



Securing the Rights of Women and Girls: A Plan, and Its Test in 2026

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This plan is an initial draft prepared with AI models. It is open for review by subject-matter experts and will be revised as they join the work and as world and national events change.

Introduction

The World Bank's 2026 survey of 190 economies found that women hold about two-thirds of the legal rights of men, that legal experts judge laws supporting women's economic participation to be enforced only about halfway, and that none of the 190 economies gives women equal economic opportunity ([World Bank](#)). An estimated 840 million women, nearly one in three, have experienced partner or sexual violence ([WHO](#)), and about 260,000 women died from complications of pregnancy or childbirth in 2023, roughly one every two minutes ([WHO](#)).

The problem affects half of humanity and runs through the other problems on this site. Hunger, poverty, war and displacement fall harder on women and girls, and the World Bank found that secondary schooling for girls brings near-elimination of child marriage, a fall of about a third in fertility in countries with high population growth, and lower child mortality and malnutrition ([World Bank \(archived\)](#)). Afghanistan has shown since 2021 how quickly such gains can be reversed.

This essay sets out a seven-part plan and tests each part against the events of 2025 and 2026. The essays on [education](#), [displacement](#) and [global health](#) treat girls' schooling, displaced women and maternal health more fully.

Where things stand

The UN's annual Gender Snapshot, released by UN Women and UN DESA on 17 September 2026, reports that not one target under Sustainable Development Goal 5, the gender equality goal, is on track for 2030, and that at the current rate the goal would take 171 years to reach ([UN Women](#); [UN Women](#)).

Measure	Figure	Source
Women in extreme poverty, 2024	9.9% of women, against 9.5% of men	UN Women

Measure	Figure	Source
Women who have experienced partner or sexual violence in their lifetime	about 840 million, nearly 1 in 3	WHO
Women subjected to partner violence in the past 12 months	316 million, 11% of women aged 15 and over	WHO
Girls married before age 18	nearly 1 in 5	UN Women
Women alive today who were married as children	nearly 650 million	World Bank
Children and youth out of school	273 million in 2024; girls out of school, 133 million	UNESCO ; GEM Report
Maternal deaths, 2023	about 260,000	WHO
Women's share of seats in national parliaments, 1 January 2026	27.5%	UN News
Unpaid care and domestic work	women and girls spend 2.5 times as many hours as men	UN Women

The global maternal mortality ratio fell from 328 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 197 in 2023, a decline of about 40%, although progress has slowed markedly since 2016 ([WHO](#)). According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report team, girls now enrol in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school at the same rates as boys, and 136 million more girls are in secondary school than in 1995 ([GEM Report](#)). In India the prevalence of child marriage among girls fell from 49.4% in 1993 to 22.3% in 2021 ([World Bank](#)).

Other measures have barely moved or are worsening: the rate of partner violence has fallen by only about 0.2% a year over two decades ([WHO](#)). Nearly two-thirds of maternal deaths now occur in fragile or conflict-affected countries ([WHO](#)). The Gender Snapshot report puts parity in national parliaments at 2089 on the pace of the last five years. It finds that net development aid fell by 23.3% in 2025, after aid with gender equality objectives had fallen by 13% and funding for women's rights organizations by 28% between 2023 and 2024, and that aid for population and reproductive health could fall by as much as 54.1% between 2024 and 2026 ([UN Statistics Division](#)).

Part I: The plan

The plan has seven elements. Several cost figures below come from a 2020 UNFPA costing for 2020 to 2030, which put the cost of ending preventable maternal deaths, unmet need for family planning, and gender-based violence and harmful practices in priority countries

at \$264 billion, of which donors were expected to provide \$42 billion, leaving \$222 billion to be found (UNFPA).

1. Keep girls in school through secondary level

Governments in low-income countries, backed by donors and development banks, should make secondary school free and reachable for girls, with attendance stipends, schools within safe travelling distance, separate sanitation and more female teachers. Sierra Leone offers a working model: a 2023 law guarantees free schooling including secondary education, and the country paired it with a child marriage ban the following year ([Human Rights Watch](#)). The World Bank estimated in 2018 that barriers to girls completing 12 years of school cost countries \$15 trillion to \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings ([World Bank \(archived\)](#)).

2. End child marriage

National legislatures should set 18 as the minimum age of marriage with no exceptions for parental consent or custom, backed by birth and marriage registration and by support for girls who are already married. Sierra Leone, where 30% of girls marry before 18, passed a law in June 2024 making marriage or cohabitation with anyone under 18 a criminal offence and guaranteeing counselling for affected girls ([Human Rights Watch](#)). Colombia's Congress approved a ban without exceptions on 13 November 2024, after eight earlier bills had failed ([Equality Now](#)), and it became Law 2447 on 13 February 2025 ([Función Pública](#)). A law reaches only part of the problem, because in 105 of 110 countries with data child marriage is more common among girls from the poorest fifth of households than the richest ([World Bank](#)), so cash support for poor families and access to secondary school belong in the same package. UNFPA costed ending child marriage in 68 high-burden countries at \$35 billion over 2020 to 2030, of which \$24.1 billion was unfunded, or about \$600 for each marriage averted; ending female genital mutilation in 31 countries was costed at \$2.4 billion, or \$95 per case averted (UNFPA).

3. Prevent violence and respond to it

Governments and local organizations should fund programmes that change community norms, alongside shelters, legal aid, trained police and courts, and clinical care after rape. WHO's 2025 report names Ecuador, Liberia, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda as countries that have developed funded national action plans ([WHO](#)). Funding is small against the need: in 2022 only 0.2% of global development aid went to programmes focused on preventing violence against women (same source), while UNFPA costed ending gender-based violence in 132 countries at \$42 billion over the decade, with a gap of \$32.5 billion (UNFPA). The evidence for prevention is promising but thin. In the SASA! trial in Kampala, Uganda, women in communities that received the programme reported 52% less physical partner violence in the past year than women in control communities, an estimate that

was not statistically significant with only four pairs of communities, and their acceptance of partner violence fell by nearly half ([BMC Medicine](#)).

4. Equal economic rights, including property

Legislatures should remove the laws that still restrict women's work, pay, inheritance, land and business ownership, and governments should build the systems that make equal laws real: land registries that record women's names, courts that enforce inheritance rights, and childcare. The World Bank finds the gap between law and practice to be the larger problem. Fewer than half of the policies and institutions women need to exercise their legal rights are in place, although 68 economies enacted 113 reforms between 2023 and 2025 ([World Bank](#)). Given women's larger share of unpaid care, public childcare and eldercare belong here too. Income support and jobs are covered in the essay on [poverty](#).

5. Make pregnancy and childbirth safe

Health ministries, supported by donors and by UNFPA, WHO and UNICEF, should train and deploy midwives, keep the drugs that treat haemorrhage and pre-eclampsia in stock, and provide voluntary family planning. The State of the World's Midwifery 2021 report found the world short of 900,000 midwives, and an analysis in *The Lancet* found that fully resourcing midwife-delivered care by 2035 could avert about two-thirds of maternal and newborn deaths and stillbirths, some 4.3 million lives a year ([UNFPA](#)). UNFPA costed ending preventable maternal deaths in 120 countries at \$115.5 billion over 2020 to 2030, with a \$103.6 billion gap, and ending the unmet need for modern contraception in the same 120 countries at \$68.5 billion, with a \$59.9 billion gap ([UNFPA](#)). In crisis settings, where the risk of death in pregnancy is highest, UNFPA's 2026 humanitarian appeal asks for \$1 billion to serve 34 million women, girls and young people in 41 countries, with Sudan (\$116.5 million) the largest country appeal ([UNFPA](#)). Abortion policy is a separate and contested question, set out below.

6. Women in public decision-making

Parties and legislatures should adopt candidate quotas or reserved seats where representation is low, and electoral authorities and police should treat intimidation of women candidates as an electoral offence. In parliamentary chambers elected in 2025, those with quota legislation averaged 31% women among new members, against 23% in chambers without ([UN News](#)). When India reserved a third of village council head positions for women at random, Chattopadhyay and Duflo found across 265 councils that women leaders invested more in infrastructure that women had asked for ([Econometrica](#)). India's Parliament extended the principle nationally on 20 and 21 September 2023 with the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, which reserves a third of seats in the Lok Sabha, the state assemblies and the Delhi assembly for women for 15 years, starting after the next census and redrawing of constituencies ([PRS Legislative Research](#)). The cost of

running for office can exceed 100 times a country's average income per person ([UN Women](#)), and an Inter-Parliamentary Union survey found that 76% of women legislators had experienced violence or intimidation, against 68% of men ([UN News](#)).

7. Defend against reversal

Rights that have been won can be withdrawn, so the International Criminal Court and UN fact-finding bodies need support in pursuing the gravest abuses. Local women's organizations, which run many survivor services in crisis settings, need multi-year funding, and national gender equality bodies need legal protection from being stripped of power or budget. Household surveys, the only way to tell whether child marriage, maternal deaths or violence are rising or falling, need stable funding.

Sequencing

In the first two years, emergency maternal and survivor services, household surveys and funding for women's organizations come first, because their loss is immediate and hard to reverse. Legal reform, schooling and midwife training proceed country by country over two to ten years. Full legal equality and near-parity in representation are goals for a generation.

What makes it stick politically

Durable gains have usually come from domestic coalitions. In The Gambia, 42 members of the National Assembly voted in March 2024 to advance a bill repealing the 2015 ban on female genital mutilation; its supporters argued that the practice is part of Islam and that the ban was a Western imposition. Activists asked scholars at Al-Azhar University to examine the religious question, and in July 2024 the Assembly rejected the repeal bill by 34 votes to 19. Supporters of repeal have since petitioned the Supreme Court, arguing that the ban violates religious and cultural freedom ([openDemocracy](#)). Public opinion can favour reform even under hostile governments: in a nationwide door-to-door survey of more than 2,000 Afghans, published by UN Women on 29 August 2025, 92% said it was important for girls to continue their schooling, including 87% of rural men ([UN Women](#)).

Where reasonable people disagree

Abortion and “sexual and reproductive health and rights.” Many governments and citizens regard access to legal abortion as part of women's health and rights; many others, including many religious traditions, regard abortion as the taking of a human life and object to international texts or aid that could be read as promoting it. In the United States the Mexico City Policy, which bars foreign recipients of US aid from performing or promoting abortion, has been imposed and rescinded along party lines since 1985 and has been in force for 23 of the past 42 years. It reflects the view that the United States does not consider abortion an acceptable element of family planning programmes; opponents

call it the “global gag rule” because it also restricts referrals, lobbying and public information ([KFF](#)). A 2019 study in *The Lancet Global Health* found that, in sub-Saharan African countries more exposed to the policy, abortion rates rose by about 40% while it was in force, alongside a 13.5% fall in modern contraceptive use and a 12% rise in pregnancies, and that the changes reversed after it was rescinded ([Center for Global Development](#)). Supporters treat the use of public money for organizations that provide or promote abortion as a question of principle that such estimates do not settle. This plan takes no position on abortion law; its reproductive health elements are maternal care and voluntary contraception.

The meaning of “gender.” Governments disagree over whether international texts should use “gender” to refer to men and women or in a broader sense that includes gender identity. At the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2026, the United States proposed a resolution, “Protection of women and girls through appropriate terminology,” stating that “gender” refers to men and women, and argued that this established definition would allow constructive engagement by countries across the globe. Belgium, for the European Union, said the text tried to rewrite what had been agreed in Beijing 30 years earlier and moved that no action be taken; the motion carried by 23 votes to 3 (Chile, Pakistan and the United States), with 17 abstentions ([UN Meetings Coverage](#)). The dispute now affects negotiations on subjects where the substance is widely shared.

Sovereignty, religion and culture. Some governments and religious authorities hold that family law should follow religious law or custom and regard outside pressure as interference in matters their societies have the right to decide. Others hold that equality under law is a universal human right that no tradition can set aside. In The Gambia both sides of the repeal debate made religious arguments.

Schooling as the main lever. Education is strongly associated with later marriage, but the link is not automatic. In Bangladesh girls average more than 12 years of schooling, yet about half still marry before 18 ([World Bank](#)). Some therefore argue for putting direct measures against child marriage, and jobs for young women, ahead of further spending on schooling.

Quotas. Supporters see quotas as the fastest proven route to representation. Critics say they restrict voters’ choices or produce token officeholders, and prefer to remove barriers such as campaign costs and harassment.

Part II: The plan in the world of September 2026

Element 1, schooling: Afghanistan makes exclusion routine

The Taliban closed secondary schools to girls in March 2022 and universities to women in December 2022. In August 2026 UNESCO reported that 2.4 million Afghan girls are

barred from secondary school, 200,000 more than a year earlier, that the number could approach four million by 2030, and that the country faces a shortfall of more than 11,000 qualified female teachers by then ([Al Jazeera](#)). Elsewhere the support around schooling is thinning: in a UN Women survey of 855 women's organizations in 52 crisis-affected countries, published in July 2026, eight in ten reported more girls dropping out of school ([UN Women](#)).

Element 2, child marriage: legal gains in some places and a codified exception in one

On 14 May 2026 the Taliban's Ministry of Justice published Decree No. 18, a 31-article code on judicial separation between spouses ([Afghan Studies Center](#)). It sets no minimum age of marriage and describes how a child who was married may seek annulment after reaching puberty. UN Women said the decree sets stricter conditions for women seeking separation than for men, including multiple witness testimonies, and allows a husband to override his wife's claim ([UN Women](#)). The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said that by providing for the separation of married girls who reach puberty, the decree implies that child marriage is permitted ([Afghan Studies Center](#)). The Taliban replied that the decree follows Islamic principles and that forced marriage of girls is already prohibited ([Manila Times \(AP\)](#)).

The larger test is sub-Saharan Africa, where almost a third of women aged 20 to 24 were married before 18 ([World Bank](#)) and aid cuts are removing the support the plan pairs with legal reform. Seven in ten of the women's organizations in the July 2026 UN Women survey reported an increase in forced marriage ([UN Women](#)).

Element 3, violence: war and funding cuts work against the plan

Sudan is the clearest current case of sexual violence used as a method of war. On 26 February 2026 the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on four Rapid Support Forces commanders, including the deputy commander, Abdul Rahim Hamdan Dagalo, for atrocities in Darfur that included widespread sexual violence ([Africanews](#)). On 8 July 2026 the UN Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan reported that the Rapid Support Forces carried out mass killings, systematic abductions of women and girls, and mass gang rapes in El Fasher, which it described as distinct markers of genocide, and it opened an urgent inquiry into similar patterns around El Obeid ([OHCHR via GlobalSecurity](#)). The essay on [war](#) covers the limits of accountability for Sudan.

Services for survivors are also closing. UN Women reported on 10 July 2026 that at least one million women and girls in conflicts and crises had lost access to critical support since January 2025, that two in five of the women's organizations surveyed expected to shut down within a year, and that 86% were seeing more gender-based violence in their communities ([UN Women](#)). The Gender Snapshot projects that aid to end violence against

women and girls, which rose steadily from 2020 to 2024, fell by 17% to 20% in 2025 ([UN Statistics Division](#)).

Element 4, economic rights: steady legal reform, weak enforcement

Legal reform is the element holding up best, with the 113 reforms counted by the World Bank. Afghanistan is the worst case: only 7% of Afghan women are employed, against 84% of men; UN Women estimates the economic loss from excluding women at \$920 million, or 5.8% of GDP, over 2024 to 2026; and fewer than one in five Afghan women returning from Iran and Pakistan can earn an income ([UN Women](#)). Food and fuel price rises since the Strait of Hormuz closed after the Iran war began on 28 February 2026 add to the pressure, and nine in ten women's organizations in the July survey reported growing poverty among the women they serve ([UN Women](#)). The essay on [starvation](#) covers the food effects.

Element 5, maternal and reproductive health: the element hit hardest

On 8 May 2025 the US administration invoked the Kemp-Kasten amendment, which bars funding for any organization the president determines supports coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization, to withhold funding from UNFPA, and Congress later rescinded the money. The 2017 determination had found no evidence that UNFPA directly engages in coercion in China but treated its partnership with the Chinese family planning authorities as sufficient grounds ([KFF](#)). On 7 January 2026 the United States announced its withdrawal from 66 international organizations ([PBS NewsHour](#)), among them UNFPA, UN Women and the office of the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict ([White House](#)).

The Mexico City Policy was reinstated on 24 January 2025 and expanded on 27 January 2026 under a framework called "Promoting Human Flourishing in Foreign Assistance," effective 26 February 2026, which adds policies titled Combating Gender Ideology and Combating Discriminatory Equity Ideology to the abortion rules ([Inside Government Contracts](#)). KFF estimates that \$39.8 billion in US foreign aid, 41% of it to multilateral organizations, would be subject to the policy, compared with \$7.3 billion under the first Trump administration's version and \$300 million to \$600 million under earlier administrations ([KFF](#)). The administration and its supporters describe the rules as keeping US funds away from abortion and from programmes they regard as ideological. Critics note that foreign NGOs and multilateral organizations may not spend their other funds on the restricted activities either, and expect confusion and hard choices for providers ([Guttmacher Institute](#)).

A modelling study in *The Lancet Global Health* projected that a full end of US funding, without replacement, would cause about 140,000 additional maternal deaths from service shortages between 2025 and 2030, plus at least 200,000 more linked to 40 to 55 million

additional unintended pregnancies across 51 countries ([The Lancet Global Health](#)). UNFPA says that in 2025 more than 1,000 health facilities it supported closed or nearly closed, along with more than 250 safe spaces, and that up to 12 million women and girls in crisis settings could lose services in 2026 without full funding ([UNFPA](#)). Afghanistan's maternal mortality ratio stood at an estimated 638 per 100,000 live births in 2024, more than three times the global figure, while the education ban closes the pipeline of female medical staff ([UN Women](#)).

Element 6, political participation: slower gains

Women held 27.5% of parliamentary seats on 1 January 2026, up 0.3 points in a year, the slowest gain in nearly a decade ([UN News](#)), while the share of women among speakers of parliament fell from 23.7% to 19.9% ([JURIST](#)), the first fall in 21 years ([UN Statistics Division](#)). Six in seven countries are led by men ([UN Women](#)). India's reserved seats in the national parliament remain on hold until the census and redrawing of constituencies are complete ([PRS Legislative Research](#)).

Element 7, defence against reversal: accountability, institutions, data and consensus

On 8 July 2025 the ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber II issued arrest warrants for the Taliban's supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, and its chief justice, Abdul Hakim Haqqani, finding reasonable grounds to believe they committed the crime against humanity of persecution on gender grounds against girls, women and others not conforming to the Taliban's policy on gender, from 15 August 2021 until at least 20 January 2025 ([ICC](#)). The warrants have not changed Taliban policy so far; UN Women counts more than 100 decrees affecting women and girls since August 2021 and calls the situation the world's most severe women's rights crisis ([UN Women](#); [UN News](#)).

In the 2026 Gender Snapshot survey of national gender equality mechanisms, the bodies that enforce the legal reforms counted under element 4, one in three reported that its institutional power had been eroded over the past two years, around one in four had its operating budget cut, and nearly one in ten had lost control of its budget altogether ([UN Women](#)).

The US government ended funding for the Demographic and Health Surveys Program in February 2025. Grants of \$39 million from the Gates Foundation and \$4 million from Bloomberg Philanthropies kept it running, but as of July 2026 it was narrower in scope, with 15 surveys under way, limited success in attracting other donors, and a Gates grant that ends in 2028 ([PRB](#)).

In March 2025 the Commission on the Status of Women adopted a political declaration urging full and accelerated implementation of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action ([UN Meetings Coverage](#); [PMNCH](#)). It left out sexual and reproductive health

and rights; analysts at the International Peace Institute report that governments favouring that language gave it up to keep out “family rights” language sought by more conservative governments, and the United States set out its objections in a statement ([IPI Global Observatory](#)). A year later, for the first time in the Commission’s 70-year history, its agreed conclusions, on access to justice for women and girls, were adopted by a recorded vote of 37 in favour, one against and six abstentions. The United States voted against after its eight amendments were rejected, objecting to language on intersectionality and diversity, equity and inclusion and to a call for universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, which it read as implying abortion rights ([Council on Foreign Relations](#)). The adopted text calls on governments to repeal discriminatory laws, including those on child marriage, family law and property ([UN Women](#)).

Under the UN80 reform initiative, an assessment reported in April 2026 found a merger of UN Women and UNFPA technically sound with safeguards, found little overlap between them, and estimated savings of \$32 million to \$38 million a year once integration was complete; a separate analysis for the agencies’ boards warned of transition costs and disruption ([Health Policy Watch](#)). Nine governments (Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Korea, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden and Uruguay) wrote in May 2026 that there was insufficient evidence of large enough efficiency gains and that a merger could weaken the agencies’ mandates ([Development Today](#)), and more than 1,400 feminist organizations have opposed it. No final decision had been announced as of September 2026 ([Health Policy Watch](#)).

Part III: Revised priorities for the next 6 to 12 months

1. **Fund emergency maternal care and survivor services in crisis settings.** Other donors and national governments should close as much as possible of UNFPA’s \$1 billion 2026 humanitarian appeal, starting with Sudan, the occupied Palestinian territory, Afghanistan and Yemen, and fund local women’s organizations directly. The United States had been UNFPA’s largest donor, providing 17% of its contributions in 2024 ([KFF](#)).
2. **Keep the data systems running.** Governments and foundations should put the Demographic and Health Surveys on multi-year funding before the Gates grant ends in 2028.
3. **Hold the line in Afghanistan.** Governments should keep girls’ education and women’s work as conditions in every engagement with the Taliban, fund online and community schooling for Afghan girls, and support the ICC process, citing the 92% support for girls’ schooling recorded inside Afghanistan in 2025.
4. **Protect prevention of and accountability for sexual violence in war,** beginning with Sudan, where the Security Council has sanctioned RSF commanders and the Fact-Finding Mission’s inquiry into El Obeid is under way.

5. **Defend national gender institutions and recent legal reforms** against budget cuts and repeal attempts, drawing on the Gambian example of domestic coalitions that engage religious arguments directly.
6. **Rebuild agreement at the UN on the widely shared core.** Maternal survival, girls' schooling, ending child marriage and preventing violence have support on both sides of the disputes that split the Commission in 2026. Negotiating them separately from abortion and the definition of gender would let most of the agenda move, and any merger of UN Women and UNFPA should be judged by whether it protects those functions.

Conclusion

The plan holds up against the events of 2025 and 2026. Each element has evidence behind it, and India's fall in child marriage and the 40% decline in maternal mortality since 2000 show the results when governments act.

The threats in 2026 are mainly political and financial. Net development aid fell by almost a quarter in 2025, and the cuts have fallen heavily on maternal health, family planning and women's organizations. Afghanistan has shut girls out of secondary school and women out of most public life, and in Sudan UN investigators have described sexual violence against women and girls as a marker of genocide. The Commission on the Status of Women, which had always adopted its conclusions by consensus, needed a recorded vote. The most important decisions of the next year are whether other donors replace the lost funding for maternal and survivor services, and whether governments that disagree about abortion and gender can still act together on the large part of the agenda they share.

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