemic" of violence, emphasizing that violence harms mental and physical health alike. This requires coordination between health, legal, and social services to provide comprehensive "post-exposure" care and counseling.

The Gender Data Gap

A major systemic obstacle is the absence of gender-disaggregated data, statistical information collected and analyzed separately for women, men, and sometimes other gender identities. The absence of this kind of data keeps the specific health needs of women invisible to policymakers. Relying solely on biological "sex" does not always capture the nuance of social roles that influence health outcomes. Systemic solutions must prioritize the collection of both sex-disaggregated and gendered data to better understand global health disparities and design fair health policies.

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References & Further Reading

- 1) Commission on the Status of Women
- 2) The ECOSOC
- 3) The Beijing Declaration & Platform for Action at 30, and why that matters for gender equality
- 4) Gender and the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW): A Quick Guide Women and Health
- 5) Women and Health
- 6) SD3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages
- 7) Two billion women and girls worldwide lack access to any form of social protection, UN Women report shows
- 8) Women's autonomy, equality and reproductive health
- 9) Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- 10) CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- 11) Violence Against Women

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Countries in Committee

- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| Egypt | Argentina |
| Nigeria | Colombia |
| Mali | Cuba |
| Rwanda | Trinidad & |
| Senegal | Tobago |
| Cabo Verde | Ukraine |
| Saudi Arabia | Latvia |
| China | Romania |
| India | Netherlands |
| Japan | United States |
| Pakistan | France |
| Bangladesh | Spain Belgium |
| Afghanistan | Turkiye |
| Costa Rica | Austria |
| Brazil | |